

Storm King 551

Chapter 551: Growing Fears

"Jormun has to die," Leon gravely stated as he stared down at the stone map he'd laid upon the table in the fortress' central meeting room.

It had been several hours since he and his squad had returned to the fortress, and only a few minutes since Sigebert's return, only just long enough for everyone in positions of authority to gather and discuss their next moves.

"I agree..." Sigebert said, though his tone suggested that he wasn't quite as committed to the idea as Leon was.

"Was it that bad at that... wherever that place was?" Theuderic asked as he set aside some of the papers he'd brought to the meeting.

"It was quite grim," Sigebert replied. "Grim enough that we don't have to wonder where the inhabitants of this town went. We found them. The final count of recovered bodies stands at four thousand and twenty seven."

Leon winced. His estimates for the death toll had been in the thousands, but not quite that high. More than four thousand people represented a ton of power, even if most of them were first-tier or weaker. He had to wonder if Jormun had needed all of that power, or if this had been some kind of message. Given how the square had been found and the crucified skeletons that had pointed the way, it was clear enough that Jormun had wanted the massacre sight found, but without knowing exactly what kind of magical power had clearly been there beforehand, Leon couldn't say.

But at the very least, Jormun was proving himself to be a man that valued theatrics over practicality, which only further convinced Leon that secular power was not what he wanted.

As those thoughts ran through his head, Leon momentarily lost the thread of conversation with the Fleet Legates, and once he returned to the present, Basina was saying, "We have to keep in mind why we came here. If we can kill the pirate, then we will, without hesitation. Ancestors know that he's already done enough damage to us that ending that man's life will greatly boost morale. But we're here to find Prince Octavius and lay him at the King's feet, and we're here to restore His Majesty's rule over these islands. These have to be our top priorities."

Leon bitterly smiled as he set his hands down on the table and leaned forward. "I can't accept that. Jormun is an immense threat. He's already shown us that he doesn't care about us our push into the islands, and he's shown us that he's willing to kill enormous amounts of people for... whatever his real goal is."

"And what is that real goal?" Basina asked with a hint of condescension in her voice that had Leon's eyes narrowing in subdued anger.

For a moment, Leon was silent as he debated with himself about whether or not to push his idea that Jormun was trying to release the mythical Serpent. It sounded rather far-fetched, but he knew from Xaphan and Nestor's examples that terribly deadly things had been sealed or trapped on this plane for a long, long time. Hells, as Leon thought more about it, he remembered that this place was known as the

Divine Graveyard. He wouldn't even be surprised to find that there were things trapped in remote corners of this plane that could defy his explanation, and even his imagination.

In the end, he told the Fleet Legates his suspicions.

"That's... certainly a story," Sigebert murmured when Leon was finished, clearly unconvinced.

"A story is all that it is," Basina added with a little more certainty. "Leon, he was a pirate. He spun you a tall tale just to screw with your head. He was reveling in his deception, nothing more. This 'Serpent' doesn't exist, don't buy into Jormun's lies."

Leon frowned. "I sensed some kind of power in that colossus at that ritual site. There's something to this, I can feel it."

"What would you suggest we do?" Theuderic politely asked, though to Leon, it came off more like the Fleet Legate was humoring him more than anything.

"Set aside the issue of the Earls," Leon said. "We're... well, not *wasting* time, but we're giving Jormun all the time he needs to continue working toward his real goal. Maybe he's not actually going to release some mythical beast, but I can say with as much certainty as I can muster without speaking with him again that simply becoming King of these Isles is not what he's after. He's looking for something more."

Sigebert almost responded, but Basina held her hand up, silencing him. "That's guesswork on your part," she humorlessly stated. "All evidence we have is that he *is* working to make himself a King. He's been resisting our advance on every island, he massacred our colonists, and he purged the aristocracy of these islands until those who were left were loyal to him. All of this... sacrifice business is misdirection, it's theater for his people so that they'll feel better about losing. Nothing more than that."

"Go to that ritual site and investigate that colossus yourself," Leon growled. "You'll feel the same thing I did. Look, Jormun is clearly no ordinary pirate! We saw him with fucking krakens!"

As Leon spoke, he noted Theuderic slowly take a few steps toward Basina. It was a subtle thing, but it stated literally with whom he stood.

"*You* saw him with krakens," Basina coolly replied, her patience starting to run thin. "Krakens can't be tamed. They're too big, too intelligent for that. Those that were in the bay last night were only there to feed off our sailors that Jormun threw into the sea. They were scavenging a quick meal in his wake. Just because they were here at the same time doesn't mean that this pirate has some kind of control over them, or that they're all working toward a shared goal, or whatever you're implying by mentioning it."

Leon sighed as Sigebert took a few steps toward Basina. "How long until we can set sail for the next island?"

Basina glanced at Theuderic, who responded, "Shouldn't be more than a week. The local Earl is still alive, so getting him back on board with the King shouldn't be too much of an issue."

"A week..." Leon muttered as he stared at the stone map on the table. The corpses at the ritual site had been determined to have been killed only a few days ago, possibly even as recently as after Jormun's deception back in Kraterok.

'If he can do that in just a few days, then what the hells is he planning now?' Leon wondered.

Out loud, he said, "Jormun will have all the time he needs to do whatever it is he's going to do. And that means that more of our people are going to die. More Islanders are going to die."

"Leon," Basina quietly said, her tone that of an aged elder lecturing a child, "we have plenty of supplies, but they won't last forever. If we leave the islands behind us unsecured, then they will likely go right back to Jormun the instant we're gone. We need to do this right, otherwise we'll find ourselves pressed between Jormun on one side, and whatever forces these Isles can raise once we're gone on the other side."

"Now, I can assure you that the capture and execution of the pirate Jormun is a priority, but right now it's not the biggest one that we have to see to. But we'll get him. He's hurt us, yes, but our task force is too large for him to win. We'll run him down eventually, no matter how many Islander fairy tales he cares to invoke."

Leon bitterly smiled again. He wasn't convinced, he wanted to hunt Jormun down as soon as possible before the pirate had a chance to enact his plans. But he knew when he was outvoted, Theuderic and Sigebert were with Basina on this one.

And, if he were to be honest with himself, he couldn't blame them. It was much easier to believe that Jormun was working for political power than it was to believe that he was trying to unleash some kind of ancient, sealed god.

With a tremendous amount of reluctance, Leon dropped the issue, and he participated so little in the rest of the discussion that he might as well not have been there. Instead, he found himself dwelling on Jormun, and what might happen if he succeeded in his endeavors. Above all, he hoped with everything he had that the Fleet Legates were right, and that Jormun's actions up to this point were him just trying to screw with all of their heads. He hoped that all Jormun wanted was to set himself up as an independent King.

But Leon remained unconvinced. In fact, the idea of going off on his own to try and deal with Jormun was growing ever more appealing.

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When the meeting ended, Leon made for Maia first and foremost. If he were to try and deal with Jormun on his own, he'd need her on his side. Three krakens and three seventh-tier mages were far too much for him to take on without support, and that wasn't even accounting for all the other advantages that Jormun had, such as his ship with its strange flamethrowers, his crew, and all the others that the pirate had convinced to fight alongside him. Leon knew that he could always invoke Xaphan's power, but his left arm ached just thinking about it.

No, he couldn't do this on his own. Hells, he didn't even think that Maia would be able to kill the pirate on her own in a straight fight, just her against everything that Jormun could bring to bear.

But with the two of them together, Leon felt like they had a real chance to deal Jormun catastrophic damage, and he already had a fairly good idea about where Jormun was going to go; the Fleet Legates hadn't paid much attention to the stone map that Leon had brought to the meeting, but Leon felt like that strange, now kind of ominous Thunderbird look-a-like wouldn't have led him to it without reason.

'Jormun has to be going to whatever is here...' Leon thought, picturing the serpent's eye marking on the slopes of the next island's volcanos.

However, for all that, Leon didn't want to jump to such a reckless move right away. He felt like that would be suicide, and carried with it a great risk of failure. Still, him and Maia going off on their own was an option that he felt was on the table, and he wanted to explore it a little bit.

He found Maia at the rather grand tent that had been set aside for the use of him and his squad, though to call it a tent was to almost do it an injustice; it was practically an entire house made of cloth. Every one of his people had their own private room, and there was even some space set aside for Anzu. Additionally, they got their own bathroom complete with a small bath, and a large common room with plenty of space for them to practice and train if the desire to do so struck them.

When Leon arrived at the tent, he found Alix, Marcus, and Alcander availing themselves of that space to train with a ferocity that Leon hadn't seen since their time together during the civil war, while he found Maia and Anzu both napping on his bed. Leon had a large bed, but it seemed comically small with the large Anzu curled up on it. Maia didn't even have enough room to stretch out, and had practically draped herself over the white griffin. She probably hadn't intended on sleeping, Leon realized as he walked in and collapsed into a chair next to his desk, for there was a book on the ground where it looked like it had fallen out of her grasp as she dozed off.

He took a few seconds to rest his mind before he bent down to pick up the book. His cheeks immediately went red as he realized that it was a long medical treatise that Maia had asked for regarding the magics that the Thunderbird Clan had devised to help them reproduce—Leon had always been up front with both Maia and Elise that, being the descendent of one Ascended Beast, let alone also being the descendent of a Divine Beast, he'd probably have a great deal of trouble having children.

Maia, however, was undeterred. She'd wanted a daughter since long before she and Leon had met. Much of that desire had been to help her stave off Gorgonism, but neither her bonding with Leon—which rendered her immune to Gorgonism—nor the cure to Gorgonism that her aunt had found had killed that desire. She was committed to having a daughter with Leon, and so was putting in more time researching how it might be physically encouraged.

Leon was a little more ambivalent towards the idea, though he didn't protest when Maia had asked for the book. He'd always known that children with her was part of the deal, and when things between him and Elise had turned more serious, he'd known that children would probably be in their future, too. He was still only twenty, almost twenty-one, though, so he wasn't too keen on having any kids anytime soon. Still, there was no harm in giving Maia the information she wanted. Having the information wasn't necessarily the same as using it, and the sooner they had a way to reliably have kids, the sooner they'd be able to make a more informed decision about when they might want to have those kids.

He felt a twinge of embarrassment well up as he realized that he must've made a little too much noise moving around. As he sat back in his chair and set the book on the table, Maia started to sit up, blinking the sleep out of her eyes.

When her lake-blue eyes finally landed upon him and her lips turned up in a smile of recognition, Leon smiled back and said, "Hey there, beautiful. Sorry about waking you..."

Maia yawned and stretched as she sat up a little bit more, her languid movements drawing Leon's eyes to how little of her body her clothes concealed despite revealing little skin. After finding what she'd been reading and seeing her stretch, he got a powerful urge to join her on the bed and tear those tight clothes off her as fast as he could, but he clamped down on that urge. There'd be time enough to indulge it later, but right now he was in a more talkative mood.

[Don't worry about it,] she whispered into his mind. [What did those Legumes say?]

Leon chuckled at her mistake—likely one she made on purpose, if he had to guess—and replied, “They're not too keen on heading out without securing the islands, first. They don't want to get hit in the back while we're trying to find our pirate.”

[Seems short-sighted,] Maia replied as her heart-shaped face scrunched up in distaste. She was more than powerful and knowledgeable enough in less mainstream magical practices to know that what Jormun was doing with those bodies at the ritual site was more than just terror theater. The only problem with that in Leon's eyes was that she didn't seem to care all that much about stopping Jormun.

Leon shrugged nonchalantly, though his rapidly deepening frown betrayed the fact that he cared a lot more about this than his shrug would imply. “That's what I told them, but they're determined to continue on their own course of action. I suppose I'd do the same if I hadn't met the man or seen all of that...”

Leon fell silent for a long moment, after which Maia asked as she fixed Leon in her narrowing gaze, [You want to go after him?]

“I do, though I'm not quite seriously advocating for it, yet,” Leon readily admitted. “I... don't suppose you might be able to help with that? Getting across all of this water shouldn't be that big of an issue for you...”

Leon had hoped that she could help, but as soon as he asked the question, his heart sank. He could feel through their connection that a spike of terror had ripped through her, though she didn't let it show awfully much. A briefly averted gaze and shallow frown were the only signs of her extreme reluctance.

“No need to answer that...” Leon said with some embarrassment.

[It's...] Maia began, largely ignoring Leon's statement walking his question back, but her hesitation was almost physical with how powerful it was. After taking a moment to think, she started again. [It's not that I don't want to help you. I love you, you are my mate, and I want to help you achieve your goals. But that's a *long* way to the next island. A lot of saltwater between us and it. A lot of places for more krakens or worse to hide...]

Leon nodded, recalling the sheer visceral terror he felt when he realized he'd jumped into the sea with those terrible beasts. Their sheer size and the strength that came with it he estimated made them easily as strong as a human mage a tier or two higher than they were. And those krakens with Jormun had been sixth-tier.

“Is that why you've been so reluctant to head out to sea?” Leon asked. On the long journey from the Bull Kingdom to Kraterok, Maia had not once gone overboard to swim in her natural environment, or at least what Leon assumed to be her natural environment.

Maia slowly nodded. [In terms of magic, saltwater isn't so much different from freshwater. I'd swim up and down what you call the Gulf of Discord without hesitation or problem. Instead, it's the creatures that live this far out into the ocean that give me pause. Krakens are the only real problem this close to the surface, but when you start getting deeper, more... *alien* things start to appear. Things that might be attracted to my aura if I were to jump into the ocean. I'm fine sticking to the shallows, but as I told you before, I'm a *river* nymph, not one of my oceanic cousins.]

"So there are other nymphs out here?" Leon asked.

Maia nodded again. [They're... not quite as human as my people and I appear, but we're distantly related. They're also wilder and less communal. They're the least of my worries this far out to sea, and krakens aren't that much higher than them. My mother told me many stories about the creatures that live in the deep, and I would rather run into none, if given the chance. I'd rather not even take the chance.]

She paused a moment as she tightened her expression, giving Leon a look of utmost seriousness.

[It doesn't matter what that arrogant pirate is doing. What matters is that we return home to Elise. Stay with the ships, don't cross the open seas without them. If we want to return home, that's how we're going to do it.]

A light scowl graced Leon's face, but he didn't argue with her. "I suppose..." he said, his thoughts turning toward the bird. It wasn't just a figment of his imagination, it had led him too well for it to be a trick of his mind. But Xaphan's reveal that he hadn't been able to see it still bothered Leon. There was the possibility that it was still real, but he also remembered Alix mentioning that she hadn't seen any bird when he'd briefly brought it up. He hadn't thought much of it at the time, but now that he was thinking about it, the situation was growing more and more concerning. At the very least, the bird seemed to be helping him, so he was comfortable enough putting off discussing it with Xaphan and Nestor, but that conversation had to be held at some point, and preferably before they left this island.

He was suddenly jerked out of his thoughts when Maia got out of bed, walked over, and planted herself in his lap, straddling his legs so that she could face him directly. Her arms wrapped around his head, forcing him to look at her and only her.

[What's wrong?] she asked as she leaned in, coming within an inch of letting her nose and forehead touch Leon's.

Leon leaned forward, crossing the remaining distance between them as he simultaneously wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her well-endowed figure into him.

After a quick sigh, Leon asked her, "Do you remember a hawk or an eagle or some similar kind of bird—about three or four feet tall, brown feathers flecked with a bit of gold—leading us through the jungle last night? One that led us to each of those crucified bodies?"

Maia frowned in thought, briefly br

Chapter 552: Light Research

As Leon opened his eyes in his Mind Palace, a tiny, quiet part of himself was relieved to see that everything was, at least by cursory inspection, exactly as it ought to be. He didn't have much direct

reason to think otherwise, but he'd had a few quiet worries that the bird that he'd been able to see was due to something screwing with his head. If something was messing with his perceptions, then anchoring the magic in his soul realm would be one way to make it last.

But that wasn't the case. So, while Leon was relieved to see that it wasn't, it still left unresolved the issue of just what in the hells that damn bird was.

With a quick hop and a step, Leon got out of his throne and found himself in front of Nestor's ruby. With Xaphan busy in a healing trance and the Thunderbird out in the mists somewhere, Leon had no one else to speak with, at least for the moment, about this problem.

"Hey there, dead man," Leon said as he sauntered over.

"Ugh, must you refer to me as such?" Nestor asked, his voice tired and not at all hopeful that Leon might change, or even apologize.

"Yes," Leon replied, proving Nestor's unspoken assumption true. "I have a slight... *problem* that I could use some advice about, and while I'm rather loath to ask you for anything outside of your assigned duties, I have no one else I trust enough to ask."

"Well, don't worry," Nestor said, his voice taking on a hint of mockery in response to Leon's unrepentant and casual attitude, "such problems are very common and happen even to the best and manliest of men. It's nothing to be ashamed of..."

Leon scowled. "We're clearly not on the same page. Or maybe you're just randomly flipping through the book just to piss me off."

"Who can say? Alas, a mystery it will always be!"

"All right, dickhead, maybe if this problem continues to fester, I'll just feed your damn ruby to whatever is causing it!"

Nestor sighed in contentment, his brief revenge for Leon's insult taken and savored. "Very well, boy, what is this problem you have?"

Leon ground his teeth a little bit, the temptation to verbally strike Nestor again quite powerful, but he resisted.

"I've... been seeing something that others haven't," he said through a stiff jaw. "It hasn't happened much, but the fact that this... whatever it is, has been so helpful in a very practical way, I can say with little doubt that there is some kind of intelligence behind it. I want to know what might cause this, if I can defend myself against it, and if I should even be worried about it..."

Leon proceeded to fill Nestor in on everything that had happened between him and the Thunderbird look-a-like, from the very first time he saw it in Kraterok and finishing with its sudden disappearance after it showed him the map of the next island, along with Xaphan's reveal that he hadn't been able to perceive it.

"That's... I can't say for certain, but I would be cautious when dealing with this thing in the future," Nestor said. "I can think of several things this might be, and at least some of it can be defended against with conventional means."

“First and perhaps least likely, this is an actual bird, in which case if you wanted it to stop following you, you could use blade and bow to ward it off. However, the fact that it looks so much like our Ancestor and the fact that no one else has been able to see it, either with magic senses or physical senses, disturbs me greatly. Still, maybe its physical resemblance to our Ancestor is just a coincidence and it simply has various powers that keep it hidden save for those it chooses to reveal itself to. I know of several applications of light and darkness magic that could accomplish such a thing.

“The second possibility, however, I think is much more likely: this is some kind of illusion that is being sent directly to you through darkness magic. It read your mind using darkness magic, and then used that knowledge and magical connection to make you see something that you trust, in which case your problems are much worse than they might be if the first possibility is true.

Leon stepped back, his face paling by a few shades. If something could magically enter his mind deep enough to be able to display an image so alike to the Thunderbird, then he would have no secrets before them. Theoretically, they could make him see whatever they wanted him to see, perhaps even muddling his mind enough that he didn’t know what was real and what wasn’t.

“Now, now, boy, don’t go getting weak in the knees,” Nestor chided. “You have been practicing those techniques that our Ancestor and that arrogant demon gave you, right?”

It was with a grimace that Leon remembered the several times he’d asked Xaphan and the Thunderbird for help in defending his mind against mental invasions of this sort. The vampire Bran had used such a technique against him during the war with Talfar, but it wasn’t until Nestor used a technique to deliver information straight to Leon’s mind while he was in his family’s archives that he started to realize just how vulnerable he was to such things. Xaphan and the Thunderbird had both given him a few techniques he could try practicing to shield his mind from such invasions, but there had been so much going on recently and so much on his plate—specifically, enchantments—that he hadn’t had much time to practice those techniques.

But he regretted that lapse in judgment now—he should’ve *made* time to brush up on these defenses even though they weren’t strictly needed just yet. If this was some kind of hallucination being sent straight to his brain, then he needed some way to defend himself. If whatever was doing this could get to his brain, after all, then there was a strong possibility they could also get to his heart, and thus, his soul realm.

“I wouldn’t worry too much, Leon,” Nestor said in a somewhat soothing tone. “Such powers have limits, no man could ever recreate the world with enough detail that it would fool you—you’d probably realize that something wasn’t right eventually, so convincing you that everything you see isn’t real is off the table. I mean, just look at this, you’ve only seen this bird a few times, and already it’s been revealed that something’s off about it.

“Additionally, you’re uniquely qualified to defend yourself against such attacks, or have you forgotten the power that you inherited from our Ancestor?”

Leon took a deep breath and calmed down. The Thunderbird’s lightning was unique in that it had the power to free the mind from all external forces that inhibited it. His mind couldn’t be controlled, and every time his lightning coursed through his body, any power that might be making him see things that weren’t there should be cleared up.

Should. Leon was still a little wary that there might be exceptions here or there, but at least for the time being, he managed to force himself to relax. His lightning had fought off the effects of banshees and the darkness magic of the vampire Bran, so he could easily place his faith in it.

"All you have to do," Nestor continued, "is give yourself a quick blast of lightning the next time you see this bird. Let your power flow through your body and mind, destroying any foreign magic that it comes across and freeing your mind from any control or sensory illusion it might be subject to."

"Assuming I see it again," Leon said.

"Assuming that, yes. However, given how much you've seen it, I'd wager there's a damn good chance that you'll see it again."

Leon nodded. "I don't suppose you've noticed anything out of the ordinary in here, have you? Anything that might indicate some kind of power being used on me?"

"No," Nestor replied. "If such a power were used on you to influence your thoughts and perceptions, there wouldn't be much point in targeting the soul realm as well. It might actually tip you off that something was wrong, to be honest, so if someone *were* trying to influence you, going after the soul realm as well would only have downsides. Someone skilled enough to try swaying your mind wouldn't make that mistake."

Leon nodded again. "Good to know..."

He stood there for a few more awkward seconds, knowing that he didn't have much else to say on that front until the Thunderbird showed up for their training session and he could pick her brain. But that wasn't to say he didn't have other questions.

"You know," he began with a bit of hesitation, knowing that the legend that Jormun told him could just be a whole load of crap, "I was told something recently..."

He quickly recounted the parts of Jormun's tale that he thought relevant—namely, the Serpent's supposed reign of terror and the arrival of three heroes bearing the power of lightning, wind, and water who arrived to slay it. He hoped if he had more information, even if it was only hearsay, then he might have more insight into Jormun's goals. At the very least, it cost him nothing to ask.

"... does any of that ring any bells?"

"Can't say that it does," Nestor replied. "I wasn't all that invested in the daily goings-on of this plane. I was mostly involved in research and little else. I never had much stomach for the problems and politics of the lesser peoples we conquered."

The edges of Leon's mouth turned downward into a deep frown. "Man with a heart of gold, that's you, Nestor," he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Don't act like you're superior, kid," the dead man replied. "You care about as much for the common people as I do."

Leon had to fight the urge to grimace. Nestor wasn't entirely wrong; after spending much of the first day in Kraterok ruminating on how he'd deal with the people of the Serpentine Isles if he were the Bull King or otherwise in charge of their handling, he'd almost completely forgotten about them as soon as

something more 'interesting' came up, aside from the occasional musing as he'd walked through the city's streets during that first week in the Isles. He'd been thinking about almost nothing but Jormun since Turiel was revealed to actually be the pirate in disguise.

And even then, his interest in the Islanders was largely restricted to threat evaluation and hypothetical theories. He didn't know these people, and he hadn't done much to try to get to know them, either.

Nestor spoke again before Leon could respond.

"If you want to know about that time, go speak with the Librarian. I built that thing to keep our Clan's records, so if anything might know if there was such action in these islands, it would be that golem." Leon could practically hear Nestor's dismissive wave in his tone, subtly telling him that the conversation was over and to leave him alone.

With a roll of his eyes, Leon obliged, leaving the ghost alone. He didn't want to talk to the man anyway, not with the sudden shame at being called out for his hypocrisy.

So, he moseyed on over to the simple library he'd built for the books from the archives and the golems. Decidedly less aesthetically pleasing than the archives building, the large stone box was at least functional in all the ways that mattered. There was more than enough room for him to store the thousands of books he'd taken in whatever order the golems wished, but as Leon pushed open the door and entered the somewhat dark and dreary chamber, he figured a little bit of sprucing up was in order.

With a few quick thoughts, he extended the building back a bit and began adding more stone to the sides of the box, rounding out the edges until the box had become a squat cylinder. Then, he built alcoves all along the edge with practically no space between them, turning the cylinder into more of a gear shape. Next, he raised the ceiling, rounded it out into a large dome, peppered its surface with simple square coffers, and cut a circular hole in the ceiling to let in a great deal more 'natural' light, as opposed to the magic lights that he already had lying around the library chamber. With another quick thought, he cut tall, thin windows into the walls of the alcoves and topped them with partial domes. Finally, he used the great deal of new space he'd created to add a central reading area beneath the hole in the roof, with a long table and a comfortable chaise lounge, and did a little bit of rearranging of the bookshelves around that reading area, though he left most of the organizing for the golems to handle.

The structure he wound up with was much better looking, even if it still lacked artistic flourish, but Leon was much happier with it, now, and it had given him somewhere to channel his frustration with Nestor, leaving him feeling much better. It had still taken about an hour to complete, however, and the structure was left much too big to hold in his Mind Palace, forcing Leon to carefully and painstakingly move it out of his palisade and set it down in the field of purple grass that surrounded it over the course of another ten minutes.

When all of it was finished, Leon finally turned his attention to the Librarian. The golem had hardly been waiting in the wings for Leon to arrive, and so in the few minutes between Leon showing up in the library and the Librarian coming to greet him, Leon had already thrown himself completely into the work of expanding and prettying up the place. Still, the automaton was nothing if not patient, and so waited, almost frozen next to Leon, until the young man was finished with his work.

As he put the finishing touches on his work and collapsed into the lounge, Leon turned his gaze toward the nearby golem and tiredly said, "Sorry about that, I didn't mean to make you wait, I just couldn't stop that once I got going..."

"It's no matter," the golem replied, its metallic resonant tone one of complete sincerity. "This one exists to serve at the pleasure of the Clan."

"That hardly makes me feel better about ignoring you when you've been right there practically this whole time..." Leon self-consciously replied. Of course, the Librarian said a few words after that excusing his behavior, but if anything, it only made Leon feel even more self-conscious.

He couldn't help but imagine himself being in the Librarian's position, which he felt like wasn't too far-fetched—if he'd been born into the Clan during its heyday, he supposed he might've been given some kind of menial task like maintaining archives; he'd earned nothing else, so far. If someone had kept him waiting like that and then expected him to be polite about it, Leon would have left them wanting.

"Is there something you require of this one?" the Librarian eventually asked, helping Leon to move on.

"Yes," Leon said. "Is there any information here from back when the Clan was first occupying this plane regarding the... well, I don't know what they were called back then, but nowadays they're known as the Serpentine Isles."

Leon quickly relayed the relevant parts of Jormun's story again, for however much good it did.

The Librarian froze for a moment, marking the first time Leon had seen it had ever taken so long to give an answer. After almost five seconds, it eventually said, "This one's catalogue suggests there *were* records at some point, but most have been lost."

"*Most?*" Leon was a little surprised, he hadn't realized that there was *anything* left for the Librarian to find. He remembered that House Raime hadn't known they were a part of the Thunderbird Clan, so the records within the archives couldn't have been particularly complete.

"A few scant references can be located of a conflict happening that matches your description," the Librarian explained as Leon noticed a few other golems suddenly stop what they were doing and start rummaging around through the stone shelves. "Factual, first-hand reports, however, were not contained within these archives," the Librarian continued. "Later legends abound."

The other golems moved quickly, and with his magic senses watching them, Leon felt whatever hope he had in his heart for an answer to his questions deflate. The golems were retrieving children's books and collections of myths. The latter *might* be useful, but he doubted it.

Over the next few minutes, the golems brought him several books. Most were useless—or so Leon judged after a cursory glance through their pages—but one seemed promising. It contained a short poem written about how an island people came to the Clan's doorstep seeking aid against a terrible serpentine monster. The Clan's Princess, seeking glorious battle, took three hundred of her personal guard to slay the beast. She returned triumphant, but the islands where the battle took place had been devastated.

What exactly 'devastated' meant, Leon was unsure, for the poem was short, light on details, and seemed to exist mostly as a way to hype the Princess up. It didn't even mention the Thunderbird's

power anywhere, nor did it dwell on the monster overmuch. Still, Leon could see a few common elements between the poem, Jormun's story, and the evil spirits of the Valemén.

Leon sighed, unsure of what else he could do. The fleets would be sticking around for a few more days, so he supposed he could hitch a ride to one of the bigger cities on the island and ask around for any more local information about Jormun's Serpent or the ruins found further inland, but he doubted how much information he'd be able to find. The Islanders, as a general rule, apparently didn't stray too far into the jungles.

Still, even though he'd accepted the decision of the Fleet Legates to take their time going after Jormun, he couldn't help but dwell on the idea that they were playing right into his hands. He couldn't wait until they finally left this island and moved on. They needed to find this damn pirate and stop whatever it was he was doing.

Chapter 553: Pushing Into the Jungle

It was with a glad heart that Leon bade farewell to the second of the Serpentine Isles. It had been more than a week since he'd found the ritual site, and in that time, he'd focused mostly on calming himself down and practicing the mental defense techniques that Nestor and the Thunderbird taught him.

He remained tremendously anxious about what lay ahead, but since the Fleet Legates wanted to proceed using more conventional strategies, his hands were tied. After having time to think, he was glad that he hadn't grabbed Maia and Anzu and flown half-cocked toward the next island, abandoning his squad and the rest of the task force in the process. With the power that Jormun had already displayed, even with Maia at his side, he would've lost and probably been killed. He needed the Legion fleets if he wanted even the slightest chance of stopping Jormun from unsealing this Serpent, or whatever it was that he was planning.

To that end, while Leon accepted the decision of the Fleet Legates, he'd still managed to convince them to allocate a marine battalion to him to investigate the point marked on the stone map he'd found deep in the jungles of the third island. They were still focused on the more mundane political sides of this conflict, so their focus was going to be on the Islander settlements of the island. Leon and his battalion would be practically on their own in the jungle as the rest secured the inhabited areas and searched for signs of Octavius.

For that, Leon wasn't too happy, but he supposed he could understand their perspective. He just wished that Sigebert, who'd been given the same mission as he—bring Octavius back to the Bull Kingdom—would treat finding and defeating Jormun a little more seriously. As far as Leon could tell, finding Jormun would essentially be the same as finding Octavius, but it seemed that Sigebert wasn't too convinced about Jormun's motives as Leon; the Fleet Legate was of the mind that Jormun was simply sadistic, not a fanatical cultist worshipping some ancient god.

But Leon simply pushed those thoughts out of his mind as he watched the second island disappear behind the ship. The decisions had been made, and he didn't want to waste his time being bitter. There were too many things he had to do to waste his time like that.

Over the past week, the thing he placed most emphasis on was his mental defenses. The fact that he was seeing a bird fly around that no one else could disturb him greatly, and while it had been quite

helpful so far, so much so that Leon thought it impossible that the bird wasn't real in some form or fashion, Leon didn't want to just trust that this bird was exactly as benevolent as it seemed. If it was just a targeted illusion, some magical trick played upon his senses, Leon wasn't about to let it continue.

The easiest way for magic to create an illusion was by creating some kind of magical projection, much like the light projections that decorated the slanted walls of so many Thunderbird Clan facilities, but the bird was clearly not that—others couldn't see the damn thing, after all. That meant, as far as Leon, Xaphan, Nestor, and the Thunderbird could tell, there were much fewer possibilities as to what it was. The most likely was an application of foreign darkness magic that was entering Leon's brain somehow and causing a controlled hallucination.

The possibility that the bird was real and just somehow concealing itself from everyone else was floated, but all three of the ancient beings living in Leon's soul realm agreed that that possibility was remote, and that it was a better use of Leon's time to focus on defending against darkness magic. He already had the means to defend himself against physical threats, after all.

In that vein, they taught Leon a rather easy and boring, though quite effective, technique. Leon could, of course, always send silver-blue lightning magic coursing through his body if he ever felt like he was being influenced unduly, but that was more of a contingency if he ever realized that something seemed off and that his senses were being toyed with. This technique would keep darkness magic from entering his mind in the first place.

The technique was almost insultingly simple, consisting of insulating the brain from any possible foreign magic that might've entered the body and slipped past Leon's senses and other bodily defenses. A 'shell' of sorts was created from element-less magic power around the brain, forcing any darkness magic to try and crack through it to create any such illusions as those Leon might've been experiencing, and if that happened, Leon would be able to detect it and immediately blast himself with lightning, hopefully freeing himself from that influence.

As far as these things went, it was quite practical, too, requiring nothing more than using the magic power already in Leon's body. It slightly lowered the amount of magic power available to him, but otherwise required no power maintenance, so long as the defenses weren't tested.

By the time the fleets departed the second island, Leon had already gotten a reasonable handle on the technique. Maybe not enough to defend himself against a dedicated darkness mage who wanted access to his mind, but enough to feel at least somewhat secure. Besides, it wasn't like such mages were common, at least in this part of the world.

But his mental defenses were only a single part of how Leon had to prepare himself. He had an entire marine battalion to watch out for, now, and he didn't want to repeat the mistakes that had led his unit in the civil war to wiped out. For the moment, his biggest issue was that he wasn't all the known amongst the fleet's marines aside from rumors and speculation.

He solved that about as best as he could, which wasn't that great. He spent some time with the marines he'd be leading into the jungle, but there wasn't much conversation. They were fairly well intimidated by him, and his misanthropy kept him from trying too hard to make up for that gap. Still, he exchanged a few words with the Tribune who'd be traveling with him—the same Tribune who'd survived the march along the coast, as it so happened.

Spending time with his small company was easier. He and Gaius played another game of keeps, he sparred with Alix and Alcander, and he debated the current situation with Marcus, who argued for the side of the Fleet Legates. He and Maia were practically inseparable when the sun went down, and Leon took Anzu on a few scouting flights over the coast just to give the young griffin some exercise—he didn't dare bring Anzu into the jungle, not with some of the auras he sensed from deeper in.

All-in-all, he was much calmer when the ships left the fortress than he was the day after Jormun's attack and his subsequent discovery of the ritual site. That calm did little for his mounting dread, though. While it didn't seem to be supported by any other evidence, Xaphan mentioning that the serpent colossus in the center of the ritual courtyard possibly had divine power within it stuck in Leon's mind. Leon desperately hoped that the Fleet Legates were right, and that what Jormun was trying to do was impossible.

He hoped it was all just Islander stories. He hoped this Serpent wasn't real.

But that hope did little to alleviate his dread. He suspected nothing save for seeing Jormun dead on the ground at his feet would help.

Leon wound up spending a lot more time on the deck of Sigebert's flagship on the way to the next island than he had previously. He kept himself as calm as he could, but he couldn't help but wonder just what they'd find on this next island. The first island had an ambush with Flame Lances, the second had the massacre of the Bull Kingdom colonists and the reveal of Jormun's krakens. The next island was going to be much worse than that, Leon could feel it in his bones.

—

It was with both a great deal of trepidation and a lack of surprise that Leon finally landed on the black volcanic beach of the third island, and both feelings were due to the same thing: the landing of the Legion marines had been uncontested. Two and half days of sailing, and not a sign of Jormun anywhere, and not for lack of trying; Leon had been bathing the area around the fleets with his magic senses, constantly scanning for the pirate the entire journey. But it seemed like Jormun had simply disappeared.

Perhaps more accurately, Leon assumed that Jormun was preparing whatever was awaiting them here.

Whatever that was, however, it was clear that Jormun wasn't planning on suddenly resisting them with more conventional means now that they had reached the rough halfway point of their campaign. No ships, no krakens, no forces on land resisted the Legion's advance as they secured the seat of the island's Earl. Much like Kraterok, however, the city was severely depopulated—by Leon's estimation, about a third of the city was deserted, or about five thousand people.

The Earl herself was also absent, allowing Leon and the others who'd landed further up the coast to practically walk right into the city. Leon's eyes were open for any traps, whether that be explosive spells hidden in empty buildings or along their path, enemies in the jungle, or places that he, if he had to defend the island, might've placed a salvage Flame Lance or some other such weapon.

But the march was uneventful, and not a single Legion life had been lost by the time the sun went down. To Leon, this was practically incontrovertible proof that Jormun didn't care about the Isles, that his goal was worse than what the Fleet Legates had assumed, but the counter argument was always that Jormun was smart and that he was simply avoiding an unwinnable battle.

Leon didn't push his beliefs too hard this time. He'd be leading his battalion of marines out into the jungle in the morning, so all he could do was hope that Jormun wasn't waiting out in the sea somewhere underwater with his pirate allies, just waiting for an opportunity to attack, an opportunity such as Leon leaving the fleets. Fortunately, this was a possibility that Basina was taking seriously, and she'd drilled her scouts to check not just above the waves, but beneath them as well.

Heading out into the jungle was still a risk, but Leon couldn't set aside his dread, he couldn't just sit by while Jormun spilled blood to try and summon a possibly mythological creature. He hated leaving the Legion fleets somewhat vulnerable by taking away himself and Maia, but he put his faith in the Fleet Legates; they knew their craft better than he did, and at the very least, they were putting in counter-measures to how they'd been attacked before. Jormun wouldn't surprise them again if he stuck to the same tactics.

So it was that Leon, early in the morning the day after the task force made landfall on the third island, led his squad and a thousand Legion marines out of the Earl's city and into the deep, dark jungles that blanketed the island's interior.

His destination was whatever had been marked on the map he'd been led to, and he intended to find whatever it was even if he had to burn half the jungle to the ground.

—

"You seem jumpy, Leon," Marcus observed as several Legion marines cut through the thick jungle underbrush ahead of them, clearing the way for the long line of Legion marines behind them to follow. They were only about half a mile into the jungle, but it was still dense enough that the going was almost excruciating slow as everyone waited for these few marines to create a usable path. There were so many trees that it was almost impossible to spread out too much, and Leon could see with his magic senses that the terrain was only going to grow rougher as they proceeded farther inland; the volcanic mountains had, over thousands of years, torn the landscape asunder, rendering the jungle a web of sheer cliffs of black stone—rather reminiscent of the trap rock pillars of the Border Mountains, Leon noted—and deep ravines that defied the sun's attempts to bring light to their floors. The jungle would eventually clear up a little bit with the landscape breaking it up, but that didn't mean they'd be moving any faster.

Leon's eyes were darting every which way as they slowly proceeded. From the perspective of a man well-versed in forestry, if he had to defend this place, Leon could see countless places he could operate from, an almost endless number of defensible locations in their way that he could launch an ambush from. It was almost dizzying the number of places he had to keep track of, just in case any of them revealed themselves to be a hiding place for Jormun's people, or maybe for the missing folks from the Earl's city.

"Is there any reason I shouldn't be jumpy?" Leon drily asked.

"None that I can see," Marcus replied. "Personally, though, I think if anything's going to happen, it's going to happen further into the jungle, so I'd save being stressed until we're a little deeper..."

Leon nodded, understanding his words. If he were Jormun, he'd start launching his ambushes in a place deep enough that reinforcements couldn't easily be sent from the city. As it was, their line was so thinned by the jungle that their rear wasn't all that far from the outskirts of the Earl's city.

On the other hand, that also meant if any part of the line were to be attacked, then it would be difficult to reinforce. Leon wasn't too worried about that, though, since the jungle was too thick to move even a small ambush party around without it being visible.

"There are things other than humans out here that can do us harm," Leon pointed out.

"Oh?" Marcus asked. "Things that might attack even a group this size?"

"Most predators in places where people don't frequent have no qualms about picking off a straggler or two," Leon pointed out as his eyes drifted in the direction of a large jungle cat with dark green fur that blended in perfectly with the jungle foliage, and a robust fifth-tier aura, that was watching their group from the safety of the branches of a massive seventy-ish foot tall tree about three hundred feet away. He had no doubt that it would grab one or two marines if it thought it could get away without injury.

"I suppose that's true," Marcus replied.

Leon paused a moment, a spike of confusion going through his head. "Aren't you an experienced hunter?"

Marcus shrugged. "Hunting in Aventino is a far sight from these parts. Hells, I didn't even bring my bow with me for this..."

Leon sighed and turned his attention back to the task at hand. As far as he could see, there weren't any signs of an imminent ambush, but the jungle was both dense and wide, there were more than enough places for someone or something to hide in wait. Besides, Leon remembered during his attack on the fortress on the second island Jormun had at least a handful of people creep near the walls with some kind of cloaks that rendered their wearers invisible to magic senses.

Or, Leon assumed they were on Jormun's side.

If his assumption was correct, then those people could be out in the jungle, just waiting for Leon and his people to walk right into an ambush. He'd never even see them until it was too late.

Leon quietly swore, wishing that he had even just a few earth mages. Unfortunately for him, there weren't many earth mages in the fleets, and they were almost entirely relegated to the engineering corps. And all of the engineers were back in the Earl's city with the Fleet Legates. If they weren't, he could've easily built a few fortified locations along their path that would've greatly mitigated the risks of being ambushed on the path.

As things were, he couldn't do that without slowing their pace down to a crawl—without earth magic and the expertise of the engineers, clearing enough ground and then raising defenses in a timely manner was practically impossible. If he wanted to actually get to the location the stone map had specified in a timely manner, he could only build on fortified camp per day, so wherever it was built would be where they'd rest for the night.

So, they pushed onward into the jungle, the heat and humidity bringing forth all kinds of discomfort to torment them, from coaxing out sweat from even the most powerful of their number, to harassing them with giant alien-looking insects who seemed to make it their sole purpose in life to buzz around in the ears of Leon's marines.

Those that drew too close to Leon were quickly zapped, though. A quick flash of lightning and Leon got some momentary relief from the constant droning, though even just a second or two later another damn buzzing thing would come too close. Still, a more useful application of his magic he'd yet to find.

Leon was a little surprised to find that, as the sun started to set, there had been barely a peep from the jungle that might've given him some amount of worry. Perhaps it was because of the sheer denseness of the jungle and how difficult it was to move around within it, or one of a myriad of other reasons, but they hadn't been attacked. Now, however, they were moving into rockier terrain, further up the outer slopes of the handful of relatively barren volcanos that formed the center of the island, and upon which was whatever their destination was.

But only relatively barren by the island's standards; the jungle merely thinned to allow more comfortable movement as the jungle was broken up by enormous boulders, and the cliffs and ravines started to carve up the land. Still, the jungle opened up in those higher altitudes to allow for a camp and had room for the defenses Leon wanted.

Leon called everyone to a halt, and the Tribune who commanded the marine battalion ran forward to ask what was going on.

"We're going to stop and make camp here," Leon told him as he looked around at their location fairly high up on the slopes, with enough sheer cliffs around that they wouldn't have to defend every side of their camp if they were to be attacked. "We only have an hour or two of daylight left, I want to use that to build our camp. Nothing less than a proper walled compound will do. We also need to set up a heavy scout patrol and a strong Quick Response Force; I want to know what's in our immediate vicinity, and those that are going to find out must have support."

"Got it," the Tribune replied. There wasn't much respect in the man's voice, but there wasn't much defiance either. That started to change when Leon proceeded with his next order.

"We're going to be at fifty percent watch for the night," Leon said. That meant at least half of the marines within the camp had to be awake and on guard at any given moment.

The Tribune visibly winced, asking, "Is that necessary? Surely ordering everyone to sleep in their armor would allow us to have—"

"Maybe it isn't necessary," Leon conceded as he glared at the Tribune, "but we've underestimated Jormun enough. If we're going to be killed tonight, it won't be because we were lazy. Fifty percent watch. And scouts. By the time the sun comes up, I want every leaf, every fern within half a mile of this camp to have had Legion eyes on it at least once."

"Very well," the Tribune replied as he turned and started relaying Leon's commands to the Centurions. He didn't seem particularly happy, but Leon didn't care that much. If he had to pick between keeping these marines happy or alive, he'd pick alive. He'd made a few concessions with his previous unit for

their comfort during the civil war, and it was quite likely that it was those concessions that had allowed the Octavian force that destroyed his unit to come so close. He wasn't going to do that again.

Fortunately, it didn't take long once the Tribune got everyone into gear. They weren't trained soldiers used to fighting on land, but the marines were no slouches when it came to this sort of work. They cleared the land as best as they could, and the few logistics knights that were capable of it broke out some wooden wall pieces from their soul realms that the marines quickly assembled into proper fortifications. A few of the trees were taller than the wall's battlements which had Leon a bit concerned, and there wasn't enough wall to cover their entire camp with the way the terrain forced them to spread out, but the marines made do with some of the cut trees they were left with when clearing ground.

When the sun fell, Leon's battalion of marines had a fairly nice camp constructed, and strong enchanted palisade on every vulnerable side of the camp. To their south was a long, steep slope that they'd climbed up, topped with a fairly even twenty-foot-tall or so cliff. Leon had some marines patrolling the cliff, but apart from the small pass they'd taken to climb in, there wasn't much else they had to do to protect that side, freeing up plenty of marines for the north, east, and west.

As they were working, Leon kept his magic senses projected, constantly scanning the fraction of the island within his range. They'd moved about ten miles inland, and as far as he could tell, were still about twenty miles from their destination, a distance that was just inside the range of his magic senses, so he began to sweep the area looking for anything of interest.

Nothing immediately jumped out at him—no ruins, no large camps full of Jormun's goons, no signs of any human habitation at all, but again, Leon knew that the jungle was large and dense and could hold secrets that would require more than a brief scan with magic senses to discern.

As he scanned the volcanos, Leon also spared a few seconds to check out the Earl's city behind them. So far, things looked peaceful enough—the streets were absolutely jumping with activity, though that was mostly due to the Legion occupying it, but there didn't seem to be anyone running around in panic, and none of the guards on the hastily-built outer walls of the beachside city seemed disturbed. The ships out in the sea, too, appeared to be at rest.

That could all change quickly, Leon knew, and if it did change, he didn't intend to miss it. He wasn't going to sleep that night. He was a seventh-tier mage, so while it would be uncomfortable and rather against his instincts and preferences, he could go weeks without sleeping if he were pressed.

It was like this that Leon settled in for the night, with his small squad asleep in his tent, Maia resting next to him with her legs thrown over his lap, and Anzu lounging just outside. Leon's magic senses were constantly projected, his eyes always on the lookout for anything and everything that might seem suspicious, taking note of every dangerous looking jungle creature—and there were quite a few, though they gave his huge group a wide berth—and keeping an eye on all the scouts that the Tribune was sending out. If any of them disappeared, Leon would know almost instantly, so long as his focus wasn't pulled away.

By about midnight, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Nothing, that is, save for a large eagle-like bird that flew almost entirely unnoticed into the camp, flew with remarkable dexterity through the entrance of Leon's tent, past Leon's resting comrades, and into the small, attached room where he and the sleeping Maia were.

It defied Leon's magic senses, despite having been revealed by them on the previous island. It landed in front of Leon, perching on a small desk that Leon had taken out while unpacking. Its eyes, so like the Thunderbird's, locked onto Leon just as Leon's golden irises locked onto it.

And the two stared at each other, the bird almost mocking, daring, throwing its presence in Leon's presence, and Leon almost shocked into motionlessness by its sudden and brazen entrance.

But that shock quickly wore off as Leon pushed himself to his feet, waking Maia as he did, conjured his sword and armor, raised his mental defenses, and faced the bird head-on, ready for whatever its appearance might herald.

Chapter 554: The Eagle of the Isles

Leon glared at the bird, his sword half-brandished, his face hidden behind his helmet. Behind him, Maia was scrambling to her feet after being so suddenly and unexpectedly awoken by Leon's movement, while magic power surged through Leon's body. Small arcs of silver-blue lightning coursed over his limbs while element-less magic power encased his brain, forming a protective shell against any potential foreign influence. However, Leon couldn't sense any magic within his body that wasn't his own, and even if there was, his silver-blue lightning was already coursing through his body, so there wasn't any darkness magic affecting his mind...

Throughout all of this, the bird simply stood there, perched on Leon's desk, staring at him as if he were as interesting as a stain on the carpet. Even as the Thunderbird's lightning coursed through his body, even as his element-less magic snapped into place around his brain, the bird remained there, visible, and seemingly as solid and real as the small pile of papers that it was slowly crushing in its talons.

[What's going on?] Maia blearily asked as a small cloud of water congealed around her and hovered there, ready to be used at a moment's notice.

Leon pointed at the bird on his desk, his hand moving slowly as if he feared the answer to the question he was going to ask.

"Do you see that?" he asked out loud.

Maia glanced to the desk with both curiosity and a slight sense of caution—not too much though, because the bird still only radiated an aura of about the fourth-tier—and a moment later responded, [The bird?]

"You can see the bird?" Leon quietly asked, almost unable to believe the words he'd 'heard' in his head.

[Yes...] Maia said as she slid around the wall of the tent to assume a flanking position on the Thunderbird look-a-like.

Breathing deeply, Leon stared at the bird, just as it stared right back at him, nearly motionless save for a twitch now and then and the gentle swaying of its body as it breathed.

"What... what are you?!" Leon asked, his tone unsure and slightly shaky. He didn't know how to feel about this right now, whether or not he ought to trust his senses. If Maia could now see the bird, and the bird was still there even with his mental defenses raised, then... did that mean the bird was real and

not a hallucination? Did this thing just have some kind of innate ability to hide itself from everyone except those it chose to reveal itself to?

Leon wasn't really expecting any kind of response—it was a bird after all, and though it was clearly intelligent on some level, there was no doubt in Leon's mind that no human voice could come from that avian beak. What was more, its fourth-tier aura was strong, but not so strong that Leon would've automatically assumed it was on-par with the average human. Anzu, after all, was fifth-tier, and while he was smart enough to understand Leon on some level, Leon wouldn't say that the griffin was on par with even an average human.

And yet, as the bird stared him down, it opened its beak, and a vaguely human voice came out. It was mostly deep and resonant, not gravelly but not silky-smooth, either. It had had a masculine quality that seemed dominant, but there was a strange echoing quality to it where it almost sounded like a feminine voice was muttering the same words only a fraction of a second after the masculine one. It also had a faint accent, but one that wasn't reminiscent of the Serpentine Islanders; rather it was one that Leon had never heard before and couldn't place.

"I... am not your... enemy..." the voice said.

Leon took a step back, his eyes wide behind his helmet's visor.

[Xaphan? Nestor? Ancestor? Can any of you tell me what in the hells I'm seeing?] Leon shouted into his soul realm.

As he waited for their responses, he addressed the bird, "That doesn't explain what you *are*, though. What is your interest in me?"

"I... I am but an eagle..." it said, bringing a skeptical frown to Leon's face. "I... sensed your aura... and wished to help..."

"To help with what?" Leon asked.

"You came here... seeking the followers... of the Serpent?"

Leon clenched his jaw so tightly he thought he might accidentally crack a tooth.

[Well, isn't that just *interesting*...] Nestor murmured into Leon's mind.

[What is?] Leon responded.

Instead of Nestor, it was Xaphan who explained, [If what we're sensing is right, that bird has some innate talents in darkness magic, which would actually explain quite a bit. It would go a long toward explaining why it seems so smart and why it can mask itself from everyone except those it chooses to reveal itself to.]

[So... this thing is actually real?] Leon asked. To all his senses, it *did* seem real, but he was cautious about trusting it too much too fast.

[I would say that you could reach out and touch it,] Xaphan concluded. [It's solid. *Real*, though? I suppose that depends on your definition, but right now, I would say yes.]

[I'd agree with that,] Nestor added.

Unfortunately, the Thunderbird was clearly not in his soul realm at the moment, so Leon would have to continue without her input.

Turning his attention back to the bird, Leon hesitantly said, "If by the 'followers of the Serpent', you mean Jormun's pirates, the monsters who crucified all of those people on the previous island, then yes, I'm after them."

Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Maia giving him a searching look, and he gave her a quick wave, telling her through their connection to stand down, but to keep her guard up, just in case. This bird didn't seem strong enough to hurt either of them, but after underestimating so much on this expedition, Leon wanted to treat this talking bird with darkness magic with the seriousness it demanded.

Although, he had to stifle a slight chuckle when he thought about just how ridiculous the current situation was.

"I will... I wish... to help you..." the bird replied, its voice sounding soothing and amiable despite how alien it was.

Leon was tempted to agree immediately, but it wasn't too hard to stamp down on that temptation.

"Nothing is free," he stated as Maia started to relax and move again to his side, though the drops of water hanging in the air around her didn't go away and remained present as a silent threat if this bird did anything untoward.

"Some things are," the bird countered. "These... people... threaten my world... they threaten everything... I will help you... hunt them... for the sake of all of us..."

Leon's eyes narrowed in suspicion and incredulity. "An... admirable motivation, I suppose," he said, unsure of exactly how he was supposed to follow up on that. After a moment of silence, he decided to just be honest with it. "If you were a human, I'd probably call you a liar, or at least not believe what you just said. Everyone wants something, what do you get out of this?"

The bird cocked its head for a moment as it regarded Leon, its cold yellow eyes boring into him, not breaking eye contact even to blink. Even with his mental defenses active, Leon felt kind of like everything that he was, all of his thoughts and intentions, was being laid bare before this bird. It was not a particularly pleasant feeling, and he instinctually took a couple of steps back, pressing his calves against the small bed that he and Maia had been relaxing in only a few minutes before.

"I... can understand... your reticence, young human," the bird said. "I have... seen many of my kin... hunted by these... pirates. To indulge in baser... instincts like vengeance... is not for me... but perhaps, by aiding you... those who have killed my kind... may see justice."

Leon nodded. He couldn't read the bird's body language, and the voice was quite even throughout, so he couldn't point at anything definitive and say that it was proof the bird was lying, but its words still didn't feel quite right.

"You do not trust... me," the bird said.

"I do not," Leon replied.

Into his mind, he heard Maia mutter, [A talking bird. Who would trust anything it says?]

[I think you might be surprised by that answer,] Leon replied as he playfully bumped his elbow into her arm, though he kept his face neutral and stoic. [Honestly, I kind of want to trust it. It led us through the previous island to that ritual site, and then it showed me that map...]

[I'll follow your lead, but be careful,] Maia replied.

Leon took a deep breath. The bird hadn't responded to his admission; it almost seemed to be giving them time to speak with each other, which was a disconcerting notion to Leon. He didn't think mental communication could be eavesdropped on, but the things that he didn't know about magic were overwhelmingly endless. Even the powerful and experienced beings living in his soul realm didn't have all the answers and could only give him possibilities and hypotheticals when he asked them most questions.

"Why me?" Leon asked. He almost thought the bird had chosen to appear to him because of his power, but it was only fourth-tier, it couldn't possibly know how strong he was. Besides, if it were only power it wanted to pursue, then it would've appeared first to Maia. "Of all the people in this task force, why me? I'm not the smartest, I'm not the best leader, I'm not... well, not really anything other than good at putting sharp bits of metal into people. Is that what you're after? Just someone who can deal enough death to satisfy you?"

"As I said... I wish not for vengeance... but justice," the bird insisted, its eyes narrowing slightly in clear disapproval.

"There are other, better options of people for you to choose to appear to," Leon said. "People with better connections and more authority to do as you want..."

In his heart, Leon felt like maybe the bird had sensed his connection to the Thunderbird, or just sensed his power in general. It had to be that. There was never any other reason for an entity such as this, one so disconnected from politics and the powers-that-be in the world, to make the first move and take an interest in him. It was like that for the stone giants, and it was like that for the Talfar vampire.

'It always comes back to that, doesn't it?' Leon thought, his face slightly curling up in bitterness.

He was thus terribly surprised when the bird replied, "You looked like... someone who knew loss. You... know my pain... It is a pain... that you continue to feel..."

Leon blinked about a dozen times in only a couple seconds, his mind sent reeling by the bird's words.

"Pain?" he said. He tried his best to control the disrespectful disbelief in his voice, but he failed. He stole a quick glance at Maia, something that kind of resembled a sly grin on his face as if he were silently asking what this bird was on about, but found her staring back at him with an odd look on her face.

Leon cleared his throat and turned back toward the bird, any traces of levity, disbelief, and incredulity vanishing in that moment.

"I'm not entirely sure what you're talking about," he said.

“Maybe... it’s not something you’re entirely... conscious of,” the bird said. “Maybe it’s not something... that you even know... But there’s a hole in you... something that claws at your mind... something that caused pain... And I can sense... it...”

Leon nodded as his expression slid into one of confusion and uncertainty. He had no idea what the bird could be referring to, he didn’t think he was in any kind of pain.

“And this... pain,” Leon slow said, his voice tinged with suspicion and incredulity, “is what... leads you to come to me instead of anyone else?”

The bird gave a surprisingly human nod. “You would... understand...”

Leon nodded again as he thought over the issue a little bit more. He supposed the bird was referring to his father, but how it knew... well, he didn’t have to wonder too hard, the bird probably picked up on it from his mind with its darkness magic. That Leon had desired vengeance and justice for his father was, at least as far as he could tell, what the bird was trying to invoke to get him to empathize with it.

But such a thing wasn’t easy. Leon felt some twinges of sympathy, but the bird was an unknown, and those it had lost were even more so. Empathy wasn’t coming easily.

“Perhaps...” the bird said as its head suddenly started to swivel about on its shoulders as it looked around, its eyes seemingly peering past the walls of the tent and perceiving what was outside.

“Perhaps... you would trust me... more if I gave... you some help. There is going... to be an attack upon your people... tonight. The followers of the Serpent... are already getting ready out there...”

Leon frowned as he projected his magic senses again. He hadn’t seen any large movements of people out there in the hours he’d spent watching, but magic senses weren’t perfect, especially not over such an immense distance as the jungle. He couldn’t now see anything that might indicated the camp was about to come under attack, but he didn’t argue.

Simply stating a fact, Leon said, “I can’t see anything.”

“They’re... out there,” the bird replied, extending a wing and ‘pointing’ roughly southwest toward some of the lower and denser parts of the jungle.

Leon directed his magic senses in that direction, projecting them slowly and doing his best to thoroughly examine the area.

And, about half a mile out from the furthest of his scouts, he saw a dark moving figure. It was definitely humanoid, and carried a fifth-tier aura. Behind that thing was another, and then another, and then another, until Leon could see hundreds, perhaps even a few thousand of these figures slowly making their way through the jungle, many of them fifth-tier or stronger. One he even noticed was seventh-tier, a woman with wild, frizzy red hair and a look of anticipation plastered all over her face.

Leon cut off his magic senses. He’d seen enough, Jormun’s people were about a mile away from them. He needed to respond, and he didn’t want to let them know that they had been seen by saturating them in his magic senses.

Pausing for just a moment, Leon said to the bird, “I think we might be able to talk later, but right now, I have to deal with this.”

The bird said nothing, merely bowing its head slightly as Leon and Maia gave it one last look before rushing out into the tent's main room where the rest of the squad was sleeping. Leon began to rouse them, and after taking a minute or two to clear their heads of sleep and get them up to speed, he exited the tent to start rousing everyone else who wasn't on watch and getting them ready for the imminent attack.

—

Leon took a deep breath as he finally settled into position in the jungle. All of the marines in the camp who'd been sleeping had been woken up, and he'd taken the Quick Response Force—a company of marines whose entire job was to be awake and ready to respond to sudden attacks—out into the jungle to try and intercept the pirates. The rest of the marines were left in the camp to watch their rear and hold their position.

There was no way the pirates didn't see this happening, Leon knew that. He also saw the moment when the red-haired seventh-tier mage realized it, for she started to madly smile in his direction and shout at her people to pick up the pace.

Even with himself and Maia, Leon didn't think he'd be able to hold his ground against this oncoming assault, not with only a hundred marines. But he didn't think he had to. They'd posted up on a ridge that overlooked the slope the pirates would have to take to reach his camp in a perfect position to rain arrows down upon the approaching pirates. There was still a ton of jungle trees and plants in the way, however, so Leon wasn't expecting the tactic to be as effective as it might've otherwise been—at least, not without a little bit of intervention from him—but he wasn't trying to win here, just slow them down and make them bleed before moving back to the better defenses of the camp.

"There's still some time before they come into range," he said to his squad. "I'll be right back, don't hesitate to open up on them as soon as you can even if I'm not back."

"What are you...?" Alix began as Leon's ring flashed green and light began to bend around him until he vanished from sight. He heard her swear under her breath as he started to creep down to the slope as he pulled explosive spells from his soul realm.

At the same he was doing this, he felt Maia coming after him, her own ring of invisibility activated. He couldn't help but smile, knowing that with her power and the way that the pirates were being forced into a thin line by the jungle, they were about to hit a magical wall. They might not even have to fall back to—

Leon cut that line of thought right off. Thinking that they were invincible and couldn't possibly lose was the same kind of thinking that had led the Legion to approach Kraterok with so little caution, and why the Fleet Legates were now underestimating Jormun's capabilities. Leon couldn't do the same.

Maia, using their connection to know where he was, shadowed him along the slope as he hid a number of explosive mines in the best places that the pirates would be able to use for cover. Behind trees, rocks, and slight pits and rolls in the land, he placed at least thirty mines along the slope before the pirates finally got too close for comfort, and he and Maia fell back to the ridge.

They made it back to Leon's original position with barely a minute to spare.

When they seemingly stepped out of thin air, many of the nearby marines and Leon's own squad just about jumped out of their own skin, but they relaxed as Leon joined them again.

"How about telling us you're going to do something like that, next time?" Alix whispered as Leon took his position and drew his bow. "We almost went out to find you!"

Leon gave her a searching look before glancing at Marcus, Alcander, and Gaius. The latter two were focused entirely on the oncoming pirates, a pair of rather cheap and only very lightly enchanted bows loaned to them by Leon in their hands. Marcus, however, returned Leon's look and shrugged.

"We don't want you out there without support," he simply stated as he raised his own loaned bow.

Leon sighed, knowing their concerns were valid. "There wasn't much time, sorry about that," he said. "But those pirates are going to be in for a whole world of pain if they don't turn around soon..."

Leon projected as much confidence as he could for everyone else's sake, but a moment later, he was readying himself for whatever might come. Jormun himself didn't appear to be present, and that was making him nervous, so he quickly projected his magic senses back toward the Earl's city. As far as his swift scan could reveal, there wasn't anything going on back there, but he couldn't get in a better look, for only a moment later, the first of the pirates stepped into range, and the marines began to open fire.

Chapter 555: Battle in the Jungle

The marines in the Royal Legions were equipped differently compared to the soldiers Leon was more used to dealing with. Their shields were smaller and a little rounder at the corners; their swords were a little bit longer; their bows were also larger and more heavily enchanted. They also largely had lighter armor, with some equipped with little more than cloth gambeson and a few pieces of leather on their limbs.

But, if these equipment differences worried Leon at all, those worries were quickly put to rest as the marines displayed astounding skill with their bows. The first handful of pirates that came into range were quickly cut down by Legion arrows. Leon followed that rough volley up with an explosive arrow, with the blast tearing through the surrounding foliage and opening up the slope a little bit for more Legion arrows.

The members of Leon's squad participated, as well, with Alix, Gaius, Marcus, and Alcander all pushing the cheap bows Leon had tested his enchantments on to their limits with how quickly they were firing their arrows. Maia didn't use such weapons, however, and contented herself with pulling water out of the extremely humid jungle air, freezing the drops into tiny darts, and almost uncaringly sent them careening into the jungle. She hardly seemed to care about the battle, though Leon noticed that she still used her magic with unerring accuracy.

But the flood of pirates was unending. In the first couple of minutes, about a hundred of the pirates were shot, but Leon's handful of explosive arrows hadn't just cleared the slope a bit and thus extend the range of the Legion bows, but had also considerably widened the amount of space the pirates had to work with. Their marching column burst out of the bottleneck that the jungle had forced them into, sending the pirates scattering in small groups out onto the slope. They poured out in numbers great enough that soon, the Legion marines couldn't keep up, and some of the pirates were finding some cover.

Leon was gratified to see that some of his mines then went off, killing a few of the pirates. But then, a huge fireball came hurtling out of the jungle aimed squarely at Leon. He reacted as quickly as he was able, projecting his magic out of his body to try and catch the fireball in a desperate attempt to stop it.

This fireball had been thrown by the red-haired seventh-tier mage, and Leon knew if it exploded on him, then most of the people around him would be injured at the very least, including his squad.

Leon pushed with all his might, time practically slowing down as both magic and adrenaline hit his brain. The fireball almost moved in slow motion as it crawled through the air, Leon's magic wrapping around it like fingers around a small ball.

The fire burned away most of Leon's magic power, but he had more where that came from. He kept pushing, kept trying to push against the power that pushed the fireball forward. It was draining, leaving Leon feeling like he was pushing against an entire mountain, with sweat starting to bead up on his forehead, but it produced results; the fireball slowed nearly to a stop about ten feet from his chest, the dense cluster of fire roiling and spinning as Leon and the fire mage fought for control.

All around him, Leon could also see more magic being thrown around as the stronger of the pirates started to step up. Unfortunately, there weren't any marines in the company capable of responding, leaving Maia alone in her response—a great water dragon appeared upon the slope and came crashing down into the pirates, crushing many.

But Leon couldn't pay too much attention, for he felt a slight change in the fire mage's magic power. She clearly wasn't in the mood to play tug-of-war with him over her fireball, and sensing what was coming, Leon widened the scope of his magic power. A moment later, the fireball detonated in a great conflagration, a shining example of nearly yellow-hot fire that showed just how much a seventh-tier fire mage was capable of.

Leon was also a seventh-tier fire mage, though, and the fire expanded in front of the marines like burning oil across glass. His projected magic power acted as a kind of shield, blocking the fire from expanding and causing damage.

When it finally died down, Leon breathed a sigh of relief and some minor fatigue, the task of blocking that one fireball taking almost as much out of him as a handful of lightning bolts. He didn't let himself get too carried away, because he could see the fire mage throwing fistfuls of fire into Maia's water dragon, blasting huge chunks of water off of it as the water was flash-vaporized into steam.

Conjuring a lightning bolt in his hand, Leon took a step toward the lip of the ridge and hurled the bolt with great might. It sailed across the distance between himself and the fire mage faster than anyone else could see it and exploded across her body. She wasn't wearing that much armor, and so was thrown back by the force behind Leon's attack. Half a dozen pirates around her were showered in sparks hot enough to melt through their chainmail and sear flesh, leaving them collapsed and screaming in the wet jungle dirt, only granted mercy when the enchanted bows of Legion marines filled them with arrows.

They were doing well, Leon could see that, but the pirates were slowly pushing up the slope. As stronger mages with better equipment started appearing from within the jungle, the Legion's arrows started having less and less effect, and many of Leon's mines had already been tripped, killing dozens of pirates but not stopping their charge. Soon enough, only Maia's water dragon was having much effect on the

front line, and he could see the red-haired mage getting back to her feet, some of her clothes torn and burned, leaving portions of her chest bare enough for Leon to see just how badly his lightning bolt had burned her; the exposed areas of her upper chest were covered in the jagged and spiraling fractal patterns of black lightning burns, while blood seeped through here and there where her flesh hadn't been entirely cauterized.

They could hold for a little bit longer, Leon could see that. With himself keeping that fire mage at bay and Maia dealing with the rest with her water dragon, their position was still fairly secure. But Leon didn't want to wait until their enemy had almost fallen upon them to order their return to the fortified camp. That would be too late.

He sucked in a breath to start shouting at his marines to fall back while another lightning bolt started to take shape in his hands, but just before he could start with either, the female fire mage raised a hand and conjured some kind of white gemstone set in a palm-sized diamond-shaped chunk of polished turquoise. The gemstone glowed for just long enough for Leon to see it, then flashed, and Maia's water dragon collapsed into nothing.

A moment later, Leon heard Maia gasp in pain as her arms curled into her chest.

Leon didn't need anything more than that. He hurled the bolt at the fire mage and then roared, "BACK TO THE CAMP!"

The Legion Centurion and company Prefects repeated his order, and the marines abandoned the ridge to sprint back through the half-mile of jungle toward the camp.

But Leon's eyes, instead of watching that or keeping his eye on the battlefield, went to Maia. He did his best to watch the battle with his magic senses, but in his mind, she took priority. She'd collapsed to her knees beside him, her eyes wide and watering in pain, her arms still folded and clutched against her chest.

In that moment, Leon felt a great many emotions—rage, concern, and empathy were the biggest ones—but in his mind, he had only one thought. With one swift motion, he wrapped his arms around Maia and scooped her into his arms, then leaped up onto Anzu. He didn't need to hold Anzu's reins, so he just held Maia close and shouted at his squad, "All of you! Move!"

They'd only stuck around a few seconds after the marines had started retreating, and with Leon's order in their ears, their pace doubled. Still, they were all constantly looking back over their shoulders, and didn't seem to relax until Anzu caught up a moment later.

Leon ground his teeth together in frustration as Maia shook in his arms, their connection communicating to him nothing but pain. Whatever that woman had done to his river nymph, it was clearly more sinister than just dispelling the magic that Maia had used to conjure the water dragon.

Leon breathed deeply as rage began to grow into his dominant emotion, and he began to haphazardly toss out explosive mines as Anzu ran, not bothering to leave them anywhere concealed, just throwing them to ground or onto jungle foliage as they passed. They might have less impact being left where they could be easily seen, but Leon didn't care. All he could see or think about was the river nymph in his arms.

At the very least, his explosive mines kept the pirates from catching up too quickly once the marines retreated. They hadn't lost a single marine in the entire engagement, and by Leon's estimation, probably killed or otherwise incapacitated about one or two hundred pirates. Not that many as far as their entire group went, but not an insignificant number, either.

They also held off Jormun's people long enough for the entire camp to wake up and get in position, and for nearly all of the scouts to be recalled back to the camp. Once Leon's squad and the Quick Response Force streamed through the gate, it was shut and barred. The battalion of marines had taken up their positions behind the palisade wall on a number of platforms that acted as both ramparts and towers, and with a few basic enchantments woven into the walls to keep the pirates from simply leaping over or knocking the walls down, it was about as secure of a position as Leon's group could build in the handful of hours since they'd arrived at this location.

Still, as Leon came back to his senses, he knew that it wouldn't be enough if something more drastic wasn't done. Aside from him and Maia, the marines only had a small handful of mages capable of using elemental magic, whereas the pirates, going just by what he'd seen back at the ridge, had at least three times as many, if not more, and one of them was a seventh-tier mage, to boot.

And now, it seemed they were down one river nymph. Maia was still shuddering in Leon's arms, not responding to anything he did to try and get her to wake up. Her aura was shaking violently, and Leon sensed a lot of pain through their connection, enough that didn't think Maia was going to wake up anytime soon, let alone be in any kind of position where she could help them.

That she had been put into this position both terrified and enraged Leon. That item that the red-haired mage had used... he had no idea what that might be, or what its restrictions might be. For all he knew, if he tried to stop that mage, she'd be able to use the same thing on him, putting him into a similar state as Maia.

But as he took a deep breath and cast his gaze around at the marines taking up their positions on the wall, or just behind it acting as reserves or helping to bar the gates, he knew that he couldn't just wait for the pirates to come here. The jungle was thin enough this far up the volcano that he had other options, and he *had* to pursue them if he didn't want those pirates to eventually surround the camp and overwhelm their defenses.

He just couldn't bring Maia with him.

With a heart-wrenching amount of resolve, Leon slid off of Anzu's back, told his squad to wait for him for a moment, and carried Maia into his tent. There, he laid her down upon their bed, then turned to Anzu, who'd followed them inside. He took the griffin's head into his hands and looked him straight in his blood-red eyes.

"Keep her safe. I'll be back in no time," Leon said quietly. He and Anzu could understand each other well enough at the best of times with tone and body language, but he hoped that the griffin could understand him a little bit better in this moment.

The griffin seemed to grumble a bit as he opened his beak and made some kind of watery growl from his throat, but he brushed past Leon and laid down next to the bed, his eyes on the door of the tent, one wing protectively covering Maia's slightly convulsing form.

Leon spared enough time only to press a small handful of healing spells onto Maia and to pat his griffin on the head before he ran back outside and took stock of the situation.

Immediately, he used his magic senses to check up on the pirates. It seemed that, despite the powerful mages on their side—their seventh-tier fire mage, in particular, looked to still be in good fighting condition—they were advancing much slower than they were before. Leon surmised that they were waiting for more of their people to exit the denser parts of the jungle so that they could pursue his marines with a wider front, and from what he could see, his explosion spells were still giving them some pause and slowing them down.

So, he had time. Not a lot, but enough to do what he needed to do.

By his estimation, he had too many marines for the amount of space he had on the camp walls. Their rudimentary ramparts only had so much room, leaving about half of his marine battalion to stand in the empty space between the palisade and the tents. Many of these marines were guarding the gates, and others were acting as reserves, but there were a couple hundred he could pull, especially once he considered the terrain.

They were relatively high up on the slopes of the volcano, with ridges, cliffs, and ravines fairly common, keeping the jungle from growing too dense and restricting movement. Leon could see a place between the walls and a nearby ridge not too far to the north where, if he moved those marines he could spare, would keep the camp from becoming surrounded and subjecting the pirates to enfilade fire from both those marines and the walls of the camp—thanks to that ridge in the north and the cliff on the camp's south side, the pirates could only approach from the west. If he did it this way, he'd even be able to pull more marines off the other sides of the camp wall and consolidate their defenses along these two fronts instead of the entire camp wall.

To an extent, this is what the Tribune in charge of the marine battalion had already done since Leon had informed him of where the pirates were coming from, but this way, they could commit more of their forces to this battle.

His mind made up, Leon only spared the time to project his magic senses out one more time to ensure that there weren't any more pirates coming in from other directions—his strategy would leave the camp vulnerable to such attacks—but as far as he could tell, they were clear.

With nothing more holding him back, Leon grabbed his squad and swiftly made his way to the Tribune, who was on one of the central 'towers' that they'd built along the palisade, keeping an eye on their preparations. Leon explained his plan as quickly as he could, and while the Tribune had a few objections, he had no plans to offer other than hunkering down within the camp and trusting in the hastily-build walls.

In the end, he reluctantly accepted Leon's plan, and started to bark orders to shift their lines accordingly, leaving Leon with about three hundred marines he could pull from their reserves.

By the time Leon had explained to the Centurions of these three companies what was happening and gotten his entire flanking force out of the camp, the pirates were starting to close in, having assembled enough of their massive force to significantly widen their front line. The explosive spells Leon had

thrown around as he'd retreated were still slowing them a bit, but not as much as those that he'd placed with a little more care.

Making another snap decision, Leon ordered his squad and the Centurions to keep going while he made another play.

"There he goes again!" he heard Alix shout as he activated his invisibility ring once more and tore off into the jungle. The Centurions knew what to do, he could trust them to carry out his orders. He just needed to buy them a little bit of time.

He moved through the trees like a ghost, barely detectable even by the standards of experienced rangers. As he closed with the pirates, he drew his bow and prepared a few explosive arrows. With all the trees in the area, he had to get a little bit closer than he would've preferred to get a clean line of sight, leaving him with not too much time to pick his targets.

His eyes found the nearest fifth-tier mage in the enemy force, and without hesitation, he drew back an arrow and loosed. His aim was true, and the arrowhead sank into the man's exposed neck, the spell tied to it detonating only a moment later, enveloping his body in flame as well as half a dozen other pirates who were close by.

The pirate lines rippled in shock as many of the weaker members paused a moment in fear. Their coordination was lacking, and it seemed clear to Leon that none of them expected another attack like his before they reached the walls of the Legion camp. Leon merely smiled and selected his next target, a sixth-tier mage who was starting to shout in the Islander language something that Leon couldn't understand.

For this man, he chose one of his stronger Thunderblast spells instead of his explosive spell arrows. He aimed, drew, and loosed in one smooth motion, his arrow sailing across the couple hundred feet between them, but glancing off the man's plate armor. Leon didn't mind, though, for a moment later, the man and at least fifteen nearby pirates were consumed in a storm of lightning and booming thunder, tearing their bodies asunder and sending their nearby fellows into a panic. The armor kept the sixth-tier mage's body relatively intact, but the man himself had been killed by Leon's spell arrow.

'Should've been wearing a helmet, idiot,' Leon smugly thought to himself, seeing how the man's face had been charred and rent beyond recognition in the moment before he hit the ground. The man wearing a helmet probably wouldn't have changed his fate, but at least he would've died with a recognizable face.

Leon then fell back a ways, not taking any chances with letting the pirates get too close. He took a few more shots with his bow, explosive arrows and one more Thunderblast spell wreaking havoc in the lines of the pirates, slowing them down and giving his marines more time to prepare. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to get another shot on the female fire mage, because she was staying well behind the lines making sure the pirates kept moving forward instead of retreating under this unknown pressure.

Or maybe Leon's lightning bolt had injured her more than he'd thought it did, he couldn't be sure. She wasn't exactly wearing a lot of armor and had taken his bolt head-on, so it was possible she was just trying to get through the pain while projecting an air of confidence, Leon couldn't say for sure.

Leon regretted not getting another shot on her. He would've loved to put her down for whatever she did to Maia, but he was doing his best not to let his desire for revenge cloud his judgment. He killed about half a dozen higher-tier mages with his spell arrows, along with about a hundred more pirates before falling back to the line of marines he'd led out of the camp.

He reappeared next to his squad and one of the Centurions in the center of the line.

"Fucking hells!" Alix almost shouted in alarm, her cry echoed by several other marines who were startled by Leon's sudden appearance.

"Sorry about that," Leon whispered.

"Did whatever you just did go well?" Marcus asked, seemingly not startled in the least. "Sounded like it did, if all those explosions are evidence of anything."

"Yeah, they were slowed and they lost some of their leaders," Leon said. "They lost most of their mages who can use elemental magic, too, so this should be pretty easily solved with conventional means. These people are *not* well armored."

"That's good to hear..." the nearby Centurion stated, her speaking up reminding Leon that he was supposed to be leading these people.

"Keep an eye open out there," Leon said as he started to creep further down the line, "don't wait for me to order it before you open up on these people! You see a good shot, you take it!"

The marines had done a pretty good job of clearing the area immediately in front of the camp's walls of foliage during the camp's construction, and all the stumps

Chapter 556: Proceeding With the Mission

Leon sighed in mental exhaustion as he entered his tent. The battle had gone extraordinarily well, all things considered, but the burns he'd sustained were causing him some discomfort, and he was just tired. But he wasn't going to do anything until he saw Maia again.

When he walked back into his private area, he found his river nymph lover curled up in their bed, sound asleep with Anzu's wing still protectively covering her body. He couldn't sense any pain coming through their connection, so he assumed she was all right... He extended a hand out to her, almost succumbing to the temptation to wake her up and see how well she was doing, but he caught himself. He could let her sleep, and with Anzu right there with her, no matter how out of it she was, she was in no danger.

Even with that certainty, though, Leon paused a moment as he looked his river nymph lover over, searching for any other wounds or signs of just what in the hells that female fire mage had hit Maia with. He had a pretty good idea of what had happened, though, and it made him nervous.

[Xaphan, Nestor,] Leon whispered into his soul realm as he nervously began to twist a band of silver secured around his left wrist, [I have a question...]

Leon didn't have to wait long to feel the attention of Xaphan and Nestor extend out of his body and take in his surroundings.

[What is it?] Nestor asked. Xaphan simply silently waited for Leon to make his inquiry.

[Naiad... is she going to be all right? What was she hit with?]

[Looks lik—] Xaphan began, only to be rudely interrupted by Nestor.

[Silver milk putty,] the dead man stated.

Both Leon and Xaphan went silent in confusion. For his part, Leon had no idea how to parse that statement, and wondered if he'd even heard it correctly.

Xaphan found his tongue first. [What...?] the demon said in bewilderment.

Nestor explained, [The boy asked a stupid question, so he received a stupid answer.]

Leon scowled and felt a similar sense of muted anger from Xaphan.

[Why would I ever expect anything less from you?] Xaphan wondered aloud.

[Don't worry about it, we all make mistakes sometimes,] Nestor cheekily replied. [I, myself, not too long ago made the false assumption that you would stop reeking of rotten eggs at some point, and yet here we are.]

Xaphan made an indistinguishable sound of disgust.

[Look, Leon,] Nestor said, his tone turning a little more serious, [you already know what happened. You and I have spoken at length about such magic these past couple of months. You don't need us to confirm what you already know.]

Leon sighed as he closed his eyes a moment, his hand pausing in its fidgeting with the silver band. [Is it something I ought to be concerned about? She'll wake up, right?]

[Looks to me like it was nothing more than a mild jolt to the soul realm,] Nestor replied. [Given her power, there's nothing to worry about, she'll be up and about in an hour or two. Probably be back to normal only another hour or two after that.]

[Good to know.] Leon sighed again, but this time in relief.

He and Nestor had spoken about a great many things as he practiced his enchanting skills, and Leon had thought he'd recognized what had happened to Maia based on those conversations, but he couldn't be certain. The weapon he'd made based on those talks was a prototype at best, and he wasn't even sure if it worked or not. If Jormun's people had artifacts that actually worked, then it would make his job just that much harder.

The weapon in question was the silver band on his left wrist, something that Leon had designed while contemplating the problem of how to counter a water mage in their own environment. Essentially, it was a magical spike that, if thrust into the center of a mage's attack, might be enough to disrupt it and possibly even cancel it out. It would weaken it, for sure, though. Leon had started to think of it as a kind of anti-magic, even though it was just another application of standard magic.

Leon's prototype utilized water magic, so even if it worked as intended—a *big* if—then it would only be effective against water magic. What was worse, it was an exceedingly complex enchantment that Leon had needed a lot of help from Nestor to design, and he was almost certain that even using the bracelet

once would probably shatter it and render it useless, which was why he hadn't even tested it up to this point.

For all that, though, Leon was certain that his bracelet wasn't nearly capable of doing to water mages what that turquoise stone that the fire mage had used did to Maia. However, if Leon had to guess why Maia had been knocked out, he'd say that she hadn't been expecting such a counter—though Leon could hardly blame her for it given that neither of them had ever encountered something like this before—and over committed to her attack. She poured so much of her power into that water dragon that once it was disrupted, the ripple effects had put some amount of strain on her soul realm, causing a great deal of pain and knocking her unconscious.

Leon couldn't identify anything else wrong with her, and she felt like she was recovering, which at least gave him some comfort. He changed out her healing spells and stepped back from their bed. There was nothing he wanted to do more than to join Maia in bed and pass out for the remainder of the night, but he couldn't do that. With Jormun's forces having been routed only a few minutes before, there was just too much to do. She'd be fine, he'd just have to put his faith in that diagnosis.

So, Leon forced himself to wake up a bit, stuffed a healing spell down the front of his cuirass to tend to the burns on his chest, and walked back out into the camp.

The camp was a flurry of activity. Half of the marines were still on watch, another two companies had been sent out as scouts—one to survey the jungle around them, and the other to pursue at a distance the fleeing pirates, just to make sure that their enemy wasn't making some grand feint. They had been given orders not to engage, and Leon made sure to closely monitor them with his magic senses to ensure that they followed that order. The last thing he wanted right now was to have to leave the fortified camp and rescue a company of marines that had defied his orders or overextended themselves.

Fortunately, they were keeping their distance from their fleeing enemies, not even harassing any of the smaller groups of Islanders who were seemingly abandoning the cause completely and fleeing in different directions. The female fire mage who was in charge seemed to be trying to get some order back, but Leon wondered how much order existed in the first place. She'd managed to wrangle together about five hundred of the Islanders, but the rest were completely ignoring her.

As far as Leon could tell, there probably wasn't going to be another attack this night. He momentarily contemplated sallying out and venturing into the jungle to attack the female fire mage's much smaller force, but he decided against it. The marines had sustained a few casualties, and he could see a few of the stronger jungle monsters starting to approach the slope where Leon had first engaged the Islanders.

He saw some black furred thing that looked vaguely cat-like, though it had five legs and three eyes, snatch up three Islander corpses in its enormous mouth and vanish back into the jungle, the shadows wrapping around it until it disappeared completely. He saw a small horde of dark-green reptiles with long snapping jaws, bulbous eyes, four short stubby legs, and long viciously barbed tails waddle out of a dirty green jungle river faster than he would've thought they would be capable of, snap up about thirty more Islander bodies, two of whom Leon realized were still alive when they stirred and started screaming, and dragged them down into the river water. He even saw a gigantic black winged *thing*, covered in scales, somewhat resembling a heinous chimeric mix of bat and eagle, swoop down, grab two more corpses in its pitch-black obsidian claws, and then vanish into the night.

None of these creatures were strong enough to threaten him, but Leon wasn't about to lead his much more vulnerable marines out into the jungle if these creatures were stirring with their noses filled with the stench of blood.

After getting the lay of the land, Leon made his way over to the Tribune, who was doing most of the work making sure the marines cleaned the place up. Those three companies who weren't scouting or keeping watch were busy gathering up the hundreds of Islander bodies, seeing to any camp repairs that needed to be done, tending to their wounded, or dealing with some other camp work that Leon couldn't identify.

Gaius was there with the Tribune, quietly exchanging a few words with the man. When he noticed Leon walking over, Gaius smiled and waved him over.

"Things are looking pretty good, Leon," he said.

"They are," the Tribune agreed. "If you hadn't warned us of that incoming attack, it could've gone so much worse. We probably would've lost a few dozen scouts before we even knew we were under attack, and then lost quite a few more of my people after that."

Leon nodded, letting the man think what he wanted to think. He wasn't about to tell him that a talking bird was responsible for his giving Leon the heads-up.

"How do things look?" Leon asked.

"We took a few casualties," the Tribune immediately began, "about fifty of my people were injured in some way. Sixteen were killed."

"Preliminary estimates place Islander deaths at about eight hundred," Gaius added. "I think a few scouts were going to go and count up those dead Islanders out on that western slope—"

"Best not to do that," Leon said. "The scavengers are out in force right now. We don't want to tangle with the wildlife who lives this deep in the jungle. Just let them have the bodies. We don't need an accurate count of the enemy dead."

Gaius opened his mouth looking like he wanted to argue the point, but after a moment spent with his mouth hanging open, he sighed and said, "Very well."

The Tribune then caught Leon up on the rest of the goings-on around the camp, making sure that Leon knew in *exhaustive* detail about how well the camp's defenses were holding up, and how soon they would be able to start moving again once the morning arrived. Leon found blasting the jungle insects that were swarming around the hot and muggy camp more interesting than such talks of logistics, but he paid attention to the conversation, nonetheless. He was woefully deficient in such fields of expertise, and the only way he was going to get better was by actively participating when opportunities arose to engage with them.

In this case, his attention was vindicated when he noticed a slight problem.

"Has anyone been sent back to... the city back there, the Earl's seat? Has anyone been sent back or has word been sent back in any way to inform the Fleet Legates about what's..." Leon trailed off as his magic

senses swept out in the direction of the Earl's city. As they washed over the buildings and then glided out to sea, they took in a scene much different from the last time Leon had checked in on the city.

Dozens of ships were burning in the port, the Earl's palace looked like it had been completely razed to the ground, and large swathes of the city lay in smoking ruins. It had only been a matter of hours since Leon had last checked in on them.

"Leon?" Gaius asked as Leon froze, his words dying in his throat, his eyes staring blankly at the camp walls between him and the city.

Leon barely heard him. He was too busy inspecting the city to get a better idea of where things stood there. For a moment, anger blossomed in his chest as he wondered just how in the hells they had missed the city being attacked, but then he remembered that the marines assigned to keep an eye out for signals sent from the city had been pulled from that duty to help defend the camp. Given they had been outnumbered at least four to one, Leon and the Tribune had agreed that they needed all hands on deck for the camp's defense. It looked like they hadn't yet gotten organized and cleaned up enough to send someone back up a tree or onto a ridge to keep an eye on the situation back in the city, yet.

However, before Leon could inform the other two of what he was seeing, he saw a few promising signs. Being hoisted out of the water to dangle over the deck of one of the dreadnoughts was the corpse of a gigantic kraken, its body riddled with harpoons dripping both black ichorous blood, and a bright grey liquid that Leon assumed to be the monster's mana. He saw Legion marines patrolling the streets, putting out fires, and gathering bodies. He saw Sigebert standing in front of the Earl's destroyed palace, vigorously questioning someone whom Leon assumed to be the new acting-Earl and gesturing wildly at the ruined palace.

It seemed that whatever happened, the Legion had gotten a handle on it.

Leon quickly told the Tribune and Gaius what he was looking at. After some discussion, he and Gaius left the Tribune to continue the work on securing and cleaning up the camp to climb the same nearby ridge that Leon and the female fire mage had fought upon only an hour before. From there, Gaius could get an excellent vantage point from which to communicate with the city.

Once there, Gaius brought out a white flare and fired it into the air, where it climbed for a good five or six hundred feet. Only a few seconds later, Leon saw another flare rise up from the city, also shining brightly.

"Now, we wait," Gaius said.

Leon nodded, understanding this was nothing more than a greeting. He watched as the signalman who fired the flare passed on the message all the way to Sigebert, who paused in whatever he was doing with the acting-Earl and moved over to the signals position high up on the newly-constructed walls, where he could see Leon and Gaius on the distant ridge. It took about ten minutes, but once he arrived, Gaius and Sigebert began exchanging flares and hand signals. With only about ten miles between them, they could see each other easily enough that Leon even gave Sigebert a quick wave of greeting.

"Looks like... they were attacked by a small fleet and some local ground forces," Gaius said, squinting at the signalman as he translated Sigebert's words into hand signals and the occasional flare. "Oh, and a

kraken. Lots of damage to buildings ... Jormun's people were fought off, and the other Fleet Legates are seeing to the pursuit... Thousands of enemy Islanders were killed, Legion casualties minimal."

"Let him know what happened here," Leon ordered, and Gaius began to make large sweeping gestures that Leon watched the Legion signalman translate to Sigebert.

"All right, passed on," Gaius said after about five minutes.

"Ask if he needs us to return," Leon added. It sounded like things back in the city were fine, but he needed to make sure. He wasn't going to continue on to whatever was at the marked location if the rest of the task force back in the city was under siege or something of that nature. He needed a secure route back to the fleets if he wanted to conduct this expedition in a safe manner.

A moment later, Gaius reported, "No, Sir Sigebert is saying they have everything in hand, and that we should proceed with your mission."

Leon nodded with enough exaggeration that Sigebert noticed and returned it. With their reports made, Leon and Gaius made their back down to the camp and met back up with the Tribune. There, Leon made plans to leave a little bit later than he intended, giving the marines a little bit more time to rest up before proceeding further up the volcano. They were still about twenty miles away from their destination, and now that they were out of the thickest parts of the jungle, he was hoping they could make that march in a single day.

First, however, they had to clean up and secure the area. Two marine companies also had to be left behind to keep the camp occupied and to secure a route for the rest of the battalion to retreat along, if need be. Leon wasn't about to rush further away from the support of the fleets without leaving at least one strongpoint along the route.

Once all of that was finally taken care of, Leon thought it was just about time to return to his tent. However, along the way, he made the snap decision to visit those marines who'd been injured and congratulate them on a hard fought victory. When he arrived, he found that most of them had been healed up and were resting, so he indulged his introverted nature and made do with a few nods and claps on the shoulder for those who were still awake. Still, it seemed to brighten them up a bit, so Leon left the medical tent feeling like it hadn't been a complete waste of time.

Once he arrived back at his tent, he found his squad there, right where he'd left them. Marcus was fast asleep, but Alix and Alcander were quietly playing a game of cards, and they looked up when he walked in, but when he waved and started making his way toward his private area, they went back to their game.

Upon returning to his 'bedroom', Leon froze in surprise. There, he found Maia awake and sitting up, her eyes locked on the Thunderbird look-a-like who had perched itself upon Leon's desk once again. Anzu, had risen from his place next to the bed and was glaring at the bird, as well, his fur and feathers raised threateningly, his wings slightly spread with tiny gusts of wind magic flowing through the pure white feathers, and his blood-red eyes narrowed in suspicion.

If Leon needed any sign that the bird was actually *there*, then Anzu's behavior was it. Still, his mental defenses were raised back to their peak. He hadn't let them completely lapse during the battle, but they'd fallen out of his mind a bit with a seventh-tier fire mage on the battlefield.

Leon walked into the room and laid his hand upon Anzu's back, right in between the shoulders of his wings. The griffin gave Leon a questioning look out of the corner of his eye, and only relaxed when Leon gave him the slightest of nods.

The bird didn't seem to care at all, however; it slowly ran its beak through the feathers on the underside of one of its wings, not even sparing Anzu a single glance. It only looked up when Leon began to quietly speak.

"Thank you for that tip, we were able to respond quickly enough that the Islanders weren't able to inflict too much damage."

"I watched from above," the bird said in its strange, echoing, inhuman voice as it raised its head to look Leon in the eye. "You did quite well. Gives me... confidence that you'll stop... the Serpent's Followers."

"Glad to see that you're more confident in our chances," Leon replied as he took a seat next to Maia. He gave her a quick searching look, trusting that she knew what he was asking without him needing to say it out loud.

She responded with a brief, but glowing smile, and a quick nod of her head before her face went back to stony seriousness and her eyes returned to the bird.

"Have you kept an... eye on them?" the bird asked.

"About as well as I can," Leon replied. He'd been diligently keeping his magic senses trained on the Islanders, constantly alert to the possibility of the female fire mage rallying enough of them to come and attack again. Fortunately, it seemed like the time for that had come and gone, for the fire mage was leading her relatively small group deeper into the jungle away from Leon's camp. As far as Leon could tell, they were making their way toward the western shores of the island where a large number of small villages were located. None of the Islanders were proceeding up the volcano toward his destination.

"They were not direct... followers of the Serpent," the bird

Chapter 557: Beginning the Crawl

"Fuuuck that," Marcus said as he and the rest of Leon's squad stared down into the hole that Leon had dug.

It hadn't taken long for Leon to dig up the entrance that the bird had spoken of. Not even two feet below the ashy depression, his shovel hit stone, and only a few minutes after that, Leon had uncovered a square stone slab about six feet to a side. The slab was thick and tremendously heavy, but with his seventh-tier strength, Leon was able to lift the thing out of the depression, revealing a steep staircase made of black stone that led down deep below the volcano. So deep, in fact, that the light from the early evening sun didn't reach the bottom of the stairs.

The passage was tight and narrow, barely wide enough to allow a single armored man of Leon's size to descend without tucking in too much. Leon could easily see why Marcus had reeled back once it was revealed; even he was getting claustrophobic just staring down into this abyss. For all his power, Leon couldn't see the bottom of the stairway.

Quickly projecting his magic senses, Leon tried to scan for the bottom. He didn't want to descend down these stairs without knowing everything he possibly could about what may lay below. Hells, he didn't want to descend at all, just the thought of it was making his feathers slim down in fear...

'Feathers?' Leon thought, momentarily confused as to where that feeling came from.

He didn't sense any magic swirling around in the smooth black stone bricks, so he was unpleasantly surprised when his magic senses were immediately scattered at the entrance of this deep, foreboding stairway.

"Let's all back up a bit..." he said, waving back his squad and several of the Legion marines who had stepped closer to have a look. He and Maia were the only two who stayed close by.

"Don't have to ask me twice," Alix whispered as she stepped away from the stairs.

"Same here," Marcus added. "I am not walking down that death pit! You can chalk me up to an intense *fuck no!*"

"I think you made that perfectly clear just a few seconds ago," Gaius pointed out. His voice was a little calmer and steadier than Alix or Marcus', but his face had paled considerably once Leon had opened the shaft.

There wasn't an actual magical aura that Leon could perceive emanating from this abyssal stairway, but he couldn't help but agree with everyone else that this black maw was about as welcoming as a snake pit. His heart couldn't help but race faster as he stared deep down into that pitch-black darkness, and all desire he had to run Jormun down died swiftly as the darkness seemed to swirl around deep below.

He did *not* want to go down there. He couldn't even imagine what kind of dark and terrible things might live in such a place. Things that might not take kindly to someone like him, someone full of life and power. As he stared down into the stairway, sensations began to crawl up his body of scaled hands brushing against him, of cold winds swirling around him, of countless black eyes filled with hatred, longing, and malice landing upon him.

Leon shivered in quiet terror. There was nothing down those stairs but death and horror, and no matter how much his claws rent the flesh of the creatures down there, there would be no end—

'Claws?' Leon thought, again wondering just what was going on with him as the strange instinct pulled him out of the awful reverie he'd lost himself in.

The bird was still there, perched on the fallen log and staring at Leon as he quietly freaked out about descending down these stairs. It remained silent, seemingly doing nothing more than waiting for when Leon had need of it again. Finally, as Leon took a couple stumbling steps back from the mouth of this abyssal stairway, he filled his body with the Thunderbird's lightning and glanced back at the bird, his body calming down significantly as the power he'd inherited from his Ancestor inundated his every cell.

"What... is all this?" he demanded to know, his voice trembling with fear and anxiety, his eyes narrowed in suspicion as they locked upon the bird. There was no magic emanating from these dreadful stairs, but Leon still found himself affected enough that he no longer hid his suspicion of the bird. It had proven itself helpful, but after his experience with carelessly trusting Nestor, Leon wasn't about to allow himself to trust something so easily again.

"I... couldn't tell you," the bird replied.

From behind them, Leon heard Marcus murmur, "This just gets so much better! Pirates, krakens, talking birds, now this shit! Pit of death, that's what this is! Pit of death!"

Ignoring Marcus for the moment, Leon said, "You knew about the map at the second island. You knew where those ruins were. You knew where this was. You know more than you're letting on. You say you want revenge against those who killed your aerie, but unless I get some answers, we're just going to blast this entrance to bits and move on. I'm not going to lead my people down this thing without more information."

"Some sense, thank the Ancestors," Alix muttered as she took another few steps away from the stairs before doubling over in nausea, her shiny brown hair falling over her face and hiding it from view.

Alcander walked over to her, and though he was looking a little pale as well, he at least had enough poise remaining to lay a friendly hand upon her shoulder in solidarity.

"Are you... saying you don't want... my help?" the bird asked, its strangely resonant voice not changing at all even though its feathers puffed up a bit in seeming indignation.

"I'm saying I don't trust you," Leon replied. "I'm saying I don't know you. I'm saying you could give me any story you wished and I would have no idea if it's true or not. I suppose I'm saying quite a bit more than that, too, but I think you get the gist. Now, you lead me and my people to this dark, dank hole in the ground and you expect me to just walk down into it without a word? I think not."

The bird was silent for a long time, its feathers slowly slimming back down to its normal size. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, it simply said, "Fair," and flew away without further fanfare.

Leon was surprised, almost to the point of calling out after it. He'd wanted to speak with it a bit more, to feel it out and see if his slowly growing trust wasn't misplaced, but he supposed the bird took offence and decided to cut its losses. This was fine enough in Leon's mind, though he was somewhat regretful that the bird hadn't shared more of what it knew—and it *did* know more, of that Leon was certain. But for all that, Leon still didn't trust it; there was just something about it that rankled him, something that had his instincts, if not screaming at him to get rid of the bird, at least had him constantly on guard.

Maybe it was just how the fact that no one had been able to see it before, or maybe it was just the fact that it was a *talking bird*, but Leon felt that it was just better to get a little bit more distance rather than keep following its advice without thought. But, with the bird's departure, he was left with a bit of a conundrum: what to do about this unfathomably deep pit the bird had led him to.

The stairs themselves were completely unadorned. They were made of large black stone bricks, shaped into rough rectangular boxes and held together with, as far as Leon could tell, standard mortar. There were no signs of magic at all in its construction, nor were there any hints of magic flowing within the stone, despite Leon's inability to project his magic senses past the entrance.

It screamed 'trap'. It screamed all kinds of strange magic and terrible danger. Leon didn't want to go down there.

But, as he stared down the pit, his heart hammering in his chest, his body screaming at him that it was a foolish thing to do, he knew he was going to. He had to stop Jormun. He needed to know what the man

was doing, and if what was at the bottom of these stairs could give him any kind of clue, then Leon was going to find out. He couldn't just let the man release some kind of apocalyptic beast upon the world. Leon had struggled greatly to keep the sense of justice that Artorias had instilled within him alive after his father's death, and even though Trajan had tried to kindle it again, Leon had wound up indulging his more introverted instincts instead.

But this, Leon wouldn't let slide. He couldn't. This was so much more than just letting two Princes he didn't care about tear apart their Kingdom. This was something that could affect the entire plane—the scale and depravity of it Leon had seen in the ritual site on the previous island. Leon could almost feel the disapproving gazes of Trajan and his father every time he thought about just letting this go.

That Jormun had tricked Leon so completely was a not inconsiderable factor, too. Leon had both personal and moral reasons for wanting Jormun stopped. This mission was no longer about Octavius for him.

So, Leon knew that he was going down into that pit. He'd see what was at the bottom, and if he could disrupt Jormun's plans at all, he was going to.

With hardly another word, Leon walked back to the mouth of the stairs. His heart raced in his chest, his vision wavered as he cast it down into the abyss, and a strange echo resounded in his ears—almost as if some horrific monster were roaring in the distance, and the sound was only just barely reaching his ears.

"Leon...?" Gaius called out, but Leon largely ignored him as, in a flash of light, a sheet of spell paper appeared in his hand.

Leon held out that paper, aiming the inscribed spell down the hole, and only a moment later, a bright orange flare was fired down the stairs.

Whatever power was keeping his magic senses from pushing past the door didn't work on the flare, which Leon was grateful for. He was mildly concerned that this would alert anything down there to his presence, but that was a small price to pay for getting a better idea of what he was going to walk down into.

The flare rocketed down the stairs at terrific speed. Since Leon had fired at a downward angle, the flare soon began to drop and bounce down the stairs, the ball of orange fire sputtering every time it did so. Down and down it went, until the light would've only been a tiny pinprick orange in the deep abyssal black of the stairway to mortal eyes.

But Leon's eyes were much greater than that of a mortal's, and he watched like a hawk as the flare kept falling down the stairs, down into the deepest depths of the island, until it eventually winked out as the magic that kept it burning was exhausted.

It had cleared at least half a mile and had not reached the bottom.

'Shitting fucking shit,' Leon thought, wondering just how deep this pit was that even his flares couldn't reach the bottom.

And knowing that he had to go down there.

"Alcander, Gaius, Alix, Marcus," Leon said, his voice quivering only slightly as he did his absolute level best to keep his fear under control. He also called over the Centurions who were monitoring the area and keeping it secure.

"We're not going down there...?" Alix asked as she walked over, her body starting to shake. "I'll go if you need me to... but I *really* don't want to go... I don't like the idea of having that much rock above me in such a tight space."

"I don't blame you," Leon said. There wasn't even enough space on those stairs to spread his wing—to spread his *arms*, and Leon felt like that reason alone was responsible for at least half of the anxiety he was feeling. He also felt like he was starting to understand just why the Thunderbird Clan had chosen a building aesthetic for its more important facilities that emphasized nature, taking pains to build much bigger and wider open spaces and to enchant the ceilings of their buildings to look like the sky. For beings descended from birds, such a confined space as this stairway would never have been tolerated.

At the very least, though, Leon could feel a few pangs of excitement that tempered his dread and nervousness. Exploring some old ruins of long-dead civilizations wasn't a new thing for him, but it would be the first time he'd ventured into such a place that wasn't connected to the Thunderbird Clan.

"I'm going down there," Leon declared, to the horror of just about everyone else. Only Maia stood with him, her expression unchanged. "I don't expect anyone else to join me. I can't imagine what might be down there, what kind of traps or monsters or other unspeakable things might await us. Hells, maybe it could be worse than horrors from beyond our plane: there could be nothing at all down there, and we might've wasted our time."

Leon smirked, but whether it was his delivery or just the oppressive terror that was leaking out of the pit, his joke didn't even bring the tiniest of smiles to anyone's face.

"But," Leon continued, not dwelling on that, "I need to see what's down there." He turned to the Centurions. "You will keep this entrance secured. I don't know what might happen down there, but I want to know that I can always retreat this way if need be. No marines are to follow me down there."

The Centurions nodded their agreement, and Leon saw the three fourth-tier mages sigh in quiet relief that they wouldn't be venturing down those stairs.

"The rest of you, I'll leave it up to you whether or not you want to join me." The rest of Leon's squad slowly nodded, but Leon's eyes were soon drawn towards Anzu. The young griffin had grown a lot in the few years since Leon had found him abandoned by his mother. He was on par with a fifth-tier mage, and viciously strong as well. But he was too big to follow Leon down that hole—not that Leon would ever try to force him. "Someone has to stay with Anzu," Leon said. "He can't follow me, so at least one of you has to stay behind."

"That... won't be me," Gaius said almost immediately, to Leon's obvious surprise. "I was sent by Sir Sigebert to stay with you and to collect reports for him. I'm not about to just watch you head down this hellish thing and not go with."

Leon slowly nodded in appreciation. Alcander, Marcus, and Alix, however, all exchanged quick, guilty looks. Leon didn't need to know what was going through their minds. They weren't going to accompany

him, he could see it in their body language. They felt guilty about it, enough that they were hesitating to say it out loud.

Perhaps Leon could've ordered them to head down there with him. Perhaps they might've gone with him if they had a greater sense of loyalty to him. Leon knew that he didn't command enough of their respect—not even from Alix—for them to risk heading down into this pit for him, which only made him even more appreciative that Gaius and Maia were going to follow him.

And he knew that Maia was going to, too. He didn't even have to look at her to know that. He could sense through their connection that she wouldn't tolerate him even asking her to stay behind. He felt a bit guilty about dragging her along, especially since she'd been injured during the night before, but he was grateful to have her support, nonetheless.

"You three stay here," Leon said, not wanting to wait any longer. "Keep Anzu company for me. The three of us won't take too long. Even if what we find is too big, we'll come back and report back to everyone what we find."

"Leon..." Alix whispered, guilt and fear dripping from her voice, but Leon interrupted with a quick wave before she could finish.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "It's a terrifying thing, and a deep risk to venture down there. It would be safer to remain topside. But we won't stop Jormun by staying safe. We won't do *anything* by staying safe. We have to take risks sometime, and I believe that this is a risk worth taking. I'll gamble with my life, but I won't gamble with all of yours. Stay here, stay safe, and if anything happens, get word back to Sigebert and the others."

With that, Leon turned and walked straight into the pit. He felt like if he waited another moment, the pressure of the pit would overwhelm him, and he'd never head down there. So he didn't hesitate.

Gaius and Maia were at his back, only a few steps behind him, lending him strength and keeping him on his toes. He owed it to them to get them out of this place alive, too—for all his talk of risk, he wasn't intending to leave his caution up here as he headed down this abyssal stairway.

Leon descended the first several dozen steps quite quickly, just enough to commit to this course of action. It was just far enough for all traces of the jungle breeze to die and for the air to grow dusty and stale, along with a few faint whiffs of burning sulfur that had been left by the flare.

But there, Leon paused for a moment. He was now past the entrance, and hopefully, past the point where his magic senses would be scattered. Unfortunately, as he tried to push his magic senses out of his body to scan the staircase, he barely managed to project them more than about ten feet from his body before they were scattered.

[Can you sense anything?] Leon asked Maia. As an eighth-tier equivalent being, he hoped she could see farther than him, maybe even overwhelm whatever was blocking their senses with her power.

[No,] she replied, crushing that hope.

Leon took a deep, steadying breath as he fished another spell out of his soul realm. This one was much like a flare, but both much longer lasting, and much dimmer. After he activated the spell, a small ball of fire about the size of a large candle's flame began to burn about a foot in front of him, and with little

more than a thought on his part, began to descend the stairs. One it had gone down about thirty steps, Leon began to follow it, grateful that whatever was blocking his magic senses wasn't blocking other kinds of magic.

He was more than powerful enough to see in the dark, but there was something about the darkness here that made it nearly impenetrable to his vision. This tiny candle spell helped a great deal, extending his vision dozens of feet in this claustrophobic passage.

But didn't seem to matter all that much, for the stairs just kept going, on and on and on. The weight of the rock and soil above them seemed to grow ever heavier, and it killed any desire to speak they may have had.

The air seemed to somehow grow even staler and more stagnant with every step they descended, while the walls seemed to press in on them from all sides. After a few minutes of walking while this feeling continued to grow, Leon realized that the stairway was, indeed, subtly growing narrower as they moved, with the walls almost scrapping against his pauldrons as he proceeded on down.

Leon heart rose into his throat as his dread and muted terror rose in tandem. He liked nothing about this, but he needed answers, he needed to know exactly what Jormun was doing and how to stop him. And he hadn't quite reached his mental limit.

From behind, Leon could hear Gaius' breathing getting faster and shallower, and while Maia didn't seem physically affected, Leon could feel her fear rising through their connection. He didn't know how much more of this any of them could take.

Finally, as the walls narrowed so much that Leon had to start turning his shoulders to keep moving with his armor, and right before he made the decision to turn around and send for a few Legion engineers from the fleets to make the days-long journey here and widen this passage, Leon saw the end of the stairs. The flickering light of his torch spell licked at the bottom of the stairs, bringing some slight relief to him. They'd descended nearly a mile into the earth, and while it had hardly been physically strenuous, Leon's nerves were frayed.

He didn't know what he would've done if the passage hadn't widened at the bottom. Probably turn around, as he'd already been about to do. But fortunately, as Leon emerged at the bottom of the stairs, he found that they opened onto a fairly large

Chapter 558: Entering the Temple of the Serpent

Leon, Maia, and Gaius stood before this giant temple, taking in the sight of the countless serpents covering the columns, and the gigantic Horned Serpent hanging down from the ceiling over the portico, its ruby eyes seeming to track their every move. With a closer inspection, each one of these seemingly crudely made reliefs were anything but, with extremely detailed scale patterns covering their bodies, and every one was different. Some were as large as giant cobras, some were of more medium size with long fangs bared and rattles on the end of their tails raised, but the vast majority were only about the size of garden snakes. Still, there were countless serpent statues covering the portico's columns, thousands in all.

If Leon had been told that these were real snakes that had been somehow petrified as they writhed and coiled about each other as they tried to slither their way up these columns, he'd have found it easy to

believe, for the detail in these otherwise roughly-cut reliefs was so fine, though their overall shapes were still fairly crude.

The massive Horned Serpent in the entrance, likewise, was immaculately detailed, and lacked the shapely drawbacks of the cruder serpent statues, being covered in millions of tiny carved scales, its horn and eyes fitting so perfectly in its skull that it almost looked like they had been naturally grown within the shining jade.

But all of this wasn't the most eye-catching thing, however. As he'd approached, Leon had managed to tear his attention away from these art pieces to examine the temple entrance as a whole, and found that it radiated an immense amount of magic power. There was a horrifying amount of magic flowing through the stone bricks of this temple, enough that Leon had a thought enter the back of his mind that maybe these *were* real snakes that had been somehow petrified. There was more than enough magic here to do something like that...

"No one... touch anything..." Leon said in a breathy whisper, his voice tinged with fear. "There's enough magic flowing through these walls to turn each one of us into a fine red mist..."

"Noted..." Gaius muttered as he took a step back from the temple, his eyes wide with fear and anxiety. "What in the name of all of our Ancestors *is* this place?"

"Hard to say," Leon replied as he took a few deep breaths to steady himself and examine the magic in the temple more closely. The power felt wrong, like oily water was covering his skin. It was incredibly disquieting, but he was able to at least identify it as some awful combination of darkness and water magic. "Whatever this place was built for, it wasn't for any orthodox rituals..."

"I think that much is obvious," Gaius said. "Look at the floor just in front of the door."

Leon obliged, and his mouth instantly began to curl in revulsion. It had been subtle enough that he'd failed to notice in the face of all the rest of the temple's artwork, but seeping out from the crack between the bottom of the titanic stone doors—themselves covered in serpentine reliefs—and the floor was some kind of dark red liquid that Leon didn't need to take too much time to identify.

Maia remained quiet, but Leon could feel her taking a few steps closer to him and lightly taking some of the Skyflax padding of his armor into her hand. When Leon glanced at her, he could see that while she was maintaining a stoic façade, her wide eyes spoke volumes about how much fear she was feeling. Leon took a quick step back and entwined his fingers with hers for a brief moment before he turned back to the temple's entrance.

He wasn't sure what to make of this. He was only a hair's breadth away from asking Xaphan and Nestor for their opinions of this place when a voice suddenly rang out in the entrance chamber, a smooth, confident voice that Leon recognized.

"Well, well, well," said the voice of Turiel—or rather, Jormun. "Looks like the guest of honor has finally arrived, and he brought a couple friends..."

Leon's blade was in his hand in an instant, and his magic surged through his body as his eyes danced around every corner of the chamber, searching for the pirate. Maia likewise prepared herself for battle

as a small water dragon erupted from her bronze skin and wrapped around the three of them. Gaius reacted the slowest of them, but he drew his blade and assumed a defensive stance, too.

“Now, now,” Jormun smugly said, “is that any way to act when you stand upon someone’s threshold? Maybe I ought to teach you three some manners...”

A deep thrumming sound reverberated through the chamber, originating somewhere behind the gargantuan doors, and Leon, Maia, and Gaius turned to face them. The ground began to subtly shake and the magical currents flowing through the chamber bent and flexed toward and away from the doors in time with each thrum.

The doors slowly began to slide open, but nothing beyond them was revealed, not even as both Leon and Maia flooded the room with their magic senses. Just beyond the doors was a curtain of inky black darkness that flowed downward from the ceiling of the next chamber like oil running down glass. Leon’s magic senses couldn’t penetrate this power, and he couldn’t otherwise see through it.

As the doors continued to open, Jormun seemed unable to refrain from talking. “I’ve always held it true,” he said, “that you can tell a lot about a person’s character by how they treat those creatures that are lower than them on the totem pole, so to speak. I’d like to introduce you to some of my lovely pets. They *love* meeting new people, so I hope the three of you get along *smashingly*...”

Emerging from the darkness that filled the doorway was a giant feline that radiated sixth-tier power. It had deep black fur, a pair of deep-set eyes that glowed in its skull like lit coals, long obsidian fangs that looked sharp enough to pierce even Leon’s armor, and vicious claws that looked more than up to the task of skinning even the most powerful of mages alive.

This great cat was not alone; following behind it was something altogether more unsettling: some massive beast covered in dark green scales, with a long, thin body, a narrow triangular skull set with what looked like easily a hundred eyes or more, and a huge gaping maw filled with countless teeth. All along its spine—covering a length of thirty feet at least—were a series of barbs that grew as they extended back along its body, eventually ending in a ball of scaled flesh spiked like a morning star at the end. Emanating from its body was another robust sixth-tier aura, but Leon had no doubt that its power was not limited solely to magic given the obvious thickness of its scales and its muscles that rippled beneath them.

Finally, one more creature came crawling out, and it was, without a doubt, the worst of the bunch. A centipede almost as long as the scaled thing, covered in glistening black chiton, dozens of antennae and other long thin appendages protruding out from its head, all of which were covered in fine hairs. It had a sickening number of legs that clicked incessantly as it crawled first across the floor, and then up the wall and onto the ceiling. It had a pair of sickly yellow stripes running down its body, and as it paused, it dangled its head off the ceiling for just long enough to snap at Leon with its half a dozen mandibles that covered its small, toothy mouth. Like the previous two, it only had a sixth-tier aura, but Leon couldn’t help but gulp and take a step back, his disgust only growing the longer he stared at this monstrosity.

These three monsters, from the moment they walked out the door, filled the chamber with killing intent—there was no doubt in Leon’s mind at all about what was about to happen. With his magic surging through his body, he turned to look at Gaius, intent on ordering him to retreat back to the stairs where Leon and Maia could protect him. However, as the words were leaving Leon’s mouth, sliding

doors hidden in the walls at the narrow, claustrophobic exit to the stairway slammed shut behind them, trapping them in with these three creatures.

'Shit,' Leon thought, as Gaius echoed the thought out loud.

"All right, then," Leon stated as he quickly waved to Gaius to get behind him, "I suppose this is how it's going to be, huh?"

As far as he could tell, the big cat was the smallest threat. All three creatures were only of the sixth-tier, but the reptile's scales and the centipede's carapace would prove themselves to be difficult to pierce, of that Leon felt certain. As a result, without waiting for another moment, Leon conjured a lightning spear in his off hand and hurled it with all the force he could muster at the cat. He wanted that thing gone as soon as possible so that he and Maia could each concentrate on one enemy apiece.

The cat, however, had seemingly sensed Leon's power, and hadn't immediately approached. Instead, it, the reptile, and the centipede had merely circled around or above Leon, Maia, and Gaius, wisely taking their measure instead of just charging right in.

Leon's lightning bolt instantly changed the dynamic. Those few brief seconds of calm were shattered as a bolt of silver-blue lightning appeared in Leon's hand one moment, and then exploded across the hide of the big cat the next.

The cat shrieked in pain and recoiled, but only a moment later, its shadow lengthened and thinned, and black smoky tentacles peeled off the floor and whipped toward Leon, only to glance off his armor. At the same time, the reptile snapped its long jaws and the surface of Maia's water dragon rippled, causing a large amount of water that made up its body to lose cohesion and spill out onto the floor, while from above, the centipede let the front third of its body peel off the ceiling, letting its head hang down almost level with Leon's head, its six mandibles peeling off of its mouth. Leon had just enough time to shift his attention to the centipede before jets of viscous, foul-smelling liquid were shot from each of its six mandibles.

Leon had no idea what that liquid was, and he was not of a mind to find out. He channeled as much power as his panicked and utterly repelled body was capable of using right now into his family's sword and swiped it toward the massive insect in a swift horizontal slash. A wave of lightning ripped through the air, sizzling through the liquid and flash-boiling it all away before it could touch any in Leon's party.

A moment later, Maia's water dragon abandoned its defensive posture and lunged for the reptile. With seeming ease, it snapped the creature up in its jaws, but when it bit down, not much happened apart from the monster making some sounds of vague discomfort. It then snapped its jaws again, and the bottom jaw of Maia's water dragon returned to formless liquid, splashing onto the cold stone floor.

The cat returned to its feet and bounded forward. Leon nimbly twisted out of the way as the creature's claws raked through the space he just occupied. He countered with a blast of lightning sent through his legs, knocking the cat back, while at the same time conjuring another lightning bolt in his off hand and hurling it at the centipede.

The bolt splashed across the centipede's chitin, not doing much visible damage, but still ripping the insect off the ceiling and sending it flying across the room.

“Oof!” Jormun’s disembodied voice called out. “You two are truly some wicked people, treating my pets like this! All they want to do is play a little bit!” The pirate’s voice was mocking, and Leon could tell that he was wearing a wide smile.

Even if Leon wanted to respond, he wouldn’t. He focused instead on the fight as he side-stepped another whip of darkness that cracked right past him. A moment later, he snapped his fingers and let loose with a gout of flame that consumed another half-dozen jets of venom or whatever liquid the centipede shot at him.

With a sickening crunch, Leon noticed that Maia had finally managed to snap the reptile in half. Whatever powers it had were strong, but clearly not strong enough in the face of Maia’s overwhelming might; her water dragon had managed to reform its jaws and snapped them around the reptile’s neck. Its scaled hide hadn’t been penetrated, but the water dragon had still managed to break the reptile’s neck and kill it almost instantly.

Maia wore a look of hatred and mild frustration, one that was mirrored on Leon’s face. Jormun’s monsters weren’t particularly powerful, and their attacks weren’t putting all that much pressure on either of them, but they still had some traits that made them hard to deal with.

As the large cat’s shadows began to swirl around it again in clear preparation to lash out at Leon with more tendrils, Leon leaped toward it, ignoring the centipede for the moment and trusting in Maia to keep it in check. Lightning coursed through his body and into his blade, and when Leon lunged forward, the cat’s darkness magic melted away before the tip of the blade.

The cat almost managed to twist out of the way, but the blade still raked across its spine and sent countless arcs of lightning into its body. The cat shrieked in pain once more and sped away from Leon as fast as it could, clearly not having taken enough damage to cripple it entirely. Leon recognized the look of a defeated animal, and let it go. Whatever Jormun had done to make it loyal and to fight for him paled in comparison to the pain Leon had just inflicted. Now, its fight-or-flight instincts kicked in, and the cat had settled on flight.

Turning back around, Leon saw the serpentine water dragon imposing itself between him and the centipede, a few dark streaks flowing through Maia’s water that Leon assumed to be more of the centipede’s venom that the dragon had blocked.

Leon gathered lightning in his hand once more, conjuring a great bolt of silver-blue energy. All it took was a thought directed toward Maia, and the dragon twisted out of the way just in time for Leon to hurl the bolt at the centipede. The insect’s body rippled and vibrated as it tried to dodge, but the bolt was too fast. It splashed across the centipede’s face, boiling away its eyes and burning away its antennae. Lightning dancing across its form, scorching its chiton and seeking out any chink in its armor. It seemed to find a few, for only a moment or two after the explosion of lightning died down, the insect had ceased to move, laying there on the floor, its body gently smoking as the stench of fried meat filled the air.

Leon glanced back at the cat just in case it decided that it had to fight if it couldn’t find a way out of this chamber. He was briefly concerned that it might try to run up the stairs and make trouble for the marines at the top, but he saw the cat quickly melt away into its shadow, which then disappeared into the masonry of the temple.

Leon, Maia, and Gaius all took deep breaths now that the fight was over, at least for now.

"Damn..." Gaius muttered as he stared at the hideous bodies of the reptile and the centipede, "I think... maybe following you two down here may have been a mistake."

"Maybe it was," Leon replied, though his tone was light and without a shred of accusation. "Maybe it wasn't. I get the feeling that there's going to be more to this place than just fighting..."

"And you wouldn't be wrong, Leon Raime," Jormun's disembodied voice replied as it echoed throughout the chamber. Leon did his best, but he couldn't detect anything—not from the sound, nor from the way that the magic in the air responded to his words—that might've indicated where Jormun was speaking from, nor how he could see and hear them, nor how he was speaking with them. For all Leon knew, Jormun was in the room with them, just invisible and somehow masking his voice.

With that chilling thought, Leon quickly summoned his magic once more and sent great arcs of lightning surging out from his body and bathing the room in his power. He didn't put too much power into the attack, but he knew from his own ring of invisibility that if Jormun were here, even the mildest of attacks would reveal him.

Or so Leon hoped.

However, no pirate was revealed, and the room soon echoed with the sound of Jormun's laughter even as Maia stared at Leon in surprise and Gaius covered his eyes and ears and ducked for cover as bolts of lightning flashed past him. These bolts painted great black burn marks over the walls and shattered some of the serpentine reliefs covering the temple's columns, though.

As Jormun's great guffaws died down, he asked slightly breathlessly, "Looking for me, Leon? I'm not in there with you, but I can understand why you might be worried about that. No, I'm a *bit* further in, and I'm waiting for you. After the show you just put on, I daresay that you've proven yourself worthy to enter this temple and join me. Don't keep me waiting, now..."

With Jormun's voice dying down, the great stone doors of the temple began to rumble and swing inward, once more revealing the completely opaque inky black curtain of darkness that obscured the interior of the temple from view. Not even Leon or Maia's magic senses could penetrate that barrier.

"Are we... going in there?" Gaius asked as he straightened himself up, his voice cracking one with fear.

Leon frowned. If Jormun was in here, then he wanted to go in, but he knew that it wouldn't be quite so easy as exploring some empty rooms and finding the pirate lounging in some ruined furniture. This was a trap, there was no way two ways about it. If Leon were to enter, he'd essentially be agreeing to play Jormun's game.

But Jormun was right here, Leon couldn't just turn away, not even as the possibility of the pirate simply lying to him passed through his mind.

'No, he's telling the truth,' Leon thought to himself, certain in his belief. *'He's here just to fuck with our heads. Maybe he could do this from farther away, but being here would make it just that much easier to toy around with us. He's here.'*

"I am," Leon whispered, and when he glanced at Maia, she nodded, too. When Leon turned his eyes toward Gaius, he saw the young blond nobleman go pale as he stared at the black curtain just beyond the temple's doors. "I won't force you to come with, Gaius. Just make up your mind quickly, I don't want to leave you here alone. If you're not going to come with, just head back up the stairs and wait with everyone else."

Gaius took a deep breath, and then another, and then another, almost as if he were starting to hyperventilate. However, after only a few seconds, he said, "I'll go with. I may not be of much help, especially if things turn violent in there, but you never know, I might also prove useful..."

Leon nodded. "As I said, I don't think there's going to be too much violence from here on out, but you never know. Stay behind either myself or Naiad, and don't take any chances."

Gaius was a smart man, that much Leon knew. He didn't have to go over every possible scenario and give Gaius instructions. Leon felt like he'd said enough, and he turned back to the temple's entrance.

"All right, no use in delaying this. Keep your eyes open, be on the lookout for anything unusual."

"That might describe a lot of things down here," Gaius pointed out.

"True, but use your best judgment. I don't want Jormun to lead us around by the nose, and this has all the makings of a trap, but... I don't know... I'm just *certain* that things aren't going to be quite so clear-cut from here on out..."

"How do you know that?" Gaius asked.

Leon paused in his answer. He wasn't sure how to explain it, he just had a feeling that he couldn't identify that, while Jormun was using this as a trap, the temple was designed more as some kind of test. He could almost hear a voice in the back of his head telling him that entering the temple wouldn't prove to be quite as terrible a decision as it seemed right now.

And suddenly, a terrible thought went through Leon's head, and he made sure his mental defenses were raised while at the same time he sent a bolt of the Thunderbird's power surging through his brain. Nothing seemed to change, but Leon was still moderately unnerved.

"On second thought..." Leon said as he glanced back toward Gaius, for the most part ignoring Gaius' question. "How about we run back upstairs real quick and grab the others? Now that we know what's down here, they can at least secure this entrance chamber."

Gaius agreed, and twenty minutes or so later, a dozen marines and the rest of Leon's squad had come down. The Centurions remained topside, while a messenger was sent back to Leon's camp to relay what they'd found to Sigebert and ask about possible reinforcements now that they had a solid lead on Jormun.

Those of Leon's party that had come down weren't looking too good, however, with Alix staring apprehensively at the temple doors, while Marcus and Alcander hovered nearby, clearly uncomfortable. Anzu was the only member of Leon's party that had remained at the top of the stairs since he couldn't fit down the stairway.

"I can't believe you're going in there," Alix muttered to Leon. She'd spent a great deal of time as they headed down the stairs trying to convince him not to do so, or at least to wait for Sigebert's reply to his report, but Leon felt like he'd already delayed this too long. If he waited too much longer, then Jormun would probably leave the temple, or the doors might close for good. He'd already taken something of a risk in that regard by taking the time to head back up to the surface to gather his squad and send his report.

"I can't entirely believe it, either," Leon muttered.

With a grimace, Leon started to walk toward the doors with Maia just a step behind him. So far, only she and Gaius had agreed to enter the temple with him. Leon couldn't blame the others for their apprehension, his heart was racing madly at the thought of entering the temple and seeing what fresh horrors might await them.

[Are you... sure about this?] Maia asked.

[Not at all,] Leon truthfully replied. [This whole thing is a bad idea, I know that, but I think we can get through it. We can't go running away just because this *seems* like a terrible thing. We can't give ground just because it *seems* like a trap. Let's just take this slow and keep our guards up. If we run into something we can't handle, we'll turn around and make our way out however we can.]

That answer didn't seem to satisfy Maia, but she nodded and kept her head on a swivel as she watched for any threats.

When the three of them reached the curtain, Leon halted. He examined it in great detail, looking for any runes or anything of that nature. He briefly consulted with Nestor and Xaphan, and when they told him that these markings didn't seem to be anything directly dangerous, Leon reached out and touched the curtain. Indeed, his hand passed through the curtain like it wasn't even there, showing that it was no more than an illusion.

With a deep sigh and a quick meaningful look exchanged with Maia and Gaius, Leon committed to his decision and walked through the curtain.

Chapter 559: The Serpent's Gold

Walking through the curtain of darkness felt to Leon like walking into a freezing pool—which was remarkable since, as a seventh-tier mage, it wasn't often that Leon was bothered enough by such things to even notice them. It wasn't debilitating, but it was uncomfortable and more than enough to amplify his disquieted feelings.

What amplified those feelings even more was Leon's immediate realization that he was alone—Gaius and Maia were nowhere to be seen.

His heart rate spiking in panic, Leon turned around, his eyes wide and staring into the abyssal void as he searched for two, yet seeing nothing.

"Gaius!" Leon called out, his voice seeming muted, almost as if he were buried in a pile of blankets. No reply came, and he quickly began to reach for his connection with Maia. It was still there, so he felt some comfort, but he couldn't get a read on where she might be.

[Maia...] Leon whispered through the connection, but again, he received no response.

'Shit...' Leon thought to himself as he forced himself to calm down and evaluate the situation. This might just be a function of the darkness curtain, and maybe Gaius and Maia would be there when he got to the other side...

As this thought passed through his head, Leon realized that, in his haste to look around, he'd completely disoriented himself. The abyssal void he found himself in was completely black—he could still see his body somehow, so it wasn't like everything was shrouded in darkness, but his surroundings were so devoid of color and shape that he felt like he stood upon an invisible platform floating in empty space. When he tried to project his magic senses to try and get an idea of where he was, his surroundings felt much less than empty, however; they felt thick and syrupy, and he couldn't push his magic power out any further than about ten feet.

[Nestor, Xaphan,] Leon called out into his soul realm, [What's going on, where am I?]

Nestor responded first, the speed with which his reply came betraying the fact that he was probably watching Leon this whole time.

[You're in a liminal space,] the dead man replied. [It's a transition between one place to another. Think of it like a tunnel that you walk through, but only connected to normal space at either end.]

[... Huh?] Leon grunted, not quite understanding the answer—or at least, not having confidence in his interpretation of Nestor's explanation. It sounded almost like he was being teleported...

[You're being teleported,] Xaphan said. [The ghost is just being needlessly pompous and verbose.]

[You'd know a thing or two about that, wouldn't you?] Nestor shot back, and Leon kind of hated it, but he found himself agreeing with Nestor on that one.

Before the two long-term residents of his soul realm could descend into juvenile bickering that wouldn't help anyone, Leon interrupted.

[Is this something I ought to be nervous about? Is this a threat?]

[Of course it's a threat,] Xaphan said, his tone sounding dismissive and almost incredulous, as if Leon had asked what color the sky was or something equally obvious. [However, it's not an active one. From what I can tell, if you wanted to, you could turn around and make your way out the way you came.]

[Yes,] Nestor agreed. [There's no threat here from the limin—from the teleportation tunnel, I suppose I ought to call it... However, you're heading into the unknown, and that's always threatening. If someone has control over the enchantment that controls this teleportation, then they could also do some pretty terrible things to you if they knew what they were doing, but I can't imagine anyone—]

As if deliberately cutting Nestor off, from roughly behind Leon came a titanic beam of light that stretched from the furthest depths of this abyssal void and reached all the way up to the highest heavens. Leon felt an ungodly amount of magic power within, and the chilly interior of this teleportation tunnel began to rapidly heat up. At first, the temperature became mild and pleasant, and then in the space of a second or two, started to get relatively hot, and then even hotter.

[I think that's all the motivation I need to get moving,] Leon said as he turned in the opposite direction of the beam of light and began to run. He had no idea how much hotter that beam of light would make the tunnel, or what else it might be doing to the tunnel, but he wasn't keen on finding out. Already, after only about five steps, the heat in the tunnel almost became unbearable, but then, Leon's surroundings bent and distorted and began to grow brighter...

And he burst out of the curtain of darkness into a blazingly bright room that seared his eyes and forced him to squeeze them shut until he could direct a little bit of magic into them to soothe the pain and decrease his light sensitivity that had, since he'd just been underground and in the void, been turned up quite high.

The temperature, at least, had stabilized.

Leon didn't immediately open his eyes once the dull pain died down. Instead, he projected his magic senses now that the void wasn't pressing in on him from all sides, and to his delight, he found he could project his magic power without issues again. He wasted no time letting his magic senses try and fill the place he now found himself.

He was immediately stunned by what his magic senses sent back to him. Instead of the dark, bleak, grey and black granite that he'd been expecting that would've matched the temple's exterior, he instead found himself in an immaculately lit and appointed domed chamber, and one that was quite large—the ceiling was easily five hundred feet tall, and the circular chamber had a radius of about a thousand feet. The floor was white marble so finely polished it was almost as reflective as water, the walls looked like smooth silver, and the shallow domed ceiling looked like it was made of gold. Etched upon the surface of the dome were countless intricately-detailed serpents who were slithering toward the dome's center, while in the very center of the room was a golden pillar made of a mass of golden serpentine statues that looked like they were frozen in the midst of climbing and writhing over one another to reach the top, almost identical to the serpent reliefs adorning the columns of the temple's exterior portico.

The center of the central pillar over which all of the serpents were slithering, however, wasn't polished granite, it was an immense golden colossus of a muscular, yet androgenous humanoid figure with a spear in their right hand, their left hand raised up against the ceiling like this colossus was holding up the dome. Their head, like the statues outside, was not human, but serpentine in shape, with a long ivory horn extending backward from the colossus' forehead toward their uncannily long, scaled neck.

The eyes of this colossus were made of shining emeralds, each one at least as large as Leon's torso, and they glowed with magical light. It might've also been a trick of the light or the uncanny way the colossus had been built, but Leon felt like those eyes were boring straight into him, peeling away his every layer and divining every secret of his being.

Curiously, Leon wasn't able to see the source of the white light that filled the room. Nothing save for the colossus' emerald eyes gave off any light, and yet everything was perfectly well-lit, at least as far as Leon's magic senses could tell.

There was nothing else of note in the immense chamber, at least by cursory examination. No furniture, no fancy decorations adorning the walls, just a vast, otherwise empty chamber. He made sure to keep his magic senses at least partially directed at the massive serpent-man statue, though, as the last

colossus he'd run into like this—the Thunderbird colossus outside of Nestor's lab—had tossed immensely powerful lightning at him.

Unfortunately, he couldn't see Gaius or Maia. Neither were present in the chamber, but Leon was at least a little relieved to feel his connection with Maia was still there, even if his quick attempts to contact her went without response.

"You know, I wasn't exactly expecting *this*," came Jormun's disembodied voice echoing throughout the chamber. Leon was already wearing his armor, but his blade suddenly appeared in his hand as he assumed an aggressive stance and sent his power surging through his body. The room was already inundated with his magic senses which told him that Jormun wasn't in the room, but Leon's eyes snapped open and he scanned the room just in case. However, if Jormun was in the room with him, then Leon wasn't able to perceive him.

It seemed that the pirate could see him, however, for a moment later, he continued with an amused tone.

"Was that reaction just for me, or did I startle you? I won't deny that I'd be flattered immensely if you were that passionate to speak with me one-on-one again..."

Leon scowled behind his helmet and shouted, "Where are you!"

"Still here," Jormun replied. "Why? Do you rue your decision not to come back to my place? Looking to fix that mistake? I mean, I wouldn't blame you, I'm *quite* the catch, if I do say so myself, but unfortunately, I have work I need to get to today."

"What work are you referring to?" Leon demanded to know as he started to slowly wander around the chamber, quietly looking for anything that might resemble a door or enchantment control console. Unfortunately, it seemed like going back wasn't much of an option since the dark curtain that he'd walked out of had disappeared, leaving nothing behind but the curved silver wall. So, if Leon was going to get his bearings and try to figure out a way forward, then he'd have to buy himself some time. It seemed like Jormun had some control over this place, though Leon was still getting a grasp on just what kind of a temple this was and what that control could mean, but if Leon could keep him talking, then he might be able to learn something about the temple while also distracting Jormun long enough for Leon to find something useful.

Jormun was silent for a moment, and Leon gritted his teeth in frustration, thinking that maybe Jormun hadn't decided to stick around to talk.

The pirate proved that immediate reaction wrong, however, when he responded with a note of incredulousness in his voice, "Did you really ask me that, Leon? Do you not know what I'm doing here? Have I overestimated your abilities or your intelligence?"

Leon paused for a moment and shrugged. "Probably," he frankly replied. "Why don't you explain everything you're doing here to me like I'm only five? Should make things easier to understand..."

The sound of Jormun chuckling filled the chamber. "I don't honestly think a five-year-old would understand what I'm doing," he said as his guffaws died down. "But *you*... I think you do... I mean, I basically told you, you know?"

Leon hummed noncommittally as he quickly assessed what he'd found in the chamber so far: a whole lot of nothing. There were no enchantments he could manipulate, no command consoles to be seen, no doors, no windows, no nothing. The chamber was just... empty, save for the enormous colossus. Leon began to hesitantly approach it, but he kept himself on guard the entire time.

"Look, Leon," Jormun said, his tone light and casual as if he and Leon were just discussing gardening or something equally inconsequential, "do you know what this place is?"

"Some kind of temple to the Serpent from that story you told me?" Leon asked.

"Right in one!" Jormun proudly declared. "This place was built during the height of civilization in these islands, when the Serpent still spoke to us! When the Serpent's presence could be felt in every facet of my people's lives!"

"The imagery's a little strange," Leon said as his eyes slowly swept over the colossus, taking in the humanoid body and long serpentine head.

"I suppose it might be, but I get the feeling that it's something you, of all people, ought to understand and appreciate," Jormun replied. "I mean, you carry a power in your blood, don't you? Something passed down to you from some inhuman ancestor?"

Leon froze in shock as, once again, he checked his mental defenses and sent a quick jolt of silver-blue lightning into his brain. He did his best to ensure that his senses were clear and that there wasn't any foreign power in his mind—or anywhere else in his body—before he responded.

"How do you know about that...?" Leon quietly asked, deciding not to deny it. His lightning was eye-catching and quite special, there was little he could do to deny his inheritance even if he were of a mind to do so. Besides, for as much thought as he'd given to trying to reject the Thunderbird Clan, he could now recognize that it was mostly just a reaction to Nestor, and to his own failings as a mage and a sense of inadequacy that had wormed its way into his head.

Or maybe it had been there all along, he wasn't sure.

Regardless, Leon didn't want to announce it from the rooftops, but he also still took some small amount of pride in bearing the Thunderbird's blood; he found that right now, he didn't want to deny it.

"The Serpent quickly identified you as soon as you showed up on these shores," Jormun admitted. "It knows who and what you are, and it took enough interest to tell me..."

"You speak with this beast?" Leon asked, his tone skeptical as he sought confirmation.

"I do," Jormun replied without hesitation. "Years and years ago, it appeared to me in a vision, asking me to help it to free itself. Thanks to the power it lent to me, I was able to escape the Serpent's Rattle—what used to be the most distant of the Serpentine Isles from your Bull Kingdom—before your Penitent Paladin destroyed it, and ever since then, I've been faithfully serving as its vanguard. I will release this Serpent back into the world, and all will know of its glory!"

The pirate spoke with great gusto, enough that Leon could almost imagine whatever enchantment console he might be hunched over getting drenched in more and more of the man's spit with every syllable. But even with all that energy, Leon was unconvinced.

“Forgive me for not taking you at face value,” he said as he finally came to a stop at the foot of the colossus, where hundreds of snakes of all kinds had been rendered in gold and wrapped around its legs.

“You don’t have to,” Jormun replied. “All you need to know is that I know you’re of the Thunderbird, and so you ought to understand this concept... You see, the older myths of the Serpent—those from ages long past, *thousands* of years ago at the very least, possibly from as far back as before the appearance of the Central Empires—the old myths hold that the Serpent wasn’t a gigantic monster, at least not all the time. It could transform its body into that of a human at will, allowing it to rule in comfort and style. It took a great many concubines, and from those unions were born many children, children that spread its power down through the lines of the Serpentine Islanders down to this very day. I don’t think there’s a single Islander in existence who isn’t somehow descended from the Serpent...”

“So this is an allusion to that?” Leon asked, gesturing at the colossus and trusting that Jormun could see it, or at least understand what he was trying to ask.

“Yes,” Jormun replied.

“Well, you’re right, I do understand,” Leon truthfully replied. He’d seen the Thunderbird transform herself into her human form many times in his soul realm, he could completely get why worshippers of a shapeshifting snake might depict it as both human and serpent.

“Good,” Jormun drawled.

“What I don’t understand, however,” Leon continued, “is what exactly all of this is *for*. Is this just a place for worshippers to gather?”

“Something like that,” Jormun said, sounding like he was sighing at the same time. “This temple was built to accommodate the Serpent’s truest of followers. They were to be tested at every turn, shown their deepest and darkest fears and challenged to overcome them with their faith in the Serpent. They were supposed to reach this chamber with a newfound appreciation and veneration of the Serpent’s power, with their faith redoubled. How *you* arrived here so early—especially after walking through the portal after almost *half a damn hour*—is honestly quite mind-blowing. I mean, I *figured* you’d get through it quickly, but I didn’t expect you to blast through the first trial in less than a minute!”

“The two who were with me...” Leon hesitantly began.

“Hmm? Oh, yes, they’re still in their trials, I believe. It’s only been a few minutes, Leon, you can’t expect *everyone* to be as quick as you!”

Leon scowled again and doubled down on his inspection of the colossus. He couldn’t sense any unusual magics flowing through the gold, but he was still convinced that if there was anything to be found in this chamber, it was here. Maybe he could find something that might cancel this trial, or whatever the hells was keeping Maia from him. And Gaius, too, but the lion’s share of Leon’s concern right now was claimed by Maia.

“You know, if I’m honest, I think even the chamber is a little bamboozled, Leon,” Jormun admitted.

“Normally, there’s a lot more stuff in there. I don’t think that place was ready for you to get through it so quickly... Every time that I returned to that room after completing a trial, I found food, wine, and plenty of *companionship*, if you know what I mean... But always, without fail, the doors to the rest of the

temple would open as soon as I walked out, allowing me to roam this temple freely and to take in the majesties that the Serpent bestows upon its followers at my leisure. That no doors have opened for you... seems strange to me..."

Leon paused in his search as he contemplated Jormun's words. Leon had only spent a little bit of time within a spatial tunnel and had a beam of light practically push him out; he hadn't faced anything even remotely close to what he might've called a 'trial'. If he had to guess, he'd say that *something* hadn't wanted him in there.

Given the legends he knew of Thunderbirds striking down Horned Serpents in the Northern Vales, and of the legend that Jormun had told him of the three heroes wielding what sounded to Leon a lot like the power of the Thunderbird—he imagined that *maybe* the Thunderbird, or those who possessed the Thunderbird's power, were somehow opposed to this Serpent. Maybe this Serpent had been struck down by members of the old Clan and bore a grudge, preventing anyone of his bloodline from partaking of its trials.

It made more sense to Leon the more he thought about it, but there was a small part of him that was a little sad. Some of the most fun and exhilarating things he'd ever done in his life were exploring ancient places like this and learning of the powers hidden within them. The Cradle, Xaphan's prison, his family's archives... There was a part of him that was greatly disappointed that he hadn't gotten to see the powers left behind here by the Serpent, or whatever this place was built to honor.

The greater part of him, however, was instead focused on trying to find some way to either join Maia or to bring her to him. Leon wasn't about to leave her in whatever half-baked 'trial' this damn place had cooked up for her.

"By the way, Leon," Jormun continued, "I have to wonder a bit about why you're here..."

"You've asked me that question before," Leon shot back before he turned his attention briefly inward.

[I can't make heads or tails of this thing, I can barely even sense the magic flowing through this chamber,] he said to Xaphan and

Chapter 560: Breaking Into a Trial

Leon gritted his teeth as he knelt there in the spatial tunnel. His gauntlet had been ripped and torn as it was pulled from behind the wall in the previous chamber and into the curtain of darkness, and the flesh and bone beneath had fared little better. Blood poured out from the shredded metal, and Leon could barely think from the pain. His right hand, his dominant hand, had been horribly mangled.

With a terrible scream, Leon summoned the strongest healing spell he possessed and wrapped his hand up in it. The blood soaked through the spell paper immediately, but fortunately for him, the spell paper he'd used for this spell was of particularly high quality, so it still activated and soothed his pain considerably, enough that he could start to fit more than just pain into his head.

Leon used that spare mental capacity to quickly take stock of his surroundings. He was in an identical spatial tunnel that he'd been in not too long before—it was pitch black all around him, enough so that he had little frame of reference for where he needed to go or where he literally stood.

At the very least, it seemed like the golden serpent-man colossus, which had been mere feet away from snatching him up in its gilded fist, hadn't been able to follow him through the curtain of darkness. That brought a small sense of relief to Leon.

That relief was immediately dashed when Jormun's disembodied voice suddenly rang out through the tunnel.

"Now, now, now, Leon, we were having such a fine conversation, why did you have to just start ignoring me like that? As I told you a moment ago, I can enable any security features I want. Just leaving that colossus doesn't mean I can't strike at you, so why don't we continue where we left off?"

"Kiss my ass!" Leon shouted as he struggled to his feet, his voice hoarse with pain even as his flesh slowly stitched itself back together. He could tell that he'd need several more healing spells and likely a few days of rest to properly recover, but at the least, he estimated that he'd have full functionality of his hand again in about ten minutes so long as he wasn't disturbed overmuch.

"Is that an invitation?" Jormun asked flirtatiously as a flash of light from behind Leon suddenly illuminated the tunnel, turning the floor stark white and the walls into a strange grey gradient that darkened as it rose toward the still-pitch black ceiling. The tunnel was incredibly wide and endlessly long, but as the tunnel began to heat up, Leon just forced himself to his feet and began to run. Clearly, Jormun was activating some defensive measures, and he wanted to get to wherever this tunnel led before he found himself caught here.

[Oh, that's not good...] Leon heard Nestor whisper from his soul realm.

[What are you saying?!] Leon demanded in panic as he continued to build up speed, the light that illuminate the tunnel from behind him growing more intense with every passing second. Already, he could feel his back starting to break out into sweat despite his command over fire magic and the extensive defensive enchantments he'd built into his armor.

[It looks like the exit of this tunnel has been somehow blocked,] Nestor explained.

[That's hardly an issue, just tear your way out,] Xaphan stated like it was the most obvious thing in the world. [I did it all the time back in the Void when traveling around the Elemental Plane of Fire. If you don't like where you're going, or if the tunnel begins to destabilize, just rip your way out and deal with wherever you land. You could land right back in front of that colossus, and it would still be less dangerous than staying in a spatial tunnel that's actively resisting you like this.]

"Have you noticed it, yet, Leon?" Jormun's smug voice sounded. "Coming into this tunnel was a terrible mistake, you'll only die here. You *really* should've stayed where we could talk more, I would've much preferred us to hash this out like men, not for me to crush you like an ant in a paper tunnel. Ah well, I suppose I can't have *everything*..."

Leon heard a surprising amount of remorse in Jormun's voice, and he couldn't help but wonder where the hells it was coming from. He didn't for a moment think that Jormun was being properly genuine, so Leon just chalked it up to Jormun just being *very* convincing with his act, or there was an aspect to this whole situation that he was missing, some reason that Jormun was so interested in him beyond simply being the only seventh-tier mage that accompanied the Legion to the Isles.

And Leon felt like he knew why: his Inherited Bloodline.

Far behind Leon, another great light began to shine, but from the way it twisted and turned as it shone on the walls made Leon realize that it wasn't some static light that changed the spatial properties of the tunnel. He took the chance to slow down enough to glance back over his shoulder, and immediately turned back around and kept running as fast as his lightning-enhanced legs could carry him.

He'd seen a bright white light that was coalescing into the shape of a massive serpent with a long curved horn jutting out from its forehead. The amount of magic that Leon could sense within it was staggering—more than enough to seriously screw him up if not kill him outright.

"This one looks like fun," Jormun said thoughtfully. "And it's not even the most powerful one that I can use right now. Looks like there are a *ton* of things I can use on you and your friends if I wanted—and even more that were activated by *your* presence, Leon. Seems like my Ancestors and yours hated each other fiercely."

"Shut the fuck up!" Leon roared as he sprinted down the spatial passage in the vain hope of reaching the end before that serpent finally finished forming and came tearing down the tunnel after him.

[Stop running!] Xaphan shouted into Leon's mind. [You'll get nowhere! That fuckstick pulling the strings isn't just going to open the door for you if you reach the end! Take a breath, collect yourself, and rip your way out! You have to do it! Use your lightning, it shouldn't be too difficult! You should still end up close to either your fish girl or that other hanger-on!]

Leon gritted his teeth, groaned in frustration, then raised his left hand and conjured a lightning bolt.

"What are you—" Jormun began before Leon brought the bolt crashing down upon the floor of the spatial tunnel.

Immediately, the tunnel shook like it was experiencing a powerful earthquake, and the lights behind Leon began to flicker. The serpent forming even paused for a moment as Leon's magic began to interfere with the magic of the tunnel.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you..." Jormun cautioned as Leon fought to remain standing amidst the tunnel's shaking. "Who knows where you might end up, and no matter where you go, I'll still be able to reach you..."

Leon screamed incoherently as he conjured another lightning bolt and slammed it into the ground again, causing cracks to spiderweb out from where he stood, and the shaking in the tunnel grew more intense. Leon wasn't able to stay on his feet, and as the lights behind him began to flicker even more, he fell to the ground. But he wasn't done, and he raised one of his legs into the air, channeled a huge amount of lightning magic into his foot, and brought his heel back down onto the ground with as much force as he could manage given his position. It wasn't as powerful a strike as his lightning bolts, but the magic transferred into the tunnel was still quite powerful. The shaking reached a breaking point as the lights behind Leon winked out, along with the coalescing serpent, and the tunnel began to rip itself in two.

Leon instinctively hung on for dear life as the cracks in the floor of the tunnel began to widen, but eventually they grew too large too quickly for him to hang on, and he found himself falling into the black void that surrounded the tunnel.

He couldn't help but scream as the sound of wind roaring in his ears overtook everything else. The world went dark, he couldn't hear anything, and he spun over and over himself in the featureless black abyss the tunnel had left him in when it shattered.

He tried to don his flight suit, but his magic wasn't able to reach outside of his body, leaving him stuck with only his armor. He couldn't even project his magic senses or conjure lightning as he fell through this seemingly endless abyss.

After about five minutes, Leon started to have thoughts running through his head that maybe he might die here, that he might just spin out and be lost forever in this dark place, but as soon as these thoughts passed through his head, he hit soft ground.

Leon still spun ass-over-teakettle, all of the momentum built up during his fall coming to a rapid and painful stop as he plowed his way through...

'... *Is this grass?*' Leon thought as he finally came to a stop. His entire body was in sharp pain, and he could barely move, but his eyes were open, and though his face was pressed against the ground, he could see a few hints of sunlight peeking through the grass that now wound through his helmet.

It was warm, but temperate, about what Leon would've expected in the Bull Kingdom's Central Territories—or in the Serpentine Isles. He could hear birds singing, insects buzzing around, and the soft roar of a distant beach.

'*Am I... back out on the island?*' he wondered as he tried to move his battered body. Immediately, Leon winced in pain, but as far as he was able to tell, none of his bones were broken. His right hand was still mangled and burned with pain, but the rest of him seemed reasonably intact.

[You seem fine,] Xaphan observed. [You might want to get up. Fuckstick will likely know where you are soon, and he won't wait for you to get your bearings.]

Leon groaned as he struggled first to a sitting position, and then to his feet, where he took stock of his surroundings.

He was in a glade in the middle of a fairly thin forest, full of the same flora and fauna that Leon had grown familiar with in the Bull Kingdom, ruling out him being in the Serpentine Isles. However, the landscape itself seemed a little different from what he was used to in the Bull Kingdom, consisting of lightly forested rolling hills and, as Leon saw when he projected his magic senses, vineyards and terraced farms to his north.

A couple of miles to his south was a villa with blatantly Bull Kingdom architecture, all columns, white marble, and red roof tiles. That sight alone showed him exactly where he was: presumably, he was in Gaius' 'trial', or wherever the temple had whisked him away to.

Leon broke out into a fast jog as he made for the villa. As he moved, he couldn't help but marvel at his surroundings. As far as he could tell—and being a man with his skillset, he could tell quite well—this place was real, not some kind of illusion. The wind on his face, the insects that crawled around in the grass, and the birds in the trees, all of it contributed to the feeling that he was actually *in* a forest, not walking through some kind of illusory space. His magic senses spread out far in this place, and he could easily imagine that he could walk back to the Bull Kingdom's capital if he wanted to.

His family's power surging through his brain helped with that impression, proving about as well as he could that his mind wasn't being influenced right now.

[What is this place?] Leon asked Nestor and Xaphan.

[A marvel of magical engineering,] Nestor whispered in awe.

[Tangible, but not necessarily real,] Xaphan answered a little more helpfully. [If I had to guess, I'd say this is a space not dissimilar to your soul realm—some kind of small demiplane layered over your home plane using spatial magic—it's outside of the universe, and yet not. Not easy to wrap your head around, but that's about the best way I can describe it without getting extremely technical. What I can say even easier, though, is that I cannot possibly guess as to what purpose this place serves.]

[Jormun mentioned that the temple was designed as some kind of trial for servants of the Serpent,] Leon replied. As he did, he held out his hand and grabbed a handful of a bush, tearing it off as he ran past. He rubbed the leaves in his hands, crushing them between his fingers and snapping the twigs they were attached to. He could detect no signs that they were illusory or unreal.

[The exact functions are impossible to guess without seeing the underlying enchantments,] Nestor breathed in excitement. [However, the sheer scale of this place is incredible! Keep an eye out, young Raime, whatever being made this was easily the match for the most powerful and knowledgeable of our old Clan. This is... well, I hesitate to say this given where in the universe we are—we *were*—but this is magic on the scale of divinity! Perhaps some kind of leftover from the Grave Warden? Some remnant or echo of the Primal Gods that were interred here...?]

Nestor quietly trailed off as he started muttered to himself various possibilities of how this space was created. Leon tried to pay attention, but the man soon went completely silent. He didn't sound worried, but Leon had a slowly rising sense of creeping dread. Running around a forest was a far sight better in his opinion than being caught in a spatial tunnel or completely empty chamber with that colossus, but he couldn't help but remember the hint of possible divine power that he'd sensed at the ritual site on the second island.

The power that had built this place was so far beyond him that he could barely even conceive of it. His most impressive feat was cobbling together a haphazard method of making himself fly; this was essentially a world unto itself.

And it seemed like Jormun had at least some degree of control over it. That control clearly wasn't absolute, for Leon had been running through the forest for about five minutes after falling out of the spatial tunnel and the pirate hadn't seemed to have found him, but Jormun had still demonstrated that he could do things like activate the colossus of the serpent-man and activate the defenses of the spatial tunnel.

For now, though, Leon put that out of his mind. He couldn't do anything to Jormun right now except react to whatever he did, so there wasn't much use in worrying about it. He could only prepare for the worst and deal with what was in front of him. So, Leon began to focus on the villa, the only building around for miles—the vineyards and farms hadn't even a single mud hut among them.

As he approached the villa, Leon began to take in its scale. It was easily one of the largest country estates he'd seen, covering dozens of acres without even taking into account its massive and extensive

gardens. However, relative to its size, Leon couldn't see that many people around. One or two here and there, but for the villa's size, Leon could easily imagine it having at least ten times as many people just working as staff, let alone its residents. In the nearby vineyards, as well, Leon could sense an odd lack of people. Everything looked pristine and well-maintained, but there just weren't nearly as many people around as he would've thought.

[Are the people I can sense illusions?] Leon asked Xaphan and Nestor.

[I'd imagine so,] Xaphan replied. [If this supposed to be some kind of trial, I'd think that whoever built this place would've used darkness magic to read the mind of the person or people undergoing it, using their memories to design the world they found themselves in and to populate it with people they know. Makes it more believable to your feeble human minds.]

[You saying that demons aren't so susceptible?] Leon asked, a hint of challenge and defensiveness in his voice.

[That's exactly what I'm saying, I'm glad you were able to pick up on my extremely subtle subtext with your feeble human mind,] Xaphan smugly replied, but Leon only smiled. He and Xaphan had been together long enough that he could tell when the demon was being serious and when he was just being an ass for the sake of being an ass.

Ignoring Xaphan's subsequent remark, Leon asked, [Should I be worried that my presence will mess with the trial? Will things start appearing out of my head?]

[I doubt it,] Xaphan said. [If I had to guess, I'd say that once this world was built and populated, then the changes that could be made to it by anyone other than the original 'architect', or 'trial-taker', or however you want to call them, would be limited. So, worrying that a lightning pigeon would appear just because you showed up or this place suddenly turning into your worst nightmare isn't warranted. That being said, I wouldn't rule out the possibility that your presence might change some things. This place is using darkness magic to manipulate minds, so keep your mental defenses up and stay on your toes. Don't take anything you see or hear or feel for granted—this isn't the normal, static world you're used to, no matter how identical it may seem.]

[Got it,] Leon replied as he finally started to close in on the villa. He entertained the idea that this place was just a random villa filled with random people that were thrown in only for the trial's 'believability' or something like that, and had no overall significance to his goal, but he was going to check the place out first and see what he could see.

He jogged fairly quickly out of the forest, and as he did so, the ring on his finger began to glow with green light as he faded from view. He wasn't sure what he was going to find, but without any subordinates that might need to follow him, Leon wasn't going to take any chances by being visible. He could stay invisible with his ring almost indefinitely, so as far as he was concerned, without the need to command, there was little need to remain visible at all.

As soon as he arrived, however, it almost seemed like it wasn't even worth being so cautious. Leon paused at the northern-eastern edge of the villa complex, taking a few moments to examine in greater detail everything that he could see with his magic senses. Perhaps most notably, he couldn't see any

guards anywhere in the villa aside from a handful at each entrance. It wasn't just the villa's serving staff that was anemic, the guards were, too.

However, there were a few buildings that were warded against magic senses. That didn't strike Leon as particularly odd, this was a place that looked more than wealthy enough to have robust defensive enchantments, so he decided to stick to the assumption that there were plenty of guards around at all times, or at the very least, that whatever power had summoned this place into being could also summon more guards, perhaps even at a strong enough level that they could threaten him.

'Remaining invisible is for the best,' Leon thought to himself as he crouched down and prepared to infiltrate the villa. Just before, he scanned the everything within range of his magic senses one last time in search of either Gaius or Maia. This was apparently one of their trials, and if he had to guess which one, he'd guess Gaius', but he couldn't see either one, so he kept his assumptions in check.

No matter what, though, it seemed clear enough that the way forward was to be found somewhere inside this villa, so without further ado, Leon leaped up and over the villa's surprisingly unenchanted outer wall, and began his infiltration in earnest.