

## Storm King 561

### Chapter 561: The Trial's Restrictions

Leon was almost surprised when he made it over the villa's low wall. He hadn't sensed anything concerning within it, but it was still odd that a place like this villa, where its main buildings were obviously so heavily warded, would have an unenchanted outer wall—and Leon knew that it was unenchanted, for if it had even the tiniest of defensive wards, then his invisibility would've been disrupted. When he hit the ground on the other side, his feet sinking down at least an inch in the soft soil of the garden, he was still invisible.

Leon counted himself lucky and moved on. Chief among his concerns was Jormun. If the pirate was able to see everything that was going on in these 'trials', then why hadn't he tried to screw with Leon again? Where was he and what was he doing? He'd been quite chatty in the spatial tunnel and in the chamber with the golden colossus, so it struck Leon as odd that he suddenly went silent.

Maybe he had some kind of limitation that Leon wasn't aware of, maybe it wasn't nearly as simple as he made it out to be. Maybe Leon's invisibility worked on him as well, even with all the tools apparently at his disposal.

Regardless, Leon wound his way through the strangely deserted garden paths, his eyes, ears, and magic senses all open and searching for any sign that he'd been discovered. So far, however, all of the villa's curiously light security detail remained at their posts, and Leon could detect not signs that Jormun was manipulating anything behind the scenes.

It wasn't long before Leon found himself on the final approach to the villa's main building. He began to slow down, noting that each of the villa's entrances had at least one guard stationed by it. The few servants around were also mostly concentrated around here, greatly complicating Leon's intention to make his way inside the building despite his invisibility.

He supposed he could just fight his way in, but Leon was loath to try. None of the guards seemed stronger than the fourth-tier, but as of yet, Jormun wasn't interfering. Leon didn't want to screw with the place too much just in case the only reason Jormun was staying out of this was because he hadn't been able to find Leon.

So, with fighting relegated to a distant if-all-else-fails plan, that left more subtle means of infiltration. The villa's wards kept him from seeing inside this huge building, but he had a fairly good idea what was where just by inspecting the outside. Leon came to a halt just behind some shrubs where he hoped none of the servants might accidentally bump into him and did his best to map out the villa complex using his magic senses once more in as excruciating detail as he could.

The most obvious point of entry that he could see was a large multi-level veranda on the north side that ran nearly the entire length of the villa and also contained several outside stairs. If he could jump up there and avoid some of the guards, he could access three of the villa's four stories. However, the guard detail there was heavy—especially so given how lightly defended the rest of the villa complex seemed to be.

On the eastern side, Leon didn't see many points of entry, but there was a large open exedra with a door leading inside that was guarded by only a single third-tier mage.

Finally, Leon took note of a river that flowed through the villa complex. It seemed to flow directly into a pool on the villa's west side, where Leon could see it sucked down via magical whirlpool and vanished down a pipe more than large enough for Leon to fit through, and more than deep enough that his magic senses couldn't penetrate far enough to see where it went. There were large fountains and other water features around the villa's gardens, plus the water needs of the villa's inhabitants to worry about—it made sense to Leon why the villa might need a source of fresh water to alleviate dependence on water enchantments that might need constant maintenance.

But he couldn't see into the reservoir all of that water flowed into, and for all he knew, that river water only led to the outside fountains. There was no guarantee that if he managed to get in, that it would lead inside—even less likely that it allowed access via any pipe or chamber big enough for him to use.

These three locations were the only locations that Leon could see without doing something blatant and drastic like opening a window. He couldn't be sure his invisibility would hold if he interacted too heavily with the villa, so risking his infiltration by touching the windows was out of the question.

Leon decided to investigate the veranda first.

He swiftly snuck over, easily avoiding the inattentive gardeners and other servants moving about. The villa as a whole was largely empty and deserted, but here around the main building there were enough people that Leon had to keep on his toes and avoid making too much noise or accidentally running into people. Thankfully, his invisibility, his old hunter's instincts, and the complacent servants made this almost trivial to accomplish.

Upon arriving at a good vantage point in the gardens that gave him an unobstructed view of the northern veranda, Leon's eyes confirmed what his magic senses had already noted: the veranda was heavily guarded. However, that guard detail grew increasingly sparse on each subsequent floor. Leon could easily jump up to the third floor and have a much easier time moving about, but that was still a big enough risk that he hung back and didn't immediately try it. If he were unable to find a way inside from the second or third floor of the veranda, then he'd have to find some way to scale down the huge white marble pillars holding up each successive balcony without attracting attention—just jumping down would fly in the face of his current desires to remain stealthy.

Leon moved on. He was in a hurry, but not so much that he felt comfortable abandoning all caution. His next destination was the eastern exedra. It was a large, open-air meeting place, a raised half-circle platform next to a small road that ran along the entire perimeter of the main building. The platform was big enough to hold at least fifty people, with a generic-looking marble statue of a Legion commander in the center. The exedra was ringed first with white marble benches, then by a low wall, and finally by a long blind arcade along the walls of the villa where the exedra cut into its footprint.

In the back, about as close to the center of the exedra as it could be, was a small, recessed portico where a guard watched over a single-person door. Given its location and everything else that Leon could sense about this villa, he assumed this to be the servant's entrance. The exedra was likely a place where the servants would gather in their off-time and leave or arrive from, as the for nearby was a small unpaved road just large enough to ride a horse along that extended all the way off the villa's estate, whereas the main paved road that led in and out through the main gates was on the south side of the villa.

The recessed portico, as far as Leon could tell, would be hard to infiltrate without violence. With violence, however, it would be quite easy; the guard had little in the way of armor—a simple, if functional steel cuirass, a leather hood dyed black, and a padded tunic covering his arms and shoulders. He had no gloves, no leg protection, and was armed with nothing more than a short five-foot-long spear. He also looked rather inattentive, leaning against the wall next to the door with his eyes closed, looking like he was barely keeping himself awake and upright, let alone keeping an eye out on the gardens just past the exedra where Leon still lurked, invisible.

All it would take would be a single arrow, the guard would fall, and Leon could approach the door with significantly less anxiety than he currently had. The door, even if unenchanted, still had enough magic flowing through it from the rest of the villa's enchantments that Leon wondered if he could touch it without disturbing his invisibility. He was also unsure what he would do with the guard's body; it wasn't like the area around the exedra was heavily forested or featured convenient hiding places for bodies. There weren't many gardeners running around, but Leon didn't want to complicate this if he didn't have to, and a gardener finding a body before he found Gaius and a way out or away from wherever this was would complicate this greatly.

And that was assuming the door wasn't locked beyond his ability to bypass, an assumption Leon couldn't allow himself to make.

Leon slunk away from the exedra and toward the pool. At the very least, the pool seemed reasonably magic-free, and it wasn't guarded or surrounded by the villa's few workers.

With how sparsely the gardens and grounds were populated, Leon soon found himself within eyesight of the pool. Unlike the exedra or veranda, the pool wasn't by the estate's gardens. Instead, the pool and the river that emptied into it were surrounded by a huge, well-manicured lawn that sparkled bright green in the sun. It was wide and open and beautiful, but Leon couldn't help but scowl, for if he decided to try infiltrating the villa here and something went wrong, causing his invisibility to fail, he'd have nowhere to hide for the five minutes it would take for his ring to reset and allow him to make himself invisible again. The pool itself wasn't guarded, but there was a heavily guarded entrance to the villa nearby that would be able to quickly investigate anything suspicious at the pool if he attracted their attention somehow.

Leon approached the pool, but he didn't get too close—merely close enough to start to get an idea of what was below the water's surface since his magic senses couldn't penetrate beneath it. It didn't have a bottom, there was far too much river water flowing into it for the storage space to be finite... or so Leon assumed; he reminded himself that wherever or whatever this place was, it didn't necessarily follow the same rules that governed the real world. This was a place birthed from the mind of whomever was being tested by the Serpent's Temple; it could be all completely illusory, in which case the water could simply vanish from 'existence' as soon as it flowed into this pool.

However, Leon was inclined to think that this entire place was consistent enough with the way things worked in the real world that this wasn't the case. The pool had to flow around the estate and empty out somewhere... but he also had to admit that this wasn't nearly as certain as it might be anywhere else.

With a sigh, Leon turned away from the pool. If this weren't some illusory 'trial' world, he acknowledged to himself that he would've been far more tempted to take a quick dip into the pool and see where it led—only *tempted*, though, and actually following the pool into whatever reservoir it had to empty into would be a much taller order.

As it was, however, killing one guard and checking on the door by the eastern exedra seemed less risky to Leon, for at least that was a more certain outcome. For all he knew, if he tried swimming down to the bottom of the pool, there'd be nothing waiting for him except for a hole in the world, or maybe even something more concrete—or more *literally* concrete, in keeping with the rest of the pool's structure.

[This place...] Leon murmured into his Mind Palace, [I don't what's real and what isn't. I don't know if anything I see can be taken at face value...]

Instead of Xaphan speaking up, as Leon was expecting, it was Nestor's voice he soon heard.

[You can probably take nearly everything you see here at face value,] Nestor said, though there was enough uncertainty in his voice that Leon didn't immediately believe him.

[What makes you say that?] Leon skeptically asked.

[This spatial pocket is far too advanced for this plane,] Nestor explained. [I never saw anything like it during my father's conquest, and from what I've seen of your world through your eyes, the people of this plane haven't advanced far enough into the field of spatial magic to build something even half as powerful as this, let alone have it be old enough to be abandoned ruins by the time you stumbled across it. This place... *shouldn't exist*.]

[We are in the Divine Graveyard,] Xaphan spoke up, his deep, crackling voice cutting Nestor off from whatever else he was going to say. [Who can say what may or may not be buried here? Who can say *who* may or may not be buried here?]

[Valid point,] Nestor conceded. [No matter this spatial pocket's origins, though, Leon, from everything I can see, this estate has been built much like a Mind Palace: with the Mists of Chaos. Darkness magic is used to read the mind of whoever is taking this 'trial', and then the Mists are used to provoke some kind of reaction—without getting an in-depth look at the underlying enchantments, I can't say exactly what reaction the enchantments are looking for, though.]

Leon sighed as he processed that information. [I wasn't aware that the Mists of Chaos could leave a soul realm, though...]

[Our Ancestor has told you not to think of the soul realm as some metaphysical, unreal space, correct? A place that doesn't exist anywhere but in your mind?] Nestor asked. [It's as much a physical space as the outside world, just as this place is just as physical as the outside world. Don't think of the outside as 'real', for this place is just as tangible and *real* as it. You've just been thrown into a slightly tangled and distorted corner of the world, not removed from it entirely or subjected to some mind-invading illusion. Treat this place as you would the real world.]

Leon nodded out of habit, then quickly replied, [Got it. These enchantments sound rather mind-bendingly complicated, though...]

[Such things are... the-they would've been difficult for me to design even during my prime,] Nestor quietly admitted, though the admission had him tripping on his words a bit. [I probably would've needed at least a thousand wisps devoted to maintaining them, too—they never would've functioned properly without some kind of intelligence to guide them, even if that intelligence was simple.]

[So you're saying that there might be something other than Jormun guiding these enchantments?] Leon asked.

[Probably, but again, I can't say for sure. At the very least, I doubt very much that your pirate friend has the skills necessary to run enchantments this complex.]

With an invisible shrug, Leon whispered back, [I wouldn't count him out. Me and mine have underestimated him enough already...]

Leon kept as much of what Nestor said in mind as he could. Despite being told that he could treat this place like it was real, Leon still didn't turn back around to indulge his temptation to take a swim into the pool and see where it might lead. Instead, he slowly made his way back to the exedra, though he had to stop at one point when a gardener boxed him into a dead end. It would've been easy enough to escape by jumping or something like that, but Leon was concerned that it might attract undue attention. Fortunately, the gardener hadn't stayed long and Leon soon found himself right back where he was only about fifteen minutes before: hiding behind the bushes staring at the guard almost hidden in the shadow of the servant's covered entrance.

After verifying that there wasn't anyone else around who might notice what he was about to do, he quietly drew his bow from his soul realm along with a handful of arrows, drew one back, paused for just long enough to ask himself if this was really how he wanted to play this, and loosed.

In an instant, the arrow sank into the guard's throat, spraying blood across the inside of his hood and across a little bit of the wall. The guard's eyes went wide as he fell to his knees, his mouth opening and closing several times as he tried to speak, but only succeeding in sputtering and choking on his own blood. And then, he fell, his face hitting the stone floor with a sickening crunch, his body twitching a couple more times before falling still.

By that point, Leon had already sprinted over, his bow and remaining arrows disappearing back into his soul realm as he filled his arm with water mana. With a quick wave, the blood on the wall was washed off, and the man's body was pulled into his soul realm.

Leon had to grit his teeth to bear that. Whether or not the man was real or some construct of this pocket world didn't matter; Leon hated the idea of pulling corpses into his soul realm. With that thought, though, it struck him as a little ironic that he had an entire mausoleum to the fallen giants in the mountains around his Mind Palace, but he didn't contemplate that for too long. He simply blasted the floor with a few jets of water to wash off the blood, leaving the this recessed portico a little wet, but otherwise empty and clueless as to where the guard had gone.

Unfortunately, Leon had to let his invisibility drop to allow him to use his magic. This left him waiting for five minutes that were so agonizingly long he briefly weighed the merits of putting on the dead guard's bloody clothes to try and blend in better. This didn't turn out to be necessary, which he was grateful for, and he spent much of that time studying the door.

The door held no detectable wards, and when Leon took a deep breath and gripped the doorknob, it opened easily enough. He slipped inside, light bending around him as he regained the use of his ring .

He found himself in a thin hallway with bare stone walls, dimly lit, and with a handful of nondescript doors leading off of it. Nothing impressive and about what he'd expect from the area of the villa where the servants might be expected to work, but as he stood just inside the doorway, letting the door close behind as quietly as he could manage, Leon's heart sank.

He'd tried to project his magic senses to get a better idea of what he might be facing inside; he was inside the wards, so it shouldn't have been a problem.

Unfortunately, as he found out as soon as his magic senses brushed against the walls just to his right and left, the interior walls were warded against magic senses, as well, not just the outer walls. He'd have to scout the villa out without the aid of his magic senses.

Worse, it meant that there was enough magic flowing through the interior walls that his ring of invisibility would likely be disrupted at every doorway.

He had to find Gaius somewhere in this place, and he couldn't rely entirely on his magic senses, nor his ring of invisibility to do so.

## **Chapter 562: The Conspicuous Lion**

Leon gritted his teeth as he inched forward into the hallway. From what he could sense, his ring of invisibility was going to be greatly limited here, being disrupted every time he opened a door and leaving him unable to use it for at least five minutes after, and his magic senses would be even less useful with how heavily warded the building was—he could sense everything in the room he was in, but as soon as he tried to push his magic senses past the walls, they were scattered by the walls' enchantments. He'd have to rely on his more mundane powers and skills to find Gaius—or whoever else might be here, but Leon could think of no one else who *could* be here; certainly not Maia if this was supposed to be a world constructed from someone's mind.

Leon wasn't too thrilled at having his ring and magic senses severely defanged, but for the moment, he at least remained invisible. However, remaining here in the hallway would do no one any good, so he began to investigate the half-dozen doors in the hallway.

He already had a strong suspicion that this was the servant's area of the villa, so he expected there to be barracks for the servants to sleep, storage rooms for food and other maintenance supplies, and probably large kitchens.

Leon crept up to the first door on his left. There wasn't much indication of where he ought to be going, so he had to just choose one of the several doors in the hallway at random.

As he expected, as soon as his hand brushed against the doorknob, his invisibility was broken, confirming that, while not rendered completely useless, his invisibility would be of significantly less help now than it had been.

With a deep sigh, Leon knelt down before the door and pressed his head against the wood. His helmet had small enchantments to aid in his hearing, effectively canceling out the issues he might otherwise

have in relying on his hearing while wearing a helmet without ear holes. However, even with those enchantments, he couldn't hear anything on the other side of the door.

He hoped that meant the room was devoid of people, but he still drew his blade from his soul realm as he twisted the doorknob and pushed the door open.

It was with little surprise and a modicum of relief that he found nothing but a storeroom filled with sealed crates. From what he was able to tell from filling the room with his magic senses, there was nothing in those crates except building materials, tools, and...

... What looked like spare servant uniforms.

Leon quickly shut the door behind him and pulled his armor back into his soul realm. The crates weren't sealed particularly tightly, and it took only a few seconds more for Leon to open the one with the uniforms and to start rummaging around within, searching for a size that would fit him.

If he couldn't be literally invisible, then he'd do his best to be figuratively so; in his experience, people who owned such large palaces as this rarely ever paid that much attention to the palace staff, though it wasn't nearly a fool-proof plan.

*'Whatever,'* Leon thought as he found a white shirt and pair of simple, unadorned, bog-standard brown leather pants that fit him reasonably well. *'It's either this or wander around in full armor...'*

When Leon walked out of the storeroom, he looked almost indistinguishable from the servants he'd seen working outside, though remarkably more lost and less sure of himself than those who knew they were supposed to be here.

Leon quickly moved on to the next rooms. The second one he investigated was another storeroom, though this one was filled with food and had been enchanted with robust temperature controls—it was basically a walk-in freezer. The third room was a large barrack filled with enough bunk beds and small storage chests for about a hundred people, all of them packed into the room like sardines with barely enough room between them to move around. Leon took some comfort in that—there were enough beds that it was possible he could pass himself off as just another part of the staff, but since it seemed like the staff all at least slept in the same room, the possibility remained that he'd get called out if no one recognized him.

The next two rooms were a large bathroom and what sounded like some kind of gathering room—it was clearly not deserted, as Leon found out as he pressed his ear against the door. He could hear the quiet din of conversation and the occasional loud yell or shout of victory. It sounded to him like at least a handful of people were playing a game.

He wasn't looking to draw attention to himself like that, so he turned around and made for the last door. It sounded quiet within, so Leon quickly ducked inside and found himself in a large kitchen with enough space for at least five chefs and their teams to work at the same time. Unfortunately, the room wasn't nearly as deserted as its silence had made it seem: three servants dressed in slightly more ostentatious attire than Leon's stolen clothes were busy working in silence, chopping vegetables, cutting and frying meat, and baking bread. It all made for a heavenly scent, but Leon found it none too inviting.

He almost froze in the doorway at the unexpected company, but he forced himself to keep walking into the kitchen with as much confidence as he could. *'Keep going,'* he ordered himself, *'look like you belong and no one will stop you...'*

There were two other doors in the kitchen, and Leon picked one and started walking toward it. Both were identical, giving him nothing to go on as he tried to find his way through the kitchen as confidently as he could. Unfortunately, it seemed he picked the wrong door, for as he made his way over, one of the servants turned away from his work and sternly said, "Hey! You there!"

Leon paused with his hand outstretched, his fingers brushing against the doorknob. He was facing the door and not any of the three servants, all of whom seemed to have set their work aside and turned their attention toward him. He took advantage of that to quickly grimace before steeling himself and turning around.

"What do you want?" he growled as he subtly flexed his power, letting a few hints of killing intent enter his aura as he made eye contact with the man who'd called him out.

The man was fairly average looking—brown hair, brown eyes, pale skin, average height and build—and possessed barely first-tier strength. Under normal circumstances, Leon would've expected even his minute flexing of power to nearly drive the man to his knees. At the very least, Leon expected him to show some kind of fear when he made eye contact, some sign that Leon's prodigious killing intent affected him at all.

Instead, the servant met his gaze with a glare and barely even an acknowledgment that Leon was so much stronger than he was.

"What are you doing?" the man demanded to know as he fully turned away from the counter where he'd been cutting meat, and facing Leon, his chest puffing out slightly as the man crossed his arms. His uniform had red spiral designs along the edges of his long white sleeves and along his collar, indicating to Leon that this man's rank within the villa was probably higher than whoever would've been given the uniform he'd stolen.

Leon was tempted to give a hostile retort to his cook who sought to question him and, if nothing else, slow him down, but he clamped down on that temptation. This man's attitude offended Leon's pride, but that in and of itself was no reason for Leon to abandon all pretenses and start throwing around lightning bolts.

Besides, Nestor had said that it would be better if he treated this world like it was real. Leon wasn't sure if that applied to just the underlying mechanics of how it'd been constructed, or it included the people in the villa, but Leon decided in that moment that it did. He wouldn't just slaughter the people in this villa if he could help it. Illusions or not, no matter what they were, Leon didn't want to solve this problem with violence. He felt that doing so would only bring Jormun's attention back to him faster, and Leon wasn't too fond of the idea on its own merits, either. It would be all too easy to indulge that instinct until it became a habit, and before he knew it, he'd be killing people just for looking at him funny.

So, with his heart racing in his chest as he stood there, enduring the accusing stares of the three servants, his hands subtly shaking with anxiety and misanthropy, Leon replied, "I was ordered to go to



the ballroom, but I think I've gotten a bit turned around. I'm just trying to find my way around..." He let his voice shake a little as he reigned in his aura, playing the part of a junior servant caught by a senior doing something he shouldn't be doing. Though they possessed barely any power between them, the sheer social pressure of their judgmental gazes meant that Leon didn't have to work too hard to bring across his nervousness.

"Fucking new guys," one of the other servants whispered as he turned back to the dough he was kneading, but the other two remained focused on Leon.

The one who'd spoken before walked over and got himself right in Leon's face.

"I haven't seen you around before, what's your name?" he demanded as the other one still paying attention began to edge toward the other door as her eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Charles," Leon lied.

"How long have you been here?" the servant demanded as the other one paying attention edged even closer to the door.

"Just hired a few days ago, this is my first day," Leon quickly replied. "I haven't quite gotten to know this place, so I was a bit lost. I don't suppose you can point me in the right direction?" Leon didn't guess he was being very convincing despite, at least in his opinion, lying quite well. He didn't hesitate or stutter, though maybe his confidence wasn't quite where it ought to have been to avoid such scrutiny.

"We weren't getting any new people today," the servant stated. "Come with me. I'm taking you to see the steward. If you're not who you say you are, then you're going to be jailed."

Leon frowned, but as the man turned on his heel and started walking toward the door, Leon decided to go after him. He was sorely tempted to just kill all three of these people, hide their bodies, and move on, but he was of a mind that this was still salvageable; he didn't need to resort to that level of violence just yet.

The servant led him out of the other door that Leon hadn't come through, emerging out into a dining room with one wall that opened onto a fairly large and quite beautiful marble courtyard, separated only by the columns of a peristyle. The dining room had a long wooden table big enough to seat at least thirty people, and the walls were lined with bright magic lanterns, potted plants, and marble statues. The adjacent courtyard, however, was completely devoid of furniture or other decorations. It did have at least three other hallways leading off of it, though, including one that was notably large and ornately decorated.

"So, uh, do you know where the ballroom is?" Leon asked as the servant led him out into the courtyard and toward the opposite side—the ornate side—playing into his uncertainty and hesitancy a bit to try to put the servant at ease.

The servant gave him a derisive sneer and replied, "This villa doesn't have a ballroom, you brainless fool. Parties are held in this space." The servant indicated the open courtyard, and Leon smiled bitterly.

"Bad guess on my part, then," he said as he took a quick look around to make sure they were alone. He could see a couple guards milling around the peristyle where they would be out of the way, but close to

the action if anything happened. His magic senses couldn't get much more information than that, but Leon was at least certain that he and the servant weren't being watched.

Leon decided to act before the servant tried calling the guards or doing anything else. His infiltration had gone quite poorly so far, and every moment he spent in the company of this servant was another moment everything went further up shit's creek. He needed to do something right now or else he'd be giving up on this infiltration completely and have to resort to killing his way through the villa.

With no warning, he lunged forward and lightly brushed his hand against the side of the servant's head, his speed as his lightning magic surged through his body allowing him to move almost instantaneously. A single tiny arc of silver-blue lightning crossed from Leon's fingers and into the servant's head. The servant immediately seized up, his eyes going wide, his body curling forward. The servant fell straight onto his face, hitting the floor of the stone courtyard nose first.

He was unconscious before he hit the floor.

Leon crouched down, quickly checking the man's pulse. He felt a bit weird even bothering to do so for someone that wasn't 'real', but given that he could sense the body of the guard he'd killed still in his soul realm, sticking around like it was a real thing, Leon didn't think he could just walk away without at least checking on the servant. He hadn't used enough power to kill anyone, just a little jolt to 'turn him off', so to speak. So, it was with relief that Leon found a pulse, though it was quite fast and erratic.

Leon took a deep breath, then started shouting, "Help! Someone's hurt! Help!"

Barely even two seconds later, he heard the sound of the guards in the courtyard running over from behind, and he had to control his immediate instinct to turn and draw his weapon.

"What happened?!" one of them shouted.

"He just tripped and didn't catch himself!" Leon responded, his voice shaking with 'fear' and 'anxiety'.

"He's not responding to anything, either!"

"Shit!" the guard cried out as he crouched down next to the servant just as Leon had a moment before, the other guard that had come running over hanging back a little bit.

Leon didn't give them much time to examine the servant before making his next play. He said, "I'm going to get help!" and started running for the ornate hallway.

"No, wait!" the other guard called out, but Leon had already taken off. There was a moment when Leon thought at least one of the guards might follow him, but it seemed that they were untrained, unworried about attack, or otherwise unsuspicious of him. Whatever the case, neither of them followed, and Leon disappeared down the ornate hallway, leaving them behind to take care of the unconscious servant.

Almost immediately, Leon was confronted with a T-intersection and a door on his right and left. Given that he could hear a lot of movement coming through the door to the left—possibly spurred on by his shouting for help—he chose to go right. He quickly dashed over to the door, flung it open, and ducked inside, closing it just as the door on the opposite side crashed open and what sounded like at least a dozen people traipsed into the courtyard where they started shouting with the two guards who'd already been in the courtyard.

Leon sighed, then began to move. He wanted to put as much distance between himself and the courtyard as he could. The alarm might've been raised by what he did, but he figured that this was still a better outcome than continuing to go along with the servant as he led Leon to who-knew-where.

*'Better to take control myself than to just follow him into a dungeon cell,'* Leon thought to himself as he darted down the hallway he found himself in.

This hallway was a great deal larger than the one he'd just been in, though no less ostentatious. From what he could tell by keeping the size of the building in mind, this hall ran nearly the entire length of the building, with multiple alcoves filled with marble statues and other examples of high-end art, doors that led to who only knew where, and open doorways to no less than three more courtyards.

However, seeing this, Leon at least had some idea of where he needed to go, now. This main complex of the villa was four stories tall at its highest, but not every part of the building was that tall. It stood to reason in his mind that his destination was one of the higher floors. At the very least, the guard detail that he could sense on this first floor, while more in line with what he might expect of a building this size, wasn't numerous enough anywhere to indicate where someone important might be.

So, Leon began to slink off toward a nearby courtyard where he might be able to access the places where more private residences might be. As he went, he activated his ring once again, reasoning that in such a large space, there was no reason for him to be seen until he found a door he wanted to pass through.

And it was a good thing he did, too, for less than a minute later, he noticed a handful of guards come barreling through the door he'd just passed through, whispering to themselves about finding 'that floor-licking peon that just came through here'. Leon ducked into an alcove as they passed him by, but he was becoming more and more aware that his time was running short. The security had been light and lax up to this point, but if the guards were spreading the word that an unknown servant was walking around their premises, and that he may be involved in an attack on another servant, then security was likely to be stepped up.

With a sigh of frustration, Leon continued to quietly slink down the hall. However, he soon paused again, for he noticed with his magic senses a pair of the guards that had just rushed past him talking to another servant in a secluded corner of the smallest courtyard not too far away. He wasn't too interested in their conversation; rather, it was the servant's attire and toolbelt that interested him.

The servant wore clothes that emblazoned with several purely-aesthetic runes, and she carried various writing implements on her toolbelt—a paintbrush, a hammer and chisel, several rolls of enchantment spell paper... This woman was obviously an enchanter, and if Leon's guess was correct, she was probably the one who maintained the enchantments of this villa.

With a smile, Leon watched as the guards finished asking the female enchanter their questions and moved on, and the enchanter turned around and walked through a door that they'd been speaking just outside of. Leon only got the quickest of glimpses inside before the enchanter closed the door behind her, but Leon knew what he'd seen: the control room for the villa's defensive wards.

*'I think this might warrant a bit of a detour...'* Leon thought to himself. He quickly changed course and made his way over to the door, avoiding several guards along the way as they hurriedly patrolled the ground floor of the building, clearly stirred up by his actions only a few minutes before.

Leon entered the enchantment's control room, finding the door unlocked though still heavily enchanted. A sound like a bell chimed as he stepped in and his invisibility was disrupted, causing him to fade back into view just as the female enchanter turned around in her chair only a few steps away, with anger, frustration, and confusion all mixing on her face.

Before she could say a word, Leon bolted forward and hit her with the same attack he used on the previous servant. She was a little bit stronger as a second-tier mage, but it was nothing at all to Leon to quickly give her a nonlethal jolt and knock her unconscious for the time being.

Once she was down and he had the room to himself, Leon took stock of it. There was a bank of enchantment control consoles on one side of the room, and five pillars on the other, all made of stone and coated with smooth, clear glass, upon which dozens of enchantments had been inscribed. It was a surprisingly complex design, with the coating worked into several dozen glass 'rings' with latches and hinges encasing the pillars. From what Leon could tell, these rings had been so well-designed that they could also be easily removed for maintenance or replacement, giving the enchantment scheme of the villa a unique modular design that he couldn't help but admire.

For how well made the enchantment scheme was, it still made his job much easier. He rapidly circled the pillars, giving himself plenty of time to parse through them and for his ring to ready itself again. By the time he was about ready to make himself in

### **Chapter 563: Jormun's Argument**

"Ahh, there you are..." Jormun whispered in Leon's ear as Leon took down some of the villa's defensive wards.

Leon immediately swapped out his stolen servant's attire for his armor and drew his sword. His eyes flitted from corner to corner in the small enchantment control room, but he took in nothing that he hadn't before; nothing but the enchantment control consoles, the five glass-covered pillars, and some spare enchantment materials in the corner, behind which Leon had stashed the corpse of the guard he'd killed to enter the villa undetected. The woman who'd been working in here before Leon had entered was also unconscious in a corner, still not yet recovered from the jolt Leon had given her to cover his entrance.

Nowhere did he see Jormun, nor did he see any sign that Jormun was screwing with his head or with this 'trial world'.

"Sorry about that," Jormun continued, chatting with a tone as if he and Leon were but old friends who'd run into each other while out running mundane errands, "I don't like to keep people waiting for my company, but you were *so hard* to find! And these controls up here certainly don't help. Anyways, how are you doing? All right, I hope... After all, I can't win someone's allegiance from beyond the grave..."

Jormun's voice was buttery smooth and so tantalizing, his every syllable seemed to offer something new and wonderful, so naturally, Leon immediately raised his mental defenses and let his Ancestor's

lightning course through his veins. He wasn't about to leave Jormun an opening that he could magically exploit.

And he did it not a moment too soon, for he felt a few tiny currents of darkness magic that had wormed its way into several parts of his body, including his ears and forearms, be immediately torn to shreds by his lightning magic. As they were, Leon found himself much less taken with Jormun's words and profoundly thankful that he'd practiced even just some basic precautions for mental attacks like these.

However, he was also mildly concerned, for there had been no darkness magic touching his brain, and yet he'd still been mildly affected by Jormun's words. It was as much proof as anything could be that his mental defenses were anything but perfect... and Leon's thoughts momentarily turned back to the Thunderbird look-a-like before he refocused on the situation at hand.

"That's playing dirty," Leon growled, his normally-smooth voice resonating within his Magmic Steel helmet.

"Mmm, *dirty*," Jormun crowed, obviously relishing every syllable. "Just how I like it..."

Leon scowled and went back to work on the pillars. He wasn't sure how much control Jormun had over the trial world, so he wasn't going to just abandon all caution just because the pirate had found him. The sense that he'd need to do so soon, however, was rising within him. Jormun had already proven himself capable of manipulating at least some of the temple's enchantments—either that, or he took credit, either implicitly or directly, for several *very* convincing coincidences—so Leon had no doubt that things here in the trial world were about to get much more complicated.

"You talking just to talk? I'm not that big on conversation for the sake of itself," Leon asked as he removed another ring of glass from the pillars, and he immediately sensed the change in the way magic power flowed through the walls of the villa. He'd be able to use his ring of invisibility without reservation, now.

At least, he would once the ring recovered in another minute or two, assuming Jormun didn't try to pull any shenanigans.

"No, I'm not talking just for the sake of talking," Jormun retorted, sounding almost insulted that Leon had even asked at all. "Listen, Leon, I was serious when I suggested that we work together. You need allies, do you not? The Serpent has told me so much about you and your Clan that I couldn't help but sympathize with you..."

"Fuck your sympathy," Leon muttered as he removed the third and final glass ring from the pillars, leaving nearly all of the villa's enchantment scheme completely intact, just missing its main passive defenses.

"Now, now, Leon, surely you're a bigger man than that? Can't you hear the sincerity in my voice?"

Jormun sounded so genuinely upset that Leon had to fight for a moment not to be taken in. He wasn't falling for that. He'd made his peace with Justin, but that was over the man's personal attacks against Leon and his family, and for the sake of Valeria, whom Leon had strong feelings for; Leon had seen with his own eyes the unconstrained destruction that Jormun wrought, how far it went beyond personal

issues, and he knew how much further Jormun was going to take this. He'd make no peace with the man.

"You're a proven liar, and a man who has perpetuated at least one massacre on the previous island in this chain. I can make peace with just about any enemy I make, but there's a world of difference between those who personally harm me and mine, and those who bring death and destruction on a scale like you've done. So, no, I won't be wasting my time talking with you. Instead, I think I'm just going to find whatever hole you're hiding in and drag you out into the light."

"I mean it, Leon. Nothing good will come of our conflict, and we only stand to benefit from working together." Jormun's voice was quiet and earnest, but Leon still ignored it as he felt his invisibility ring return to normal functions.

With that, Leon completely ceased participating in this conversation and made for the door, the light all around him bending and warping until Leon was rendered invisible.

"Oh, come now, Leon," Jormun droned on, "we don't have to do this, we should be united in this. After all, we're in practically the same situation! Your family once ruled as a dominant force in this world, as did mine! Your family was unjustly overthrown, and so was mine!"

Jormun paused a moment for dramatic effect, and Leon didn't take the opportunity to speak up, choosing instead to test out if his strategic removal of wards from the enchantment pillars had worked by brushing his hand against the control room door's doorknob. What Jormun said next, however, brought him to at least a momentary halt.

"... You bear the power of an Inherited Bloodline, and so do I!"

Leon stood there, in front of the door, blinking in surprise at what Jormun had just claimed. He wasn't going to take what he said at face value, but... if what Jormun was saying was true...

"This world is cruel to people like us," Jormun quietly stated. "People will always resent those in power for having that power, and by virtue of how our kind reproduces, those without powers like ours will *always* heavily outnumber us. Now, we may make a few friends, we may even gain a great deal of power every now and then, and we may even keep that power for a long period of time, but the people will *never* accept us. They see us as less than human, when in reality, we are something *more*! But they will never accept that we are inherently superior; they will covet our powers, our ancestors, and our very blood! So long as we exist, all of humanity will be our enemies! The only way we can survive is if we unite!

"Think about it, scion of the Thunderbird. You, ruling the skies, and me, ruling the seas. With our powers combined, all that exists will be forced to bend their knees to us. We need only make a mutual alliance, and the world is ours! All of the powers and positions that have been taken from our families, we'll take back! Not even the Four Empires will be able to stop us!"

Leon stood before the door, his heart pounding in his chest, his hand outstretched, fingers brushing against the doorknob. He wasn't of a mind to accept Jormun's offer, but he couldn't deny the fact that he wanted more information.

*'Nothing he says can be taken at face value,'* Leon thought to himself as he took a few quiet steps away from the door and, without dropping his invisibility, asked, "Are you saying that you're the descendent of some Ascended Beast?"

As soon as he was done speaking, he moved a few steps over, not wanting Jormun to be able to figure out where he stood by the sound of his voice, just in case that was even possible with the magical way they were now speaking.

"That's exactly what I'm saying, young Leon," Jormun replied, the swaggering smile he wore evident in the tone of his voice. "My family is descended from the legendary Serpent of my people. We were the last of his descendants, and after the death of my father at the hands of the Penitent Paladin, the only remaining man who bears that legacy... is me."

Leon frowned, though not so much at the story told as he did at the remarkable coincidence it would take for Jormun's story to be exactly as he said—it was close enough to Leon's own story that it made it impossible for Leon to believe.

He didn't voice those doubts, however, and simply let Jormun talk while he began to sidle back toward the door. He also began to, as subtly as he could, project his magic senses through the villa in an attempt to get some idea of what to do and where to go once he left this room. Now that the wards against such things had been disabled, there shouldn't be much of an issue.

Almost immediately, he saw almost the entire villa in near-perfect clarity, from the small army of guards that filled the main villa's halls—many of whom were now scrambling about and locking the large building down—to every plant and blade of grass in the garden courtyards, if he cared enough to examine them. The one exception was a large section of the top floor that appeared to have its own independent ward scheme, for as his magic senses brushed against the walls of this section, they were immediately scattered.

*'I guess that's where I have to go,'* Leon thought just as Jormun began to speak again.

"I know the pain and the strife that comes when those who bear powers passed down through their blood start to gain power," Jormun continued, obliging Leon's curiosity. "Those already in power don't like to see others rise out of fear that they'll try to supplant them. They also resent us for having a magical edge. This prevents us from having any true friends or allies. Trust me when I say this, Leon: you will find no one except for me who will accept you when they learn who you are and the advantages that you enjoy because of your Thunderbird. I've been all over this plane, finding those who've inherited powers from their ancestors, and their story is always the same. They, if they wish to participate in human society, must either give up their powers, or resign themselves to a life of paranoia and superstition—either their own, from others, or some combination of both.

"So, Leon, all I ask is that you support me in my endeavor. When I raise the Serpent, a new world will be born. If you join me, you will be greatly rewarded by the Serpent, and you will take your rightful place as the ruler of the skies!"

Leon had to hold himself back from snorting in derision. Even if he wanted to seize back all the power of the old Thunderbird Clan with blood and blade, he would never do so by unleashing some terrible creature of yore that had been sealed for at least eighty thousand years. He momentarily grimaced

when he realized that that had been exactly what he'd done with Xaphan, but he comforted himself with the knowledge that Xaphan's power had been incredibly drained and they'd made a magical contract—plus, he hadn't even needed to sacrifice a single person to do it, let alone the thousands Jormun had sacrificed on the previous island, let alone again the number of people he'd sacrificed that Leon didn't even know about. He wasn't about to aid Jormun in releasing this Serpent and watch as it destroyed this world.

But that wasn't the only reason Leon found the offer so repulsive, and after several long seconds, his urge to laugh managed to break through his self-control, and he slowly began to laugh harder and harder at Jormun's offer. It started as a low chuckle before growing into full-bodied roaring guffaws as each successive laugh made it harder and harder for Leon to get control of himself.

Even more intense were the emotions that were cutting through Leon's being as he thought about some dinky little water snake being so arrogant as to think that it could vassalize *him*! If that snake were here right now, Leon felt like he'd rip and tear into it with fang and claw, stripping its scales, rending its flesh, and finally burning it into ash.

It was only the strangeness of that feeling that allowed Leon to bring himself back under control. As he took a deep breath to steady himself from more than ten seconds of completely uncontrollable laughter, only one thought ran through his head: *'What in the hells is wrong with me?'*

It wasn't the first time that he'd felt some kind of instinct compelling him to move or use body parts that he didn't have, and he had no idea where they were coming from, only that it was a recent thing.

*'Something about these islands, maybe?'* he wondered, for he'd never felt such things before arriving at Kraterok.

"What do you say, Leon?" Jormun asked, his voice soothing and inviting, though tinged with an undercurrent of offense from Leon's outburst.

But Leon wanted nothing he had to offer. The very idea of accepting anything from Jormun had his blood boiling. But he kept his reaction as neutral as he could, and he asked, "On the last island I was on, I found what looked like a mass blood sacrifice. Your doing?"

Leon already knew it was, but he wanted to know if Jormun would admit to it or lie. And it seemed that Jormun might've been thrown for a bit of loop by the question, because it took him a moment to respond.

"It was," Jormun slowly admitted. "Nothing changes without sacrifice. Those people gave their lives so that my dream could live on. They went to that ritual site willingly, and offered themselves up to the Serpent."

Leon smiled behind his helmet, understanding that Jormun both told the truth and lied.

Or, well, he supposed he couldn't *know* that the thousands of dead people he'd found at the ritual site had gone there willingly or not, but he doubted they did—especially not the children—but Jormun at least admitted that he did it.



"It sounds like the powers-that-be on this plane aren't going to take kindly to you messing with their sandbox," Leon observed. "As you said, those in power don't like it when those beneath them start getting too big of their britches. Do you not worry that they'll retaliate?"

"Their time to retaliate has come and gone," Jormun smugly stated. "They could've stopped me thirty years ago when I was in the southeast, raiding and pillaging the southern coast of the continent. Got my hands on quite a few nice magical toys and made a big enough name for myself that there's not a single pirate in all of Aeterna that doesn't know who I am! But for all my successes, they didn't consider me worth their time. The eyes of the Emperors don't turn this far north. *Ever*. They don't care about the troubles of people this far from their seats of power; the only things they care about beyond their own borders are Titanstone and the Sky Devils far to the southeast. By the time they realize their mistake, the Serpent will already have been unleashed, and their time will have already ended. I don't fear them."

Leon didn't ask any more questions, even though everything Jormun had just said brought quite a few to mind. Instead, he just pushed open the door and left the control room without a shred of hesitation. Jormun wasn't going to stop, and Leon wasn't going to join him. He'd lost his patience for the conversation, and there was no point in indulging Jormun any longer, not when he still had yet to find Gaius or Maia.

"Hang on, now," Jormun called out, his voice sticking with Leon, proving that it wasn't limited to the room. "We're still talking, it's rude to just walk away like that."

"It's rude to murder thousands of people to satisfy your own vanity and lust for power, too," Leon retorted as he strode through the courtyard, still invisible. The guards who'd been stirred up by his incapacitation of the servant were still assembling and running around, so he still had some work to do, but now, he had unfettered use of his ring and magic senses again, so he moved with greater purpose and confidence than he had after stealing the servant's clothes.

He slipped past guards and other household servants as they did their best to lock the villa down, but invisible, Leon was able to slink past them all for a short while as he crept through the villa. Eventually, he knew he'd have to kill someone or resort to violence to get past a closed and guarded door or something of that nature, but he didn't run into any immediate troubles.

Although, he supposed he did have *one* trouble: Jormun was continuing to try and entice him to go back to the control room—or any other private place where they could easily talk—and was growing increasingly frustrated that Leon wasn't doing as he wanted. Strangely, it didn't seem like anyone else could hear the man, for he wasn't being quiet, and yet no one reacted to his voice.

Eventually, as Leon set his foot down upon the first step of the closest set of stairs that would lead him to the top floor, Jormun sighed dramatically and said, "I suppose there's no convincing you, then. A shame. I regretted immediately lashing out at you when you started putting holes in this place, but now, I do this with no regret. I tried to convince you, but you won't listen to reason. My regret is better spent on others."

Only a moment later, a great pulse of magic power swept through the entire villa, doing largely nothing at all, but when it hit Leon, his shell of invisibility conjured by his ring was torn to shreds, revealing him there on the stairs to the guards both below and above.

Guards who immediately began to shout and draw their weapons, drawing other guards with their shouts of alarm. Even as Leon was drawing his blade from his soul realm, at least a dozen other guards appeared from around corners and from within other rooms as if from nowhere, quickly surrounding Leon.

None of them were above the fourth-tier, but that didn't seem to matter all that much to them; none of them seemed at all intimidated by Leon's unrestrained aura and prodigious killing intent.

It was with a conflicted heart that Leon began to cut them down as they charged at him. With his power and lightning magic, none of them could so much as scratch his armor, let alone do him any real harm.

It was over in less than a minute. Leon hadn't even had to use any elemental attacks, he used only his blade to end the fight. He was left standing there on the stairs, surrounded by corpses and the sounds of additional guards running in his direction.

He sighed and began to run up the stairs, scowling as he heard Jormun's voice again.

"I'll admit, that was petty, but it seems clear enough to me that you're not going to stop. So, how about I do... *this*..."

Leon came to a swift halt as three more guards made their presence known at the top of the stairs leading from the second to the third floor, his sword going up in p

#### **Chapter 564: Fighting a Shade**

Agony became Leon's world for just a moment as Artorias' blade cleanly sliced through the metal of his cuirass, cut through the Skyflax padding beneath, slid between his ribs, and impaled one of Leon's lungs. It was such a painful and debilitating strike that Leon could do nothing more than go limp with a pathetic squeak, being held aloft only by Artorias' blade.

But the pain that Leon felt was only partially physical. In fact, for all the pain that this vision of Artorias had just inflicted upon Leon with his blade, the agony of it being Leon's *father* was what truly knocked Leon down.

Artorias smirked at Leon and slid the blade out from Leon's chest, letting the younger man fall to his knees and wheeze for breath as air rushed through the hole the blade had made and into his chest cavity.

Leon laid there, barely able to do anything more than press his hand against his chest where blood was pouring out and stare at his father looming above him, blade in hand, a twisted smile upon his face.

"That," Artorias quietly said, "was for letting the man who murdered me continue breathing."

His voice, strong and filled with life—and filled with hate—struck such terror and sorrow within Leon that he couldn't even bring himself to struggle.

It had been more than four years since Artorias had been murdered. More than four years since Leon had heard his voice with his own ears. More than four years since Leon had to bury him in their ruined home in the Northern Vales. More than four years since Leon had sworn to get vengeance.

Less than three months since he'd gone back on that oath and spared Justin Isynos' life, for the sake of Valeria.

Leon couldn't move. Shame, pain—both emotional and physical—and terror immobilized him. His vision blurred as his eyes began to water in shock and sorrow. He couldn't even bring himself to close his eyes as he waited for the death blow to fall. He knew his father, it would be swift and decisive.

But Artorias just stood above Leon, grinning with his blade raised in the air. The deathblow didn't come, and after a few tense seconds, Artorias' arm began to lower. A few seconds later, Artorias took a couple steps back and growled, "Is this all you can muster, boy? Four years of gaining experience in the south, and all you can managed to do is kneel there like a used whore, sputtering and wheezing, waiting to be finished off?"

Leon sputtered, but the pain in his chest was awful. Every breath he took was ragged and labored and getting worse with every passing second as his adrenaline stopped blocking the pain. He could barely inhale enough to take a comfortable breath, let alone verbally respond.

"Well, I suppose like a used whore, you're going to have learn to live with not being finished," Artorias said with a wry, almost mad grin. "Get up. Face me as the man you've become. Show me what you can do. Show me that you deserve to bear the legacy of our family. Show me that it wasn't a *mistake* to die for you."

Artorias sat back down on his stool and stared at Leon, a manic look in his eye that finally began to cut through the layers of shock and pain that had completely overwhelmed Leon's mind. And as he regained clarity, Leon finally registered the fact that Xaphan and Nestor were screaming into his mind from his soul realm.

[GET UP AND FIGHT!] Xaphan was roaring. [THIS IS NO TIME TO BE KNEELING! FIGHT! OR YOU WILL BE KILLED!]

[It's not real!] Nestor was shouting, his voice far more muted than Xaphan's, though no less desperate. If Leon died, then he would soon follow as Leon's soul realm collapsed, after all. [Get up and face this phantom, Leon! It's just a construct born from your memories! Face it and defeat it!]

[OR SUMMON ME AND LET ME HANDLE IT!] Xaphan boomed, his crackling voice sounding like a conflagration that had already consumed an ancient forest.

[No!] Nestor shouted back. [You must face this alone, Leon! Nothing but you and that construct! Nothing but your power against it!]

Leon took a deep, painful breath as he forced himself to calm down. He wasn't going to die just yet. This wasn't real. This was just some kind of an illusion.

An illusion that stuck a copy of his family's blade into his chest, so not an intangible projection, but it was in some sense, fake, nonetheless.

Leon began to channel his magic as his visceral fear began to slowly be replaced with a deep anger at this violation. This temple had conjured forth his *father*, and that was not something that Leon could abide. His heart began to race even faster than it already was as another wave of adrenaline shook him.

With a grimace and a lot of ignored pain, Leon conjured a healing spell and used all the strength he could muster to press it against the bloody hole in his armor. He was vaguely aware of just how powerful that strike had to have been to penetrate his armor, so recently repaired and re-enchanted, but he felt almost nothing for the metal that he had put so much of his time into re-enchancing. All of his emotional bandwidth was being taken up by the sight of Artorias sitting on his stool, watching Leon try to heal himself with the same shit-eating grin that this damned temple had forced him to wear.

The healing spell activated, and Leon felt the hole in his lung close. With another ragged breath, he forced it to inflate with air, pushing all of the air that filled his chest cavity out through his still-profusely-bleeding wound with a ragged hiss, and held that breath. After a few more moments, his natural healing ability and his healing spell had managed to seal up the wound, but it was only a thick scab, he'd need more a few more healing spells to fix himself completely.

But he hadn't the time or the patience for that. For now, he was back in fighting condition.

Leon took one last full breath, enjoying as much as he could being able to do so with comparatively little pain as what he was just suffering. This temple had managed to stun him with this move, but he wasn't going to let it have the last laugh. It hadn't finished him off when it could, and Leon would make it pay.

Leon stood, his head pounding with pain and fury, his eyes locked on Artorias the entire time. And he drew his sword, the *real* sword, the weapon that had been passed down through the Raime family for countless generations, since long before the founding of the House.

For just a moment, for the briefest of intervals of time, an almost imperceptibly small flame began to crawl and spread across the blade's edge, black in color and dreadful in power, but Leon didn't notice it. Less than a second later, a torrent of silver-blue lightning covered the blade, making the blade seem like it was made out of cascading lightning rather than Adamant.

Leon raised his weapon, pointing it at the image of his father, and said, "Whatever you are, whatever intelligence thought it wise to bring you into being, will regret bringing you back like this."

Artorias' smile didn't budge an inch.

"We'll see, little lion," he whispered, and in barely enough time for Leon to blink, he was upon the younger man, his blade already up and falling toward Leon's head in a vicious slash.

With all the speed of his lightning magic, Leon was able to raise his blade in time to block, but the force behind Artorias' blow was immense, and Leon had to use both hands to hold the phantom back.

Taking advantage of that opening, Artorias slammed his off-hand into Leon's armor, causing the Magmic Steel to crumple around the impact point like thin foil. Leon was thrown back like he weighed no more than a sack of potatoes, and all air was driven from his lungs.

"Not good enough," Artorias chided instead of immediately closing and taking advantage of that opening he'd made.

Leon gasped for breath as he got back in the primary stance of his family's fighting style. He didn't respond to Artorias, and like he had so many times during his childhood, he charged at his father.

He couldn't even begin to count the number of times a scenario like this had played out in the past. He had been around no one but his father for months at a time during the first sixteen years of his life, and in that time, Artorias had never once slacked off on teaching Leon how to fight. However, since there were no other people around who could act as Leon's sparring partner, that meant that Leon and Artorias had sparred with each other a thousand times at the very least. Leon estimated the number at much more than that.

And not once had he ever won a fight against his father. Artorias had always been too fast, too strong, too experienced. Every move that Leon made he could see through. Every strike could be blocked or dodged. And Artorias always had, or at least for as long as Leon could remember, the lightning magic of the Thunderbird boosting his speed and power. For all that Artorias had taught Leon, it had never ever once been a contest between them, the gulf of ability too much for Leon to overcome with barely first-tier strength.

This time would have to be different. From what Leon could feel, this projection of Artorias was on the same level as his father had been, at least from his own retrospective estimations; the projection felt like a late-seventh-tier. That meant the projection had much more magic to draw from, at least in theory, but on a moment-to-moment basis, their power was about equal. If Leon had any hope of living through this, he had to do something he'd never done before—defeat his father—and do so as quickly as he possibly could, before that difference in available power could be felt.

When Leon lunged forward, his blade was aimed directly at Artorias' throat. This illusion of his father wasn't wearing any armor, so Leon wanted an immediate killing blow.

He wasn't surprised in the least when Artorias' blade moved so quickly to deflect his thrust that it practically appeared out of thin air. Leon was thrown momentarily off balance, and Artorias followed up by lunging forward for another strike from his fist, this time aimed at Leon's helmet. But Leon knew it was coming and twisted enough for Artorias' fist to glance off his armored face. Leon then used what little momentum was transferred to him to spin around and slash at Artorias' calf. Artorias lifted his leg, letting Leon's sword, still blazing with lightning magic, to pass harmlessly beneath him.

Before Artorias could follow up with a riposte, Leon took a step back to right his footing and gain some poise, while Artorias did likewise.

"Now that's more like it," Artorias said, his tone appreciative but cold. "Not quite what I was hoping for, but better than what you displayed upon your arrival. Come on, little lion, show me how much you've grown.

[Leon...] Xaphan whispered into Leon's mind, his voice dripping with white-hot fury and a powerful need for violence. [Let me out. I will rend this thing to pieces. I will incinerate it until nothing remains. *Let me out.*]

Leon ignored the demon's request. This temple had conjured Artorias from his mind, he couldn't imagine what it might pull from Xaphan, assuming it could. Probably something like Amon, if Leon's guess was accurate. Whatever the case, Leon didn't want help for this fight. He was irate, he wanted to sink his teeth into this heretical illusion and rip it apart for daring to wear the face of his father. He wanted to sink his claws in and tear, he wanted to savor the feeling of tendons snapping off the bone, he wanted to revel in the bloody rending of flesh, he wanted...

He wanted many things, but most of all, he just wanted to win. He wanted to beat this illusion. To lose against such a thing, to allow such a profane thing to exist, was beyond the pale for Leon. No one, no *thing*, could ever impersonate his father like this. He wouldn't allow it.

Leon prepared to lunge again, but this time, he pulled his helmet back into his soul realm. Whatever else it was, this illusion still wore the face of his father, and Leon wanted to look Artorias in the eye once more, even if it was in this situation.

"There you are, little lion," Artorias said as Leon revealed his face. "You're looking good, I have to say."

The illusion raised his blade once more, and Leon made his move. Lightning exploded out of his legs, sending him soaring at Artorias at a speed too great for mortal eyes to perceive. An equal amount of lightning blazed in his sword, ready to explode out into whatever Leon hit with it.

Artorias blocked Leon's opening strike, and a small explosion of lightning from Leon's blade sent them both flying back a few feet. Very little made it through the blade into Artorias' hands, but Leon wasn't deterred. He struck again and again, and though Artorias blocked every time, Leon had effectively seized the initiative that Artorias had abandoned.

He pushed and pushed against Artorias' defenses, not letting up even for a moment, constantly on the attack, not letting the illusion make even a single move other than to defend itself. Leon fought with tremendous ferocity, the impact of every blocked strike and resulting bright flash of lightning sending a wave of rage coursing through his mind. That rage empowered every swing, and steadily, Leon forced Artorias back. Already, he'd lasted longer than he ever had in any fight he'd ever had with his father, but given how much stronger he'd become since then, that was only expected.

Finally, with one deadly swing of his sword, Leon sent Artorias' fake blade flying through the air, and he gave the illusory Artorias a harsh body slam that sent him crashing to the hardwood floor. Leon then stepped in, his blade raised, his power overflowing so much that his form was practically lost in the countless arcs of lightning that passed between his body and blade.

Artorias groaned in pain, and in that moment, with his blade raised, ready to fall down and cleave this illusion's head clean off, Leon hesitated.

It was only for such a fleeting moment that anyone else would've missed it. If anyone else were his opponent, it wouldn't have mattered.

But he was fighting Artorias, or something that had approximated his appearance. Rage only carried Leon so far, and in that moment, he couldn't end things without thought. He couldn't bring his blade down upon his own father's head, not when he'd buried Artorias personally. Not when he'd cut open his father's chest and planted a Heartwood seed within his heart. Not when he'd practically betrayed Artorias' memory by making peace with Justin.

Artorias rose with shocking speed, his blade somehow back in his hand, and he slammed the pommel into the bottom of Leon's chin with enough force to throw Leon's head back with a sickening crack. Leon remained on his feet, but only for a moment, for Artorias then followed up with another strike, a slash across Leon's chest that cut through his armor like a hot knife through warm butter.

Leon fell to the ground, his cuirass landing on either side of him, now nothing more than a pair of light weights attached to his body by a few untouched leather straps. Nearly all of the silver bands within his cuirass had been sliced into pieces, breaking nearly all of his enchantments. And Artorias loomed over him once more, the cocky smile that was so unlike him back on his face.

"I remember teaching you to never hesitate..." he said. He then ripped Leon's blade from his hands and flicked it across the floor with the end of his own.

"You did," Leon replied as he raised his right arm. Artorias smiled and raised his sword once more, clearly not intending to let Leon fire another blast of lightning at him.

But he was too slow. Leon didn't use lightning, he used one of his 'trick' weapons, a silver band that he'd inscribed with an enchantment to form a sharp, hellishly thin blade of condensed air, and, with little more than a thought, fired it at Artorias.

He didn't need to conjure lightning mana to do this, he didn't need to condense or channel any fancy magic, and as a result, even by the standards of his lightning magic, the wind blade was launched with extreme swiftness.

Artorias blocked it, but he was thrown back a few feet, giving Leon enough room to pull his cuirass back into his soul realm and stand. He ignored the pain in his chest from the thin cut that Artorias had left—the illusion's blade had broken Leon's skin in that last attack, leading to a little bit of pain and bleeding, but it was a minor injury at best. Leon was far more wounded by his own self-recriminations from hesitating at the last moment, right when he'd won. The illusion was right, Artorias had taught him *many* times to never hesitate, for victory, even when in the palm of his hand, would never truly be his until it had been achieved.

Leon was reminded of Artorias' favorite story, that of a legendary hero who sought immortality. The hero, after many trials and tribulations, eventually found a flower that would grant eternal life to whomever ate it, but the hero doubted what he'd heard and hesitated, and to punish that hesitation, a snake snatched the flower from his hand and ate it in front of him, leaving the hero with nothing to show for his efforts.

Even in his mindless rage, Leon had been unable to kill this illusion because it wore the face of his father. But now, he'd thought about it, and his heart had been steeled. Leon conjured a lightning bolt that glowed silver-blue with such intensity that it completely drowned out the two lights that had sprung into existence when this massive fighting space first formed. At the same time, Artorias had recovered and lunged forward, this time clearly aiming for Leon's heart—the illusion seemed to be done toying with Leon, and was now moving for a killing blow.

A killing blow which never came. With an emotional roar, filled with fury, frustration, and resignation, Leon's lightning bolt left his hand with no time to spare, exploding across Artorias' face with all the force that Leon's considerable rage and humiliation had packed it with, the tip of Artorias' blade mere inches away from Leon's chest, now only covered with the Skyflax cloth gambeson he wore beneath his Magmic Steel armor. Sparks and arcs of lightning filled the room, and Artorias' figure was completely lost in the bright explosion. Thunder nearly deafened Leon, and the brightness of the lightning blinded him to the point that he had to shut his eyes tight. Either he'd thrown far more lightning than he'd intended, or Artorias' body had exploded into more of the stuff—Leon honestly couldn't tell.

But it couldn't last forever, and after a few intense seconds, the lightning died down, leaving nothing behind. Not a corpse, not a singed piece of cloth, not even a scorch mark on the ground. Once the last spark faded into the wind, it was as if Artorias had never been there at all.

Leon breathed deeply, the shock of everything that had just happened in the past couple of minutes crashing down upon him all at once. He forced himself to remain standing just long enough to scan his surroundings, to note that the room was rapidly returning to normal as the ceiling descended and the walls closed in, but once it became clear it was just returning to normal and wasn't going to box him in, Leon fell to his knees, his eyes shining with unshed tears, his breathing hard and rapid, his limbs still shaking with anger and adrenaline, utterly exhausted, both emotionally and physically.

### **Chapter 565: Gaius' Nightmare**

The room that Leon fought the shade of Artorias in swiftly reformed around him. In only a matter of seconds, all of the furniture had returned, the carpets had sprung back into being, and the room's proportions had fixed themselves. There wasn't so much as a single scorch mark on the floor to act as proof of the fight that had just taken place.

The lights, however, did not turn back on; neither did the sun begin to shine again, nor the villa become populated with people.

Leon barely noticed any of this. He knelt on the ground, his eyes unfocused, his body and mind fatigued, his brain locked up as he tried to comprehend everything that had just happened. An illusion of his father, and one that had quite gravely injured him. One that he'd had to kill. One that had almost killed him after he'd hesitated to strike the killing blow.

There was no strength in Leon's body. He felt about as weak as he did when he'd first seen Artorias and been stricken with terror.

He had no idea how long he knelt there, but he was slowly pulled out of his fugue state by Nestor and Xaphan.

[Leon!] Xaphan shouted. [You need to get up and finish this! The longer you stay there, the more time you're giving that Yooman asslicker to fix his shit and start fucking with us again!]

[By the Gods, demon, you're dumb,] Nestor softly said in response, his tone almost soothing despite the words he was speaking. [Have you not been paying any attention at all? The pirate's name is 'Jormun', and look around at this place... Whatever that idiot controlling this place did, it clearly broke much of this pocket space. It'll take hours if not longer for it to recover. Leon has plenty of time to get his mind back in order.]

[Who are you and what did you do with the dead man?] Xaphan sarcastically demanded before turning his attention back to Leon. [Leon, there'll be time to think later. Right now, you need to move.]

Leon rapidly blinked. His vision had blurred again with unshed tears, this whole incident ripping open the wound that was his father's death. But as his brain started to get whirring again, he realized just how much of a mess he was. He wasn't wearing his cuirass or his helmet, but his armor was still covering his legs, left arm, and most of his right arm. His torso was covered in blood from the wounds the shade



inflicted upon him, the latter of which was still bleeding a bit, though Leon's natural healing abilities had largely stopped it. Still, Leon was in a significant amount of physical pain.

And that wasn't even touching on the still-lingering wounds his right hand had taken when they'd been caught up in the formation of the spatial tunnel that had brought Leon here.

But all of that was nothing compared to how awful Leon felt about what had just happened. Sure, he hadn't just *actually* killed his father, that much his rational mind could understand, but he'd still caused a great deal of damage to his father's image, and he was having a bit of trouble reconciling that with his emotions.

*'It wasn't real...'* Leon thought to himself repeatedly. *'It wasn't real. It wasn't real...'*

After a number of repetitions, he finally said it out loud.

"It wasn't real..."

It wasn't much, and he still felt terrible, but it was enough for him to start moving again. He summoned all the grit he could and pushed himself to his feet, while summoning another healing spell in the same breath. He pressed that spell to his chest, using it to quickly close his wounds that were still bleeding. He then stripped himself down to his skivvies and blasted himself with water to wash himself clean of blood, before drying himself with fire and then summoning fresh clothes from his soul realm. In all, it only took about thirty seconds, but he felt immeasurably better once it was done. He wasn't back to normal, but he was at least ready to get his head back in the game.

[Leon, you good?] Xaphan asked.

[Well enough,] Leon replied. [What in the hells was that? Was it darkness magic? My lightning didn't have the effect I would've thought it would...]

[Our family's power isn't a hard counter to darkness magic,] Nestor said in a tone that was both didactic and exasperated. [As I'm sure you've been taught—and if you haven't, then your teachers have treated you with criminal neglect—no element of magic has a perfect counter, not even light and dark or fire and water. What our powers do is prevent foreign magic from interfering with our minds. And in that respect, your power was completely successful. Your mental defenses were breached, allowing this temple to summon that shade—your father, I presume? Regardless, once you saturated your brain with your power, the influence was eliminated. Your power after that wouldn't have any extra effect on the shade once it was summoned, though.]

Leon took a deep, steadying breath. [I suppose that makes sense. It wasn't really my father, though. Whatever that thing was didn't even use any magic.]

[Of course it wouldn't,] Nestor said chidingly. [As powerful as the forces that power this temple's magics may be, the lightning of our family is unique and can't be reproduced so easily. That shade could never have displayed our power.]

Leon nodded and closed his eyes. [I suppose... that makes sense,] he whispered, though it didn't quite explain why the shade hadn't used normal lightning magic.

When he opened his eyes, he was ready to face the world again. He'd be thinking about what happened here for a long time, but for now, he had to focus on finding Gaius and Maia. To that end, he took quick stock of his surroundings.

The villa was still devoid of magical power, save for the section not too far ahead that still scattered his magic senses. The room he'd just defeated Artorias in had returned to normal, but Leon didn't take that for granted, and kept his eyes open for any signs of change. For the most part, however, the villa was still dark and deserted.

[What happened to this place?] Leon wondered to his soul realm passengers.

[I think that Jormun broke this place,] Nestor explained. [To create a pocket space such as this and fill it with all that it has is no small feat, as I believe I've said before. Without the direct influence of *powerful* beings, a pocket realm would have to rely solely upon enchantments and wisps to run them.]

[Right, I remember you saying something to that effect earlier...]

[Yes. Well, that enchantment scheme would have to be mind-bendingly complex, too much for any one person to really comprehend and control all at once. If Jormun is screwing with the settings to mess with you, it's likely that he's disrupting the enchantment scheme to the point of breakage. At the very least, it seems like whatever 'trial' this temple was having its subject undergo has, at least partially, been unraveled.]

[But anything might happen, Jormun could send in a massive dragon or something, couldn't he?]

[I doubt it,] Nestor said dismissively. [I think he's already done as much as he's capable of. If I had to guess, I'd say that that there's not much else he can do until you go to a new pocket space. This one looks so mangled that it can't be manipulated in any coherent way from the outside anymore. The only thing you can do is to find the exit and leave as fast as you can.]

[And there *is* an exit?]

[I should think so, this is supposed to be a trial, not a prison. I'm guessing that whoever is the subject of the trial has to do something that fulfills the trial's conditions, and then you and they will be transported out.]

[Right...]

Leon was still a little anxious, but there was nothing he could do right now except move forward. Unless...

[I don't suppose there's any way I might be able to break out of here if I had to?] he asked Nestor.

Nestor replied, [That's always a possibility, but save that as a backup plan. Trying to break through a world, even one this small, isn't as easy a thing as breaking through a spatial tunnel.]

Xaphan snorted and added, [You're still in this world, too. Unless there're conditions like what you faced in the spatial tunnel, you shouldn't even contemplate that option unless you want to risk being so twisted by spatial forces that all of your organs are ripped out through your asshole.]

Leon smiled as he turned his attention back toward the only door out of this room that he hadn't taken to enter. [As always, demon, your powers of rhetoric allow you to make the most *compelling* arguments.]

[Damn right!] Xaphan sounded quite proud, either not picking up on Leon's light sarcasm or just ignoring it.

Leon strode over to the door and walked right through without hesitation. There was another long hallway on the other side with more than a dozen doors leading off of it. Leon ignored nearly all of them, though, for he already knew where he needed to go. He didn't need to waste his time exploring dark, empty rooms, not when the black hole in his perception began at the opposite end of the hallway.

As he walked, he felt his heart rate start to slow down. He was about to walk into the unknown, into quite possibly some other kind of terror that this place could've drawn from his mind. Anything and everything could be beyond that door. But compared to facing down his own father, Leon couldn't imagine anything more making his heart flutter even a little. After what had just happened, he felt numb and resigned. His walking pace was steady, his heart rate quickly slowing, and his hands no longer shook. He wouldn't exactly say that he was ready for anything, but at the very least, he was about as ready as his mental state would allow.

Leon didn't pay any more attention to the door between him and the warded part of this floor than he needed to see if it was in any way trapped. Thankfully, it wasn't, or at least, not in any way that he could detect, so he pushed the door open and stepped into the room beyond.

The other side of the door was like a whole other world compared to where Leon just was. In the rest of the trial world, everything was dark and devoid of life; whatever Jormun had done to screw with Leon had caused the world to nearly break down completely. No sun, no magic lanterns, no people. Just a dark and cold world.

When he entered the next room, it was like all the light in the world turned back on. The sun shone through the windows, there was a large firepit in the center of the surprisingly small room, and there were magic lanterns glowing in the ceiling casting soft, white light onto the walls. The room was much smaller than it had appeared outside, where it had seemed to be at least five or six similarly-sized rooms, making Leon's head swim a little bit as he was forced to adjust his spatial awareness, but his disorientation lasted only a few seconds.

[Oh yeah...] he heard Nestor mutter from his soul realm, [I would wipe out this entire plane just to pick the brain of whoever or whatever built this place...]

Leon ignored the dead man. He couldn't spare Nestor too much attention, for the room wasn't unoccupied, and his sudden entrance drew the gazes of everyone else there.

"Ahh, I was told that we had an uninvited guest..." said an almost obscenely rotund man sitting on the other side of the room, across from the firepit. It took Leon a moment, but after a second or two, he realized that he knew who this profoundly fat man was: Prince Octavius.

Leon rapidly blinked, wondering if he was mistaken, but the more he looked, the more he realized that it *was* the Prince, or some twisted image of him. Like with Artorias, there wasn't much doubt in Leon's

mind that this form was just an illusion conjured by darkness magic or something of that nature, but it was still a shock.

Even more of a shock was seeing the other handful of people in the room. He saw sitting on Octavius' left, the Sapphire Paladin, while on his right, the Earthshaker Paladin—a brief spike of anger flashing through Leon's mind as he laid eyes on Trajan's murderer, quelled only by the memory of skewering the Paladin upon his blade and turning him to ash with a copious application of lightning.

Both Paladins were smiling obsequiously and hanging off the Prince's arm like well-paid escorts, and barely spared Leon more than a glance. Each one had skin as smooth as glass of the highest quality, their features seeming just a little more symmetrical than they were, their beauty exaggerated by the trial world beyond reality. Still, their auras were seventh-tier, so if things went south, Leon knew that he'd be in a bit of a pickle.

However, all thoughts about the Paladins were immediately snuffed out when his gaze landed upon the woman behind Octavius, quietly rubbing the folds of his thick, soft neck with a contented smile on her face, her pale skin practically glowing in the sunlight that streamed through the windows, her hair appearing like glimmering silver as it cascaded down her back, her sapphire eyes narrow with how widely she was smiling.

Valeria.

And she looked like she was gladly serving Octavius, her hands practically disappearing into the rolls of fat behind his neck like she was kneading the softest of dough. She didn't spare Leon so much as a single glance.

Leon had thought that, after Artorias, this trial world had nothing left to throw at him that could truly infuriate him. And now, he kicked himself for his lack of imagination. To see someone here whom he loved, their form twisted and perverted, had his heart rate climbing right back up. Leon took a menacing step forward before he caught himself. His anger at seeing her here nearly drove his anger at seeing Earthshaker out of his mind.

*'Two seventh-tier mages...' he thought to himself. 'Calm yourself, idiot, she's not real! Keep a cool head... Keep cool.... Keep cool... The last thing you need is to make a fatal mistake at this stage...'*

Leon did his best not to immediately fly off the handle, but that was easier said than done. He began to walk forward again, his body filling with magic power almost uncontrollably as he prepared for what seemed like inevitable violence.

"Who are you, and why are you here?" the fat Octavius blubbered, his voice almost comically distorted by his immense girth, the huge pouch of fat below his chin quivering with every syllable. "How did you get through my guards?"

Leon ignored the questions. His eyes were mostly focused on Valeria, still rubbing Octavius' neck with a look of utter bliss on her face.

"Are you ignoring me, Peasant?"

Leon slowly walked around the firepit, his mantra of keeping himself cool, already not working all that well, now starting to fail completely. He was only a hair's breadth away from drawing his blade and

attacking, and it seemed that the Paladins sensed this, for they stood up and drew their own weapons, their auras rising to match his in intensity and degree of killing intent.

But Leon didn't charge. As he got a closer look at the group, he realized something: he'd missed someone in his initial scan of the area. A man, golden-haired, handsome, but much thinner and weaker than he remembered. He was on his hands and feet, his head bowed low.

Octavius was sitting on him like a stool.

Leon paused a moment as he took in this strange sight. Gaius' aura was weak and his body was nearly devoid of all muscle, but Leon had a strange feeling that he was real, unlike everyone else in the room, who were practically gross caricatures of their real life counterparts.

"Gaius...?" Leon asked aloud.

Gaius didn't respond. All he did he was whimper and bow his head lower.

Octavius, on the other hand, looked incensed, and he shouted, "YOU WOULD ADDRESS THIS SLAVE BEFORE YOUR KING! I WOULD HAVE YOUR HEAD!" The fat Prince began to struggle and shake in a clear attempt to rise to his feet, but he was unable to do so, even his fifth-tier powers proving unable to support all of this extra weight.

The same wasn't true of the Paladins. In unison, they began to circle around to Leon's sides, trapping him between them and the firepit.

Leon wasn't too interested in them, only giving them enough attention to be sure they weren't attacking just yet.

"Gaius," Leon loudly stated, "can you hear me?"

"Kill this peasant!" Octavius shouted irately, his arm jiggling with fat as he waved his hand at Leon. "I want his head! Kill him now!"

Leon sighed, then turned his attention fully to the Paladins. With his armor wrecked again, he was sorely tempted to finally take Xaphan up on his offer to come out of his soul realm and crack a few skulls, but he didn't indulge that temptation just yet. He was starting to get an idea of what exactly was going on here, and he didn't think that violence was going to be the best way to solve this problem.

Earthshaker and Sapphire began to wordlessly approach Leon, identical sadistic smiles plastered on their inhumanely-perfect faces, but before they could take more than a couple of steps, the ring on Leon's finger flashed with light, and his form began to fade from view as light was bent around him.

"GAIUS!" Leon shouted as he moved, not wanting either Sapphire or Earthshaker to start hurling magic at him and get in a lucky hit that might disrupt his invisibility. "Get ahold of yourself! We have to go!"

Leon wasn't quite sure what he could say. From his own experience dealing with the shade of Artorias, he could take a guess as to what was going on here: the trial world was striking Gaius where it hurt. Leon had to get Gaius to start fighting back, but he couldn't be sure what kind of state Gaius was in, or far Leon could push him without breaking his mind. The nobleman already didn't even acknowledge anyone around him, merely meekly keeping his eyes on the floor directly below him as he struggled to

support the obese Prince using him as a stool, tears occasionally slipping from his eyes and sliding down his nose.

At the very least, Leon had a bad feeling that Gaius needed to rise up and do most of this work himself if either of them had any hope to escape.

“You’re better than this!” Leon shouted, hoping his voice was reaching the broken, quietly sobbing man. He kept shouting, and he kept moving, not stopping for even a moment even as the two Paladins did their best to hunt him down. He hoped Gaius would do something soon, because he didn’t know how long he had left until those two started to throw magic around.

When they did, he’d likely be revealed, and at that point, he’d have little choice but to fight.

—

Gaius was worthless. He knew that in his heart of hearts. There was no confirmation needed, the proof was in how long and how willing he was to go along with Octavius.

Sure, he had his moments of rebellion during his squireship, but in the end, he did little to stop Octavius’ mad grab for power even though he’d had the power to stop it, and thousands died because of it. He was worthless.

When Gaius walked through the doors of the temple and appeared in front of Octavius, he did his best to make up for that. He knew that something was wrong, that this was some kind of illusionary world, but the punishment doled out by the Paladins felt every bit as painful as he’d imagined.

All the fight he had in him vanished as soon as Valeria appeared. The things she’d said to him were nothing that he hadn’t said to himself in the past, but to hear those words in her voice, telling h

### **Chapter 566: Entering the Next Trial**

Leon stood there in the black void, staring at Gaius with a complex look on his face, and even more complex emotions running through his mind. The shock of the trial world conjuring the images of both Artorias and Valeria still hadn’t quite worn off, and it made him dread venturing into Maia’s trial world.

He felt a great deal of anger, too, and for more than just encountering Artorias and Valeria within that world. That anger was simpler, so he started with that, first.

“It’s about damn time you got your shit together,” Leon said with a deep sigh, his eyes narrowing as he coolly regarded Gaius. “I’ve been trying to get you to move your ass for more than an hour. An *hour*. Of watching you act as that fat fuck’s ass-rest. Of watching Valeria putting her hands on him in profanely intimate ways. Of dodging those jackass Paladins as they tried to chase me down.”

“I’m sorry for all of that,” Gaius said without hesitation even though it didn’t seem like Leon was quite done complaining.

It halted the growing momentum of Leon’s tirade in its tracks, and after a moment of reflection after feeling some reactionary annoyance, Leon was glad that Gaius cut him off before he went too far.

But there were some things that he needed answers to, though.

“Why was Valeria there?” Leon asked through gritted teeth, unable to stop his primitive instincts from seeing this as Gaius encroaching on where he wasn’t wanted. “I believe you told me that you didn’t love her anymore. That place drew her from your mind, conjuring her image because it knew you still have feelings for her.”

“I recall telling you that I’d given up on ever having a relationship with her,” Gaius countered. “That doesn’t mean my feelings vanish overnight. I still care about her deeply, even if I know that there can never be anything between us.” He sighed in exasperation and exhaustion. “Look, Leon, she didn’t choose me. I’m an arrogant ass, but I can’t blame her for that decision, and it’s more than enough for me to drop it.”

Leon clenched his jaw so hard that he almost started to fear that he was about to crack a tooth, but he didn’t say anything more. He was angry, and he was emotionally raw. He was reluctant to do so, but he couldn’t stop himself from admitting that continuing down this line of vitriolic questioning wasn’t productive or helpful in any way.

He sighed once more as he forced himself to calm down.

“All right,” he whispered more to himself than to Gaius. “All right. I suppose it’s none of my damn business, anyway. That’s between you and Valeria. I’m... sorry for... all of that. How are you doing now that we’re out of there?”

Gaius gave Leon a brief look of confusion before he replied, “I’m doing about as well as I can be expected to, I think. I might need some time alone once we get out of here to really process everything we saw, but I think that for the time being, I’m good to go. Having something else to focus on right now sounds like the best damn thing ever.”

“I can agree with that sentiment,” Leon replied, though he silently wondered just how far they’d be able to get from everything that just happened.

*‘Probably not that far until we get the hells out of here...’* he cynically thought to himself as he checked to make sure his mental defenses were back in place. The trial world had smashed right through his protective shell of magic, but the shell had at least slowed it down enough for him to realize that he’d been under a mental attack by darkness magic, thus allowing him to use his silver-blue lightning to fight it off. But that only made him feel marginally better; he needed to practice his mental defenses quite a bit more. He hadn’t encountered that many darkness mages so far, lowering mental defenses on his list of priorities, but it was relevant now, and he was finding that his skills were deficient.

He briefly wondered if there were any enchantments he and Nestor could devise to help him in this regard. There probably were, but that line of thought was for another time, and he focused back on his and Gaius’ surroundings.

Everything around them was completely dark, like they were standing in a completely black featureless void. What made this even stranger, though, was the fact that both he and Gaius were perfectly lit, as if there were soft, unintrusive lights shining on them from every angle. It made for quite the unsettling effect—though Leon still thought it better than having to contend with a conjured shade of his father.

“Where are we?” Gaius asked aloud.

"I'm not sure," Leon replied. It wasn't exactly like the spatial tunnels he'd been in before, but this dark void did bear some stark similarities that led Leon to make a guess. "I think it's some kind of transitory space, like a spatial tunnel. Something that would link the trial world with the temple..."

Leon trailed off as he remembered what exactly awaited them inside the temple: the gigantic golden colossus of the serpent-man.

"Just for your information..." Leon suddenly said as panic began to fill his body once again. He quickly informed Gaius of what might await them if whatever this place was wound up depositing them back in that colossus' chamber.

When Leon was done with his explanation, Gaius' face had gone a bit pale. "I... uh... I don't suppose you have a spare weapon I might borrow?" he asked as he patted himself down, though the nervous expression he wore indicated that he wasn't actually thinking he'd find anything that he might be able to use.

"I don't have much," Leon admitted, "but I have a couple blades you can choose from..."

He quickly conjured a small collection of arming swords he had in his soul realm. Since he already had an Adamant blade that was more powerful than anything he could possibly enchant and would likely remain so for a very long time, Leon didn't make a habit of carrying around many swords. However, he still had a few relatively cheap blades, just in case.

While Gaius made his choice, Leon addressed Nestor and asked, [What am I looking at? What is this place?]

Nestor, proving that he'd been watching for a while, immediately explained, [The purpose of that world was fulfilled, whatever that purpose may have been. To keep it active is to waste a tremendous amount of power. Just the couple of hours you and the other one spent in there probably burned enough aetoi to propel a mid-sized ark from here all the way to the Nexus.]

Leon frowned as his eyes went wide. He didn't know that much about arks, only that they were magical vehicles that could traverse the vast expanses of the Void between planes. Teleportation between planes wasn't a thing done easily or lightly, and as a result was usually reserved only for the most important of people, something which Leon took special note of when he was told by Nestor weeks ago as he remembered that his father told him that his mother had been whisked away by some kind of teleportation sphere.

But most people, even those who'd achieved Apotheosis, traveled the Void in great arks, not through magical teleportation. The distances were just too vast to make spatial tunnels economical to use for anyone but the most powerful of people.

Most of that hardly matter right now, but it at least served to give Leon at least some kind of frame of reference for this; he could've gotten into an ark and flown to the Nexus for the kind of power the temple used to run that trial world.

And there was at least one more that it was running: Maia's. As he thought about his river nymph lover, Leon felt his heart rate accelerate. He didn't know what was going on with her, and it was causing him no small amount of anxiety.



[How do I get out of this place?] Leon asked, his nervousness creeping into his voice. [Naiad is still somewhere in here, and I need to find her...]

[That's going to be rather difficult,] Nestor said. [The internal layout of these kinds of spatial passages aren't exactly analogous to space in the outside world. To be honest, it might be best to just wait a little while for an exit to appear, take your chances with that colossus, and then try again: repeat what you did to enter this trial world. Shouldn't be too difficult, maybe only a few seconds once you return to that chamber.]

[You're not exactly giving me much comfort here, Nestor,] Leon growled.

[I'm not here to provide comfort, I'm here to provide information,] Nestor sniped back. [If you want comfort, seek it elsewhere. I apologize if I sound callous, though; I'm just trying to remain objective, and I have a tendency to think out loud. Too much time alone, I suppose.]

[I don't mind the thinking out loud, I'd just prefer if you were thinking about how to get out of this place.]

[Wait five minutes, young Raime. If an exit hasn't appeared by the—]

Before Nestor could even finish his response, a bright white light suddenly began to shine in the great black void, appearing like an actual light at the end of a tunnel.

[—Never mind, that looks like what you were waiting for,] Nestor drily stated. [If you need me again, just let me know.]

[Keep paying attention,] Leon ordered. [I'd rather not have to explain what's going on if I need help again...]

[Mmhmm...]

"Is that...?" Gaius hesitantly asked as he pointed at the light.

"Come on," Leon said as he led the way toward the light, adjusting the tattered remains of his armor as he went. When he walked into the light, he did so weapon first and with silver-blue lightning surging through his body.

Barely even a few seconds later, Leon and Gaius found themselves emerging back in the colossus' chamber, but despite this, it initially seemed like Leon's cautious advance wasn't justified; the serpent-man colossus had returned to its position in the center of the domed chamber and assumed its pervious pose with one hand on the ceiling as if the colossus were holding it up.

Rather unsettling, however, was the fact that small rivers of gold were leaking out of all of its joints like blood. Some quirk of the light in the chamber gave the liquid gold a reddish tint, adding to the bloody illusion.

Once it reached the floor, however, that gold twisted into long, sinuous shapes, and began to slither back up the colossus' legs. The colossus was slowly being covered again by golden serpents writhing and slithering over each other in an attempt to race each other to the ceiling. Most of these golden serpents didn't get too far before they froze in place, but it still made for an eerie and unsettling sight.

Leon didn't spend too much time taking this in. He made sure the colossus wasn't moving, and then he surveyed the rest of the massive chamber. Nothing else seemed out of place or moved since he'd been here last, so he immediately turned around and watched the spatial tunnel wink out of existence behind Gaius.

"Wow..." Gaius said in wonder and a hint of fear as he took in the sight of the colossus and the chamber. "I'm... glad that thing's not attacking us..."

"As am I..." Leon said as he examined the wall. The hole he'd punched remained, so if what Nestor said was true, he'd just have to stick his hand in and re-activate the same enchantment.

However, before he could take even one step toward it, Jormun's voice rang out through the chamber.

"That can easily be changed, you know..."

Leon instantly assumed an aggressive stance as his eyes darted around the room, searching for any sign of the pirate. However, this was in vain; the pirate hadn't shown himself so far, and this time wasn't any different.

"Still hiding somewhere in this temple?!" Leon shouted back. "Why don't you come here and we can settle this properly!"

"I already tried to settle this properly," Jormun protested in a low and slow cadence. "You turned me down. You didn't want to settle this peacefully, so we'll have to settle this with violence. But that's something that can wait. I'd rather congratulate the two of you on your successful triumph over the temple's trial. I remember when I went through the very same thing... oh, what was it, forty years ago? By the Serpent, time does fly, doesn't it?"

As Jormun spoke, Gaius began to relax, and he glanced at Leon with a look of such utter confusion and bafflement on his face that Leon almost burst out laughing.

"*This* is Jormun?" he quietly asked.

Leon nodded and he turned back toward the wall so that he could begin the process for entering Maia's trial world. Nestor had told him that it ought to be identical to how he entered Gaius' trial world, but when Leon started to poke around behind the wall, he found that it wasn't quite so simple. The glyph that he'd activated was now gone, meaning he'd have to find an active spatial glyph that could take him to Maia.

"Trying to leave already, Leon?" Jormun asked, sounding quite hurt. "Trying to make your way to that river nymph? How about this, I'll open up a portal to where she's undergoing her trial, and once you get her out, we can talk more. Deal? Maybe then we can give this whole settling things peacefully another shot."

"No," Leon bluntly replied. He wanted to settle things *properly*, not *peacefully*.

Jormun sighed heavily, a thick tone of frustration audible even in this simple utterance.

"You frustrate me, Leon," Jormun said, making his feelings clear. "I'll say this, I can't imagine what the Serpent sees in you. Fine, then. Be stubborn. Be inflexible. It'll only get you killed." Jormun paused for a moment as Leon continued his search, flooding the hole in the wall with his magic senses. There were

many spatial glyphs nearby, but parsing out which ones he may or may not need wasn't easy. Fortunately, Nestor was giving him some advice.

Leon was a little concerned about what Jormun was going to do, though, so he wasn't nearly as unresponsive as he was making it seem. His magic senses were flooding the room as well, and he paid extra attention to anything that might be move or had the potential to threaten him or Gaius. However, it seemed that Jormun was simply in a talkative mood, rather than a violent one, for after a few seconds of silence, he finally spoke again, but this time, his words were directed toward Gaius.

"You, the other one, your name is Gaius, correct?" Jormun's tone was different from how he spoke with Leon. Instead of a friendlier, cajoling tone, Jormun assumed something a little more commanding and imperious. His question was rather innocuous, but his tone impressed upon Gaius the fact that Jormun wasn't going to take silence as an answer.

Gaius looked terrified, but he quickly composed himself, and with as much noble dignity as he could muster, replied, "Yes, that's my name. I am Gaius Caecilius Tullius, the brother of Gratian, the current Duke of Lentia!"

"An auspicious name," Jormun said. "You must have questions, Gaius. Give voice to them, and if I can, I'll answer them. Leon over there isn't willing to indulge my desire for speech, but I'm hoping you'll be a little more accommodating..."

Gaius scowled. "Why should I be?"

"Because we're now enemies, even though we didn't have to be," Jormun bitterly replied. Leon loudly snorted and gave an exaggerated laugh in response.

"Ha! Your offers of peace were horseshit, and you know it!"

"I always negotiate in good faith," Jormun shot back. "Allow me to prove it. Ask me anything. Anything at all. My motives, my goals, my forces, whatever it is you ask of me, I'll answer to the best of my ability. Of that, you have my word."

"How much is your word worth, though?" Gaius muttered.

"You'd be surprised, I think," Jormun replied. "I am a pirate, and not just any pirate, but one that has contended with the Four Empires and the Sky Devils in the southeast! A man like me doesn't get to where I am now without honoring some kind of code! I have a reputation to maintain! I have given you my word, Gaius, and I will answer honestly. Now, what questions do you have?"

Leon felt Gaius give him an odd look, almost as if he were asking himself if this was really all right, but Leon didn't turn around. His main priority was finding Maia, not staying here in this chamber indulging a mad pirate.

Finally, Gaius seemed to settle on his question.

"What was the point of all that we just went through? I don't really feel any different, just... well..."

"Humiliated?" Jormun asked as Gaius trailed off. "Emasculated? Made to feel as if you're worthless, or instilled with some other kind of negative complex about yourself?"

Gaius lightly scowled, but he didn't immediately respond.

"That's all right," Jormun continued, "you don't need to say anything, I understand completely. As I said before, I've been through this temple's trials, as well. Now, I can't tell you what the purpose of this place was supposed to be, I can only give you my guesses, and based on the experience I've had in my life, I'd say that I have a pretty accurate idea of what was going on here back in the day.

"They were trying to break you down. You see, there are a few temples scattered all over these islands, and it's my personal theory that they used to function as some kind of pilgrimage, of sorts. The pilgrim would start on the first island, and make some grand display of their piety to the Great Horned Serpent. The temple on the second island would introduce that pilgrim to the Serpent's power, awing them with its might and majesty. This place, this temple, was designed to attack you in your weakest places, to tear down your sense of self-worth and leave you as easy-pickings for the priests who ran this place. It was all just to screw with people's heads so that they'd be more pliable and receptive to the Serpent's teachings. I mean, just look at the place you now stand in! This is the place where the pilgrims would find themselves if they passed the trials, if they conquered their fears and surmounted their weaknesses! They'd be rewarded with glimpses into the Serpent's abundance and awed even more by its majesty. They'd be made to feel great after having been torn down. Made to feel like after their struggles, they'd found a place that understood them and empathized with them, and gave them a sense of belonging—and to overwhelm them with the Serpent's power.

"That's just my guess, anyway. For all I know this was all just one big fetish den that we've completely misunderstood."

"I wish this place was just a fetish dungeon..." Gaius muttered.

"I can agree with you, there, at least," Jormun said, eliciting a glare of suspicion and alertness from Gaius, his gaze wandering the room with his inability to see the pirate. "Do you have any more questions, Gaius?" Jormun asked.

Before Gaius could answer, a black curtain appeared behind him; Leon had found the active spatial glyph and managed to activate it, though it was relatively far and it took a moment for his magic to travel far enough to activate it. Fortunately, Leon didn't injure himself this time, having pulled his arm out of the hole just in time to avoid being torn and shredded by the spatial curtain.

"Let's go," Leon said as he took Gaius by the arm and practically dragged the young nobleman through the curtain into the spatial tunnel beyond. Leon was not about to willingly provide further entertainment to Jormun.

Just after they left, a long sigh echoed throughout the colossus' chamber.

"If the Serpent wasn't demanding your blood, Leon..." Jormun whispered, his words echoing throughout the largely-empty chamber. He intended to leave his threat unsaid, but then he heard the slithering of the Serpent; the sealed god was near.

[My curiosity... has been sated,] the Serpent hissed into Jormun's mind. [Finish this... bring the boy to me...]

## **Chapter 567: Maia's Fear**

Leon and Gaius sped through the spatial tunnel they appeared in, Leon not allowing them to stop for even a moment. With Jormun's attention on them, he didn't want to give the pirate another opportunity to screw with the spatial tunnel like he did last time.

It seemed like Leon's caution paid off immediately, for as they sprinted down the tunnel, a burning light appeared behind them, causing Gaius to stumble as he cried out in pain—had they been any slower and not put so much of the tunnel behind them, it might've been a lot worse. Leon was likewise uncomfortable, but being so much stronger, he barely even missed a step as he grabbed Gaius and kept him on his feet and moving toward the other side of the tunnel.

It took a long run to get to the other side, but fortunately, they made it fairly quickly; Leon didn't even have to resort to destroying this spatial tunnel before they reached the end, though he was at the point of channeling his lightning magic in preparation by then.

Upon reaching the tunnel's end, there was a great flash of light, and Leon and Gaius found themselves standing in a clearing surrounded by dense, utterly wild forest. It seemed like a completely primeval forest with no signs of human civilization anywhere near their location, an impression that was soon confirmed when Leon immediately projected his magic senses and saw nothing but forest.

Leon took a long, calming breath as Gaius collapsed next to him, shivering.

"Ugghh," Gaius groaned.

"You all right?" Leon asked as he knelt down next to his companion, preparing to conjure a few healing spells if Gaius needed them.

"Yeah," Gaius responded. The blond nobleman took a deep breath, adjusted his hair, and then stood up, his face still wearing a slightly pained expression, but one that was nearly completely obscured by determination and grit. "So, that was Jormun..."

"Yeah," Leon replied. Gaius had met Jormun before, but only while the pirate was in the guise of Turiel.

"Have to admit... not what I was expecting..."

"Yeah," Leon repeated. "Bit of a chatty fellow, isn't he?"

"Eh, chatty isn't surprising. I was just expecting more threats and cursing. Not offering information and being kind of pleasant..."

Leon frowned and warned, "Don't let that impression go to your head. Remember that this is a man that strung up children for some blood ritual. Or maybe just to scare us, who can really say; but he still tortured thousands to death."

"I got it," Gaius said, but Leon wasn't quite done with his warning.

"Jormun was talking to me a lot before I found you. He seemed to switch at random between trying to cajole me to his side, and flying into a murderous rage whenever I refused. Don't trust what he says, and most definitely don't take his current amiability at face value. The man's just trying to screw with our heads."

Gaius nodded, and Leon let the matter rest.

Throughout that quick exchange, Leon had kept his magic senses projected and he'd been examining the surrounding terrain in as much detail as he could on such a short time frame. He needed to find Maia; he was keeping himself calm and trying not to descend into an anxiety-fueled frenzy, but he *needed* to find her to put his mind at ease.

But, at least initially, there were absolutely no signs of where to go. This was just empty forest as far as he could see, and while he certainly appreciated the change in terrain, it did little to immediately aid him in realizing where he needed to go to find his river nymph lover. Not even the connection he and Maia shared was of any help in this constructed world.

And then it all clicked in his head. There was a deep ravine a few miles to the south, and a familiar pond not too far to the north that he knew was much deeper than it seemed. Leon *knew* this forest; he'd spent days running around through the trees, sleeping in hidden nooks and crannies, avoiding Talfar hunters that had been sent to find him and kill him. He was in the same forest he'd run into for cover after leaping down from the walls of the Bull's Horns during Talfar's first assault a few years ago—it was in the course of escaping the Talfar hunters that had discovered him after he'd infiltrated their camp that he'd fallen into that ravine and down into the river below, been taken captive by a river nymph, and first brought to Maia.

A deeply bitter smile began to creep across Leon's face as he started to recognize his surroundings. The events surrounding his meeting with Maia were not what he would call good memories; they weren't *bad* memories, either, per se, but it had still been a harrowing experience. He could look back on all of it fondly, especially since it all worked out in the end, but during those events, he'd gone off on his own to do serious damage to the Talfar army, been chased into the woods, beaten into unconsciousness by a river nymph, nearly raped by another river nymph, and spent days under the constant threat of capture and death. Fun, exhilarating, harrowing, and terrifying were all words that Leon could use to describe those days, and which one came first depended largely on his mood.

"I know where we need to go..." Leon said as he steered Gaius toward the south. He wanted them to get moving quickly so that they could find Maia, deal with whatever this trial world was throwing at her, and escape as quickly as they could, but there didn't appear to be anyone out in the woods, so Leon took the opportunity to let both him and Gaius mentally rest a bit as they made their way toward the ravine. Neither of them had had a good time in Gaius' trial world, and while neither were exactly breaking down, Leon was a little worried about what might happen once they no longer had something to focus on. Jormun and these trials were taking the center spot in both of their minds, but once—or *if*—they got out of this temple, they'd have to process everything that happened, and having at least a bit of time to get a bit of a head start on that couldn't hurt. Leon even thought it would be more immediately beneficial since it might help to compartmentalize before the next burst of violence broke out.

They didn't move particularly quietly. Leon wasn't sure if Jormun could hear them, but he didn't much care, either; he told Gaius everything that he thought relevant about the forest and his time in it. He went *very* light on the details with how his and Maia's meeting went, but other than that, by the time they arrived at the top of the ravine and could look down into the raging river below, Gaius had been reasonably caught up to Leon's knowledge of where they were and what may be awaiting them down in the waters below.

Leon hadn't brought them to the place where he'd jumped down in the outside world. He'd broken both of his legs when he did that, and given that Gaius was still weaker than Leon had been at that time, Leon had opted to take them on a slightly longer route to a point further down the river where the cliffs weren't quite so high. Gaius *should* be fine if jumping from that height, if Leon's estimate about his durability was accurate...

"And we're going to jump down there?" Gaius hesitantly asked as they stared down at the river below.

"Yes," Leon replied. He supposed he could've brought them to the pond where Maia had left him following their meeting way back then, but she'd led him through a maze of underwater caves to reach that pond from her lake, and he had no idea how to make his way back through there. This was, at the very least, they might have the opportunity to grab another river nymph and get Maia's location from her.

*Maybe.* It was the best plan that Leon had right now, and it wasn't stirring up a great deal of confidence within him, but he was determined to press on until he found Maia.

Making matter just that much worse, he was a little concerned about bringing Gaius along—he didn't want the nobleman to be privy to whatever secrets and insecurities that this trial world might draw from Maia—but he was even more concerned with the practical risks of leaving Gaius behind. What if Jormun managed to find them while they were separated? What if the pirate were to activate defenses that Gaius was unable to deal with on his own? Jormun had already demonstrated a willingness to break the trial worlds to try and kill him, he couldn't imagine that the pirate would balk at killing Gaius if given the opportunity.

No, it was just safer to bring Gaius with him, and to try and protect Maia's dignity as best as he could in other ways. And that was assuming it needed protecting on his part, too, he couldn't even be sure that she was as indisposed as Gaius was during his trial.

"Be on your guard," Leon said as he took a moment to psyche himself up for the plunge into the river, "who knows what this place may have conjured from her mind. At the very least, we're going to have to find our way through some underwater caves..."

"Oh... shit," Gaius whispered, though when Leon glanced at him, he saw not fear and wavering certainty, but determination. Gaius was only fourth-tier, but he was solid, he was ready for this. Leon couldn't help but smile, but he prepared his helmet, just in case. The enchantments it bore would help them both breathe underwater if the need for it arose. Gaius was in more need of it, but he was still powerful enough to last underwater a terrifically long time without needing air.

"Well, no use putting this off for too long," Leon said, and without any more thought, he leaped from the cliff.

He heard Gaius shout from behind, but with his magic senses, he saw Gaius jump only a couple seconds after him, the nobleman's determined demeanor cracking slightly as gravity sank its unforgiving claws into him and dragged him down a couple hundred feet toward the river below.

It was an exciting fall. The last time Leon had made it, he'd been chased by a Talfar chariot commander who'd been a tier stronger than him, so he hadn't been all that able to enjoy the descent. But now, a smile couldn't help but bloom on his face despite all that was happening.

That smile vanished as Leon hit the water. He sank deep into the river, all the air practically exploding out of his lungs as he was swept downstream, the force of the river twisting and throwing him until his sense of balance and direction went all out of whack. But Leon forced himself to remain calm and to go with the flow until he could project his magic senses. His lungs burned and his skin stung from the impact with the water, but he was fine and on course. He could see behind that Gaius wasn't nearly so comfortable after his impact, but at the very least, he seemed reasonably intact.

Leon then turned his attention to the water around them. If any hostile river nymphs were going to attack them, he needed to be ready.

But he didn't see any threats—not of the nymph variety, at the very least, but there were quite a few sharp rocks in the deep and fast-flowing river that Leon was a little concerned about. However, as he kicked toward Gaius and helped the nobleman swim up to the surface and suck down some air, he noticed half a dozen river nymphs appear behind them and follow them as they were swept downriver. They were as nude as nymphs typically were, and they were staring with great interest at Leon and Gaius as they floated in the water, but Leon could detect no killing intent in their gazes.

"There's a big rock coming up!" Leon shouted to Gaius, barely able to make his voice heard over the roaring rapids. "Grab onto it!"

Gaius sputtered as he struggled to keep his head above water, but he did as Leon ordered, and the two managed to arrest their journey down the river by grabbing onto a jagged rock that jutted out of the water like the fin of a massive shark.

"What's going on?" Gaius loudly inquired as they hung onto the rock. "Did you see the caves when you were underneath?"

"No, but there's something else here!" Leon shouted back, his attention still on the nymphs. One of them—the strongest of the bunch, by the look of her aura—had broken away from the group and was traveling down the river towards them. Leon didn't think she was too big of a threat given that she was possessed of only roughly fifth-tier power, but he summoned his lightning and let it fill his body, just in case.

He needn't have worried, though. The river nymph never made any hostile movements, and after establishing her peaceful intentions with hand gestures, she eventually helped Leon and Gaius find the cave they were looking for—not that interpreting those intentions were easy since this river nymph wasn't an exception to the rule that river nymphs were generally less intelligent than humans, save for those like Maia who ruled over them. Leon kept his guard up the entire time, so he was genuinely surprised—though only mildly so—to find that, after swimming for a while through some dark underwater caves, the river nymph had led them right to Maia's grotto that she'd lived in for decades before Leon was first brought to her.

But just because there was a river nymph with them leading the way and using her water magic to help them swim, that didn't mean that it was an easy journey. It was dark and cold in those submerged caves, and Leon on more than one occasion felt extremely claustrophobic. By the time he and Gaius hauled their miserable asses out onto the rocky beach on Maia's island in the middle of the underground lake, both were mentally exhausted even though their bodies were still relatively flush with magic power.



Their river nymph guide made herself scarce at this point, though Leon was more comforted by that than anything. It meant there was one less element that he had to worry about.

“What... what now?” Gaius asked, leaving the decision up to Leon.

Leon quickly projected his magic senses over the island. Maia was here, he could sense her proximity, though not her direction. However, that thrill that he was getting closer to his river nymph lover was immediately and ruthlessly crushed once he got a better idea of what—or rather *who* the trial world had chosen to manifest this time.

“Stay here,” he growled to Gaius, any concerns about leaving him alone when Jormun hadn’t revealed himself yet vanishing as a cloud of affronted anger descended over Leon’s mind.

It seemed that Gaius must’ve sensed that, for he paled and sat down on a nearby rock, nodding to Leon as the latter started walking further into the island.

The place was exactly as Leon remembered: the ceiling of the immense grotto was covered in glowing crystals and mushrooms, while the interior of the island was covered in rather out-of-place trees with glowing leaves that shed just enough light for a mortal to have been able to find their way around with little issue.

It was a dark, serene, and staggeringly beautiful place, but its beauty was utterly lost on Leon. He paid no attention at all to it, and only grew angrier and more offended with every step he took.

First was Artorias during Gaius’ trial, and that was bad enough that Leon was already contemplating trying to find a way to annihilate this temple if he could. Then, the trial world conjured an image of Valeria putting her hands on a grotesquely obese Octavius, and Leon only grew even more angry, the primitive animal within him demanding that *someone* shed blood for such an affront. And now, as he passed by dozens of trees and laid eyes upon his destination with his golden eyes, he saw the latest profanity that this temple’s trial worlds saw fit to spew forth.

He saw a woman standing before Maia’s pond in the center of the clearing, which was itself in the center of Maia’s island. This woman’s long red hair spilled down her back like liquid fire, her hands were clasped behind her alluring figure, her delightful curves framed perfectly by the glow emanating from the pond as if she were deliberately standing in such a way as to enflame Leon’s desire.

If that was the case, it wasn’t working, and when this profaned image of Elise turned around and gave Leon an enchanting smile, he found himself nearly overcome with the powerful urge to cut this shade down. The only thing that prevented it was a natural aversion to attacking the image of his fire-haired lover. As heretical as he found this to be, not even his towering rage was enough for him to draw his weapon against Elise’s image.

“Ah, husband, you’re here,” the shade said in Elise’s sonorous voice.

Leon couldn’t deny that there was a big part of him that was utterly delighted to hear it; it had been almost two months since he’d seen or heard her, and while he did his best not to think about it—and having Jormun around as a distraction was, in this one regard, almost a boon—it still greatly pained him to be apart from his fiancée.

"Is she here?" Leon demanded, unable to just ignore this conjured image of Elise no matter how hard he tried.

"Of course she is," the shade replied, the smile she wore—which would've brought nothing but joy to Leon's heart if he saw it on the real Elise's face—bringing him instead nothing but pain and the urge to either blast her with lightning or vomit. Or both. "She's a *little* different now, though, husband."

"What do you mean?" Leon inquired as he probed the pond's shallow depths for any sign of Maia. Even though he was here, making no secret of his presence, constantly probing their connection for a response, Maia wasn't revealing herself.

"Oh, I think you'll see soon enough..." the shade of Elise cryptically replied. "Oh, my dear Naiad, why won't you come out and show yourself off? I'm sure Leon would *love* to see how *ugly* you truly are!"

In a display of magic that the real Elise wasn't yet capable of, the shade lifted one of her hands in a dramatic flourish toward the ceiling of the grotto, and the water in the pond vibrated like it was resonating with a tremendous earthquake. A moment later, it erupted into the air like water from a steam geyser, enshrouding the clearing in thick mist.

Almost immediately, Leon heard the sound of weeping, and it was such a heartbreaking sound that almost all of his righteous anger died. It felt like his heart was snapping in half, and he stumbled forward, so distracted that he could do little more than instinctually move toward the sound, blinded by the mist. He was so taken by the sound of that weeping that he didn't even project his magic senses again—the very prospect of finding the source of that weeping bringing him almost as much terror as he'd felt upon seeing the shade of Artorias for the first time.

Only a couple seconds later, Leon saw her as he drew close. With his advance and the mist rapidly clearing, Maia was revealed, and Leon's anger came roaring back.

He saw Maia in the pit left behind by the pond, now absent water. She was as naked as the day they'd met, though her attitude was about as different as it could possibly be. Instead of the calm and confident woman she usually was, she lay in the pit, her hands doing little more than covering her face as she curled up into herself.

Leon's eyes slowly traveled down her body, tracing the familiar lines of her fit and well-endowed figure, until they reached her hips, where they were greeted not with more of Maia's bronze skin, but with deep green scales.

Where Maia's legs once were, was now a long, thick serpent's tail. The trial world had turned her into a Gorgon.

## **Chapter 568: Reuniting the Party**

"Finally!" the shade of Elise spat, her voice sending chills of dissonance through Leon. "Look at her! The bitch is as ugly on the outside as she is on the inside..."

Leon grimaced as he took in the sight of Maia down in the dry pit left behind by the pond. Her lower half had been turned into the long, scaled tail of a snake. She was curled up in a ball, her lake-blue eyes squeezed shut, her arms wrapped around herself. She twitched a few times now that the pond water was gone, showing that she was aware of where she was and the events transpiring around her on at

least some level, but she wasn't responding to Elise's words or to Leon's attempts to contact her through their connection.

Leon was tempted to call out to her, but he refrained, reasoning that he didn't want to speak her true name aloud when he could sense even just Xaphan and Nestor listening in, let alone who else might be watching that he wasn't aware of.

It took some effort to ignore the shade behind speak. Her words infuriated him, and he was offended on many levels that it was wearing Elise's face as it spoke such vile things, but it *was* still wearing Elise's face, and that made it difficult for him to violently rebuke. He'd already had to cut down the image of his father today, and to do the same for his fire-haired lover wasn't something he was quite emotionally ready to do.

As if sensing his reticence to engage with her, the shade almost soundlessly approached Leon from behind and wrapped her arms around his neck, causing him to freeze in shock and indecision. Elise's soft red lips were brought close to Leon's ear by the shade as she jumped a bit onto Leon's back.

"Look at her, my love," she whispered, "she thought she could take advantage of you when you were most vulnerable—in *this* very place, no less—and force herself upon you! She thought she could come into *our* home and take you from me! She thought she was *worthy* of bearing your child, of becoming a part of our family! And when she realized her true place was out in the muck and dirt and far away from the light of civilization, she left! Only to come back and—"

"Enough!" Leon firmly growled. That the shade wore Elise's face only went so far—and it wasn't even Elise's face, not *really*. Elise had some light freckles on her nose and upper cheeks, barely discernable under normal conditions, and a small mole high up on her forehead that was normally hidden by her hair, none of which this shade had. But Leon knew her body better than anyone else, he could never miss these little details of his first love's face, let alone how her breasts seemed a little bit bigger, her waist a little bit slimmer, and her hips a little bit wider. This shade *looked* like Elise, but it wasn't her. It was some idealized copy of her formed from Maia's memories, much like the too-perfect Valeria that Leon had seen in Gaius' trial world—or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that this shade was exaggerated almost to the point of caricature. That Elise was fully dressed was probably the only reason it remained even somewhat true-to-life.

That made things easier. Leon was fiercely attracted to Elise on a physical level, but not even that attraction could survive the words that were pouring from this pale imitation's mouth.

"Oh? Don't tell me you're going to take *her* side..." the shade said as she let herself down from around Leon's neck and took a few steps back. She turned away from Leon and hugged her body with one hand as the other gently covered her mouth—not that that stopped her from speaking. "You have me, and all that I bring to the table, and you choose *her* over *me*?! Ugh, that just turns my stomach! My husband would rather stick his cock in *this* monster than satisfy me!"

The temptation to smite this shade grew considerably. Leon knew that Elise would never say these things; she was in love with Maia as he was. That this shade was going on like this was helping him to dissociate it with Elise in his head. And yet, it still wasn't quite enough for Leon to summon his power and *do* something.

Instead, he turned away from the shade and started walking down into the pit where Maia still lay.

When he reached her, Leon held out his hand and reached out to touch her shoulder. Maia shuddered and pulled away, but Leon didn't stop. He just took one more step closer until his fingers rested upon the smooth skin of her shoulder.

[Maia...] he whispered through their connection, hoping that she could hear him even though she wasn't responding in any way, [I'm here. I've come for you. It's time to wake up from this nightmare.]

He didn't say anything more; instead, sending a quick burst of silver-blue lightning surging through his hand and into Maia's body.

The reaction was immediate. She instantly seized up, her eyes opening so wide that her eyes almost seemed like they were about to fall out, her lips pulling back from her mouth in a hideous grimace, and her serpent's tail first curling up, then lashing out at him. Leon was tossed back like a ragdoll, but he suffered nothing worse than having his back covered in mud.

When Leon groaned in irritation and pushed himself to feet, he ignored the shade's callous laughter from outside the pit and focused on Maia. He couldn't be sure if her catatonic state had been caused by the darkness magic of this temple, but he'd been confident that that had been the case.

It seemed his suspicion paid off, for Maia was slowly uncurling her body, her eyes locked on him the entire time.

"... Leon...?" she whispered aloud, her voice like music to his ears, especially as it caused the fake Elise to stop laughing.

"I'm here," he quietly said as he once more went to her side. He took Maia into his arms and held her close, but the moment was ruined when the shade behind them refused to leave them in peace.

"What a scene this is," she said, "my husband and his rapist, acting like a loving couple while completely ignoring *me*! I suppose my first instincts were right, Leon: you are not worthy of me, you never were, and you never will be."

Those were harsh words, and they cut deeply into Leon. It didn't matter that he knew this shade wasn't real, it was still using Elise's voice, and speaking with a near-identical copy of her face.

Still, he forced himself to remain calm and to take a deep breath.

"I've been in this situation before, believe it or not," he slowly whispered to Maia, who looked up to him in surprise. "A couple years ago, a few days or so before we met, I was attacked by a vampire that used darkness magic. He hit me with some attack that caused me to hallucinate something much like this. I saw Valeria, Elise, and my father, all telling me everything I didn't want to hear."

Leon began to stand, and with Maia still in his arms, he also pulled her up. Her serpent tail writhed, but after some flailing, Maia managed to get it under her and provide her with a little bit of support, even if she was still leaning on Leon.

"Don't listen to that thing," Leon continued, ignoring the shade completely. "It doesn't speak for Elise. That's just a monster that lives in your head, not our firebrand back home."

"An interesting theory, Leon," the shade said. "But here I am, and everything I've ever said to her is the truth. She's nothing but a monster, and one that should be put down. She has no place in human society! She has no place with *us*! You both know this... that rabid viper's place is here, so far underground that she can't pollute the light of day with her presence! Down here, where she can't hurt anyone or *try to force herself into relationships where she's not wanted!*"

Leon didn't give Maia the chance to internalize that diatribe, instead responding immediately, "Everything you just said proves me right! I don't know what you are, but I know for a fact that the *real* Elise would never say such things! She's made it clear on many occasions that the past is the past, and that she wouldn't give up what the three of us have for anything!" Leon then turned his attention to Maia. "You know this. All this thing is doing is playing into your fears. This temple has attacked you with darkness magic, read through your mind, and manifested your greatest fears."

He paused for a moment, and the shade began to speak again. However, Leon paid her no mind, and when Maia began to turn her head back to the shade, Leon pulled her gaze back to him with a nothing more than a finger lightly touching her chin.

"Look at me, not at her," he said. "Do you trust me?"

"Without question," Maia replied, a little bit of iron creeping into her tone.

"All of this is fake, it's nothing more than some half-baked trial that the temple cooked up," Leon explained. "Your legs are fine, you're not a Gorgon. Even if you were, it wouldn't change anything. There's no need to worry about any of this, and all that it will take to banish this place forever is to admit what you know to be true: this place isn't real."

Leon and Maia held their gaze for a long moment, ignoring the shade that was shouting louder and louder in a vain attempt to get their attention.

And, after several long seconds, Maia said, "This... isn't real. This isn't real."

She spoke with conviction; she believed it, she was just allowing herself to admit it. And as soon as she did, her serpentine tail vanished in a flash of green light, replaced with her real legs. She stumbled a bit, but with Leon holding onto her, she quickly adjusted and got her legs back under her.

Leon was gratified to see that it took so little effort on his part to get her to see the truth, especially with how long it took him to reach Gaius. Though, he supposed that they'd been through this enough times that his saying these words was becoming almost old hat.

Maia smiled, and even though her real legs were back under her, she leaned even more into Leon's embrace. "Of course it wasn't real. Thank you for coming for me," she said.

Leon chuckled and replied, "I will always come for you, no matter what."

Maia sighed. "I know... you've said so several times, by now. I just... it's one thing to hear it, and another for it to happen. I love you."

"I love you, too," Leon replied.

The two shared a long kiss, and when they parted, the shade of Elise was gone, vanished like she'd never been there in the first place.

“Well, that thing was unpleasant,” Leon said.

[It was,] Maia replied, switching back to her normal mode of speech. And with a quick flash of light that indicated she was reaching into her soul realm, she was clothed again. [Let’s get this thing done, shall we? I need to get home as soon as possible and... *talk* with Elise...]

From the lascivious feelings Leon was sensing through their connection, he imagined that there wouldn’t be much talking between his lovers; instead, they’d be doing something a little more strenuous and... *pleasurable*. The thought of that had him ready to go in many senses of the phrase.

“Yeah, let’s just head back to the shore really quick,” he said. “When I tried to find you, this temple led me to Gaius first...”

The two began to walk back toward the shore in a fairly slow, languid pace as Leon explained everything that had happened after he, Maia, and Gaius were separated. By the time they left the trees behind and appeared back on the lakefront where Gaius was waiting, Maia was fully caught up to speed.

Gaius waved as the two approached, his casual demeanor relieving most of the anxiety that Leon had felt ever since they’d parted.

Leon waved back and asked, “Anything happen here?” He’d been monitoring Gaius every so often with his magic senses, but he wasn’t omniscient; maybe Gaius saw something he hadn’t.

“Nothing,” Gaius replied. “Everything good with you two?”

Leon glanced at Maia, and when she nodded, he said to Gaius, “Yeah, we’re good.”

Gaius slowly nodded as his face contorted in muted confusion. “Uuh. That’s good, but...”

Before any of them could really delve too deeply into that unspoken worry, however, the cave began to grow dark as the ceiling faded away and the walls fell back into a dark void.

“Ah, never mind, I guess this it,” Gaius observed, though he got to his feet and drew his borrowed sword anyway, just in case. “I wonder where Jormun was throughout all of that?”

“Who the hells knows—or cares,” Leon replied. “The less I hear his voice, the better. I’d rather just put a blade through his throat and be done with all of this, but I don’t think we’re going to be lucky enough to just get an opportunity for that.”

“Yeah...” Gaius responded.

“We might be here for a hot second, so let’s get our strategy down,” Leon said, drawing the attention of the others from their darkening surroundings to him. “That gold colossus is probably going to be used against us, unless Jormun goes hard on trying to recruit or subvert us. Either way, that chamber isn’t the final location in this temple—or, at least, I don’t think it is. Jormun is directing the temple’s enchantments from *somewhere*, and we need to find where that place is quickly enough that we can catch him before he slips away.”

“I didn’t see any doors when we were in that chamber,” Gaius pointed out. “That colossus chamber may not be the extent of the temple, but how will we be able to get to the rest? The same way you broke into our trials?”

“Maybe...” Leon murmured as he contemplated the problem. It wasn’t the only problem they had, either—he needed at least a few contingencies. Jormun was slippery and clever; he’d been able to slide in and out of the Legion’s defenses like they were a cheap whore and he’d just returned to port after months at sea. A man like that had contingencies of his own, of that Leon would stake his life on. So, in the likely event that the pirate ran or otherwise managed to escape, Leon needed a way to follow him to wherever he went, some way he could run the man down and put him in the ground for good.

For that, Leon had a few ideas, but he needed a more knowledgeable opinion before he started giving them voice.

[Nestor, I have a few questions...]

[Share them, please, I could use a distraction from the everlasting boredom of your rustic soul realm.]

Leon ignored the insult and asked, [I need some ways to track someone over long distances, some way I can find them if I lose track of them.]

[I know of far too many ways to do that to count, boy,] Nestor said. [I don’t suppose you could narrow your request down a little?]

Before Leon could respond, he heard Xaphan speak up.

[That lack of a brain must be getting to you, dead man, if you can’t narrow it down on your own.]

[What?!] Nestor shouted back indignantly.

[Leon,] Xaphan began in a deliberate snub of Nestor, [most tracking methods require either more power or more *specific* power that you do not possess—and I’m not talking raw magical power or access to a certain element, either. However, there are some methods that I think you might find useful in this particular situation.]

[What do you have in mind?] Leon asked, his tone one of happy surprise.

[I have in mind a spell that, if attached to your opponent in some manner, will ‘light them up’, so to speak. If the spell was used properly, you would be able to use an accompanying spell to follow your enemy wherever they go...]

Xaphan quickly described the spell in as much detail as he could without getting overbearing. The gist of it was that the spell would subtly alter someone’s aura with fire magic, marking it in such a way so that it could be tracked with a compass-like spell.

But that was assuming Leon could get close enough to Jormun to use this spell. That might not be the easiest thing to do, especially if Jormun continued his habit of keeping himself distant from Leon. At the very least, Leon doubted that Jormun would be foolish enough to challenge Leon with Maia present, so if he were going to personally fight Leon, he would’ve made his move before now.

[Xaphan,] Leon said after a few moments of thought, [can that enchantment be placed upon something that I can throw... or maybe an arrow? So that I can follow that object instead of a person?]

[Well... the enchantment works by marking someone's aura. You'd need to either heavily adapt the tracking spell or find something else that emits a magical aura for it to mark. It doesn't look to me like you have a hell of a lot of time to work with, so that will limit your options even more.]

[I think I can jury-rig something like that,] Leon replied. [I have quite a few gems left over, and I still have that power crystal I got from Nestor's lab... It won't be much, but even then, I think I'll need some help to get it to work.]

[Actually, you know what? You've got enough to worry about right now; leave the manufacturing to me,] Xaphan said. [The dead man and I will take care of getting the spell arrow made—those library golems ought to prove themselves useful in this case. You just concentrate on staying alive.]

[Thanks, demon.] Leon smiled as a sense of deep appreciation welled up from within him for his demonic partner.

[Don't worry about it, human. We're all in this boat together, and besides, you need to discipline that pirate. It's been far too long for him to show us such... *disrespect*.]

Leon smiled. The confrontation with the shade of Artorias had brought out some of the same feelings he'd felt when he'd first lost his father: loss, fear, and loneliness. But with Maia, Gaius, and Xaphan in his corner, the loneliness at least was beaten back, and Leon felt like his position, despite still being stuck in this damn temple, wasn't quite as dire as it might seem, even with keeping in mind everything that Jormun had managed to accomplish thus far.

With them, Leon didn't think there was anything he couldn't accomplish with the right amount of work and preparation.

### **Chapter 569: Battling the Golden Serpent**

Leon, Maia, and Gaius arrived in the colossus chamber ready for a long and protracted battle. What remained of Leon's armor adorned his body, and his family's blade was in his hands; Maia looked about ready to cleave a mountain in twain, and the water dragon she immediately conjured to her was more than powerful enough to follow through on that implied threat; Gaius was the least threatening of the three, but the blade he'd borrowed from Leon was brandished and his aura was laced with killing intent. The three were ready for a fight.

But it didn't seem like they were going to get one. As they stood there, waiting for something to happen, Leon noted that the golden serpents that had melted down into the joints of the colossus were all back to where they were originally: numbering in the thousands, frozen in place as they writhed and slithered over each other in an attempt to climb the colossus and reach the ceiling that it acted like it was holding up.

Aside from the hole in the silver wall that Leon made with his lightning in order to access the enchantments, the massive chamber looked about as it did when he first arrived.

"Back already?" Jormun's voice rang out through the chamber, sounding more than a little disappointed. "Damn, Leon, that was *efficient*. I'm surprised."

"Ignore him," Leon ordered the other two. "Look for any way out of this place."



“Oh, you needn’t bother,” Jormun said, his tone turning almost seductive. “If you chat with me for a little while, I’ll open the door for you to come visit me. I’ll roll out the red carpet, as it were.”

His words fell on deaf ears—at least in Leon and Maia’s case. Gaius had a little more trouble ignoring the man, but he stayed true to the spirit of Leon’s order, at least, and didn’t respond to the pirate.

“If you don’t want to talk, then I suppose I can just activate the colossus again,” Jormun continued, the seductive tones in his voice wavering. “You are just dead set on standing in opposition to me, aren’t you?”

Leon began to scan the walls again, searching for any sign of a doorway, whether magical or material. He did his best to ignore Jormun, but he had to admit that the words the pirate spoke struck something of a chord within him. As a rule, he wasn’t necessarily opposed to peaceful solutions, and he even acknowledged that he should seek them out more often. He’d even managed to get Justin’s cooperation, and in doing so, acquired more benefits for himself than if he’d given into his murderous urges and killed the man.

However, he couldn’t get the memory of finding that ritual site out of his head. So many dead, and all killed in horrible ways. Leon had been on many a battlefield, and so had seen great many people die, but that ritual site had been something else entirely. Those people were executed in some profane ritual to a sealed primordial god.

There were limits to his desire to seek out more peaceful solutions, and Jormun had flown past all of them. Every time the pirate now spoke of peace, Leon just thought about those people, and showed Jormun’s words to be hollow at best—and that wasn’t even touching on everything that had happened since he’d entered the temple.

“All right, fine, you asked for it,” Jormun said, and a moment later, the golden serpents covering the serpent-man colossus all began to melt once more, filling the colossus with their molten gold. “This place was always designed to strike awe into the hearts of those who arrived, having successfully passed their trials,” Jormun smugly stated. “How’s it doing? Do you feel awed, yet? It doesn’t look like it, but let’s see how you feel in a couple minutes...”

Without a word, Leon, Gaius, and Maia all turned from their fruitless search for an exit to the chamber and faced the colossus, which began to slowly move.

When it had first begun to move before Leon had ventured out into the trial worlds, he’d sensed an enormous amount of magic flowing through it. He hadn’t questioned much about it, reasoning that it made sense for something guarding a temple like this to be immensely powerful, much like the similarly-sized colossus of the Thunderbird outside of Nestor’s lab. However, now that he was properly facing it with Gaius and Maia at his side, no way to escape in sight, he analyzed the golden thing a little more closely.

What he saw, while not entirely encouraging, gave him more hope than he’d had before.

This thing, while powerful and animated with a great deal of magic power, didn’t feel as powerful as the colossus of the Thunderbird. Most of the magic that flowed through it was for the purpose of keeping it moving, at least as far as he could tell. There were no special weapons built into the massive golden statue, no fancy magical tricks spooling up beneath its golden chassis that might give the three of them

some trouble. Even the emerald eyes, glowing with some strange power, seemed more for show than anything.

It was just one big moving statue. It was heavy and strong, but there wasn't much power beneath those golden plates.

"We can do this," he stated confidently as the colossus took its first ponderous step in their direction, its snake-like head locking onto him as he spoke, its ivory horn practically glowing in the strange, omnipresent light that filled the chamber. "This thing isn't invincible. We can bring it down."

"Gold is soft as far as metal goes," Gaius pointed out. "It can hold significant amounts of magic, though..."

"Not as much as silver," Leon replied. "Still, I get your point. It shouldn't be too difficult to damage this thing. The key will be how much damage it can take; it's big enough to soak up quite a bit that we'll be able to throw at it..."

As Leon spoke, Maia raised her hand and sent her readied water dragon careening at the colossus. Clearly, she was tired of the talking and wanted to get to fighting. Leon couldn't blame her, but he held back a little bit to watch, first.

The water dragon crashed into the colossus' right leg, sinking its teeth into the massive construct's ankle. Its aqueous form surged forward, wrapping itself around the colossus' leg as its teeth tried and failed to sink in deeper and deeper into the gold.

Throughout this, the colossus stopped moving and slowly bent over and reached for the water dragon in an attempt to pull it off its leg. Just by how languidly it moved, it gave the impression that it hardly cared about the water dragon gnawing on its ankle. Its golden fingers started to dig into the dragon, causing much of its body to lose cohesion.

Leon had seen enough, he wasn't going to just sit there and watch the colossus rip his river nymph lover's dragon apart; he conjured a lightning bolt and hurled it with pinpoint accuracy. The bolt splashed across the colossus' serpentine head, showering it in so many sparks that it momentarily vanished behind the light.

When the lightning died down, Leon was disappointed to see little damage, but the snake-like features of the serpent-man's face had been somewhat warped by the heat, and the bone-white ivory had new black vein-like lightning patterns burned into it.

"It's strong," Leon muttered just before the colossus finished tearing the back half of Maia's water dragon off of its leg, causing enough trauma to the summoned magic to cause its entire body to fall apart.

Maia wasn't done with that one water dragon, though. With barely any change in expression, both of her arms fell off, collapsing into water that immediately ballooned into another water dragon, this one gargantuan in size, easily a match for the colossus.

The water dragon charged, and Leon was right behind it. The colossus charged as well, and it crashed into the water dragon with enough force to shake the ground. The two titans began to wrestle for dominance, and despite their equal size and Maia's prodigious power, her water dragon wasn't able to

do much, its teeth only scratching the colossus' golden armor and its body not enough to do much more than immobilize the massive construct.

Leon dodged and weaved through these two clashing behemoths as best as he could. Given their size, this wasn't easy, and he had to keep his magic senses projected at all times so that he could dodge before being stepped on and crushed.

This was harder than it initially seemed, though. The colossus moved faster up close than it appeared from a distance, and its every footfall shook the ground and made it difficult for Leon to maintain his footing. However, that wasn't enough to prevent him from launching a barrage of lightning at the colossus' legs, using his blade to direct and amplify his magic power. In a matter of seconds, he'd scorched the gold of the colossus' legs a delicious shade of golden brown, and it was starting to glow from the transferred heat.

A couple times, Leon also managed to get in physical attacks on the construct, gouging out bits of the soft gold from the massive thing's ankles.

Unfortunately, for all of this, Leon didn't feel like he was having much of an effect on the colossus. It barely seemed to pay any attention to him, using far more of its time wrestling with Maia's water dragon than it did sparing him even so much as a single swipe of its massive hands.

To say that Leon's frustration was growing would be to put it mildly, but he at least comforted himself with the knowledge that the colossus wasn't attacking any of them directly, instead filling its hands with water—

With a startling degree of alacrity, the colossus suddenly knelt on the ground, shaking the ground with its impact and nearly knocking Leon on his ass. With this sudden shift in balance, Leon was unable to respond properly when one of the colossus' massive hands came careening in from the side in a vicious swipe and crashed into his body, sending him flying through the air as his mind just about exploded with pain. He felt some of his bones crack on impact, and when he hit the ground a moment later after sailing through the air, the pain that wracked his body nearly left him gasping on the floor.

"Ahh! That looked like it hurt!" shouted Jormun, his tone sounding so smug that Leon started to struggle to his feet just to spite the pirate, even as the pain began to fully assault his senses. The colossus had immediately stood back up to deal with the water dragon, which had used its momentary distraction to latch onto its long serpentine neck behind the construct's ivory horn and start tearing into the gold. With that being the case, Leon would've been tempted to lay on the ground for a few more seconds to gather his breath and try to suppress his pain.

"Eat my ass..." he quietly grumbled in response, unable to speak any louder than a pained whisper as he pushed himself back into a standing position.

After that, however, he paid no attention to whatever Jormun responded with. He just took a deep breath, spared only enough time to slap a healing spell onto his chest, and then charged back in.

Leon took a more circumspect strategy this time. He needed to use his head, not just try and overpower this thing—the colossus, despite the damage it had sustained, didn't seem at all slowed down, showing that it had far more power than Leon did, and thus couldn't be overpowered. He needed to use his power more judiciously, then.

He was encouraged to see that the behemoth still wasn't using any elemental magic of its own, but that encouragement faltered when the massive construct rent the water dragon apart, sending at least half of the water that made up its body falling back to the floor in a great flood. Leon had to brace himself to not be swept off his feet, but in this, he saw an opportunity: the colossus had covered itself in water. It was possible that that might make it a little more vulnerable to his lightning attacks.

Leon conjured a bolt of silver-blue lightning in his off hand, and with a slight wince of pain as he raised the bolt up to his ear, he hurled it at the colossus. The bolt splashed across its form, inundating the construct in lightning, but unlike the last time, the colossus froze for several long seconds as lightning danced across its frame, sinking into cracks and joints that the lightning hadn't been able to reach before until the great golem was doused in water.

More importantly, Leon saw the light that perpetually shone from the glittering emeralds set into its eye sockets momentarily dim, and he knew that was on a right track.

[Fill it with water!] Leon shouted to Maia, hoping his intention carried through as he began to let his power build up in his body for a massive lightning strike. He wanted the behemoth so drenched in water that Leon's lightning had an easy time entering its chassis; Maia's water should be able to seep into the colossus' chassis better than his lightning, so if his lightning could use that water as a medium to enter the construct and destroy whatever internal enchantments drove it...

It seemed that in the brief fractions of a second that all these thoughts raced through his mind, and while he was starting to build up a massive charge, the colossus altered its priorities, either by itself or with a little help from Jormun. The pirate had gone quiet, but for that, Leon only thought himself blessed to not have to listen to the cretin anymore.

The colossus started to charge at Leon, ignoring Maia as she conjured another water dragon, this one, once again, even bigger than the one she'd conjured before.

Before his attack was ready, Leon had to dodge backward to avoid a swipe from the golden giant. He swung twice with his blade in rapid succession, sending a few bolts of lightning dancing across the colossus' arm and gouging out a couple more long slivers of gold, but the massive construct was largely unaffected, shrugging off his power.

The colossus struck again and again, ignoring everything else except Leon. It ignored the water dragon rapidly closing in on it from behind in its single-minded desire to strike at Leon, who nimbly put the speed of lightning magic and his own dexterity on display as he dodged and weaved in and out of danger. The colossus was surprisingly quick for its size, and even seemed to be speeding up, but there was no way it was fast enough to catch Leon.

After several agonizing moments—Leon was dodging relatively easily, but he knew that even one mistake could have lethal consequences with the colossus' colossal strength—the water dragon finally crashed down onto the colossus' back. Instead of trying to wrestle and grapple with the golden behemoth, however, it immediately lost all cohesion, collapsing into water that encased the construct.

[Ready,] Maia said to Leon.

Leon didn't hesitate. He let loose with a stream of lightning at the golden giant, letting his power fill the water conjured by Maia and inundate the colossus. The water began to boil, but Maia kept it steady, and

the colossus froze as its body was filled with Leon's power. Its limbs began to glow with heat, and Leon could feel the magic flow in the air change as the colossus' internal enchantments broke one-by-one.

They were beating it, and all he had to do was keep up his stream of lightning—

Suddenly, the serpentine head of the colossus slithered out of its body that had been restrained by Maia, like it had been a snake piloting a suit of armor the entire time. The massive golden serpent hit the ground and shook it hard enough to break Leon's balance, and then pounced on him far quicker than it should've been able. Its great mouth opened, golden fangs extended, emerald eyes gleaming, and it struck.

Leon sent a blast of lightning through his body, which detonated right next to him. This threw his body to the side, but not quite far enough; one of the golden fangs sank deep into his right shoulder, the thing larger than even the biggest lances Leon had seen cavalymen wield. He had to almost bite his tongue to keep himself from roaring in pain.

A moment later, something slammed into the side of the serpentine head, sending it reeling off of Leon and pulling the fang loose from his arm. Leon expected to see Maia or one of her water dragons standing there, but instead he was surprised to see Gaius standing over him in a protective stance, a determined look on his face.

That moment passed quickly, and Leon swiftly hopped to his feet. The massive golden serpent hadn't been knocked far, but Gaius had managed to drive his borrowed blade fairly deep into the soft metal around one of the serpent's eyes, knocking one of its emeralds loose.

The golden serpent flailed weakly, its body acting sluggish and seemingly not quite in control.

Leon smiled, and he darted forward, ignoring his bleeding arm and the pain it was trying to flood his mind with, and slammed a lightning spear into the other side of the serpent's head, sending the other eye flying across the chamber. Gaius was right behind him, and he grasped his borrowed blade like a crowbar and pried the other, already-loosened eye free of its socket.

And with that, the colossus finally went still and silence filled the chamber.

Leon only took a moment to savor this victory before he was pressing one of his most powerful healing spells against his shoulder and sighing in relief as his pain immediately abated. The other healing spell had largely fixed his cracked ribs, though he was still *very* sore.

In an instant, Maia appeared at his side, a look of almost violent concern on her face as one of her hands lightly brushed against the healing spell on Leon's shoulder.

Leon smiled laid one of his hands on hers, and whispered, "I'm all right."

Maia seemed a little skeptical and didn't remove her hand, almost defiantly continuing to press the healing spell into his wound. It hurt a little bit, but the pain was continuing to lessen, and Leon considered it a small price to pay for his lover's peace of mind.

A moment after accepting her concern, Leon turned to Gaius, who was crouching on the ground, examining the massive emerald that he'd pried from the colossus' head.

"Damn..." the nobleman muttered. "This thing has to be worth at least a gold talent, if not more!"

“Then we’ll take it,” Leon said. “And the other one, too. You can have them both.”

“Huh? Really?” Gaius asked, his tone somewhat disbelieving and quite surprised.

“Sure,” Leon replied with an easy smile. “You saved my ass a moment ago. If you want those things, you’re welcome to them as far as I’m concerned—after we verify that they’re not dangerous, of course. Consider it my way of saying thank you that’s a little more impactful than words.”

“Uh... sure,” Gaius replied, looking more than a little frazzled. Leon could understand that, though, he’d just dumped a fortune into Gaius lap, and he’d done it seemingly on a whim.

So, to make sure that Gaius knew that this wasn’t just passing whimsy, Leon said with quiet seriousness, “But still. Thank you.”

Gaius, who’d spent the previous second or two staring slack-jawed at the massive torso-sized emerald at his feet as it glowed with odd, sea-green eldritch light, snapped his jaw shut and glanced back at Leon.

“Sure thing,” he said. “Anytime.”

### **Chapter 570: Dancing to Jormun’s Tune**

Leon stared at the ruined colossus before him, the humanoid half lying on the ground, damp and scorched, while its serpentine half lay at his feet, gouged and eyeless. Both of the emeralds that had been embedded in its eyes had been pulled into his soul realm, but the gold Leon hesitated to try and take. He supposed he could try and start carving up the colossus into more manageable chunks to store in his soul realm, but he wasn’t sure he wanted something like this in his most sensitive place. If he screwed it up, then it might animate within his soul realm and start wreaking havoc—without further study, he couldn’t be sure if the emeralds were its power source, or if it drew magic power from something else.

However, there was a large part of him that was absolutely loath to leave it behind. He saw all of this gold just lying there, so much of it that it was probably impossible to properly envision its value on a normal human scale. Just leaving all of it behind really didn’t sit well with him, and the longer his eyes took in the shiny metal, glittering in the soft, indirect, source-less light that filled this chamber, the less he wanted to leave it all behind.

Leon was pulled from this mild reverie by a twinge of pain in his shoulder. It was raw and throbbing, having been severely injured multiple times this day alone. The colossus’ fang, the blade of the shade that had impersonated Artorias, and the damage he’d sustained going through the teleportation curtain to Gaius’ trial had all utterly ravaged his right arm. Thanks to his healing spells and some down time between these events, his arm was still fully functional and intact, but Leon could still feel more than a little bit of phantom pain, regardless. Add on top of all of that the other injuries he’d suffered today, and he was starting to feel not-so-great.

His armor was also destroyed, meaning he was weaker and more vulnerable than he was when he entered the temple only a few hours ago.

As if to add insult to injury, Nestor spoke up as Leon stared at the destroyed colossus, [You had far too much trouble with that thing, I think.]

[Do you think?] Leon asked, his tone indicating that his question could be taken in many different ways, and few of them were in good faith.

[Yes, I *do* think,] Nestor replied. [Gold, generally speaking, is hardly as good at holding enchantments as silver. However, it can hold lightning enchantments extraordinarily well, better even than iron or copper. Your power shouldn't have had so much trouble breaking through its defenses. It should've ripped right through this construct and obliterated the enchantments within with little difficulty.]

Leon shrugged, not caring too much if Nestor could see the expression. [It makes some sense to me that whoever built this thing warded it against lightning. It seems that 'the Serpent' or whatever it was that ruled here was an enemy of our Clan. They built in defenses in other parts of this temple to keep me out, which Jormun admitted to disabling, so I understand why this thing would have some extra enchantments to insulate it from lightning attacks.]

[I'd recommend bringing it with us,] Nestor suggested. [I would *very* much like to study it...]

Leon could practically hear the dead man salivating, and he supposed that, if he were feeling charitable, he could say that Nestor hadn't been insulting his capabilities when he said he had too much trouble with the colossus, and instead was praising its defenses. Leon wasn't feeling particularly charitable, but he supposed he could see the merits in trying to bring the colossus' remains with them if Nestor and Xaphan were able to keep an eye on it. Or the library golems, or whoever. Just so long as it didn't activate within his soul realm and start breaking things, he was fine with it.

Leon pulled the remains of the colossus into his soul realm. It wasn't easy, being so large and all, and Leon felt more than a bit stretched after, but it was done.

"Nice," Gaius said after Leon finished. "Looks like you're going to be even richer than you already are! That thing has to be *made of* thousands of gold talents, let alone whatever value can be found with it intact... or as intact as it is right now."

"I'm sure it'd prove itself quite valuable if someone were to melt it down," Leon agreed, but he wasn't planning on doing that anytime soon. If even Nestor was interested in studying this thing, then he figured he'd be able to study this colossus for years and still find new things to learn about it. Turning back to Gaius and Maia, he asked, "How are you two doing?"

"I'm right as rain," Gaius said as he smiled and lightly flexed, before wincing and clarifying, "Or, I suppose I'm about as all right as I can be expected after all of that..."

Leon nodded. Gaius' biggest contribution to the fight had been the strikes he landed upon the colossus' serpentine head at the end, but he'd been trying to get better shots practically the entire time. He'd not made much progress, though, and had wound up lightly injured. It wasn't anything one weak healing spell couldn't fix, though.

Maia, however, was completely uninjured. She hadn't physically participated in the battle, choosing instead to let her water dragons handle things. But Leon wasn't entirely asking about their physical state.

[I'm well and looking forward to getting out of this place,] she quietly whispered into his mind.

Leon nodded again and turned his attention back to the chamber. Nothing in the chamber seemed any different, so he began to walk toward the opposite wall from the place they'd entered the chamber from. If worse came to worst, he'd just start drilling holes into the silver walls until he found another control glyph for the teleportation magic in this place.

Before he reached the wall, however, Jormun began to speak once more, only this time, his speech wasn't directed towards Leon.

"That was a spectacular display, miss. I have to admit to being quite impressed, I don't think I've ever seen water magic used quite like that before, and I've seen many a nymph and other strange creatures. If it's not out of line for me to ask, what is your name?"

Maia ignored him completely, her face one of familiar stoicism that Leon had seen her wear whenever someone tried to speak with her whom she did not want to break words with, which was just about everyone save for him and Elise.

In an attempt to get Jormun's attention back to where it *ought* to be, Leon shouted, "I thought there was going to be a door here, Jormun? I remember you saying on multiple occasions that you'd open up the way! Or are you going back on your word?"

Leon, of course, had no doubt that Jormun wasn't good for his word, but he at least wanted the pirate speaking to him rather than Maia, if the pirate was going to speak at all.

"I *did* say that multiple times, didn't I?" Jormun said in a thoughtful tone. "I don't know, have you really earned me opening the door for you, though? I don't really consider myself that polite of a person..."

"Your self-awareness is staggering," Leon stated in a low voice as his eyes continued to scan the walls. The chamber was inundated with his magic senses, and he was carefully examining whatever he could of the flow of magic in the room to try and figure out where the teleportation glyphs were located. They required an immense amount of power to run, so it stood to reason that if he were able to sense a great deal of magic power flowing somewhere, then that would be the most likely location for the teleportation glyphs.

Unfortunately, it seemed that the Titanstone that Xaphan had been so excited about was living up to the demon's description, for Leon wasn't able to sense much of anything indicative of spatial magic in the ambient magic power.

"Relax, Leon," Jormun said in an almost sultry tone. "I'm looking forward to seeing you in person, too, you don't have to worry about that. Here, since I'm feeling generous, why don't you come right through this? It's still a little far from me, but I just *know* that you'll find your way through eventually..."

As the pirate finished speaking, another inky black curtain materialized like an oily stain on the sparkling silver wall not too far from Leon, Gaius, and Maia in an obvious invitation for them to step through.

But none of the three immediately made for it. Instead, Leon stared at it like it owed him money, while Gaius and Maia alternatively looked at him and back to the curtain, waiting for his decision on what to do.

"This likely a trap," Leon stated.



“You think so little of me,” Jormun bemoaned, but Leon ignored him.

“I doubt this is going to be immediately lethal, but prepare yourselves for anything...” Leon took a deep breath to steady himself and to suppress the pain and fatigue that had been building in his body these past few hours and began to slowly walk toward the curtain. Gaius and Maia flanked him, both of them with determined expressions and bodies filled with magic power. Leon could sense the slight undercurrents of killing intent in their auras, and he knew that they were about as ready as he was to step through this portal.

And so they did.

All light seemed to vanish from the world as they disappeared from the colossus’ chamber and appeared on the other side. However, instead of the expected strange, eldritch darkness of a teleportation tunnel, they instead found themselves in a dark room—not quite pitch dark, but the light illuminating the place seemed quite dim—richly appointed with a thick fur rug beneath their feet, stone walls adorned with serpentine mosaics, and twin lines of columns running down the length of the entire room.

And it was a long room, too, perhaps one hundred and fifty to two hundred feet, perfectly trisected by two rows of columns that were capped with majestic vaulted arches to hold up the ceiling. It quickly became clear that the reason much of the room was so dark was because the material that the room was made of was the same black stone as the claustrophobic stairs that led down to the temple; there were magic lanterns strewn about the place, set into recessed alcoves at regular intervals, but they were dim and provided not even close to the amount of light needed to make this place seem inviting.

The darkness of this place was only the most immediate sign that they weren’t exactly welcome here; with the first breath they took, Leon, Gaius, and Maia were assaulted with the foul stench of rotting meat and animal waste. Leon’s face almost cramped with how quickly he grimaced once this fetid odor worked its way through his nostrils.

“Ugh, what in the hells is that?” Gaius exclaimed as he immediately covered his nose.

[Smells like something’s been living here,] Maia said. She didn’t quite go as far as Gaius in expressing her revulsion, but Leon could tell she felt it nonetheless.

Leon quickly glanced about, ignoring just about everything else around him in favor of finding whatever the hells was stinking like that. He didn’t have to look far, for about thirty feet behind them, at the closet end of this wide hall they found themselves in, was a pile of rotting carcasses so desiccated and picked over that it wasn’t immediately clear what they were. Not too far away, in a corner of the hall, was another pile of material that Leon didn’t even want to acknowledge, the logical result of what remained after something had made a meal of those carcasses and waited a few hours.

Leon’s face contorted in disgust, but a moment later, he realized where they were. The carcasses were piled up right next to a door, which made sense if Leon assumed this place to be a hall, though he was a little taken aback by the fact that this door seemed completely separate from the teleportation curtain they’d used to reach this place. Leaking through this door were the soft vibrations of conversation; there were people on the other side speaking with each other, though what little sound was leaking through wasn’t enough for even Leon with his seventh-tier senses to understand what they were saying.

However, he knew *who* was speaking.

"We're on the other side of the front door," he said to the other two. "Marcus, Alcander, Alix, and the rest we came here with are on the other side..."

Leon took a few steps toward the door, doing his best to ignore the stench and the bloody bones and viscera, when he stopped, a strange look passing over his face.

"Leon?" Gaius asked out of concern. "Something wrong?"

Leon's eyes narrowed as they flickered back toward the carcasses. He'd almost forgotten after everything that had happened since, but this was where the three monsters that Jormun had sent out had come from. These carcasses were likely their last meal... The centipede and the reptile thing were both dead as dead could be, but Leon remembered the black shadow cat that had managed to escape back into the temple.

"Keep an eye on—" Leon began, before he sensed a sharp spike of killing intent. He reacted immediately, throwing himself to the ground just in time for a smoky black tendril of darkness magic to whip over his head faster than the mortal eye could track.

"—the shadows!" Leon finished as he sprang to his feet, his body crackling with silver-blue lightning. He couldn't see where the attack had come from, but Maia and Gaius had both assumed a more defensive posture and were looking around for anything suspicious.

Leon's eyes searched every dark corner, every long shadow in the dimly-lit entrance hall, but he couldn't see anything. Not even his magic senses could pick up on any sign of where this shadow cat might be.

"I guess this is how we're going to have to play this..." he muttered as he started to edge back to the door. If possible, he'd like to get it open and call in some reinforcements, or at least just link back up with his people.

Unfortunately, just as he drew close enough to the door to touch it, a barrier of darkness suddenly appeared over the door.

"Sorry, Leon, but I can't let you do that," Jormun said, his smug voice echoing throughout the empty hall. "The way forward is *forward*, not back."

"Eat shit you damn coward," Leon muttered in impotent anger as he glared back at the barrier. "ALIX!" he roared, hoping that maybe his voice might be able to carry through. "MARCUS! ALCANDER!"

His voice was almost deafening in the doorway, ringing in his ears for long seconds after he'd closed his mouth. However, he detected no change in the low sounds of conversation happening just on the other side of the door. Leon reached out a hand and sent a stream of lightning into the barrier, but it just splashed across the black-as-night surface, leaving it unharmed.

'Shit,' Leon thought, realizing that Jormun was right: the only way he could go now was forward. He didn't like it; he felt like he was being herded by the pirate, but at this point, there wasn't much else he could do for the moment other than head deeper into the temple and keep alert for anything he might be able to use to gain the upper hand.

"Let's keep going," Leon growled as he moved back toward Maia and Gaius.

Maia took off right behind Leon, but Gaius paused a moment. "You sure?" he asked Leon.

Leon, too, paused, and glanced over his shoulder at the black barrier. He wasn't sure if he could crack it open—at the very least, from what he'd been able to gather from probing it with his lightning, if he tried to brute force his way through, he'd be trying all day and still likely end up no more than frustrated and angry. If he tried to mess with the enchantment creating the barrier, then he'd probably be here for hours trying to dig through stone first.

"Yes," Leon replied, his tone final. He didn't want to spend the time trying to get through that door, not with how unlikely it was that he'd actually manage to get through it. Besides, Gaius and Maia would have to defend him the entire time, and that would be mentally draining. "That cat is still here, so keep your guards up," he added, and Gaius voiced his acknowledgment.

With as much determination as he could, Leon led the way down the hall towards the other end. It was a little strange to him that there was an actual entrance hall after seeing the teleportation curtain, but he supposed it shouldn't be. It would probably be a waste of power to keep that curtain ready at all times, so whoever built the temple would likely need a way in outside of teleportation.

The other side of the hall featured a door much less grand than the entrance. Rather than being large enough for a stone giant to comfortably use, this one was barely more than human-sized. Without sparing anymore time than he needed to check the door for potential traps, Leon pushed it open and strode into the next room with as much caution as he could muster. His magic was ready, what remained of his armor was protecting his body, and his blade was brandished.

All of that seemed both hardly necessary and absolutely essential once he stepped into the darkness of the next room. There were no lights at all activated in this room, but with his magic senses, Leon was able to assure himself that there was nothing else, either. In fact, it was just a square box room, with nothing but bare stone within. No carpets, no furniture, it was just a stone box with a simple wooden door on each side. However, all of that darkness meant that the shadow cat could be hiding anywhere, just waiting for a moment when their guard was down to strike.

Leon cocked his head in confusion as he entered, his caution high and defenses raised. He had no idea what this room could possibly be used for, and from the similar looks gracing the faces of Maia and Gaius, neither of them had any idea, either.

He quickly walked over to the door on his right and opened it, revealing a bare stone hallway, barely wide enough for him to spread both of his arms and not touch the walls. This hallway went on and on and on, farther and farther until even his magic senses failed to find the end, a little more than twenty miles away. All along the hallway at irregular intervals were intersections with other, similarly bare hallways.

"Ah, well. Fuck," Leon whispered. After a quick check of the other two doors revealed the same thing, Leon swore again and took a deep breath. Jormun was probably laughing at him right now. The pirate had access to all the defenses of this temple—of which, Leon was certain he hadn't even seen a fraction—there was a sixth-tier shadow cat on the loose, a beast powerful enough to cause serious and potentially fatal damage if it struck while their guard was down, and now the only way forward was through a damn maze, one that wasn't even lit. These halls were dark, completely devoid of light; the perfect place for a shadow cat—or any other manner of monstrous beast, for that matter—to hide.