

Storm King 571

Chapter 571: The Lion and the Shadow Cat

"Why's there a damn maze down here?" Gaius wondered aloud. His complaints were echoed in Leon and Maia's heads.

"Because why wouldn't there be?" Leon responded, his tone cynical and jaded. "Nothing can ever be simple, can it?"

"Simplicity is not for men like us, Leon," Jormun replied, his voice echoing throughout the bare stone chamber that Leon, Maia, and Gaius were standing in. Each of them stood in front of one of the doors leading into the maze, trying to see what they could see. Leon and Maia were projecting their magic senses as far as they could, but there seemed to be no end to the maze no matter how far they both tried to see.

"You're reveling in this, aren't you?" Leon growled at Jormun, his golden eyes momentarily scanning the walls and ceiling around him, almost as if he thought he'd be able to see a window or something that Jormun was using to watch them.

"In a way, I am," Jormun readily admitted. "However, I think I'd like it a little bit more if I did *this*..."

An immense spike of magic power pulsed through the maze, more than enough for Leon, Maia, and Gaius to all jump back from their doors in alarm. However, this wasn't an attack that Jormun was launching; as far as Leon could tell, the pirate was just activating *something* in the maze.

"What did you just do?" Leon demanded as he took a few tentative steps back toward his door.

He didn't need to ask, however, for a moment later, he found out exactly what Jormun did. Leon projected his magic senses in an attempt to learn just what had changed, and his magic senses were immediately scattered as soon as they brushed against the door.

"Mazes aren't any fun at all if you can just see the route to the end..." Jormun smugly stated. As Leon took a deep breath to keep himself under control, the pirate continued, "This temple is one of trials, and not all of them are built in worlds magically isolated from the rest of the plane. This one is more physical, and functions well enough as a defense that there weren't many other defenses added to this area."

Somehow, Leon doubted that statement.

"Choose your door wisely, you three," Jormun said, his tone indicating that he wore a wide smile, "it will determine which of the mazes you get. Not that there's that much difference between them, I suppose. Regardless, I wish you all good luck. I'll be waiting for you at the end..."

Again, Leon felt doubt surge in his chest. Jormun was enjoying this way too much, he was going to milk this opportunity as much as he could. From another perspective, though, Leon supposed that how much Jormun was obviously enjoying himself was a good sign: it indicated that he probably wasn't forcing them into a challenge that was beyond their skillsets.

Or maybe he was, Leon honestly wouldn't be surprised if Jormun just teleported them all into the heart of the island's volcano, killing them all instantly.

“Keep on your guards,” Leon ordered the other two. “That shadow cat is still around here, somewhere, and who knows what the hells else will be in these halls.”

“Got it,” Gaius replied.

Maia nodded in acknowledgment.

Before Leon chose a door, he examined each one as closely as he could. They were all scattering his magic senses, so he could only get the surface details and some vague impressions from the ambient magic that he could sense, but it was enough for him to see a subtle spatial enchantment placed upon each doorway. Unfortunately, he wasn’t able to really do much about these enchantments, but he’d seen enough to know that this wasn’t exactly another trial world, but each of these doors were acting like portals to different parts of this maze—much like the spatial enchantments used in Xaphan’s prison.

When he was done with his examinations, Leon had to agree at least superficially with Jormun’s statement that there wasn’t much difference between the doors. So, he chose the middle one. There wasn’t much practical reason why, he just wanted to face whatever was ahead of them head-on. A terrible strategy for dealing with mazes, but in this, at least, he felt like making a concession for the philosophy of the act.

Leon strode through the door, Gaius and Maia not too far behind him. The door slammed shut behind them, leaving them in the incredibly dark and tight halls of the maze, the ceiling hundreds of feet above them while the walls were barely wide enough for them to raise both of their arms comfortably.

‘Just wide enough to fight in, if need be,’ Leon noted.

With nothing else to do, Leon began walking down the first hallway. As he did, he asked Maia, [I don’t suppose you have any tips for noticing something watching you from the shadows?]

Maia frowned as she answered, [Detecting someone while they’re hidden in shadows usually depends on the skill of the shadow magic user, not on your perceptions. If someone is arrogant and thinks themselves immune to being noticed, then they’ll usually be a lot less cautious and give off more magic power into the environment that can reveal their location to anyone paying attention. Or they won’t conceal their auras effectively enough... I don’t know *all* that much about shadow magic, to be honest...]

[You still noticed that one mage that Justin Isynos sent into Emilie’s palace years ago,] Leon pointed out.

[I did...] Maia replied as her frown was briefly replaced with a smile of pride. [That man practically walked into the palace like he owned the place, he obviously felt like nothing could touch him once he got past the outer wards. Maybe he would’ve been proven right if I hadn’t been there, though, who can say? Regardless, I noticed his aura, and it led me to the shadow he was hiding in.]

[Is finding this shadow cat going to be harder?] Leon asked.

[Much harder,] Maia replied. [Animals such as these don’t typically make the same mistakes that humans do. Besides, this shadow cat likely hasn’t worked all that much for its power—it’s an innate thing it can do, its magic is as natural to it as breathing. That makes its ability to hide far greater than that man I found in Emilie’s estate, even though that man possessed far more raw power.]

[Right,] Leon replied with a hint of bitterness. [Thanks for the information.]

Maia smiled and nodded at him, but throughout their conversation, her attention never once wavered from their surroundings. She was constantly scanning for anything that might threaten them, as were Gaius and Leon.

Despite this, in a single terrifying instant, a smoky black tentacle of darkness magic about as thick as Leon's arm peeled itself off the wall as they walked past and whipped out at them. They were so close to the wall and it was so fast that any mortal would've been sliced clean in half without having ever noticed anything.

Maia and Leon, on the other hand, responded with equal alacrity. Maia projected a wave of water that stymied the tendril's attack, while Leon blasted it with lightning, ripping it asunder. Gaius, while a fourth-tier mage, only flinched after Maia's water wall flooded into place; he would've been seriously injured or killed if Leon and Maia hadn't acted as quickly as they did.

Unfortunately, even with the destruction of the darkness tendril, the shadow cat didn't reveal itself, and no follow up attacks immediately materialized. Leon, Maia, and Gaius stood in that hallway for several long moments after, though, their eyes darting from one deep shadow to another as they searched for their hunter.

"This fucking feline..." Leon muttered. He'd spent his entire childhood as the hunter, and he wasn't appreciating the role reversal that the cat was subjecting him to right now.

But they couldn't just stand there for long. When it was clear that the cat wasn't going to attack again until it felt like it could surprise them, Leon led the other two onward.

They delved further and further into the maze as minutes turned into hours. It had been more than enough time that Leon was sure that word had been sent back to the fleets that they weren't back, yet, but he did his best not to let that thought rule his emotions. Getting sloppy out of haste would only lead to disaster.

And he had a good idea what that disaster might look like, for as they explored the enormous, endless maze, they were attacked several more times by the power of the shadow cat. He and Maia defended them well enough every time, though Leon did suffer one minor wound when a tendril managed to slice his ankle. Nothing important was severed, but Leon was embarrassed and infuriated by it.

There were no other defenses they ran across in the maze. Leon led them on a logical, depth-first route, always taking the right-most path whenever they came to an intersection so that they could always find their way back. He tried to leave a few chalk markings, but the black stone of the maze walls resisted all attempts to mark them, leaving them with nothing to go on but their own memories.

Still, they found nothing but more endless paths. By Leon's reckoning, they hadn't ever overlapped paths—as they might if they took five rights, for example—so there were any more spatial shenanigans going on, but that hardly helped matters.

After the sixth time they were attacked by the shadow cat, Leon had them come to a halt.

"I can't take this," he said, his golden eyes practically glowing with how much lightning was coursing through his body, lightning that he'd built up in anticipation of a confrontation with the shadow cat or

some other defense the maze might have that never came. “We need another strategy, otherwise we’re just going to be wandering around this place forever, constantly being attacked by this damn cat.”

“Do you have a suggestion?” Gaius asked, his tone worried.

“I... do, actually,” Leon said, surprising both Gaius and Maia, if the looks on their faces were any indication. He supposed he wasn’t too surprised, he wasn’t exactly portraying the picture of a calm and collected leader. “We need bait, we need something to lure this monster out of the shadows.”

“I don’t think there’s much that’s going to get it to do that,” Gaius pointed out. “I’m not much of a hunter, I’ll readily admit that, but this thing is sixth-tier, right? That means it has to be approaching human levels of intelligence. It won’t just drop out of its shadow and abandon all defenses if it sees a perfectly grilled steak just sitting on the ground...”

“No, and most animals wouldn’t, either, regardless of magical tier or perceived intelligence,” Leon replied. “No animal that lives out in the wild abandons their caution. If they ever do, they quickly become animals that no longer *live* in the wild, if you know what I mean. Besides, this shadow cat is probably constantly watching us. It’s stalking us, always waiting for a chance to strike.”

“Then what do you have in mind?” Gaius asked.

“We need some attractive bait...” Leon said as he quickly explained his plan.

Once he was finished, Gaius and Maia were silent for a long moment. Neither immediately disagreed with his plan, but the issue of bait was something that needed to be solved. Leon had some food in his soul realm, but none of it was the sort of fare that the shadow cat might be interested in: all dried meats and fruits, some bread, nothing to really grab the interest of a carnivore. Maia, it seemed, was similarly equipped, with little save for dried fish in her soul realm.

“We need something bloody...” Gaius muttered. “Something fresh. Anything else won’t get that thing’s attention, will it?”

“No,” Leon confirmed. “But, at the very least, wild creatures rarely say no to a free meal—anything they don’t have to risk themselves to obtain is usually welcomed. This shadow cat might be a bit too intelligent for that, though, so we have to make whatever we use appetizing. That’s why I was thinking that I should act as—”

“I should be the bait,” Gaius said, cutting Leon off. Leon was taken aback by the offer—he’d been in the process of suggesting that he be the bait instead, since as the person who thought up this plan, he wanted to be the one who shouldered the greatest amount of the danger. After all, the shadow cat might just attack whoever they leave behind as bait, so leaving behind the weakest member of their party wasn’t something Leon was keen on doing.

However, entertaining the thought for a moment, Leon had to admit that it made tactical sense, even if it put Gaius in great danger.

“Why do you want to shoulder this responsibility?” Leon asked him. “Honestly, it should be me, but if you think you’d make for better bait, let’s hear why.”

"I'm basically useless in this fight," Gaius explained. "Doing it this way leaves the two of you open to kill this thing if it shows itself."

Leon slowly nodded, agreeing at least with Gaius' rationale. He also figured that having Gaius acting as the bait might also help to keep the shadow cat from striking at him when he was vulnerable. Cats had a tendency to play with their prey, torturing and tiring them out so that they're safer to eat. The shadow cat, despite having darkness magic, would probably do something similar to Gaius, using comparatively gentler and less energy-intensive methods with the weaker mage than it might with Leon.

Still, Leon felt like a real asshole for agreeing, but agree to Gaius' proposal he did. He then discussed the finer points of his plan with the other two, made sure the nobleman had a fresh stack of healing spells with him along with one that Leon hoped would be useful for insulating himself against lightning strikes, and then led Gaius and Maia onward in search of a good place for their ambush.

They found just such a place not too much further along, at a place where two four-way intersections nearly merged into one. Leon signaled to the other two that this was the place by slowing down and letting his expression drop into a scowl.

"You're worthless Gaius," Leon said, his tone a little stilted but dripping with contempt and aggression that he hoped transcended the language barrier between him and the shadow cat, who could very well be watching them even now. "You're slowing us down. I can't have that."

"I'm not trying to!" Gaius responded, his expression and tone more energetic than Leon's, perhaps even a little too much so; if they were trying to convince another person that this was a legitimate falling out, Leon wouldn't have much hope that it would succeed.

He didn't respond to Gaius verbally, and instead let his killing intent leak out into his aura.

Killing intent was essentially just what it sounds like: the intent and willingness to kill that colored an aura. Keeping it hidden was much like suppressing a smile or a scowl, physically speaking, and letting it out was much the same as letting a true expression shine through.

Leon had a prodigious killing intent; Artorias had made sure to instill in Leon a willingness to fight and kill from an early age. Even during his calmest and most secure moments, Leon could unleash his killing intent that was more than potent enough to instill great and potentially even paralyzing fear even in those who were somewhat experienced in dealing with such auras.

However, he did not want to kill Gaius, and so he had some difficulty in unleashing his killing intent. It was still potent, but he needed to push more than a little bit for it to approach the level it was at during his first fight with the shadow cat, and in those moments immediately after its repeated attempts to ambush his party throughout the maze.

Hoping to cover for that slight deficiency, he summoned his family's sword from his soul realm, noting how Gaius tensed up in a way that was far too real to be an act, and then, hoping his decisiveness might help to conceal their true goal, lunged forward and drove the tip of his sword into Gaius' abdomen.

Gaius was unable to stop himself from groaning in pain, and that sound alone was almost enough for Leon's will to falter. But he held fast to his plan and drove his blade in deeper. He'd been incredibly precise with his thrust, striking deeply enough to draw a great deal of blood, but not damaging anything

critical to Gaius. When he pulled his sword free, Gaius fell to his knees, blood soaking into his shirt as he looked up at Leon, a look of betrayal on his face.

A moment later, Maia summoned a small water dragon that surged forward and wrapped itself around Gaius, pulling him into its body as its shape collapsed into a formless blob of water. This blob flexed a few times, and Leon could see within that Maia was squeezing Gaius like a stress ball, forcing him to choke up all the air in his lungs.

Leon, doing his best to maintain a somewhat dismissive and derisive look as Gaius was seemingly drowned right in front of him, whispered into Maia's mind, [Careful... We don't want to push too far and actually drown him...]

[I'm keeping an eye on him,] Maia replied.

She held Gaius there for a few moments more, and then released the blob of water holding him there. Gaius sputtered weakly as he rolled onto his side and coughed up half a river. Once he was able to draw in a few ragged breaths, which calmed Leon's nerves just a bit, he laid there on the ground, blood pouring from his stomach wound, his face pale from coughing, looking for all the world like he was on the verge of death.

"Let's go," Leon said to Maia, sparing Gaius only one more dismissive look before the identical rings on his and Maia's fingers flashed with magical power and they quickly vanished from view.

Leon could still tell where Maia was through their connection, so he and she were able to coordinate even while invisible to proceed a few dozen feet down one of the paths of these two intersections and stop where they could monitor Gaius easily.

Leon felt horrible, and every passing second that went by made him more and more want to drop his invisibility and call this whole thing off. Gaius laying there, sputtering and groaning in pain didn't help things; compared to their lackluster performance just a few minutes ago, Gaius was putting on a much more convincing show this time around.

They waited there a long time, long enough for Leon's mind to start wandering as they waited for the shadow cat to make a move. Leon guessed either it knew they were still here and wasn't going to do anything, or it was confused and wary with Leon and Maia having vanished and leaving Gaius behind.

But Leon's mind soon turned to other things, such as speculating as to what Jormun was doing right now; the pirate hadn't said a word since they'd entered the maze, so Leon wondered if maybe he couldn't speak up in this situation. He wondered if maybe Jormun was just watching all of this like a play, just letting everything play out without his involvement.

Leon also wondered just how far he and Maia could go with their invisibility rings. It took a startlingly low amount of magic power to disrupt the rings' invisibility, and with all the defensive wards around that inhibited magic senses, Leon wasn't confident in going too far and maintaining their invisibility. But it was holding for now, so—

Suddenly, a deep black shadow began crawling unnaturally across the floor toward Gaius. It had been about twenty minutes, so the nobleman was absolutely covered in blood by this point, and had stopped

writhing and groaning in pain. If it weren't for the fourth-tier aura still emanating from his body, he would've appeared to be, at the very least, unconscious, if not dead.

But this was it; their bait had worked. The shadow cat smoothly slid out of the floor with all the grace of a dolphin momentarily breaking the surface of the ocean for a

Chapter 572: Resident of the Maze

Leon crouched down besides Gaius, a sense of anxiety in his chest that he would never have guessed would be there even just a few months ago. But anxious he was, for Gaius wasn't moving, and the reason why was easy to guess: the bloody hole Leon had poked in his chest to help bait the shadow cat into appearing.

The plan worked, the shadow cat was dead, but Gaius was still unmoving.

"Are you all right?" Leon asked as he shook the nobleman, seeking any kind of response at all since it was clear enough that Gaius wasn't all right—the nobleman was covered in his own blood, and while Leon's lightning attack hadn't been too powerful, relatively speaking, it had still burned some of Gaius' extremities.

Gaius didn't say anything, but he did quietly groan, showing himself to be alive.

Without hesitation, Leon procured one of his more powerful healing spells from his soul realm and pressed it against his ally, letting its healing light fill Gaius' body and stitch his wounds back together.

After a couple of minutes, Gaius groaned once more and opened his eyes.

"What... what happened?" he asked as he immediately tried to sit up.

Leon, pushing him back down, said, "We got the shadow cat, but you seemed to have passed out. How are you feeling?"

"Uggh, like I fought a bull and lost," Gaius replied as he shifted around enough to pull his shirt up and see that the wound Leon had left on his abdomen had closed over with a freshly-healed skin. "At least that's taken care of. Thank you, Leon."

"Yeah, no problem," Leon replied. "If you were feeling this terribly, though, why didn't you activate any of those healing spells I gave you?"

Gaius had the good graces to look a little bashful, and said, "I didn't want to endanger the plan by doing something like that. Maybe the shadow cat wouldn't have come if I weren't still blatantly injured. I thought... I thought I could take the pain, but I suppose I couldn't..."

Leon sighed as Gaius' face fell in dejection. He clapped the nobleman on the shoulder and said with a slight smile on his face, "You did just fine. You played your part perfectly. The cat's dead, so now all we have to do is find our way out of this place, make Jormun a head shorter, and we're golden."

"Sounds like a good idea," Gaius replied.

As they spoke, Leon noted the color rapidly returning to Gaius' face as his fourth-tier magic power once more filled his body with energy. Given how shaky his aura seemed to be, though, Leon knew that Gaius wasn't quite in fighting condition yet, though he should be strong enough to walk.

"Are you good to go?" Leon asked just to be sure.

Gaius nodded with as much confidence as he could muster—which was actually quite a bit, Leon was surprised to see.

Leon stood back up, then bent at the waist and held out his hand for Gaius. "Come on, we're not going to get anywhere sleeping in this dark place."

Gaius grasped Leon's hand, and the latter hauled the former to his feet. Gaius nearly immediately lost his balance, but Leon's steadying hand on his shoulder kept him on his feet.

"Thanks," Gaius repeated.

"No, thank you," Leon responded. Being bait wasn't an easy thing to do, and he respected the hells out of Gaius for volunteering for it.

But their small party couldn't stand there in the hallway constantly thanking each other and singing each other's praises for long, and soon enough, Leon was leading them through the maze once more. As was the strategy so far, Leon took every right that they encountered, but after several hours spent in the maze, they hadn't so much as run into a dead end or been brought back around to someplace they'd been before. It was like this maze was endless...

As he walked, Leon felt a subtle shift in the ambient magic of the place. It was hardly something worth mentioning, but the maze was an effectively closed environment; the magical currents in the air were generally quite consistent. This slight shift meant that an enchantment somewhere had just been activated, though given how nothing in the maze seemed to change, it couldn't have been that powerf—

Leon entered another four-way intersection, but before he could lead the party down the right passage, he glanced ahead and then to the left, and when his eyes landed upon what was sitting on the ground to the left, he froze without warning, causing Gaius to run into him from behind.

"Huh? Oh, sorry Leon!" Gaius immediately said. "What is it?"

Leon stared silently at the small object on the ground only about thirty or forty feet away, sitting on the ground of the passage, his mind too consumed with wondering just how *that* had gotten there to respond to Gaius.

It was a feather, full and fine—obviously from a large and healthy bird—colored a rich, deep brown, and flecked with gold.

It looked like a smaller version of one of the Thunderbird's feathers... or one of the feathers from her look-a-like that had led Leon and his people to this temple in the first place.

Leon stared at that feather, utterly bewildered as to how it got there, only to immediately check his mental defenses and flood his brain with silver-blue lightning as soon as he came to his senses. He quickly hurried over, ignoring the puzzled questions from Gaius as he did, but stopped about five feet away from the feather.

This wasn't a trap as far as he could tell, but he made sure to examine the area as closely as he could. He'd sensed a change in the flow of ambient magic power within the maze, so he supposed that this was the result—*'Some kind of illusion, maybe?'* Leon thought. *'Maybe something Jormun threw down here to fuck with our heads? But does he know about that bird? Are they working together?'*

Leon took the final couple of steps and knelt to pick up the feather, his senses firing on all cylinders as he looked out for anything and everything that might indicate an imminent attack, ambush, or anything else of that nature. It was dark, though, and with his attention elsewhere, he wasn't ready for what he saw when he finally reached out for the feather.

His arm was covered in black scales that seemed to sparkle even in these low light conditions. His fingers were elongated and clawed, and his forearm was much longer than it should be...

Leon let out a yelp of surprise and jerked himself back out of pure panicked instinct. His brain decided that he needed to get away from whatever it was that had just caused these scales to appear, and as he fell on his ass, Leon saw that his arm was back to normal.

"Leon? What's going on?" Gaius inquired as he hurried over, but Leon didn't hear him.

His arm was exactly as it should've been: human skin, lightly tanned from being outside most of the time these past few days, fingers the proper proportion, normal fingernails...

Leon stared at his arm, wondering just what in the hells he'd just seen. It had seemed so *real*, as if his arm had really sprouted scales and he just hadn't noticed. It was, if he were honest, rather terrifying, but as he thought about it, it wasn't really the first strange thing that had been happening these past few weeks—ever since he'd arrived in Serpentine Isles, he'd been experiencing strange instincts that were utterly foreign to his human experience of the world. Spreading his wings, tearing into his enemies with claw, talon, fang, and beak. It was as if something were drawing out some dormant instinct in his inherited blood.

Leon had no answers he could give himself. As far as he was able to tell, his senses weren't being manipulated in any way, but given everything that he'd seen on the second and third islands, his certainty in how definitively he could say something like that was starting to crack. With access to spatial magic powerful enough to create entire worlds, golden golems, teleportation, pull the image of his father out of his head... Leon had no idea what exactly else this temple was capable of.

All he knew for certain was that he needed to speak with the Thunderbird as soon as he could. She was frustratingly absent most of the time, but she usually showed up once per week at the very least to check in with his training.

But he pushed those thoughts out of his head for the time being. There'd be a time for those questions, and so long as he was fully ambulatory and capable of fighting, he needed to focus on the problems immediately in front of him. There'd be a time for other things later.

Leon pushed himself up to his feet, and only then became aware that Gaius was trying to get his attention, and that Maia was starting to get worried and was calling his name into his head.

“I’m fine, I’m fine!” he assured the two of them, but he barely even looked at them. Instead, he turned his gaze back to the ground at his feet, where the bird’s feather had been. It, like the scales on his arm, had vanished.

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The trio continued to explore the maze for the next couple of hours. They grew more and more irritable in their own ways as time continued to pass in silence. Within the dark and seemingly endless maze, all desire to speak and socialize melted away, leaving three rather sullen and impatient people who were ready to see the end of this place as soon as they possibly could. Given how much of the maze they’d explored and how many intersections they’d passed during Leon’s strategy of depth-first searching, every step they took increased exponentially how large the maze could possibly be—at least, it did in their minds, for while they all acknowledge the possibility, it was hard not to imagine every path they could take being of equal length.

The only real saving grace was a complete lack of defensive wards other than those that prevented Leon and Maia from looking ahead with their magic senses, or any of them from trying to break through the walls. There were no active defenses trying to kill them, but that also led to boredom and mounting apathy.

Leon supposed, however, that there *was actually* one more saving grace: whatever Jormun was doing, it seemed as if he couldn’t speak with them in the maze. He couldn’t imagine that with all this wandering that Jormun hadn’t gotten bored and would’ve tried speaking with them if he could.

‘Or maybe he just left after trapping us all in this maze...’ Leon thought with some anxiety. *‘Maybe this is just a prison that he led us into before vanishing to finish up whatever work he has left...’*

That thought echoed around in Leon’s head for a short while, but soon enough, his small party finally, *finally* came upon something different.

They turned right at an intersection, as they’d done so many times before, and instead of seeing a seemingly endless hall in front of them or a turn somewhere in the gloom, they saw the hall opening up into a chamber about three hundred feet or so in the distance.

Without a word, all three began to channel their magic in unison, and drew their weapons. Maia conjured a water dragon and had it follow them, both readying herself to attack in the front while covering them from the rear.

The room, however, hardly seemed to warrant such measures—at least, at first. It was relatively large; a circular chamber about fifty feet in diameter. There were no decorations on the walls, no written instructions left anywhere, not even any more doors. There were, however, seven large pools on the floor of the chamber arranged in a perfect half-circle around the center of the chamber. Each pool was about six or seven feet in diameter, and so deep that Leon couldn’t see the bottom, even when he lit the room with a torch spell.

“What the hells is all this?” Gaius wondered aloud when it became clear that there was nothing in the chamber but bare black stone and these pools.

“Who the hells can say?” Leon replied. “At least, this comforts me with the knowledge that this damn place has *some* dead ends. Now we can finally start heading back and exploring other paths...”

“Yeah, it only...” Gaius began before catching himself. Leon guessed he was going to point out that they’d been exploring for at least six hours and had only now found the end of their chosen path. They’d passed dozens of other intersections on the way, meaning that even if this was proof that the maze wasn’t endless, it would still take days or even maybe a few weeks to explore the entire thing. They could be down here for a long time, assuming that there even *was* an exit, and this wasn’t just some giant prison.

“Come on,” Leon said. “Let’s get a move on. We’re not going to find the end sitting around staring at empty—”

As if on cue, the water in the central pool began to shake and vibrate, spilling its water all around the floor of the chamber. Maia’s water dragon surged in from where it was watching the hallway and interposed itself between the trio and the pools, while Leon and Gaius readied their weapons, Leon’s blade sparking with lightning magic as he readied himself for whatever was happening.

None of them had to wait long to see what was happening; only a few seconds after the water began to shake, the pool began to overflow almost to the point of seeming like it was trying to flood the chamber. The chamber entrance, however, remained open and the water from the pool only surged out a few feet before being captured by the unmistakable use of water magic.

“Something’s coming up!” Leon shouted in warning. The water wasn’t trying to flood the chamber, it was just being displaced by something *very* large making its way up from the bottom.

A moment later, an immense head emerged from the surface of the pool as the water it had captured rushed back down into the pool. The head was reptilian, but instead of the smooth serpentine look that Leon might’ve expected, this head was almost draconic, with a pair of small ‘fins’ where its ears would be on a human face, a long snout filled with rows of gleaming white fangs, reptilian eyes burning green in their sockets, and a pair of huge horns extending from its brow and curling around the front of its face, like a pair of massive ivory hooks attached at its ridged forehead. It was dark green in color, its scales sparkling like emeralds in the light of Leon’s torch spell, and its long serpentine neck stretched from its head back down into the water, where it vanished.

It was big. Its head alone was longer than Leon was tall, and he could easily see it swallowing his entire body in one bite if it felt the desire.

Worse, it radiated a magical aura that was completely opaque to Leon; much like how it looked when he tried to read Maia’s aura, it was like trying to peer through a cloud of pitch-black smoke, utterly masking itself and whatever lay beyond.

This thing, whatever it was, was stronger than Leon, and from the way he felt Maia’s fear spike through their connection, was likely stronger than her, too. And it was intelligent, or so it appeared as it coldly regarded Leon, Gaius, and Maia with its dispassionate, reptilian gaze.

Leon and his party were momentarily frozen in fear and shock, and it seemed that this monster wasn’t about to tolerate that silence. Its mouth parted, and a long forked tongue began to dance around its teeth, making a series of high-pitch hissing sounds in what was an obvious attempt to communicate. A

moment later, a voice came emanating from the monster's mouth, speaking an older version of the same common language spoken throughout Aeterna, the same language that was ubiquitously used throughout the Bull Kingdom—older, but still perfectly understandable.

"What isss thisss visssion before me?" the monster hissed. "New pilgrimsss? Long hasss it been sssincce the Elder One sssent sssuplicantsss...."

Some of the other pools began roiling and churning, though most of them weren't overflowing quite like the central pool had. The one immediately to its right, however, was the exception, as it began bubbling and overflowing as the draconic-serpentine head finished speaking, and a moment later, another monstrous dragon-serpent head surfaced.

It was nearly identical to the first head in general shape, but not in anything else. Instead of glimmering dark green scales, it was covered in scales of the deepest blue, it had no fins on the side of its face, and its pair of horns extended backward toward its neck rather than forward along its face. Its facial structure, too, was much different, with a shorter, more snub snout, and softer, rounder edges giving it a more feminine look compared to the first serpentine thing.

When it spoke, it made almost identical hissing sounds as its forked tongue played across its *many* sharp teeth, though the more understandable voice that followed took on a more feminine tenor than the comparatively deep voice of the first.

"Are they food?" it asked aloud. "Many sssunsss have risssen sssincce lassst have offeringsss been reccceived..."

"Perhapsssss not," the first droned, its speaking cadence almost unbearably slow as it drew out the first and last syllable of every sentence, as well as lingering on every hissing sound it made in the language that Leon could understand. "Why did you three come hither?"

Leon's heart was hammering in his chest, the most primitive parts of his brain screaming at him to turn tail and run as far from this chamber as he could. The more rational parts of his brain, however, knew that, with the power he could sense from these things, he'd never get far. If they wanted to, these creatures could likely utterly annihilate his entire party, Maia included, with little effort.

He'd have to be *very* careful with what he did and did not say to them, though he managed to find some comfort in the fact that he felt no killing intent from either of these monsters. For all intents and purposes, they didn't seem hostile, and they seemed more than intelligent and willing enough to converse rather than fight.

Right now, conversation was a far more preferable way to deal with this in Leon's mind than anything else. He quietly let the magic in his body subside just a little bit—enough to not seem threatening, but still maintaining enough flowing through his circulatory system to retaliate or run if need be. He also lowered his blade and assumed a more neutral stance as he took a couple of steps forward.

"We were tra..." Leon trailed off, having almost been a bit *too* honest. He started again, "My name is Leon. I'm here... hoping for the answers to questions I have..."

"Quesssstionsss?" the first head hissed. "I have anssswerssss to many quesssstionsss... Many quesssstionsss, too, have I..."

Leon put on the best smile he could, which with how nervous he was right now, wasn't that great, and said, "Maybe we could trade, then? Answers for answers?"

"Anssswersss," the second head whispered as it began leaning forward, its serpentine neck—or body, Leon couldn't tell which—more than long enough to bring it uncomfortably close to Leon.

It nearly came into contact with Maia's water dragon, and Leon asked Maia to just let this thing pass. Maia acquiesced, but Leon could tell she wasn't happy about it.

So, with this massive thing now so close, it locked its softly glowing green eyes upon Leon's golden eyes in a manner that had Leon feeling rather unsettlingly like he was a rabbit before an anaconda, and said, "Anssswersss are pleasssing, yet few pilgrimsss anssswer well enough to satisfy..."

It pulled back, giving Leon some mental relief—and some physical relief, too, for its breath was beyond rank, and it had been more than close enough for Leon to become abundantly aware of that fact.

"A... propoossal, human," the first head asked as the other pools began to churn and roil, much like the first two had, "indulge me, and indulge you, I ssshall..."

Five more heads, each of different colors

Chapter 573: Hydra

Leon felt the cloth of his shirt start to stick to his back as he broke out into a cold sweat. The pools in this chamber had contained seven huge serpent-like monsters, each of different colors, and each with at least ninth-tier strength. They weren't overtly hostile yet, but given just how far they were above anything that Leon could possibly do—even Xaphan wouldn't be of much help in this situation—he couldn't help but imagine that it was only a matter of time before they started attacking.

When they did, he, Gaius, and Maia would likely be torn to shreds.

Each of the serpents was a different color, though none were any less spectacular than the others. The first serpent that had appeared was a dark sea green, while the second was a gorgeous dark blue, its scales the color of the deep ocean. The remaining five were red, white, black, gold, and brown, and each one had remarkably different facial features and horn structures despite the largely uniform shape of their heads. The gold serpent-dragon-thing even had whiskers poking out of its snout just above its upper lip.

What was even stranger about the gold serpent, however, was the fact that its face was horribly scarred, and what looked like a long thin rock had been lodged in its head just behind its horns. It was clearly injured and not exactly all there, for its topaz-colored eyes were dull and it didn't seem to be focusing on anything. Even the tiny micromovements it made were slow and dull compared to those of its comrades.

"Have you no anssswer to give, human?" the green head asked, its ploddingly slow speaking cadence not seeming to change at all even as its head started to bob and move about with more energy, its neck-body or whatever it had lifting its head even higher in the chamber until it was looking down at Leon. Even with dozens of feet of neck poking out of the pool, Leon couldn't see the end of this creature; its neck-body just vanished down into the pool it had arrived from.

Leon took a deep breath to steady himself as much as he could. Then, he asked, “What indulgence are all of you looking for? What would you indulge me with in return?”

The green head froze for a second, then all of the other serpentine heads lifted out of the water to stare down at Leon in an eerie and deeply unsettling manner.

“All are one, human,” the green serpent stated. “Not all, but one... One will, one mind, many eyessss, many headsssss...”

One of Leon’s eyebrows shot so far up his brow that it almost vanished into his hair.

‘Is this thing saying that all of them are on creature?!’ he thought in alarm. *‘A hydra? Or some kind of hive mind? It is being puppeted by something else entirely?!’*

Several other increasingly dire scenarios played out in Leon’s head, but he managed to shake himself back to reality by quickly sending word to Xaphan and Nestor about what was happening.

[That’s definitely a hydra,] Nestor stated once Leon was finished. [Vicious beasts, and viciously smart, too. They have a fondness for speech and live terribly long lives—easily living five or six cycles of the Nexus if they have access to plentiful food and a safe home. Don’t piss this one off, Leon, they also tend to be extremely eccentric and extremely powerful.]

[Wasn’t planning on getting on its bad side...] Leon murmured in response, his voice a little shaky as he wondered just how large this thing’s body was if its heads alone were larger than he was, while their necks were long enough to be lost entirely beneath the surface of the pools.

[Good. This one’s a runt, by the looks of it. Looks like it got stuck down in those little pools somehow. These things are usually *much* larger...]

[A wonderful thought...] Leon sarcastically replied.

When he collected himself, he straightened up and said to the hydra, “Let’s speak straightly: what do you want and what can you provide in return? My party wishes to find our way through this maze to the very end. Are directions something you can give us?”

“Pathsss onward,” the blue head whispered. “Guardianssss are I... Anssswer well, move on...”

“Indulge us with anssswersss, and indulge you with anssswersss shall I,” the green head added with a quick and insistent nod.

Leon mirrored the nod, though with much less enthusiasm and significantly more caution.

“Who goes first?” he asked.

“Hosst,” the brown head said, speaking for the first time. Its voice was so deep Leon was almost surprised it wasn’t shaking apart the maze floor.

“I suppose we can live with that,” Leon said as he glanced back at Gaius and Maia, searching for any sign of disagreement. When none came, he turned back toward the green central hydra head and continued, “Ask us whatever questions you want, and we’ll answer to the best of our ability.”

The green head nodded, but it didn't immediately respond. Instead, the black head, all the way on the left end of the half-circle, spoke first, though not without snapping its jaws together a few times in what Leon assumed to be the hydra equivalent of clearing its throat.

"Tall am I when young," it said, "but ssshort when old... Give name to me..."

Leon blinked in surprise and confusion, momentarily wondering just what in the hells the thing was talking about. He glanced back at the green head, and then at all the other heads, all of whom were staring at him with great interest—save for the gold head, which was still just staring at nothing in particular with a dazed look and dull eyes.

"This is a riddle?" Gaius quietly asked. "Not what I was expecting, to be honest..."

"Yeah," Leon hesitantly agreed. "I thought this would be more like telling hard secrets or something else of that... nature..."

"Sssuch thingsss don't interessst me," the green head explained. "Give anssswer, and receive anssswer..."

Leon nodded in understanding, getting a better feel for how this was going to work, now. The hydra would ask a riddle, and if he got it correct, then he'd be able to ask a question of it. If he didn't get the answer correct, then...

Well, he didn't want to think about that.

"Ok, then," he whispered. "I'm tall when I'm young, and short when I'm old? That was it?"

The black head nodded.

Leon went quiet for a moment as he thought it over. Nearly every living thing he knew of grew at some point in their life, and many that would shrink down in their twilight years, but he somehow doubted that the hydra would consider a tall human the proper answer to its riddle. It was looking for something specific, but Leon didn't know what—

"A candle," Gaius answered after only a couple seconds.

Leon's heart almost stopped at the unexpected answer, and his eyes locked onto the black hydra head. It stared back at him with blood red reptilian eyes, its horns curling viciously behind its head, its snout long and thick and unsettlingly dragon-like in shape.

And it nodded once more.

"Good anssswer..." the green head said, sounding quite satisfied, and Leon breathed a sigh of relief. When he glanced back over his shoulder, he saw Gaius and Maia both do likewise. The green head continued, "You ssseek anssswersss? Give voiccce to one quesstion..."

One question came to mind immediately, but Leon took a moment to think it over. He didn't want to just trample on Gaius for answering the question correctly, but it was a question that they *needed* an answer to.

"Do you know the way out of this place?"

The green head answered, “Yessss...” and said nothing more.

Leon waited a moment, but once all the heads started turning toward the white head at the other end of the half-circle, he said with confusion, “Hang on, that’s all you’re going to say?”

“One quesstion you asked, one anssswr I give...” the blue head growled.

A spike of anger wound its way through Leon’s mind, directed mostly at the hydra, but more than a bit of it was for himself. He gave Gaius a quick apologetic look, which the noble responded to with a shrug and a look of resignation.

At the very least, they now knew how the hydra was going to operate. They’d need some *very* specific questions, or questions with specific answers if they were going to get anything useful out of it.

“All right, then,” Leon said. “What’s your next riddle?”

The white head began to speak, its feminine voice smooth and motherly to match its face’s gentler lines and curves.

“Find me beginning everything, you ssshall, and ending time and spaccce. Begin every end, I do, and end every placce... What am I?”

Leon’s brow furled in thought. Taken literally, he assumed such a thing that began and ended everything like that would only be some kind of god, but it had to be something more specific to be the answer to a riddle, some kind of wordplay or misdirection obscuring an otherwise obvious answer.

Leon gritted his teeth; he’d never been that into riddles, and this was essentially why: there was almost no way to actually figure a riddle out unless it had been heard before. He thought that they were more of a way for the person asking the riddle to try and get one over the person being asked.

The answer didn’t immediately spring to his mind, so he turned toward Gaius and Maia, looking for some help. Maia’s face was scrunched up in thought, while Gaius was quietly stroking the thin blond stubble on his chin.

“I’ve got nothing,” Leon quietly stated as he tossed a worried glance over his shoulder at the hydra, hoping that this wasn’t going to be taken as his answer. Fortunately, the hydra’s heads largely didn’t react, tacitly indicating that Leon’s party could discuss these riddles amongst themselves.

[Neither do I,] Maia replied.

“Yeah, this isn’t the easiest thing to figure out,” Gaius said.

“Whatever its describing has to be extremely powerful,” Leon said, thinking out loud. “Maybe some kind of god, maybe the Serpent itself?”

“I don’t think that’s what it’s talking about,” Gaius slowly responded. “Riddles are, more often than not, wordplay—at least, in my experience. Maybe we ought to write this out?”

Leon lightly scowled, but pulled out a piece of paper, a pen, and ink. He quickly scrawled the riddle out and the other two huddled around him so that they could all stare at it together.

'The beginning of everything...' Leon contemplated. 'Ending time and space... Begin every end... and end every place...'

Leon read it over three or four times before something finally stuck out to him.

"The letter 'e' is where... look, it's the beginning of 'everything', it ends the words 'time' and 'space', it begins the word 'end', and is the final letter in 'place'..."

"That," Gaius with dawning comprehension and pride, "is exactly the kind of wordplay that I'd expect from these kinds of riddles..."

Leon nodded, but didn't immediately address the hydra. It could just be a coincidence, but the more he stared at the riddle written out, the more he convinced himself that he'd stumbled upon the correct answer.

'I fucking hate riddles...' Leon thought to himself as he steeled himself to give his answer.

"The letter 'e'."

The white head immediately nodded.

"Anssswered well," it muttered. "One quessstion you have bought..."

Leon took a deep breath and thought over his question. He didn't think there was a way that he could ask his question and get the hydra to commit to leading him and his party out of this maze—or at least, showing them the way—without it using the same trick that it did with his previous question and giving him essentially a non-answer.

So, he decided to just be honest and up front.

"We need a way out of this maze as quickly as possible. A pirate has taken control of this temple, and we need to find and kill him, wherever he might be. Will you help us find our way to where we need to go?"

The heads hissed and writhed in their pools, their eyes locked onto him in a rather unsettling way—the sole exception being the gold head, which still stared rather lifelessly at the wall behind Leon. But he didn't back down, he stood firm and returned as many of the hydra's gazes as he could. It was a question that it could easily answer 'no' to, but his initial impression of the monster was that it wouldn't play that kind of game. If it were hostile or wanted to trap them here, there were far more efficient ways to go about it than challenging them to riddles.

Of course, it was a hydra, so there was no real way that Leon could understand its thought process or its motives, but Leon trusted his gut instinct and his impression of the creature.

"Can I?" the green hydra head hissed, speaking to itself in thought. "Nooo, tissss beyond my capabilitiesssss..."

"Why is that, if you don't mind me asking?" Leon inquired. "Are you unable to leave? Or do you just not know the way out of this maze?"

All of the hydra heads, save for the gold head, glanced at each other in a way that made Leon think it was debating something with itself. It didn't deliberate too long, though, and soon replied, "I guard thisss placccce, leave I cannot... But, the way I know..."

Leon nodded. "Is this guardianship permanent? Do you like staying here? Do you need any help getting out?"

"Thossse are three questionsss," the blue head stated, but a moment later, the green head snapped its jaws a few times and the blue head went quiet and bowed its head as if chastised.

"You're concccern, I can sssenssse," the green head said. "From one sssso troubled, your concccern iss appreciated, but unneccccessary..."

A frown crossed Leon's face at the mention of him being 'troubled.' It was the second time in a matter of a couple of days that something inhuman had called him troubled, and he didn't know what they were...

Actually, after his fight with Artorias, he was starting to get an idea of just what they might be talking about, but he thought they might be blowing these things completely out of proportion.

"Are my questions appreciated enough to be answered?" Leon asked with a wry smile.

"Anssswer me first, then anssswer you ssshall I," the green head stated before turning its gaze toward the red hydra head.

The red head began to hiss identically to the others, but the magical voice that followed soon after had a quality that Leon found quite familiar: its voice crackled and popped like fire, much like how Xaphan's oftentimes did. By this point, Leon had already gotten the impression that this hydra could probably command all seven of the magical elements, and he silently doubled down on his commitment to not piss this thing off to the point of having it attack him and his party.

"Neither guesst nor tressspasser am I, here in this placce I resside... Where am I?"

As much as Leon didn't care for riddles, this one was almost painfully obvious given what he'd just asked a moment before. "Home," he answered with a light smile.

He dropped any questions he had about what the hydra felt like being here. It was home. It didn't want to leave.

"Do you wisssh to assk the sssame quesstionsss?" the green head asked, its voice softening a bit in a clear invitation to change his questions.

Leon sighed and glanced back over his shoulder at the open door. At this point, he wasn't sure if the hydra would stop him if he tried to leave, but in stark contrast to how he felt when the green head first showed itself, he didn't quite want to leave, yet. If it was going to be this pleasant and answer his questions for only the price of answering a riddle, then he might as well see what else it might know.

"No," Leon said, "I think you answered those well enough with that riddle. I'd rather know how to get out of this maze—you said that you knew the way before and could tell me."

"Sssaid that, did I?" the green head asked, its cocking to the side. "I don't recall that..."

Leon glared at the head, and then it did something he never would've thought it would do when he first laid his eyes upon it: it began to chortle with laughter, its tongue lashing out of its mouth as its head shook and lips quivered in delight.

"Pardon me, young mage," the hydra said. A moment later, the white head leaned forward and its eyes flashed with silver light. Leon almost reacted instinctively to draw his weapon and bring his power forth, but all the head did was conjure a light projection of what looked to be a map of the maze.

It was exactly as enormous as Leon thought, stretching for dozens of miles in every direction. It was so large that even in the several long moments that the hydra gave them to study it, he still wasn't able to pinpoint their exact location on it.

The green head, after giving them some time to examine the map, said, "You mussst reach the cccenter..." It pointed with its snout at the center of the square-shaped map. "We are here..." Its head then pointed at a place near the edge of the map on the left side. "I have enjoyed thisss exchange, take all the time you need to examine thisss map."

Leon blinked in surprise and turned from the map to the green head. "Really?" he couldn't quite stop himself from asking.

The green head nodded. "Next wassss..." It didn't finish its statement, but it glanced quickly at the gold head, with the long stone spike stuck in its head, its utterly blank expression not having so much as twitched since it had appeared.

"Ah," Leon grunted in understanding. He supposed if that spike was a debilitating enough injury, then the gold head might not be able to ask a riddle. He didn't know why the hydra wasn't going to just skip that head and finish with the blue, brown, and green heads, but he supposed that asking about it might be pressing his luck a bit. He just counted his lucky stars that the hydra had proven itself so reasonable and left it at that.

"Be careful, human," the green head said. "Other thingssss here live, and care for you they will not. Many treasssuresss they guard, but all trapsss. Make for the cccenter, tarry not." The green head indicated several more places on the map, fairly large chambers that were scattered all over the maze. It seemed they were more frequent closer to the center of the maze, and by following Leon's depth-first exploration strategy, his party had avoided several already and had practically walked around the entire perimeter of the maze.

Leon nodded once more. "Thank you for the warning. We won't be distracted." Leon continued examining the map, burning not just it, but the hydra's warning into his memory.

'This had better be it,' Leon thought to himself as he stared at the large chamber at the center. 'This has gone on too long already. It's time to face Jormun...'

Chapter 574: Turning Point

Leon felt rather terrible, and for more reasons than the long list he already had from the hours he and his party had spent within the temple. No, as he stared at the grand stone doors leading to the inner chambers of the temple at the center of the maze, he felt terrible for something else entirely.

He hadn't quite expected to see what he'd seen as he, Maia, and Gaius had worked their way through the maze. Their route took them past a few of the other chambers that the hydra had warned them away from, but when it had told Leon that these chambers held treasures, it hadn't quite prepared him for what he would see: great piles of gold coins sitting the center of otherwise empty rooms; one room filled to the brim with weapons that radiated startling magic power, hinting at the strength and complexity of their enchantments; and one room with a dozen plinths upon which rested thick, tremendously interesting tomes, all of which radiated even more power than the weapons had.

It pained Leon greatly to leave all of these things behind. Especially when seeing the gold, he'd felt a welling of greed surge up within him that he'd rarely, if ever, felt before.

But he didn't have time to stop, and the hydra had proven itself trustworthy enough that Leon managed to heed its warning: these chambers were dangerous, and the treasures were laid out as bait.

Even still, despite knowing these things, Leon felt awful by the time he and his party reached the end of the maze. The uncomfortable feeling of having missed out on great things had settled into his stomach and dampened some of the enthusiasm he felt for having finally reached the end of this accursed place. It was only with great effort that Leon was able to tear his thoughts away from these missed opportunities and focus on the task at hand—after all, there wasn't much reason to think that this place wouldn't still be here in a few months. Maybe these treasures might be worth a repeat visit if the fancy struck him...

"Jormun should be within the chambers behind this door," Leon stated as he, Gaius, and Maia stared at the ornately carved stone doors that stretched from the floor all the way up to the ceiling, nearly imperceptible so far above them. The maze walls had also widened, making the set of double doors nearly thirty feet long apiece.

"How can you know that?" Gaius murmured, looking as run-down as Leon did—though Leon couldn't blame him for it, given the trial he'd undergone and the pain he'd been inflicted with to act as suitable bait for the shadow cat. Compounding those things was the fact that they'd been wandering in this maze for hours, giving all of them plenty of time to think and ruminate on the things they'd seen within those trials.

Leon grimaced. "A feeling I have," he said. "Jormun isn't going to cut and run; he's waiting for us. This is all a game to him, but he's not going to leave before it's finished. We've reached the end, and it's time for the final confrontation."

"I hope you're right," Gaius said as he stretched himself out a little bit. "I do *not* want to have to do all of this again..."

"Yeah," Leon quietly agreed as he let his silver-blue lightning course through his body, filling it with energy and power. His armor on his legs, left arm, and right shoulder was still intact, as was his helmet, but his cuirass and right gauntlet had been mangled beyond usability. That left nearly all of his vitals open, save for some lighter Skyflax padding that remained—effective armor when fighting a weak mage with an unenchanted weapon, but Leon knew that Jormun had other things at his disposal.

As he'd said during one of his many rants to Leon, he and his crew had found many curious artifacts while raiding in the south. The turquoise stone that the female fire mage had used on Maia and the

sword with golden fire she used were probably two such artifacts, and Leon couldn't imagine that Jormun didn't have more.

So, Leon readied the weapons he had at his disposal. All of the trick weapons he'd developed, which used water, wind, and fire magic. All of his fire and lightning spells that might come in handy. His bow, his sword, and his power. He was as ready as he would ever be.

Without another word, Leon approached the door. As he drew close, the doors began to rumble and swing inward, shaking the ground and filling the air with the deafening sound of grinding stone.

Initially, Leon couldn't see anything behind the doors. The maze was terrifically dark, so everything beyond the threshold was just a haze of white light. But, as Leon's eyes quickly adjusted, he saw the other side to be about as different from the maze as it could be.

The doors opened into a small square atrium filled with small statues of serpent-men, while the walls were covered in reliefs of slithering serpents, each rendered in silver with sapphires for eyes. It was a staggering display of wealth, and while Leon was sorely tempted to stop for a second and admire it, he spared the atrium no more thought than he needed to assess any potential threats—there were none, it seemed the several dozen statues arranged like soldiers in formation were just decorative.

He didn't let down his guard when he slowly strode into the atrium, though, and neither did Maia or Gaius. He could sense both of their auras rise in intensity with every step they took, ready to respond if anything unexpected were to jump out at them.

At the other end of the atrium were another set of doors, though these were much smaller. They opened onto a set of apartments colored in deep sea greens and blues, from the upholstery on the furniture to the countless murals and paintings that adorned the walls. They were wide and open, clearly designed to be the living spaces for at least several dozen people.

However, for as lavish as these apartments were, Leon took in almost none of it. He registered a couple more important looking rooms, such as an empty room with empty arches set into the wall almost like blind arcades, but which he and Nestor identified as being frames for teleportation portals. He found another room that seemed almost administrative, with dozens of desks and scrolls cases—all of which were unfortunately empty. It seemed that this was where the priests of the Serpent performed all of their mundane duties and saw to their needs—or, at least this place *would've* been that, if there had been anyone around at all.

Leon found it a little strange. The place was bereft of people, yet it was perfectly appointed, as if perpetually ready for habitation. There was no sign of Jormun, yet, so Leon kept searching.

He finally found something more promising when he reached the back of the apartments. He'd been starting to entertain the idea that the hydra had been giving him false information when he pushed open a large set of doors in the back of the apartments. He and his party found themselves on a large stone landing in a huge underground cavern. It was such a shock to go from the opulent apartments to this place that Leon blinked in shock for a moment, before realizing that he finally realized that he'd reached his destination.

On the opposite side of the cavern was a sizable harbor, easily large enough to let a dreadnought dock, though the underground river that fed into and out of it wasn't large enough to allow that. A familiar

ship was already docked there, one that Leon had seen at the previous island diving and resurfacing with the help of a trio of krakens.

Jormun's ship.

Next to the dock was a large, empty yard, and then a grand set of stairs with a ramp down the center leading up to the landing. To Leon's right and left were walkways along the wall of the cavern that led to two more important-looking doors. The one on Leon's right was probably the temple's enchantment control room, if the magic that Leon could sense within was any indication.

However, Leon paid no attention to either of those doors. The cavern was filled with the sound of someone playing some kind of string instrument, but was otherwise completely devoid of artificial sound. The ship seemed deserted, with no lights on that Leon could see, and no sounds of work or conversation leaking out into the cavern.

Leon, with a few quiet hand gestures, had Gaius and Maia spread out along the landing a bit as he walked over to the top of the stairs. Directly across the yard, at the top of the gangplank that led up to the deck of the ship, sat Jormun, quietly playing a violin or something similar. He played a hauntingly beautiful melody, one that sounded more sad than intimidating or awesome.

Once Leon reached the top of the stairs and paused, his eyes locked on Jormun, his weapon in hand, Jormun stopped playing, letting the sound of nothing but the rushing of the underground river fill the cavern. He stood up from where he was seated, gently laying his instrument on his short wooden chair, and then turned toward Leon and smiled.

The two stood there, staring at each other in silence for a long moment, neither immediately making the first move, but both ready for it—both Jormun and Leon's auras were towering, filling the cavern with their power. Their killing intents clashed in the center of the room, immediately dropping the temperature so far that they could almost see their breath.

As soon as he'd walked in, Leon had filled the room with his magic senses. He'd wanted to know everything possible about the place, and so when two more figures came walking out onto the deck of the ship and stood near the railings, watching Leon and Jormun, he'd seen it and reined in his immediate instinct to charge at Jormun and end the threat as quickly as possible.

One of the figures was a large man, tall and muscular, with handsome, chiseled features and relatively long brown hair. Estimating from the feel of his aura, Leon thought him to be a light mage, but no matter what, knew him to be seventh-tier. The other figure was familiar—the female fire mage that Leon had clashed with not even a day ago. None of the burns that he'd inflicted upon her were still there, indicating that she was back completely in fighting shape.

That wasn't a good sign for Leon, as she probably still had that turquoise that had disabled Maia, as well as that powerful sword with its golden fire, and who knew what else that man might have. Leon wasn't intending to let them go without a fight, but he could easily see them retreating if the fight turned against them, and he wasn't sure if he, Maia, and Gaius would be enough to keep them here.

[Xaphan, Nestor...] Leon growled into his soul realm, [is that tracking arrow ready?]

[It's not perfect and I can't test it well under these conditions,] Xaphan cautioned, [but it's about as ready as we can make it.]

[It'll work,] Nestor assured Leon. [It's a surprisingly good design from a demon. It'll work.]

Xaphan made some kind of bitter retort, but as soon as Leon heard that the arrow worked, he shifted his attention back to the matter of hand.

"Leon!" Jormun called out from the other side of the stone dockyard. "So wonderful to see you in person! I don't suppose you've reconsidered my offers?"

Leon didn't respond, merely began estimating the distance between himself, Jormun, Jormun's ship, and the other two pirates on the deck. He'd need to move *very* fast if he wanted to achieve victory in this fight. With Maia on his side, he would've thought he had the advantage, but with that fire mage's turquoise... he wasn't sure.

"No answer?" Jormun asked, sounding offended, though to Leon's ears, he sounded almost sarcastic.

Leon didn't think he needed to give the pirate another answer. He'd given his answer enough already, Jormun would get nothing else from him save for lightning and fire. Leon began to slowly walk down the stairs as silver-blue lightning danced across his blade. Behind him, he could sense Maia conjuring a mammoth water dragon, while Gaius swapped out the sword he'd borrowed from Leon for a similarly-borrowed bow.

In response, Jormun just smiled and reached into his soul realm, procuring a massive bronze hammer, altogether far too large to be practical in combat. It had a long bronze shaft with faint etchings of flowing patterns, while the head was bigger than Jormun's entire torso, with a lumpy and nonuniform shape. It looked like its weight was equal at least to that of an average mortal man.

However, for all of that, Leon didn't discount the weapon at all: he could sense a staggering amount of magic power emanating from it, far more than Jormun with his seventh-tier power could possibly be channeling into it.

[Shit... Leon, be careful,] Nestor whispered from his soul realm. [That looks like a weapon used by one of my father's subordinates...]

Leon paused a moment as Jormun brandished the war hammer. [Are you saying that's a weapon of our Clan?]

[No,] Nestor replied. [It's a weapon from one of our vassals. Some Strategos whose name eludes me right now... but that weapon is powerful...]

Leon nodded as he doubled down on his cautious approach. As far as he could remember a Strategos was the lowest political rank of Khosrow's Law within the Nexus. It was generally reserved for those who'd just achieved Apotheosis. By the standards of the powers-that-be in the Nexus, not too powerful, but by those of Aeterna, this weapon was once the property of someone with godlike power.

"Like this thing?" Jormun teasingly asked as he shot Leon a smug smile. "I pillaged this from a Sky Devil ship back in the Argonaut Sea. I took a lot more than that, though this is one of the few things I kept. It's been *quite* useful so far..."

Leon wasn't entirely sure what he was talking about when he spoke about Sky Devils. It wasn't the first time the pirate had brought them up, and about all Leon knew about them was what Jormun had told him so far: they were located in the extreme southeast of the plane, and they apparently stood in opposition of the Four Empires. The maps of the Bull Kingdom rarely went much further than the Empires, and those that did were centuries or millennia out of date, so Leon had little idea what was going on so far away—almost twenty thousand miles, if his knowledge of geography wasn't failing him.

"It's not going to save you..." Leon muttered as he started walking toward Jormun again. His words were arrogant and provocative, but Leon maintained his caution. He kept his eyes trained on Jormun, and his other senses tuned for any changes he might notice in the cavern that might indicate some kind of trap. He couldn't believe that Jormun had been just sitting here playing his instrument without doing anything else. This *had* to be some kind of trap, Leon just couldn't figure out what...

"I think you might be wrong about that," Jormun said with a smile as he raised the massive hammer above his head.

Leon immediately began to sprint for the pirate, the lightning magic coursing through his legs propelling him to a fantastic speed in less than the blink of an eye. The magic power within the hammer that had been emanating from it had suddenly withdrawn back into the bronze—the magical equivalent of taking a deep breath right before performing something physically demanding.

Unfortunately, for all Leon's speed, Jormun was hardly a slow man, himself. He brought the hammer down just as Leon drew within three steps of him, the blade of House Raime and the Thunderbird Clan before it drawn back in anticipation of a vicious stab, his entire body sparking and crackling with lightning magic.

The hammer hit the stone yard like a fallen star. The entire yard immediately exploded into shards of broken stone, the ground that remained shattering into deep cracks that almost became ravines. Great spikes of stone erupted from the ground and slammed into the ceiling more than a hundred feet above them, causing great slabs of stone to fall to the ground.

Worst of all, Leon was hurled back like a ragdoll. He was almost caught in the storm of flying stone, but a silver bracelet on his arm flashed with light and a few well-placed wind blades, aided by his lightning magic dramatically boosting his speed, cleared some of the air around him. A stone spike almost burst from the ground beneath him as he hit the stone floor of the yard and rolled, but Maia's water dragon had already charged in and pushed him aside, saving him but impaling the water dragon upon the spike. The dragon was destroyed immediately, and Leon fell further back as the yard was torn asunder by the power of Jormun's hammer.

Leon almost shouted in frustration, just barely managing to keep himself under enough control to pull his family's sword back into his soul realm and replace it with his bow.

He vaguely heard Nestor try to say something, but the roar of all this destruction was deafening, and Leon could see Jormun turning around to walk up the gangplank and back onto his ship.

Leon pulled out a Thunderblast spell arrow, one of the most powerful he'd ever made, drew it back on his bow's string, and loosed. The arrow sailed across the yard, but the destruction wasn't yet complete. A stone spike exploded from the floor, brushing against the arrow just as it sailed past, knocking it off

course. The arrow detonated in a conflagration of golden lightning, shatter several nearby stone spikes and taking a huge chunk out of the yard not too far away from the gangplank.

But Jormun was already on the deck of his ship.

With a roar of frustration that he couldn't hold in any longer, Leon pulled his helmet back into his soul realm, freeing his eyes from the relatively restrictive visor. He was *not* going to just let Jormun run away like this, not after the past few days of trekking through the jungle, fighting off his fire mage's army, and then going through the temple's 'trials'. Jormun had even harmed Maia, perverted Elise's image to do so, and even invoked Artorias' image in an effort to cause Leon harm. All of the emotions that Leon had been suppressed for the past few hours came erupting to the surface of his current mental state, and he took his right hand off his bow and drew it back to his ear. There, bright silver-blue lightning that illuminated the entire cavern formed a dreadful spear, and with a clap of thunder that would've burs the eardrums of any mortal within the cavern, hurled it at Jormun's back.

Jormun merely smiled as he turned, and with an almost dismissive wave of his hand, caused a huge curtain of water to rise from the river beneath his ship, intercepting the lighting bolt before it could hit him. The lightning surged through the water, scorching the sides of Jormun's ship with black vein-like patterns, but with the water diluting it and spreading it out, this was nothing more than superficial damage.

"Good try, Leon!" Jormun shouted. "But not good enough! This was fun, and I'd like to continue, but unfortunately, I have business on the next island! I'll see you there!"

With that, Jormun and his fellow seventh-tier pirates turned around and walked into his ship.

Leon roared again, his instincts driving him onward even as Gaius shouted behind him and he heard Maia's voice in his head. His blood boiled, his mind filling with images of Jormun's form burning to ash in black fire.

Leon sprinted forward, but he didn't think he'd be able to make it. Someone within the ship had already started it, and it was sliding out into the river. He might be able to leap onto it, but even in his current state, Leon could understand that that was a terrible idea.

But he couldn't just let Jormun leave like this. Not after everything he and his people had been through here. In one hand, Leon conjured the tracking arrow that Xaphan and Nestor had designed. It was just another spell arrow—a regular arrow with a spell tied around the shaft. This paper used for this spell, however, was much thicker than any Leon had ever made, but he didn't think too much of it. As he reached the edge of the dock, Jormun's ship had already pushed off and was rapidly gaining speed as it sailed down the underground river, only a few seconds away from disappearing into the cave system that the river flowed into.

With nothing else that he could think to do that wouldn't be complete suicide, Leon drew the tracking arrow back and fired at the ship. From what Xaphan had told him, it would mark the aura of whatever it hit with something that would allow him to track it for a while. Leon wasn't sure if it would work on something inanimate like Jormun's ship, but there was nothing else he could do.

In a flash, the arrow flew across the cavern. With such a large target and nothing else getting in his way, Leon saw with some satisfaction the arrow impacting the back of the ship and embedding into the

wood. The spell then flashed with a deep red light, a color that Leon recognized as being the same as demonfire, and the arrow shaft was burned away. Leon could just barely see in the dim light the arrowhead still embedded in the ship.

And then the ship sailed into the cave, carrying Jormun and his crew out of Leon's reach. With that fire mage on his ship, Leon couldn't even entertain the idea of going after him with Maia.

With one last loud groan of frustration, Leon kicked a nearby stone spike, shattering a good chunk of it. He wanted nothing more than to sink his teeth into Jormun's neck, ripping and tearing as his claws scooped out the pirate's entrails and his fire roasted him from within.

As Leon took a deep breath and Jormun's ship vanished down the underground river, quickly moving past a point where Leon's magic senses were scattered, he hoped that that tracking arrow worked.

Chapter 575: Terrible Thought

Leon glared at the underground river in the harbor of the temple, the memory of the 'battle' with Jormun running through his head again and again, the pirate's shit-eating grin now practically locked in Leon's mind's eye. He just couldn't believe that, after everything that they had experienced in the temple, Jormun had still managed to escape the three of them.

It felt like a loss, even though Leon knew it wasn't that, exactly. They'd taken the temple, for however that much that was worth. Leon had taken some time immediately following Jormun's departure to secure the last few places around the temple's dormitories and had found the enchantment control room as well as another room that contained hundreds of glowing crystals submerged in a large half-spherical pool of nearly pitch-black water, illuminated only by the crystals themselves. Nestor had told Leon that these were probably the containment crystals for the wisps that controlled most of the automated enchantments, as well as the power crystals for those enchantments. After everything that had happened within the temple's trials, Leon was sorely tempted to destroy those crystals, but he managed to refrain.

These were fantastic discoveries, and if he'd found them while out and about, he'd have been ecstatic. As it was, Leon had only found them after being forced to watch Jormun escape on his ship.

The silver lining was that the tracking arrow had hit Jormun's ship, and after finishing his exploration of the temple's remaining rooms and ensuring there were no more hostile surprises and gotten as much rest as he was able to, Leon had settled in for a chat with Nestor and Xaphan for a chat about their next steps as he glared out at the underground river.

[So, demon, remind me how is this tracking arrow supposed to work, exactly?]

[You'll need a new spell tailored to the exact tracking spell that was made,] Xaphan told him. [The dead man and I modified that tracking spell while designing it to track the arrowhead if it was unable to mark an aura.]

[Right,] Leon replied.

[The accompanying spell will create a magical circle of light about a foot off the page, and a small flame about the size of a candle will move along its length in accordance with your position,] Nestor explained.

[Imagine you stand in the center of the circle; you just have to move in the direction of the flame, and you'll eventually find your quarry.]

[Is this hunting spell easy to make?] Leon asked.

[Easy enough,] Nestor replied.

[We already made it while making the tracking spell,] Xaphan smugly added.

[Then bring it out, I want to use,] Leon insisted. He needed to make sure that the tracking arrow was working, otherwise this *would* be a complete loss in his mind.

A moment later, Leon was staring at a huge sheet of spell paper that Xaphan had shown him. He spent a few brief seconds instinctively trying to analyze the spell, but it was a hugely complex spiderweb of glyphs and flowing runes that had him almost cross-eyed. So, Leon simply shut his eyes for a moment to clamp down on that instinct, and then channeled some of his power into the spell.

Immediately, a circle of red light as thin as a strand of silk appeared above the page, about two feet in diameter and hovering about a foot off the paper. A bead of fire then appeared along the strand of light, slowly moving along the strand roughly in the direction that Jormun's ship had been traveling in when it passed beyond Leon's ability to follow it with his magic senses.

[Just go in that direction,] Xaphan said, [and you'll find your pirate.]

Leon smiled as he picked up the spell paper and turned in the indicated direction. The bead of fire moved along the circle of light as the paper was turned, and Leon began to smile.

With great haste—for with every passing second, Jormun was drawing further away—Leon grabbed Maia and Gaius from where they'd been quietly resting in the few minutes following the confrontation, and then went to the enchantment control room they'd found before collapsing from mental and physical exhaustion.

The control room itself was fairly large, with half a dozen control consoles big enough for at least three people to sit at apiece. Each one was covered in glass displaying dozens upon dozens of runic circles and other flowing runes, showing the state of the temple's enchantment scheme.

At least half of these enchantments, as far as Leon could tell, were devoted to maintaining the spatial enchantments that linked each part of the temple together, as well as ensuring that every space within the temple remained habitable this far underground, with plenty of air and reinforcements to keep the temple from collapsing under the weight of all the earth above it. He was momentarily entertained to see one entire control console dedicated to maintaining a set of wards designed to protect the temple from the volcano it had been built into—the volcano itself hadn't erupted in centuries, but the temple still required much defending from its wrath this far below the surface.

However, the console he was looking for was the one that controlled the temple's teleportation capabilities. Many of the larger consoles had enchantments and intricate glyphs that were far beyond his ability to properly comprehend, but after a bit of searching, he found what he was looking for when he located a control console whose inscribed glyphs were built around only darkness, light, and lightning runes. Those three elements were the primary components of spatial magic, though apart from that, Leon had little comprehension of such a complex application of magic.

Fortunately, he had a master of the arts of enchanting squatting in his soul realm, and Nestor was able to walk Leon through some of the controls after about half an hour of study, allowing Leon and his party to, after almost a full day within the temple, finally link back up with everyone else who'd been left at the temple's entrance.

—

Leon tapped his foot with impatience as the bulky galley slid through the mouth of the cave from which the underground river flowed. It moved at a fairly good clip, but in Leon's mental state, it felt more like it was practically crawling.

It had been another day since Leon and his party had managed to get out of the temple. Leon had linked back up with his retinue, and then immediately found a place where he and Gaius could communicate directly with Sigebert. Unfortunately, when they did, Sigebert seemed to fixate on the temple rather than Leon's information on Jormun's whereabouts, and he insisted on seeing the temple for himself.

Legion scout ships had found a large number of caves along the rocky shores of the island, but few were large enough to allow ships in and out; it wasn't that hard for Sigebert's people to find the entrance to the underground network that let him sail into the temple's underground harbor once he knew what to look for.

However, Leon had been practically forced not only to wait for the Fleet Legate to arrive, but also to venture back down into the temple to welcome the Fleet Legate when he finally showed up. The only silver lining in Leon's mind was that, at the absolute, bare least, Sigebert hadn't screwed around that much when he heard about the temple and arrived in relatively good time.

Still, it was an entire day gone.

So, when Sigebert came walking off the galley, openly marveling at the underground harbor and the destruction that Jormun had wrought on his way out, Leon's mood was decidedly sour. He was particularly angered when he noticed that Sigebert was paying a lot of attention to the serpent-man statues that lined the walls.

"... they built all of this? And can you feel how much magic power is flowing through this place?" Sigebert whispered to one of his aides as he leisurely strode over to the large landing upon which Leon and his retinue were waiting.

"Took you long enough," Leon called out, interrupting Sigebert's admiration of the temple and not even bothering to hide his frustration.

Sigebert seemed to take it in stride, though, and as he started climbing the stairs up to the landing, he responded, "Getting through those caves wasn't easy."

"Neither was making our way through the temple itself," Leon retorted, but after a brief pause, he decided to just get on with it. There'd be time enough for such recriminations later, if he were so inclined, but right now, he needed to get to Jormun. "I have actionable intel on Jormun's location. We need to move quickly if we're going to catch up."

"Yes, you mentioned something like that before," Sigebert said with some interest, referring to the brief communication the two had had after Leon got out of the temple.

“And instead of taking it seriously, you decided to come here,” Leon irately pointed out. “The pirate is moving on to the next island, and we can find and eliminate him *now*, rather than waiting around for him to prepare for our arrival in a week, or however long it takes for us to stop jerking around here.”

“I thought we went over this before,” Sigebert said with some exasperation. “The best way to handle this is to make sure we move slowly, not leaving any of the islands until we’ve secured our rear. If we don’t, we might get outflanked by any forces still loyal to the Serpentine pirates who might remain here...”

“And we also have *three* fleets,” Leon insisted. “You could come with me to find and eliminate the pirate! I guarantee you that when we do, we’ll find the traitor Octavius as well! This is *our job*! It’s up to Basina and Theuderic to secure the islands, not us! We need to hunt this damn pirate down *now*! Look around you! Can you feel the amount of magic power within this place?! The level of power that Jormun had access to far outstrips ours! We need to move on him before he can truly bring that power to bear, as he’s been trying to this whole time!”

If Sigebert was in any way offended at Leon’s more casual method of referring to him and the other two Fleet Legates, he didn’t show it. Instead, he just smiled sagely at Leon and said, “Your Ancestors knew the value of patience, young Raimé. Follow their example, and victory is assured, no need to worry about that. Jormun will be brought to justice in time.”

Leon did his best to keep his cool, but inside, he seethed. He was sick and tired of the Fleet Legates dragging their feet on this issue, and though he knew it to be suicide, he was starting to much more seriously consider striking out on his own to deal with Jormun in any way he was able to. He couldn’t let this stand, and if anyone were to get in his way, he’d rip them to pieces with fang and talon...

And with that thought, something occurred to Leon. It was like a light went on in his head, and let his power flood his system—it seemed that there was something here that was influencing him somehow, that was the only explanation he could think of for these strange instincts he’d been having recently. It then stood to reason that if whatever this thing was that was strong enough to affect him, then it might very well be affecting the Fleet Legates as well. Leon would freely admit that maybe it wasn’t that overt, and that maybe their much more conservative strategy wasn’t a result of that, but Leon still had to make sure.

He got up into Sigebert’s face and grabbed the front of his tunic, to the surprise and shouts of alarm from everyone watching. Several others, including Gaius, even darted in, shouting and trying to separate the two, but Leon held firm as Sigebert’s expression twisted in surprise, then fear, and then finally some anger.

Leon let go only a moment later, but not before he sent a small bolt of silver-blue lightning coursing through Sigebert’s body. It wasn’t enough to cause the Fleet Legate any serious harm—and wasn’t even enough for anyone else to really notice—but it was more than enough for a look of confusion and slight dizziness to wash over Sigebert’s face before he righted himself.

By then, however, Gaius and half a dozen others had interposed themselves between Leon and the Fleet Legate, and were variously shouting threats, calls for Leon’s arrest, or appeals for peace.

“Wait!” Sigebert shouted, quieting everyone down. “There’s no need to arrest Leon... Is there?” He gave Leon a sharp, if meaningful look, and Leon responded with a quiet nod. “Good...”

Sigebert then began to, with a little more passion and drive in his demeanor, began to order his people to secure the temple as best as they could, while Leon and Gaius both cautioned against going too deep or messing around with the enchantment controls too much. Many of his subordinates glared warily at Leon, but after some cajoling from their Legate, they got back to work.

Sigebert, unfortunately, did not immediately order them to begin pursuit of Jormun. Leon began to assume that he’d made a mistake and started planning his next steps when Sigebert approached him about an hour later, finally agreeing to order his fleet to pursue Jormun, regardless of what Basina and Theuderic wanted.

Leon responded only with a smile and a hint of killing intent.

—

Leon felt his heart beat faster as the Thunderbird approached his Mind Palace. It had been a while since he and she had had a good conversation. Normally when they met up in Leon’s soul realm, the sole reason was training, and she rarely let him take his mind off their focus.

Now, however, Leon wasn’t in the mood for training. He’d been having strange urges and instincts practically since he’d arrived at the Serpentine Isles, and he needed to know what in the hells was going on with him.

The Thunderbird landed and transformed back into her human form, the bronze-skinned Amazonian goddess dressed all in white; her eyes a piercing avian yellow; her heart-shaped face looking both as warm as that of a loving mother, and as stern as that of military commander in charge of training new recruits.

She didn’t say a word as she approached Leon where he stood on the open stone platform set into the side of a mountain that he’d built to train upon. She simply smiled and took one of the training swords that Leon had stored here and continued to advance.

But Leon didn’t raise his defense or do anything to physically stop her. Instead, he looked her in the eye and said, “We need to talk.”

“We can talk later,” the Thunderbird said as she slowed, but continued to advance.

“I’d rather we talk now,” Leon responded.

“Is this training related?” she asked. “If not, then it can wait.”

“It isn’t, and it can’t,” Leon protested, his tone deadly serious. “There’s something wrong with my body, and I don’t quite know what...”

Leon, as succinctly as he could without glossing over any important details, quickly told the Thunderbird of all these instincts that he’d been experiencing for the past few weeks, culminating in the strange vision where he’d seen one of his arms covered in sparkling black scales.

For her part, the Thunderbird had almost interrupted him in the beginning, determined as she was to keep him training, but once he ignored her and got started on his explanation, she quietly listened, and eventually tossed aside the training blade as he progressed in his story.

When he was done, Leon went quiet for a long moment as he let the Thunderbird process everything that he'd just told her. He wasn't quite certain what to make of it, himself, only able to describe what he'd been feeling and little else. He didn't even know if this was related to the Serpentine Isles, even though the fact that it started cropping up at the same time as he arrived might be correlated.

"This is..." the Thunderbird whispered as one of her hands went up to her chin, the arm propped up on the other in thought. "I don't know what this is, but it's concerning," she finished. "And you don't know when this started? Nothing in particular happened at that time that might've triggered this within your body?"

"Nothing too consequential..." Leon murmured before a thought occurred to him. "Although, I *did* first experience these sensations and urges immediately after first speaking with Jormun, around the same time I started seeing that smaller bird that looks almost identical to you..."

The Thunderbird donned a mild scowl at the mention of her look-a-like. She wasn't too thrilled at having something ape her appearance like that, but she said nothing about it, specifically.

"There are... *some* things that occur to me," the Thunderbird said in thought. "You have the bloodlines of two great beings within you. One of them seems to be inaccessible to your conscious mind, but not your unconscious mind, which is being tapped into here..."

She went silent for a long moment, seeming to need a few more seconds to think this over. The pause made Leon more than a little nervous, as the Thunderbird's mood seemed to drop even more as she mulled the problem over.

"You... probably haven't inherited just powers from me and the Great Black Dragon," she finally said. "There might be instincts, or some kind of blood-memory there, too. However, such things probably should've manifested themselves before..."

"For what it's worth," Leon mentioned, "I have many times dreamt of flight, and have put a great deal of time and effort into figuring out how to do so. My solution isn't perfect, but there're few things I enjoy more than flying. This *does* seem related, right?"

"Maybe," the Thunderbird replied with a shrug. "I'm more concerned that these instincts have appeared so suddenly. That they seem to be escalating into hallucinations has me feeling even greater concern."

"This isn't a normal thing?" Leon asked, feeling somewhat gratified that his sense of alarm in experiencing these things wasn't misplaced.

"Not so much, no," the Thunderbird admitted. "Something here, perhaps the same thing that's been giving you visions of that *other* bird, seems to be stimulating your blood, bringing those instincts out of your unconscious mind and into your conscious one..."

"But I've been diligent in keeping my mental defenses raised," Leon pointed out. "Given how my defenses were breached yesterday, wouldn't I notice if something were influencing me like that?"

“Not necessarily,” the Thunderbird said with a long sigh a look that resembled pity, as if Leon had just asked a childish question. “Your defenses are focused in and around your brain. They’re potent defenses, but if you’ll recall when you first learned them, they were described as ‘basic’. This is because, as effective as they are at keeping your mind safe, their scope limits them. It’s not your mind that’s being attacked, here, it’s your blood. I would say that something is subtly stimulating your blood to bring out your inhuman characteristics, something tied to these islands. And it doesn’t seem to be a stretch to imagine that this fake bird has something to do with it...”

“I’m unsure if the bird is fake, though,” Leon said. “I was able to see it, talk to it, it gave me useful information, and most importantly, everyone else could see it, too. Seems to be a pretty strong case for it not being fake, to me.”

“None of that is proof of anything, only that all of you were fooled instead of just you,” the Thunderbird countered. “That also worries me, though, for it means that whatever is causing all of this has to be *quite* powerful.”

Leon nodded, the Serpent of Jormun’s desire coming to mind. But as he thought about it, he also thought about the serpent statue at the center of the mass ritual sacrifice he found on the second island, and the strange power he’d felt within it. He remembered Xaphan mentioning that Aeterna was part of a planar cluster collectively known as the ‘Divine Graveyard’, and that there could be things buried here that utterly defy explanation.

Whatever was going on, if that bird wasn’t real, then it must have been tapping into Leon’s mind somehow to conjure the image of the Thunderbird. Maybe this was the doing of the Serpent...

... Or maybe whatever was

Chapter 576: Delayed Mourning

Leon stared at the third island as it slowly grew smaller in the distance. He’d only been there for about five days—practically an eternity in his mind, but the shortest amount of time he’d spent at any of the islands.

He stood on the main deck of Sigebert’s flagship. The Fleet Legate, after hearing Leon’s words and surveying the temple for himself, decided to trust Leon and drop everything to go after Jormun. The other Fleet Legates had protested, and their subsequent argument had grown quite heated, but in the end, Sigebert had gotten his way. His fleet now sailed with him away from the third island on a course that Leon had given him. They moved with all the haste that a few hundred ships and marine transports could manage, which wasn’t much, but by their estimates, they’d reach the next island in the chain in roughly four days.

That gave Leon plenty of time to think and contemplate their situation. One thing he was quite concerned about was the fact that it seemed like Sigebert had been being somewhat influenced by something on these islands. It had been Leon quietly zapping him with the Thunderbird’s lightning that had allowed him to convince the Fleet Legate to leave the others behind for a dedicated hunt of Jormun, and since then, Leon had been trying to keep his eyes open for any other signs of such influence.

He never saw much, however. Everyone seemed to be acting normally, and he didn’t see anything that might indicate any undue influence was around them—he especially kept his eyes open for the

Thunderbird look-a-like, for as he reflected on the past few weeks, he believed more and more the Thunderbird's theory that her tiny doppelganger had something to do with his recent beastly urges, such as wanting to spread his wings or tear into something with his claws. However, there was no sign of the bird. If it was real, it seemed like Leon's distrust at the entrance of the temple had caused it to abandon him.

For the most part, he was happy that he wasn't seeing it around, but there was a small voice in the back of his mind that felt quietly guilty for running it off like that. But it was what it was, and he could do nothing more than deal with whatever consequences might come.

Joining Leon on the deck of Sigebert's flagship was the rest of his retinue, plus Gaius. Anzu was lounging not too far to Leon's right, his large body leaning up against the deck's guardrail while his head rested on top of it. He looked to be having trouble keeping his eyes open.

Behind Leon were Marcus, Alcander, Alix, and Gaius, all of whom had paired off to spar, though it hardly seemed like they were putting in too much effort. To Leon's eyes, it seemed more like they were just chatting while they lightly exercised. He didn't mind that, though, and didn't press them too much after the first few minutes to keep the intensity of their training up.

To his left was Maia, who was quietly leaning on the rail, her eyes staring off at nothing in particular, a strange look in her eyes.

[How are you doing?] Leon silently asked her.

She sighed in an almost contented manner. [I think I'm doing about as well as I could be doing,] she answered. [I'm more worried about you, though...]

[Me?] Leon asked with some surprise.

[Yes,] she responded. [You've been acting very weird since we came back from that place. I know you don't want to talk about what happened in there, but I can tell that it's weighing on your mind. What's going on?]

Leon smiled bitterly and glanced out at the ocean. It was utterly terrifying, but its beauty couldn't be denied.

[I was... forced to face my father down there...] Leon said quietly and slowly. He then hesitantly narrated everything that he'd experienced since they'd been separated after entering the temple, including his conversation with Jormun in the colossus' chamber, his subsequent break-in of Gaius' trial world, and then how Jormun manipulated it to pull a shade of Artorias from his mind that he was forced to fight.

Leon's hesitation in describing all of this doubled when he spoke of Artorias, and only grew worse as he realized that this was probably the most he'd ever spoken of his father ever since Artorias had been killed. Leon had rarely spoken about Artorias to anyone, and in the case of those like Trajan who'd been curious enough to ask him about his father, Leon had been light on details and never offered more than the answer to any questions he might've gotten. It occurred to him that the most he'd spoken of his father had probably been to Elise, but even then, he hadn't said much, mostly sticking to Artorias' death rather than stories of the kind of father he'd been.

By the time Leon finished telling Maia about how he'd been forced to 'kill' Artorias, Leon was starting to break down. His eyes were growing wet and he wasn't able to look at Maia for longer than the briefest of glances.

Maia clearly picked up on this, for she quietly took his arm and steered him back below deck, followed only by Anzu—the others at first made to follow them, but Maia had frozen them with a glare. She brought Leon directly back to their cabin and then back to his private room, where the two of them could be alone.

Once there, Leon collapsed into bed, his heart in his throat. Maia curled up behind him, wrapping one of her arms around his chest. She didn't speak, for which Leon was grateful. He just laid there, trying and failing to keep quiet as tears poured out of him.

This didn't last long. Leon pulled himself together after only a couple minutes, but after that, the two just laid there for another quarter of an hour before Maia finally broke the silence.

"Tell me about your father," she whispered aloud.

Leon hesitated for a long moment. There were a few things he didn't want to talk about, and his father was near the top of that list. But, for Maia, Leon took a deep breath and quietly said, "He... was the only person I knew for most of my life. He wasn't just my father... he was my teacher, my hunting companion, and my best friend... In the years since he's been gone, I've only rarely ever been as happy as I was back in the Forest of Black and White with him. He was the strongest and best man I've ever known... Only Trajan could compare..."

"Sounds like you idolize him quite a bit," Maia observed. Leon was still turned away from her, but he could hear the smile on her face all the same.

"I did, and still do," Leon quietly replied. "He was better than me in every way. If he were still here, he'd know exactly what to do, who to talk to, what to say... He was selfless, caring, and strong. He wasn't perfect, though... he cared about the Bull Kingdom a great deal, and I think it was that devotion that got him killed. He invited that snake Adrianos into our home, and later, that bastard came back with others..."

Leon trailed off, not quite wanting to go into too much into the details of his father's death. He refocused on his father as he was in life, not as he was in those final couple of days, and continued.

"He was devoted to his family, and he'd been forced to live through the deaths of his father, his brother, and the kidnapping of his wife—my mother. And yet, he always did his best to never let me see that side of him. It was only when I asked about my mother that he'd let even a hint of how much pain those losses caused show."

"I think you take after him in that regard," Maia playfully whispered.

Leon chuckled lightly. "Maybe I do, maybe I do..." He slowly turned around so that he was faced Maia, their faces so close that their noses brushed against each other. "Is that a problem?" he asked hesitantly.

Maia's arm went up to cup his cheek. "Not for me. I'll always be here if you need to talk, if you ever to. You've always been there for me, even forgiving me for the mistakes I made when we met... I could never do anything less than reciprocate."

Leon hugged her closer. "I love you," he whispered.

"I love you, too," she replied, then looked at him expectantly, clearly wanting him to continue talking about Artorias.

Leon obliged, moving on from the more depressing things to describing in detail the lives they'd lived in the Forest of Black and White, how they'd supported themselves by hunting the various beats that came out during the day, trading their furs back in Vale Town for other necessities, and avoiding the ice wraiths and banshees that came out at night. Maia shivered at the thought of those monsters, but relaxed a little when Leon described how his father had come to be known among the Valemén of the Brown Bear Tribe as the 'Wraith-killer'.

Leon told her other stories, too, such as how Artorias would teach him to hunt and survive, the training and studying that he had Leon do, and he told Maia the story of how he'd awoken his blood. Most importantly, he told Maia of how his father died, though he had to stop several times to compose himself before he made it through.

By the end, he was calmer, but still in a bit of state. When he was finished with his story, having told Maia of how he'd buried his father after cutting him open and putting a Heartwood seed in his chest, Leon leaned back in the bed, taking his eyes off his river nymph lover in favor of staring at the ceiling of the room.

"I can't help but think if things had been reversed, if he'd been the one burying me, he would've done a much better job at all of this than me..."

"No!" Maia almost shouted, surprising Leon with her sudden passion—she'd been quietly listening for long enough that Leon figured he might've gotten a bit *too* comfortable discussing these matters.

"Never say that!" she sternly ordered him. "You're here now, what would things be like for me if you weren't? For Elise? Do you think either of us wish that you were dead?"

Leon bitterly smiled as he realized his mistake.

"No," he whispered. "That's not what I think. Sorry, I guess I just a bit too... I don't know, a bit too down about this whole thing. I wouldn't give either of you up for the entire world."

"Good," Maia replied as her lips lightly brushed against his.

Leon's smile turned more genuine, and he and pressed his forehead against hers. She closed her eyes as her lips turned up in a smile of her own, and the two stayed like that for a while longer, not making a sound, just reveling in each other's company.

However, for Leon, it still didn't quite feel complete. He loved Maia, but he couldn't help but wish that Elise was here, too. Their little family just didn't feel right without her, like there was a massive hole where there shouldn't be.

As if reading his mind, Maia muttered, "I miss Elise."

“So do I,” Leon replied. He’d gotten enough of a hold on himself that he wasn’t about to burst into tears again, but his mood soured greatly when he thought about the distance between them and their fire-haired lover. “We’ll be with her again, soon. We just have to deal with this damn pirate, and then we can go home.”

Maia sighed, and she replied, “Then let’s get this done as quickly as we can...”

Leon agreed, and the two lay there in silence for a while longer. Soon Maia had fallen asleep, but Leon didn’t move to get up. He just lay there with her in his arms. He felt much better than he did even an hour ago—not quite like a great weight had been lifted off his shoulders, but maybe like it had lightened just a little bit.

—

“Are you done playing around?” Friga demanded of Jormun as the fourth island drew relatively close, only a day or two away. Their ship cut through the waves with great speed, but not nearly enough to make up for the time lost in the temple.

Jormun merely gave her a cheeky smile and a shrug. “Everything worked out, and we’re still ahead of schedule, why’re you so angry?”

Friga’s wild features turned down in a deep scowl.

Not too far away, Andoral, the tall, lithe, seventh-tier light mage, walked over and said, “She’s just mad that that little baby Legion knight got the better of her.”

“Say that again and I’ll gouge out your eyes,” Friga replied with a look of utter seriousness in her eyes.

Andoral, however, shrugged nonchalantly and replied, “If you do that, I’ll never heal you again. The next wound you take fighting that kid will stick around for a *long* time, I’ll tell you that!”

“Enough, you two,” Jormun ordered. His tone was light and cheerful, but neither of the other two tested that and quieted down immediately. “Now, we still have some work to do. How have the repairs to the ship gone?”

“Well enough,” Andoral replied. “The crew that died during those submergings will be difficult to replace, but they weren’t exactly critical.”

“And the ritual?”

“It was performed exactly as ordered,” Friga replied. “Rolf saw to it personally. The only locks remaining for this seal are on this island and the next.”

“And they should be just about done with unlocking the lock here,” Andoral added.

“They damn well better be, they’ve certainly had long enough,” Jormun growled.

The three were silent for a long moment as Jormun stared at the mountainous island before them, his ship swiftly cutting through the waves as it curved along the shore in a long circle about a thousand feet out.

“I... have a wonder, if you’ll indulge me, Captain,” Andoral hesitantly asked.

Jormun glanced over at him with a raised eyebrow, silently allowing him to continue.

"I can't help but wonder what the deal is with this kid," Andoral said. "I mean, we knew that they were going to send a Paladin or two after us, and it *is* weird that the one they sent is so young, but... Is he worth going so out of our way for? Why do all of this just to screw with his mind?"

Jormun chuckled. "Screwing with his mind is reason enough, I should think," he said in a playful tone. He then paused, but when Andoral's gaze didn't waver, Jormun sighed and explained, "The Serpent has taken an interest in him. I know not why, but it has ordered that we bring the boy to each of the ritual sites."

"If that's the case, why did you order me to attack him?!" Friga demanded to know, her tone indignant and her aura filling with killing intent.

Jormun was unperturbed. She was no threat to him, and besides, he knew her quite well, this was just how she was. He didn't take the killing intent seriously.

"I ordered you to attack the unit he was with," he said. "I knew he'd be fine. He's the sort of person who drew the gaze of the Serpent itself, there was no way he was going to die there."

"I was thinking more about me," Friga quietly stated. "Why was I the one you threw against him? Was it because you knew I'd fail?"

Jormun turned to her, taking his eyes off the distant volcanos. "No, my dear, it's because I trusted you to carry out the *real* plan: keeping these ungrateful bastards in line!" As he spoke, Jormun gestured to the island with a dismissive wave. "These fucking people swore themselves to me when I threw back the Bull from these islands! And promised me that they would fight with me when the Bull returned! And yet they've been utterly useless so far, even after having to be cajoled and threatened into fulfilling their pledges!

"I didn't send you out to kill Leon, or those marines he was with. It honestly doesn't matter how many of them get past the islands; they'll all die in the Shattered Tail if they insist on pursuing us. No, what I sent you out to do was to teach those cowards what freedom means! To show them why they put their faith in me!"

"That's... not going to go over well with them," Andoral said with a grimace as Jormun's eyes darted in his direction. "Already, more than half of the nobility and wealthy landowners that live among our people have died. Many have died to the Bull's aggression, enough that I don't think they'll rise up again if we push the Bull back beyond our islands again."

"You know why we fight," Jormun growled in an exasperated tone. "We fight to unleash the Serpent. Once we do—"

Before he could finish, one of Jormun's crew began to shout from high up on the observation platform near the back of the ship. Jormun glanced over at him and noticed the man frantically waving to get his attention, then pointing back toward the third island.

Curious, Jormun, Andoral, and Friga all moved to the rear of the ship to see what they could see.

The haze of distance rendered much more than fifty miles out gray and indistinct, but to mages of their caliber, they could still see quite clearly. The waves of the ocean obscured more, with some out in the distance growing quite large as various creatures fought down in the depths.

But Jormun was easily able to see what had drawn the lookout's attention. Ships—hundreds of them, departing from the third island, about one and a half or two days behind them, by his estimate.

"They're leaving early..." Andoral observed.

"No," Jormun replied as his expression darkened. "If they were, they'd be bringing all their fleets. That's just some of their armada. I think... I think we may need to speed things up."

As they stared, all three experienced pirates were able to see as the Bull ships turned in their direction.

"Yes, yes they're coming for us, now," Jormun whispered. Beneath his clothes, a bracelet made of onyx and set with half a dozen large black crystals appeared, two of which glowed with arcane light. He channeled his magic into it, and he felt the krakens at his command respond. "We need to be ready... I don't know how, but they know where we are..."

Chapter 577: Jormun's Maneuvers

It was a beautiful day when Sigebert's fleet finally came within five miles of the fourth island. The sun was shining, the seas were calm, and a light, pleasant sea breeze kept everything cool and comfortable.

For Leon, however, it was a good day for a whole other reason: the fleet was about to finally close with Jormun's ship. He stood at the bow of Sigebert's flagship, where he could see just about everything happening around him. Just behind him were Maia, Gaius, Alix, Alcander, Marcus, and Anzu, all fully armored and ready for battle.

About a dozen miles or so in the distance, Leon could see Jormun's ship, as well as the pirate himself, standing on the deck at the rear of the ship, staring back at him with a satisfying look of muted anger and frustration on his face that was completely at odds with how he usually comported himself.

For the past couple of days, Sigebert's fleet had made haste toward the fourth island, following Leon's directions toward Jormun's ship. However, as with the other islands, the fourth island had an extremely rocky and broken coastline, so the fleet had to slow down in the past couple of hours to ensure that their hundreds of ships didn't run aground or get caught in a trap planted among the rocky outcroppings that jutted out of the ocean even as far out as they were. The memory of the two Flame Lances appearing at the first island was still fresh in everyone's mind, and they were taking as many precautions to protect themselves from a similar ambush as they could.

Strangely enough, even with these precautions and slower approach than they might've otherwise made, they were still gaining on Jormun's ship. Leon, for all his elation at catching up with the pirate and having the opportunity to finish this and put a stop to Jormun's plans, couldn't help but feel some measure of disquiet at this. Jormun's ship was sleek and fast, and the man himself was a seventh-tier water mage; for as powerful as the Bull Kingdom's fleets were, they were only as fast as their slowest ship, those being Sigebert's dreadnoughts, and they weren't that fast. When Leon had hit Jormun's ship with his tracking arrow, he'd envisioned pursuing the pirate to wherever he'd docked his ship and made camp on the fourth island, not catching up to him at sea.

This would make things both much simpler and yet, much more dangerous. To face a powerful water mage at sea was not a smart move under normal circumstances, but Leon and Sigebert had made plans for this eventuality ever since they first caught sight of Jormun's ship the previous day, and at least this way, they'd be able to bring all the force of the fleet to bear. Leon had confidence that the power at their command combined with this plan would be enough to achieve victory, but he wasn't going to bet too highly on it. Jormun had proven himself tricky and devious, and Leon wouldn't be surprised if the pirate revealed that he still had cards up his sleeve.

The pirate *had* destroyed at least one fleet sent to the Isles before, and without knowing how, they had to proceed with the assumption that Jormun still had moves left to play—in fact, it was guaranteed that Jormun still had more power of a kind, for Leon and Sigebert knew that he had to have a fleet somewhere. It couldn't be as large as a proper Bull fleet, but apart from a few tiny Islander fishing vessels in the distance, they could only Jormun's one ship.

Jormun's ship continued to sail away from them, just slow enough for even their heavier dreadnoughts to slowly gain on it, and that brought a light frown to Leon's face. The pirate ship was sailing toward a narrow strait along the coast, with the island itself on the left and a long series of rocky cliffs on the right. With his magic senses, Leon could see that there wasn't anything on or around those cliffs, but he didn't take it as gospel.

He glanced back over his shoulder, and he could see that Sigebert was already altering their battle line. Instead of the wide and flat delta shape that the fleet had been sailing in, Sigebert had given orders for many of the lighter ships to close in and sail ahead of the dreadnoughts, giving them and the marine transports more cover, while the right wing—about fifteen war galleys and several dozen smaller ramming and boarding ships—split off from the main battle group to sail around the outside of the cliffs at a good distance. This group would be able to sail faster without the dreadnoughts, and at the pace that Jormun had set, they'd be able to block him in on both sides of the strait if they moved fast enough.

Jormun could see this—Leon watched as his head turned slightly in the direction of the Bull fleet's right wing as it peeled off—and yet, he did nothing. He just stood at the rear of his ship, staring back at Leon as his ship languidly pushed forward into the strait.

He'd be well in by the time Bull Fleet got into range with the Flame Lances. The Lances were Leon and Sigebert's primary strategy: bombard the pirate from afar with artillery. Jormun had those strange Flame Lances on his ship that spewed fire, along with potentially two more Legion Flame Lances that weren't accounted for from the previous fleet sent here, so they didn't want to get close. They had an advantage at range, and they were going to use it.

The tension in the air grew as they slowly closed with Jormun's ship. The protective screen of lighter ships pushed up into formation ahead of the dreadnoughts, and Leon's gaze never wavered from Jormun. His magic senses remained projected, however, and he kept an eye out for any signs of ambush, whether from above or below—the Legion had several water mages scouting out below their ships on strange-looking crane apparatuses, keeping an eye out for krakens or any other threats from below the waves.

Jormun's ship entered the strait and didn't slow down. At the back, Jormun's rather pissed off expression didn't so much as twitch.

Leon's unease grew, and it seemed to be shared, for not long after, as the fleet closed in on the mouth of the strait, a great horn blast resounded across the waves, and the ships all came to as shuddering a stop as they were capable of. They'd closed into about three miles of Jormun—not far, relatively speaking, but not nearly close enough for the Flame Lances to be effective.

"They're waiting for the right wing to seal off the other side..." Gaius said as he glanced back at the command tower of the flagship and translated the flag signals. "Looks like there's a school of krakens not too far away, too, and we need to keep an eye on them..."

Leon didn't respond, but he did note a sizable force of about five war galleys and fifteen other smaller ships break away from the fleet and start sailing off to the left, roughly southeast and back out to sea. Most of these ships were armed with huge ballistae designed for combatting just such large ocean creatures—heavily enchanted, these ballistae were capable of putting a massive, ten-foot-long harpoon through a kraken's tentacle even if it were submerged more than a hundred feet underwater.

But even then, krakens were fierce beasts, and the Legion possessing such weapons did not guarantee their victory.

Leon turned his attention back toward Jormun's ship. The sleek vessel was still cutting through the waves at a steady clip, neither slowing nor speeding up despite the Legion fleet's actions. Leon felt suspicious that there was some trap hidden within the strait, but he couldn't be sure what. He certainly couldn't see anything, and the Legion underwater scouts hadn't reported anything back aside from the krakens, either—the cliffs on the right were clear, and the jagged, rocky shore on the left was just as bereft of threats.

It was with gritted teeth that Leon was forced to watch Jormun's ship gain more and more distance. At that rate, the Legion right wing might not even make it.

Another series of horn blasts sounded from the command tower, and the lighter ships in front began to sail into the strait. Leon sighed, but he supposed that there was no other option. Caution was one thing, but letting fear paralyze them was another. The dreadnought and its escorts began sailing into the strait not long after, just as soon as enough room had been made. However, Leon noted again that Sigebert had given much of the rest of the fleet other orders—nearly the entire left wing and much of the center was circling around to the right, sailing after the right wing. Leon understood this move, for having that many ships in the strait was just inviting disaster.

Still, there were at least thirty war galleys, both dreadnoughts, and dozens of light ships sailing into the strait after Jormun.

As Leon turned his attention back to Jormun, he thought he saw a smile playing upon the man's lips, and he felt his stomach plummet into his feet. A moment later, Jormun's ship suddenly accelerated, and Jormun himself raised his hand, and a great wave rose just behind his ship, accelerating it even faster.

A series of short, but deafening horn blasts sounded, and the lighter ships picked up the pace, pursuing Jormun as quickly as they could, but the pirate's sudden burst of speed put them all behind him. He sailed out of the other end of the strait before the right wing was able to close in and block the other end.

"Shit..." Leon muttered.

From there, the fleet initiated a mad scramble to get through the strait and link back up with each other. The main force pushed through and fanned out to the right, while the wings fell back into place. Throughout this entire painfully lengthy process, Leon kept his eyes forward, locked on Jormun's ship, just as Jormun kept his eyes turned back, locked on Leon. After pushing through the strait, the pirate's ship slowed back down, as if mocking them by moving slower.

It took nearly half an hour for so many ships to get back into formation, and by then, the detachment that had gone after the krakens had largely been left behind. They'd be able to link back up later, but Leon couldn't help but frown knowing that without even getting within firing range of the Flame Lances, Jormun had already reduced the number of ships pursuing him—assuming he was responsible for the krakens, and Leon did make that assumption.

As much as he found himself hating the man, Leon couldn't help but feel some small measure of respect for him bloom.

Sigebert's fleet fell back into place about five miles behind Jormun's ship as it slowly made its way around the coast, now lesser by almost two dozen ships. However, it was still a mighty battlegroup, and it sailed ahead, undaunted. Leon could feel magic ripple through the Heartwood beneath his feet as the magic engines that kept the leviathan he stood upon moving go into overdrive. The dreadnought was burning through vast amounts of magic power to tease out just a little more speed in an attempt to catch up to Jormun, but the pirate ship kept just out of effective range, deliberately teasing them as they chased him around the island.

The Legion didn't have much choice but to pursue as fast as was possible, however Sigebert did have a number of small, fast ships break off for a flanking maneuver around the right flank again. Leon could see what he was angling for: hoping these smaller ships, even if they lacked much in the way of ranged power, might be enough to box in Jormun, assuming they were fast enough to sail around and get in front of the pirate.

Not too far ahead, only about twenty miles or so, just at the edge of Leon's range of perception with his magic senses, was what looked like the site of some massive past cataclysm. The coastline, already broken and rocky just by virtue of the island's natural landscape, appeared to have been utterly shattered into steep cliffs and deep ravines, creating a series of narrow straits that Jormun just so happened to be sailing toward. These narrows weren't too extensive, but they were more than enough to give the pirate cover from the Flame Lances and bring the Legion ships in close, into range of his strange Flame Lances, and who knew what else within those narrow channels.

'He knew we were coming,' Leon thought to himself. Maybe he hadn't as much time to prepare as he did on the other islands, but he couldn't have missed this fleet leaving the third island. Jormun had days to choose his battlefield, and he chose well.

The pirate's ship suddenly increased in speed once more, and it soon became clear that the detachment of smaller ships wasn't going to be able to cut him off in time to prevent him from entering the narrows. A series of horn blasts redirected them, and sent many other Legion ships scattering as they formed into new groups and spread out.

"Looks like we're going to split up into half a dozen groups," Gaius translated as the horn blasts and flag signals continued. "We're going to be locking down every side of this rock formation and prevent Jormun from leaving."

"Anything else?" Leon asked with some bitterness.

"Not yet," Gaius replied. "Looks like the Fleet Legate is ordering everyone to stand by once they get into position. Might be that he wants to use one group to clear the place while the rest of the battlegroup locks it down and prevents the pirate from escaping."

Leon scowled. It was a good plan, about as good as possible under these circumstances. Having hundreds of ships entering a series of broken and shattered waterways like these was just asking for a ton of accidents that would only slow them down. However, that still didn't sit well with him. He and Maia were the only two in the fleet with the range of magic senses great enough to keep an eye on the pirate, so nearly all of the ships were going to be searching blind.

"Naiad, stay here," Leon ordered. "Alix, get on Anzu. Gaius, Marcus, Alcander, you three will stay here as well. If you need to get in contact with me, say it to Naiad, she'll be able to send me the message."

As he spoke, in a flash of light, Leon donned his flight suit. Alix didn't hesitate to hop on Anzu, too, and the griffin perked up a bit. Even with everything going on, Leon was proud to see none of the old antipathy Anzu used to have for Alix.

"What are you doing?" Gaius asked with some alarm.

"I'm going to head up into the sky and keep an eye on Jormun," Leon explained as he stretched a bit. "I'm not going to attack, but I'm going to signal his position with flares. Just follow the flares, and you'll find Jormun."

"I guess that makes sense..." Gaius replied.

"You're not going to attack without us, right?" Alcander asked with a deep frown. "It wouldn't be fair to seize all the glory for yourself."

"I'm not one for glory, per se," Marcus added, "but I agree with Alcander in principle. Don't go attacking Jormun without support, Leon."

"Please, who do you think I am?" Leon replied with a cheeky smile, knowing full well that their concerns were largely justified.

"Someone who would do exactly what we're scared of," Marcus shot back with a cheeky smile of his own.

"No need to worry about that..." Leon reassured them as he turned his gaze back to the pirate ship in the distance.

[Leon,] Maia whispered into his mind. [I don't like being left behind.]

[No one does,] Leon responded. [However, I need you here. I was serious, I'm not going to attack them without support, just fly hundreds of feet above. I need you to stay here and relay any messages that Gaius and I may need to share. Will you do that for me?]

Maia scowled—the first real facial expression she'd shown all day—but she slowly nodded in agreement. She turned back to face the water and laid her hand on the deck's guard rail. Leon noted that the Heartwood seemed to be cracking under the pressure of her grip.

Leon sighed and turned back toward Gaius. "Let Sigebert know what's going on, yeah?"

Gaius shrugged. "Doesn't seem like I have much of a choice." His tone was fairly light-hearted, and he began to signal Leon's intentions to the command tower.

Leon made a bit of a show preparing himself for the flight, but he was really just waiting for Sigebert's answer. When Gaius informed him that Sigebert had agreed to the plan, however, Leon just smiled and took off, with Anzu and Alix not far behind him.

As they rose, Leon called out to Alix, "Your bow ready?"

"It always is!" she replied as she tapped the bow strapped to her back and the quiver tightly packed with arrows at her hip.

"Once we catch up to Jormun, put those arrows to good use!" Leon shouted. Alix nodded with a smile of anticipation, and they climbed higher and higher. He wasn't intending on getting too close to Jormun's ship without substantial Legion support, but even at a range of hundreds of feet, his and Alix's bows could do some damage and still be nimble and maneuverable enough to not be in any serious danger. At about six hundred feet, Leon judged them to be a safe enough distance that Jormun or his crew wouldn't be able to easily shoot them out of the sky and began flying out over the narrow passages that Jormun's ship was rapidly disappearing into.

As he went, he watched the rest of the Legion ships rapidly moving into position. However, as he scanned the narrows once more, he realized something: the cliffs were riddled with caves, and several of them were warded against magic senses, located along the shoreline, and big enough for ships to sail in and out...

"Change of plans!" Leon shouted as he slowed down to speak with Alix. "There are a few caves around here that I want you to collapse if you can! Don't get too close, just use explosive arrows!"

Leon proceeded to give Alix directions and a few more explosive arrows to use. He hoped they'd be enough—if he were operating a clandestine harbor in one of those caves, he knew one of the first things he'd do would be to get an earth mage to reinforce it to prevent just what he was sending Alix to do. But he had faith in his former squire and in the spells he'd given her. He turned his attention back to Jormun. Now that he didn't have to lead Alix and Anzu, he could use his invisibility ring again, so that's exactly what he did, swiftly fading from view as light bent around him.

It didn't take long before Leon found himself flying over Jormun's ship. He easily shadowed them as they made their way through the winding waterways, Jormun's water magic making sailing through the tight straits and corners child's play. He was impressed, too, at just how robust the pirate's ship was, for it demonstrated an enviable ability to turn on a coin despite its relatively considerable size.

Leon didn't waste a moment pulling a bright red flare spell from his soul realm and activating it. The flare rocketed upward, and Leon quickly displaced himself just in case any of Jormun's pirates decided to

shoot up at it. No one did, and Leon was free to enjoy the look of consternation on Jormun's face as he glanced up at the flare, and then watching the pirate's eyes dart everywhere looking for him.

A moment later, he was able to enjoy it even more when Alix successfully collapsed one of the four warded caves he'd noticed, and Jormun's visage grew even more terrible.

Like this, Leon followed Jormun through the straits, launching several flares so that the Legion always knew where he was. He had quite a stockpile of such spells, and he gleefully used them quite liberally. As he did this, he reveled in Alix collapsing two more of the caves.

Unfortunately, Jormun had turned in the direction of the last one, and rapidly made his way through the narrows toward it. Behind them, Leon could see that the Legion fleet had successfully blocked all of the exits from the narrows, and now a fairly sizable group of war galleys were pushing in, intent on flushing Jormun out and back into range of the dreadnoughts' Flame Lances.

However, Jormun arrived at the last cave before Alix was able to collapse it, and a moment later, a handful of ships came sailing out, each crewed with a couple hundred pirates, many of whom were higher tier. Judging from their power alone, these were not the usual Islander fare that Jormun had thrown at them so far, these were seasoned warriors.

Leon silently swore, and then sent word back to Maia to pass on to Gaius and Sigebert: Jormun wasn't alone anymore.

Chapter 578: Battle of the Fourth Island I

All in all, about a dozen ships joined Jormun out in the straits, all long and sleek, with huge iron rams on the front. They were fairly small ships compared to Legion war galleys, but they were packed with powerful mages at least a tier or two above the average Legion marine by Leon's estimation, and all equipped with more armor than Leon had grown used to seeing upon the Islanders—many were even clearly foreign by the kind of armor they chose to wear. With the combined complication of the relative narrowness of these waterways, Leon could easily see them swiftly closing with the Legion ships and boarding them.

'This is going to be a tough fight if they get in close...' Leon thought to himself as he glanced back at the group of Legion ships making their way through the straits toward him. He was still using flares to direct them to Jormun, but their aim was fairly clear, they wanted to push Jormun out of the straits and into the ship groups locking down the exits.

As Leon's eyes turned back down toward Jormun's ship, he noticed Jormun and the female fire mage staring off at something in the distance, quietly discussing something while the fire mage's aura started to rise in clear anticipation of violence. Leon glanced in the same direction as they and saw Alix and Anzu flying in their direction.

He sighed and dropped his invisibility. Immediately, he noticed Jormun's eyes turn up to him, but he paid the pirate little attention and started flying to intercept Alix and the albino griffin, cutting them off before they could come into the effective range of Jormun's fire mage. He waved to Anzu and led the griffin much higher in the sky, where they would be able to shoot down onto Jormun's ship with relative ease.

Alix wasted no time in doing just that as Anzu reached a height of about seven hundred feet. It was quite windy that high up and so close to open ocean, but Leon noted with pride that Alix's aim was true; her first arrow flew straight for Jormun's ship. It was just a regular arrow, but this was just a ranging shot, meant to gauge how Alix might need to adjust her aim, and to test the enemy's defenses.

Jormun's people had no way to tell that, though, and so as the arrow sped downward toward the deck of the ship, a bolt of fire hurled by the female fire mage rose to meet it and incinerated the arrow before it could come close to the ship.

"Keep shooting!" Leon shouted to Alix as he fired off one more flare. The Legion ships were drawing close. They were only one more turn away from making visual contact with Jormun.

With that flare fired, Leon began to conjure lightning bolts and hurling them, though not with a great amount of force. The accompanying thunder was more of what he was going for since he doubted that even his mightiest bolts would strike the pirate ships with Jormun and that fire mage on guard—he didn't even know where Jormun's other seventh-tier mage was, which made him more than a little nervous.

About a thousand feet in the distance, the first of the Legion war galleys rounded the corner and finally laid eyes upon Jormun's smaller fleet. Horns sounded, more war galleys appeared, and Jormun began to loudly shout orders for his fleet to hold fast.

Leon thought that a strange order, for the longer he waited, the more time he was giving the war galleys to swarm in and close the distance—their magical artillery, while not as powerful as the Flame Lances on the dreadnoughts, would still wreak havoc on Jormun's ships. But as the war galleys spilled out into this channel and spread out as much as they could, sailing five ships side-by-side, Jormun made his play.

Leon watched as Jormun strode to the front of his ship and raised his hands, and the water beneath his ship began to vibrate with greater and greater strength. Jormun's aura towered and grew in intensity as he pushed more and more power into this move. Leon and Alix both tried to stop it, but Alix's arrows were intercepted by the fire mage, and three sixth-tier mages among Jormun's crew leaped out to defend their captain and took the lightning bolts meant for him, their armor and own power helping them to largely shrug off the damage that Leon's bolts did to them. Jormun finished his preparations, and sent a tremendous tidal wave surging toward the Legion war galleys.

Leon saw a number of Legion water mages rush to the front of their galleys and work to halt this wave, but there was only so much they could do against a seventh-tier mage in his own element. The wave fell upon the front line of ships, knocking them around like they were toys for children, and sending them crashing into those other ships beside and behind them. Sailors and marines were thrown overboard by the dozen, and the Legion battlegroup was consumed by chaos.

Many of the galleys behind the frontline, however, were largely unaffected, with their water mages easily able to deal with the wave after it had expended most of its force on the frontline. After a few horn blasts from the ship that Leon assumed was in command, these galleys launched their payloads from the trebuchets and catapults on their main decks. Burning spheres and stones were hurled at Jormun's fleet, and though the female fire mage and Jormun himself used their power—with fireballs and great geysers of water rising from the strait to intercept these missiles—a little under half landed

among Jormun's small fleet. The stones exploded, showering Jormun's pirates in stony shrapnel, while the burning spheres detonated with great force, sending waves of fire to scour the pirate decks.

Two of Jormun's ships were immediately disabled, from what Leon could see from his vantage point, but Jormun's ship remained almost completely untouched as a shield of light erupted from the decks and kept all fire and stony shrapnel at bay—showing that the seventh-tier light mage was still on the ship somewhere, just not on the deck.

Leon scowled, but he took some comfort in seeing the pirates taking a greater beating than the Legion in their first exchange. Already, the Legion war galleys were righting themselves and slowly getting back into position, though Leon could also hear many of their magic engines screaming from use. One galley's engine seemed completely done for, as they had resorted to deploying their many oars from the second deck to steer themselves.

Leon continued to rain lightning down upon the pirates, killing a few whenever there was a chance. Alix had, in the chaos of the opening plays made by the opposing fleets, taken to firing down a few explosive arrows, which played even greater havoc on Jormun's ships than Leon's lightning bolts. Leon took only one break from harassing the pirates to send a quick update to Maia, who in turn told him that Sigebert was preparing to send in extra reinforcements.

Suddenly, as Leon was preparing another lightning bolt to hurl from the heavens down onto the deck of Jormun's most beaten-looking ship, Jormun's personal ship surged forward with a wave of magic power, and the two weapon emplacements on the front of his ship that resembled small Flame Lances began to light up with magic power.

'*Shit!*' Leon thought. The war galleys were still preparing their next salvo and couldn't immediately counter this change in tactics. The pirate ships were smaller and faster, and those that could were falling in behind their leader.

"Stay up here and keep shooting whenever you get the chance!" Leon shouted to Alix as he tossed her more explosive arrows and then began to drop from the sky.

"What are you going to do?!" Alix shouted back, the smile she wore from getting to show off her improved archery skills freezing on her face.

"I'm not sure, but I can't just watch from up here!" Leon shouted back, and he began to hurtle downward like a meteor. He couldn't attack Jormun's ship, that was too well-defended and would probably only result in him getting double-teamed by Jormun and that fire mage. They were out on the sea, so Jormun's hammer wouldn't be of much help, but that fire mage's sword with its golden fire would be a problem on top of their combined power.

No, Leon knew that he couldn't do that, but simply staying in the air wasn't doing enough. He targeted one of Jormun's other ships not too far down the line and plummeted towards it. It had taken a beating and lost a fair portion of its crew. More importantly, Leon hoped that if he managed to take it down quickly enough, it might block those ships behind it from following behind Jormun closely enough to take advantage of whatever he was doing.

Leon fell faster than Jormun's ship advanced, and practically before anyone could really react to his sudden change in tactics, Leon hit the deck of his target ship like a bolt of lightning from a furious god.

Lightning exploded out of his body on impact, bathing the deck in his silver-blue power. The innumerable arcs that erupted from his person were so hot that they covered the deck in black vein-patterned lightning burns, vaporized the soft flesh of many weaker pirates within terribly close range, and caused many pirates who were farther away to explode into wet giblets. In only a moment, the deck of the ship, made of the fairly pale red wood of the local jungles, was painted in great streaks of black and crimson, with the only survivors those whose armor possessed robust enchantments.

The force of Leon's landing did a number on the ship itself, too. Were it not relatively heavily reinforced with powerful enchantments, Leon suspected he might've even torn the ship in half. As it was, deep cracks spider-webbed out from his impact point, and the ship began to list to the right, cutting into the path of a ship just behind it and getting immediately caught on its vicious iron ram.

But as damaging as Leon's aggressive and unexpected strike was, it did nothing to stop Jormun's ship, and neither did it wipe out everyone on both of these ships. Many of the stronger mages survived, either thanks to their power or to their higher-quality armor, and they sprang into action to do battle with Leon, despite the obvious disparity in their power levels.

Barely even two seconds after he hit the deck, Leon had already drawn his blade and cut down a pair of pirates—one fifth-tier and the other fourth—who'd survived his impact with a single smooth motion, their chainmail armor proving no obstacle for Leon's Adamant blade after his previous lightning strike already tested their defenses. After taking another second to get his bearings and survey the damage he'd done, Leon sprang into action, not willing to just let the pirates come to him. As the pirates attacked him, so too did he attack them, and he was far more effective.

They charged, their swords and daggers sharp and deadly, but he was as air, dancing around and between them, slashing, stabbing, piercing, blasting with lightning, always moving, always dodging their weapons by such thin margins that an untrained eye might think he was struggling. However, with lightning flooding his body, Leon moved with the speed of that element. On this ship he'd attacked, none were even close to being fast enough to deal with him, or powerful enough to pose much of a direct threat. The only strength that the pirates had was in numbers, and Leon was quickly and efficiently destroying that advantage.

With judicious use of lightning and blade, Leon soon cleared the deck of the ship. He'd moved fast, spared no one, hesitated not at all, and so reduced the dozens of pirates on the deck to corpses. The ship that had gotten entangled with this one was still flush with more fighting men and women, however, so while Leon heard more pirates below deck scrambling to defend the ship, instead of running down there to deal with them personally, Leon sprinted to the rear of the ship. A few pirates from the other ship had leaped over to aid their doomed comrades aboard this ship, but with a few swings of his blade, Leon was once more alone on the deck, fresh corpses his only company. Killing intent poured from him like great cushions of air that preceded an avalanche in a frozen mountain range; the blood on the deck of the ship was starting to freeze, even in the heat of the sun.

More importantly, the pirates in the other ship, even their fifth-tier commanders, were frozen in fear and unable to stop Leon as he took some time to conjure a lightning bolt of truly terrifying power. Up against so many mages that were weaker than he was, Leon was able to put his own power on full display, and while he reveled in his expression of power and skill, he couldn't help but want all of this to be over.

Leon did his best to bring an end to this as quickly as he could; when he hurled his lightning bolt, he'd packed it with so much power that when it hit the other ship only the briefest of moments later, the ship was consumed in his power. Lightning arced and danced along its length, shattering the men and women aboard, scorching its deck black, and even starting a few fires here and there.

But Leon wasn't done. With the deck of the other ship cleared of any hostiles, he turned to a third ship that was sliding in alongside the first, this one also full of more pirates looking to avenge their fallen fellows. They balked at his killing intent, however, and he conjured his bow and a few explosive spell arrows from his soul realm. He drew and loosed them with terrific speed—the first exploded across the bow of the ship, not quite overwhelming its structural enchantments enough to do much damage to the ship itself, but more than a dozen pirates were caught in the fiery blast.

The second arrow landed in the center of the deck, killing several dozen more as it bathed the deck in white flame. The last hit a pirate near the rear of the ship, finally putting enough stress on the ship's enchantments to not just kill a dozen more pirates, but also to blast the rear of the ship into splinters. The third ship was thrown forward by the blast with enough force for its ram to strike the ship Leon stood upon, cracking the wood, and punching a small hole in its hull. Water flooded the inside of the ship and it began to go down.

None of the pirates on the other ships challenged him, so Leon took off back into the sky to survey the situation. He'd disabled or destroyed three ships in only a matter of a minute or two, and three more ships had been temporarily blocked by the wrecked ships that were now in their way. One of them, Leon noted, was covered in burns and holes, and it was immediately clear as to why when one of Alix's explosive arrows burst over its hull, killing several more pirates and punching a sizable hole in the ship that the force of the rowers below deck that were trying desperately to escape began to pull the ship apart at the seams.

Leon spared just enough time to glance up at his former squire, nod in approval, and then turned his attention to Jormun.

Once he did, any accomplishment he felt for his actions died in his heart; Jormun's ship had advanced far enough that it was upon the Legion's war galleys. Jormun stood upon the deck of his ship, his arms raised like those of a mad prophet as the water around his ship raged like the waves caused by the deadliest of hurricanes. The Legion ships closest to Jormun's ship were tossed around so much that their artillery was practically useless, while Jormun's ship was so close to them that the artillery of the other ships was no more useful—even if they could still afford to launch their projectiles at Jormun, Leon knew that Jormun's seventh-tier fire and light mages would likely be strong enough to save the ship from any meaningful damage.

A moment later, however, the small Flame Lances on the front of Jormun's ship began to belch flame. Great gouts of flame big enough to engulf the entirety of the pirate ships Leon had just destroyed or disabled were spat from the barrels of these fearsome weapons, bathing the two closest Legion war galleys in their light. On the decks of these ships, marines and sailors immediately died as the fire swept over them, while Leon saw a few flashes of light that indicated the fire was so hot that the defensive wards of these ships were almost immediately collapsing.

Leon barely had enough time to begin to fly in that direction before the screams of those dying men and women reached his ears, and the ships began to burn of their own accord.

With a pair of enormous water geysers, Jormun tossed those burning ships to the side, sending them crashing into the ships right next to them, and his ship sailed on through the hole in the Legion line, Jormun's Flame Lances continuing to spew fire the entire time. These strange Lances kept the Legion ships from closing with the pirate ship enough to ram it into submission, or at least to allow their complements of marines to begin boarding actions—worse, as Jormun forced his way through the Legion's second line with fire and water, Leon realized that the Legion ships were barely even able to delay Jormun by any appreciable amount.

Leon loudly swore and took off after Jormun. He conjured a few more lightning bolts, but they were thrown in vain. Jormun's light mage had, just a few moments before, come out onto the deck, and after noticing Leon, he projected a great shield of golden light behind Jormun's ship to protect it.

Every one of Leon's lightning bolts exploded across this shield and showered it in sparks and small arcs of lightning, each great enough to obliterate the smallest of Legion ships, cracking and severely damaging the shield. Under his short barrage, the light mage clearly struggled to keep the shield raised, but keep it raised he managed to do, even as he gritted his teeth and braced against the pressure Leon exerted upon the shield.

After several bolts, the female fire mage stepped up, laid a hand upon the light mage's shoulder, and pulled him back behind her. A moment later, the shield of golden light fell, and the fire mage launched a great gout of flame toward Leon, who was still rapidly approaching. Leon was in the midst of summoning another lightning bolt, and so couldn't react with his usual degree of alacrity, but he still managing to contort his body to only take a glancing blow.

However, with how thinly he was armored with his flight suit, a glancing blow from a seventh-tier mage was all he needed to take before he was harshly reminded just why he'd so rarely used his flight suit in combat before. The fire grazed his leather cuirass, upon which he'd inscribed his stabilizing air runes. The enchantment scheme immediately failed as the fire mage's magic power ripped holes in the leather, and Leon lost control of himself. He twisted and spun in the air before plummeting into the water below.

A few bolts of fire hit the water in pursuit, but they were quickly snuffed out by the deep and frigid waters of the channel.

The temperature didn't do much to Leon, but having been spun around and tossed into the sea like that threw off his spatial awareness. Combined with the primal shock and fear of being suddenly and unexpectedly submerged—and in waters that he *knew* had krakens in them, no less—Leon thrashed and writhed in the channel for a few long seconds before he understood what had just happened and where he was.

When he did, he forced himself to remain calm and project his magic senses again, quickly getting an idea of what was around him. When he saw that there weren't any sea monsters around of the sort that his panicked mind was fearfully conjuring in his head, he found it much easier to relax.

He took a quick moment to update Maia on the situation as it was, and how it looked like Jormun might be able to break through this force Sigebert sent. When she relayed that message, Leon got right back to it.

With a quick flash of light, his flight suit vanished into his soul realm. Without the stabilizers on his chest piece, the entire thing was practically useless, so there was little point in wearing it. Fortunately, while most of the enchantments on his black Magmic Steel armor had been destroyed by the shade of his father back at the Serpent's Temple, the ice fins on his boots still worked, so Leon donned those in another flash of light and, combined with his relatively rudimentary understanding of water magic, began to chase Jormun's ship.

It soon became apparent that there was no way in any hell that he was going to be able to catch up, so Leon changed course and made for the Legion ships. It took a little while, during which time he heard several muffled, but still loud booms from above the water's surface, explosions powerful enough that he felt them in his chest.

From what h

Chapter 579: Battle of the Fourth Island II

Leon and Alix, mounted upon Anzu, pursued Jormun as quickly as they could without abandoning all caution. The ships Sigebert had sent into the narrows had been heavily damaged and disabled by the pirate, though Jormun had lost all the ships he'd deployed. From what Alix told Leon, the caves she'd collapsed had also contained a few ships apiece, leading Leon to believe that Jormun had intended to lead the Legion ships into these narrows where he'd be able to spring ambushes and wreak havoc upon them with his short-range Flame Lances.

However, it seemed a bit too easy to Leon, making him think that maybe they'd managed to move quickly enough that this was an ad-hoc plan thrown together by Jormun when he realized he was being followed.

'This should be it...' Leon thought to himself. Jormun likely hadn't the time to make any more contingencies, but Leon wasn't going to bet on that, not after everything that had happened during the Legion's mission here in the Serpentine Isles.

Jormun, however, wasn't even close to being done. It seemed he was throwing caution to the wind and abandoning any plans he still had, as Leon could see him on the deck of his ship, using his water magic to help his ship practically fly through this web of fjords and straits. The narrows as a whole weren't that extensive, so it was only a matter of a few minutes before Jormun burst out and engaged the nearest group of Legion ships, which were still locking down the main entrances and exits of the straits.

Leon frowned when he realized precisely *where* Jormun was going: he was making for the weakest of the Legion battlegroups locking the entrances down, one that was far enough away from Sigebert's dreadnoughts that at his speed, he'd probably be able to blaze right through without having to worry about Legion Flame Lances.

'To the hells with that,' Leon thought as he fished a few more flare spells out of his soul realm. He fired them off, then updated Maia on Jormun's position. In the distance, he could hear the horns of Sigebert's flagship sounding off as the message was relayed from Maia to Gaius and then to Sigebert. He could see

the dreadnoughts start to move just as clearly as he could see Jormun quickly glare over his shoulder at him.

Leon relished that look, and he sent Jormun the smuggest, most shit-eating grin he could muster. Jormun seemed to darkly chuckle, then turned his attention back to his ship. The waves that were carrying the ship onward at great speed seemed to grow even more intense, and the pirate ship rocketed through the channels.

This increased speed came at the cost of taking a bit of damage as the ship scraped against various rocks that were in the waterways, but Jormun didn't seem to care, and Leon guessed any damage was probably going to be minimal anyway. With a water mage like Jormun onboard, that ship was going to have to take *extreme* damage before it would sink.

Leon, Alix, and Anzu pursued Jormun from far above, with Leon firing off a few flares as they went so that the Legion always knew where Jormun was. Leon could see a few ships breaking off from the other battlegroups to reinforce this location, including both dreadnoughts, but if this was going to turn into a race, then Jormun would win. Leon could only do everything possible to prevent Jormun from just breaking through the Legion blockage and making a run for it. He needed the pirate to be caught and then destroyed by the Legion's superior firepower.

Leon realized with some amount of exhilaration and anxiety that he was probably going to have board Jormun's ship if he wanted to be of any help in that endeavor. With three seventh-tier mages on that ship, it would be terribly dangerous, but the alternative was allowing Jormun to have his way with the fleets and probably escape.

This was a one-time thing. Leon knew that Jormun had probably just been having fun with the Legion this entire time—not just during this battle, but during their entire time in the Serpentine Isles. Now that he knew the Legion was on his ass, Leon didn't think that he was going to take any more chances. He'd finish his work in releasing this Serpent or whatever it was without any more delays.

They had to stop him here, or else they wouldn't be able to stop him in time to stop his plans.

Jormun turned the final corner and made visual contact with the first few Legion war galleys that were blocking his path. There was a wide semi-circle of a couple dozen war galleys blocking the exit, along with several dozen additional small ships filling in the gaps. Leon had little hope for the small ships with their measly crews of ten or twenty, but the war galleys had their artillery, and thank to Leon's warnings, these weapons were ready.

Jormun's ship came blazing down this last strait, and as soon as it came into range, a barrage of explosive spheres and stones were released by the war galleys.

Much like the previous attempts, however, these weapons failed to penetrate the golden barrier that was thrown up around Jormun's ship by his seventh-tier light mage. The barrier was cracked in a few places for just a couple seconds before the light mage allowed it to dissipate, but the ship hadn't even slowed down.

Leon urged Anzu on, now, and after firing off a few final flares to let everyone know that Jormun had made contact with the Legion, he brought the griffin into a quick dive.

“Start shooting!” Leon ordered Alix, and she immediately complied. Shooting arrows from the back of a flying griffin while sharing her space with him wasn’t easy, but she sure made it seem like it was as she fired off arrow after arrow at Jormun’s ship. Leon noted that she was mixing in regular arrows with the explosive arrows he’d given her, forcing the fire mage, who’d turned her attention to them as Anzu began to dive, to waste her magic burning each and every arrow before they fell upon the ship.

Leon, meanwhile, got a grip on Anzu’s saddle with one hand to keep himself steady, and in the other he conjured a lightning bolt. He hurled it and was unsurprised when the golden barrier slammed into place just in time to block the bolt. But he conjured another and hurled it, hoping that every scrap of power that the light mage was using on blocking him couldn’t then be used to defend the ship from the Legion artillery, and vice versa.

In response, the female fire mage screamed in frustration so loudly that Leon could hear her as if it were she riding Anzu with him and not Alix, and she began to throw fireballs as swiftly as she was able. Most of those fireballs were thrown in Leon’s direction, for the pirate ship was still fairly distant from the Legion war galleys, though growing closer every second.

They were far enough away, however, that Anzu merely had to flap his wings, and a burst of his wind magic pushed them out of the way, letting the fire bite nothing but air before it fizzled out a few hundred feet behind them.

Leon, keeping in mind his earlier mistake with his flight suit, kept Anzu at a relative distance from Jormun’s ship, for the time being. Risking himself and his flight suit was one thing—and it was a risk that hadn’t paid off—but he wasn’t going to risk either Alix or his griffin being shot out of the sky.

Jormun shouted something that was lost in the din of more exploding stones and other artillery strikes from the war galleys, but his meaning became clear as dozens more pirates came rushing out onto the deck, armed with bows, javelins, or their own magic. Jormun’s ship was rapidly closing on the Legion war galleys, so he clearly needed his people ready for more personal battle.

In a matter of about thirty seconds, his ship came tearing out of the mouth of the channel and right into the kill box of the war galleys. Artillery was fired from every ship that had such weapons in range. Jormun responded with great tidal waves that blocked some of these shots, while the rest were blocked by his light mage or one of the wind mages on the deck of his ship.

These waves Jormun conjured went on ahead of his ship, hitting the Legion ships like a tsunami. The war galleys were largely fine, but many of the smaller ships were immediately submerged, and did not come back to the surface. Leon was a little disturbed to notice that very few of the Legion sailors crewing those ships managed to surface, as well.

Jormun kept on going, his ship riding a huge wave as it careened for the center of the Legion line. Leon felt the power of the pirate’s Flame Lances preparing to open up, and he realized that it was now or never if he was going to make another risky play—if he didn’t, he felt like it was quite likely that Jormun was going to be able to escape.

Leon encouraged Anzu to fly higher and advance. He needed to be over and a little bit ahead of Jormun’s ship for his plan. Alix paused as she fired her arrows, but a reassuring smile from Leon had her

back to picking her targets and shooting, even though those arrows had yet make it past the slowly-cracking light shield.

Below, the war galleys didn't just sit and watch Jormun's ship advance upon them; their magic engines roared and the water behind them churned with the power of the ships' enchantments as they quickly pivoted to face their pirate foe and prepared themselves to try and ram his ship as it made to pass.

Jormun didn't slow down. He let loose with another tremendous wave of water to try and clear the way for him to break through the Legion lines, but the war galleys were too massive for such a wide-ranging attack to work, even for a mage such as him.

Leon pulled Anzu out of his climb above and ahead of Jormun's ship—for as fast as Jormun's ship was, Anzu in the air was still quite a bit faster—and took one last moment to ask himself if he was sure he wanted to do this. It was at least six or seven hundred feet straight down to the deck of Jormun's ship, and even with his power, Leon wasn't sure if that was a fall he could take without injury. Breaking a leg, or even just a toe could mean death with three other seventh-tier mages on that ship.

However, Leon could still feel the Flame Lances on the pirate's ship humming with power...

Leon ordered Alix to keep up the pressure, and then he jumped off Anzu's back. He heard the surprised shrieks of his former squire and his young griffin, and then the wind in his ears blocked out just about everything else.

He fell fast, but with his lightning magic surging through his veins, the five or six seconds it took for him to fall seemed almost an eternity. He could see the looks of surprise and alarm in the faces of Jormun and the other two seventh-tier mages, he could see the looks of momentary terror in the eyes of the other pirates on the deck as he fell like upon them like a bolt from a furious sky god.

Up to this point, the light barrier erected by the light mage hadn't completely encircled the ship. He'd mostly confined it to the areas that actually needed defending—in front of the ship to block Legion artillery, behind to block Leon and Alix's ranged strikes—but now, Leon saw him roar in exertion as he caused the shield to grow and cover the ship completely, forming a perfect half-sphere that protected the ship. The Legion continued to hit it with artillery, while Alix and Anzu were already retreating a ways, meaning that the light mage now had to defend from ahead, behind, and above.

He was being spread thin, and as Leon contorted in the air, he planned to exploit the hells out of that. Leon wound himself up in the air, drawing his sword arm back and preparing for what could quite possibly be the last strike he ever made in his life, so he called upon as much power as he could to give that strike its proper weight.

Leon hit the shield like a falling star. Just before he made contact, he stabbed forward with his blade, trusting in his Adamant weapon to cut right through. It positively glowed with silver-blue lightning, and when it hit the shield, Leon momentarily blinded even himself with how much lightning erupted from him. He became like a second sun for a few seconds, but more importantly, under the pressure of the artillery and his prodigious strike, the barrier of light collapsed like a cheap shack in a hurricane.

Leon barely even felt the impact, traveling through the barrier so quickly that he didn't even slow down, and when he crashed onto the deck of Jormun's ship, all the built-up power that hadn't been expended

on the barrier detonated. The wood beneath Leon's feet fractured and burned, while more than a dozen nearby pirates were ripped to shreds by arcs of lightning emanating from his body.

Of course, Jormun's ship was designed for the treacherous waves of the Endless Ocean, and so Leon wasn't surprised when his attack did little more than burn and break the deck. Instead, he focused completely on the light mage, who'd screamed in pain and exhaustion as his barrier finally collapsed, then himself collapsing a moment later.

There were half a dozen pirates and about forty feet between Leon and the light mage, but with his power peaking, Leon cut through the pirates like they weren't even there. Blood was spilled, and Leon's lightning filled the air with its unmistakable scent, and he reached the collapsed light mage with little trouble. Leon loomed over him like a war god over a conquered enemy, lightning dancing across his body in such quantities that he'd practically vanished within its light.

Leon raised his blade, and without a single moment of hesitation, brought it crashing down...

... only for it to be deflected almost at the last moment by the female fire mage's blade, once more covered in golden fire.

The female fire mage didn't take a single second to gloat, she just pressed Leon with her blazing blade.

Leon gave ground; he knew from their last bout that she probably had him beat in terms of raw power—especially so now that he didn't have his armor to compensate for that power difference—so he'd have to get a little more crafty if he didn't want her to stop him here and now. However, while he let her take up the lion's share of his attention, his true goal was to knock the light mage out of the fight in the next minute or two, before Jormun's ship came into contact with the Legion war galleys.

Feinting back, Leon baited the fire mage away from her comrade. Her expression was wrathful and her killing intent towered, matching his in breadth and intensity; she followed his lead without too much trouble.

She slashed; he dodged. She stabbed; he deflected. She advanced; he pulled back. Every ounce of his skill in battle was tested, and then some, but Leon drew her further and further away from the light mage, who was slowly struggling back to his feet, exhaustion clear on his face. A moment later, an explosion rocked Jormun's ship as a Legion explosive boulder burst along its flank.

Leon couldn't see how much damage the ship took, but he took full advantage of the situation.

As the ship shook, the fire mage's balance shifted ever so slightly. She was strong and experienced, so this was normally nothing more than a small annoyance, but it was all Leon needed.

Suddenly, he completely switched tactics; he ducked under a wave of fire that she'd launched from her blade, then blasted with a significant portion of the lightning he'd been building up in his sword the entire fight. She was taken off-guard, especially with the rocking of the ship, and Leon sprang forward.

She still had the poise to bring her blade up to defend herself and to angle her body to maximize the effect of her armor, but she wasn't Leon's target; he blasted right past her, much to her surprise, and appeared before the light mage once more.

The light mage's eyes widened in shock and terror, but he couldn't do anything with all of his power already committed to the light barrier that he was trying to rebuild.

Leon made it quick. His blade slipped past the light mage's arm, striking into a gap in his armor at the arm pit, slipped between his ribs, and skewered his heart, killing him instantly.

What little of the light barrier that he'd managed to create in these past few seconds instantly collapsed just as another salvo of Legion artillery came raining down upon the ship. Leon heard Jormun roar as he conjured a huge wave to shield his ship, but he was only partially successful. Huge boulders exploded in the air, showering the deck with shrapnel, while fiery explosions covered large sections of the ship, killing Jormun's crew in droves.

Behind him, cutting through all of the cries of pain and the dying, Leon heard the fire mage roar in rage and loss. She launched herself at him with so much fiery force that she bent and cracked the deck where she'd stood.

But while fire mages were known for explosive speed, they were still not in the same league as lightning mages at the peaks of their power; Leon leaped right over her, avoiding the massive conflagration she brought with her. A few of her fellow pirates weren't quite so lucky, but she didn't seem to care, even as her fires roasted them alive.

She turned and swung her blade at him, and her sword spewed golden fire. Leon already had some experience with the terrifying power of this fire, and so he fell back once more, escaping only by the skin of his teeth and by a few quick swipes of his blade to cut through some of the fire with blasts of lightning.

Then, Leon charged at her. The light mage was dead, and the Legion could deal with this ship, now. There was no more reason to play around with positioning. Besides, he was unarmored, and she wasn't; all it would take would be one mistake, and he'd be brought to a violent end.

He lunged forward, his blade crackling and sparkling with silver-blue light as he aimed to finish this fight as quickly as possible, as she brought her blade back up to defend herself.

However, before Leon could even make contact with her, a great wall of water sprouted between them, pushing them away from each other.

"Leon fucking Raime..." Jormun spat as he slowly walked over, his demeanor eerily calm amongst the explosions and the screaming and the death. "I have to say... You've really caught me flat-footed here, haven't you?"

Chapter 580: Undoing the Final Seal

Jormun walked over to Leon and the fire mage, now separated by a wall of water that no one else could've conjured.

"You've really caught me flat-footed here, haven't you?" he said with a hateful smile on his face, an expression that Leon found quite unsettling, having until this day never seen the man without anything other than the smug smile of someone who was in complete control over the situation he found himself in.

“Looks like I rattled you a bit...” Leon said with a wry grin.

For a moment, he was confused as to why Jormun was ignoring the battle around them in favor of coming to him, but a quick pulse of magic senses at the ship told him exactly why: Jormun had conjured a massive wave of water to lift the ship up and above the war galleys. It was a startling display of power, especially so since Jormun hardly seemed fazed by it, even having the spare power to separate Leon and the fire mage and speak like nothing at all was happening. Leon was no expert in such things, having met so few seventh-tier mages, but what Jormun was doing didn't seem to be possible with only seventh-tier power.

What was even stranger was the fact that, despite everything going on, and in contrast to all of his fellow pirates, Jormun wore no armor, merely a long-sleeved grey tunic and a pair of black trousers.

“Just a little bit,” Jormun replied, his statement punctuated by the sounds of more Legion artillery smashing against the hull of the ship. “My ship is strong and sturdy, this is nothing. I will escape this measly trap and continue with my work.”

“Or you'll die here...” Leon said as he slightly adjusted his stance, lowering his center of gravity in preparation for a blazing-quick charge.

“No, I don't think I will,” Jormun said as he pulled back his left sleeve, revealing a dreadful thing: a black bracelet, made of what looked to Leon like onyx or some other shiny black material, and set with half a dozen sparkling black crystals, two of which were lit up like stars to both his eyes and his magic senses, showing a truly tremendous amount of power contained within.

Leon charged. Whatever Jormun was doing, Leon didn't want him to continue. He didn't commit wholly to the strike, allowing room for him to fall back if Jormun did anything, but a moment later, another wall of water erupted from the deck and hurled Leon back like he was a sack of potatoes.

Leon was back on his feet almost instantly—just in time for the two crystals on Jormun's bracelet to flash with strange black light, and a second later, for the ocean around the Legion ships to begin to vibrate.

“What did you do?!” Leon shouted, hoping his voice carried through the water wall.

“Broken your blockade!” Jormun shouted back.

A moment later, a massive tentacle burst from the ocean, thicker than Leon's body was long, covered in dark green scales and thousands of tiny suckers. It wrapped around a war galley that was coming perilously close to Jormun's ship, and with a tremendous flex, snapped the ship in half.

The war galley was, rather obviously, built for battle, and so had extremely robust defensive wards. Leon knew them to be even harder than the temporary forts that the Legion would raise when they were on the march, though perhaps not quite as sturdy as a more permanent fortress.

Still, none of those wards made a lick of difference as the galley was squeezed like an overripe banana, crushed, bent, and dragged down into the deep.

It took no more than a couple of seconds, and an entire Legion war galley was gone. Leon could do nothing more than stare in sudden primordial terror as he suddenly realized his position. He could still

remember the chilling gaze of the kraken he'd made eye contact with at the second island, and Leon's killing intent was immediately halved as horror filled his mind.

A moment later, another tentacle burst out of the ocean, and another Legion war galley was dragged down, sailors and marines and all.

The rest of the Legion ships then reacted, with the smaller ships that survived Jormun's initial waves scattering and those Legion ships armed with ballistae turned their weapons and harpoons downward to face the threat beneath the waves.

The war galleys closest to Jormun's ship, however, stayed their course, riding up the wave he'd conjured to keep his ship away from them, their rams closing with Jormun's hull and about to hit—

Jormun's Flame Lances roared to life, spewing nightmarish amounts of flame at the nearest ship, bathing it and its crew in power enough to almost immediately disable it. The galley's wards collapsed as the bodies of the crew on the main deck practically shattered from the heat, and its speed plummeted as the magic engines shut down.

Jormun's ship sailed right through the Legion lines, spewing fire and covered by the krakens. The Legion couldn't stop him.

Leon could only partially watch, for he quickly turned his attention back to Jormun. The pirate hadn't used Leon's moment of weakness against him, merely standing there on the other side of the watery curtain, his smile slowly turning into one of triumph.

"I have a god on my side, Leon!" Jormun shouted, punctuating his statement with a cackling laugh. "You never had a chance! Call this a victory if you like, but you can't stop me! Not when I am a conduit for its power!"

Leon swung his blade, sending a bolt of lightning careening into the water wall. Leon cut right through, flash-boiling away enough that, if he timed a jump exactly right, he might be able to get through and attack Jormun without trying to jump over. But that was a risky move... Leon didn't know what to do. He could stay and fight and try to end things here, but without Legion support, Leon wasn't sure how much more he could do. The light mage was dead, and he'd managed to fend off the female fire mage for a time, but Leon could feel the strain of the day's battle settling in. He couldn't go on like this for much longer.

But there wasn't anywhere else he could really go right now; he was on board an enemy ship, and krakens were in the water. He certainly wasn't swimming away.

There were a few Legion ships nearby, though...

Suddenly an explosion rocked the back of the ship, and Leon turned his attention in that direction. About three or four hundred feet behind and above the ship flew Anzu and Alix, still hot on the ship's tail. Alix had just hit the ship with an explosive arrow and was already drawing another back in her bow.

Leon scowled deeply; Jormun was right here, right in front of him! But the titanic aura the man exuded spoke volumes about how much power he could still command, even while maintaining the colossal wave that propelled the ship onwards at great speed.

Still, appearances could be deceiving, and as Alix's second arrow sprayed fire all over the rear of Jormun's ship, Leon raised his blade and began to channel his magic through it, letting the Adamant of the blade take the power and strengthen it, amplifying it, and releasing it.

A stream of silver-blue lightning erupted from Leon's blade and sliced clean through Jormun's water wall. However, as Leon swung his blade, Jormun raised his arm and snapped his fingers, and a serpent made of water that eerily resembled one of Maia's water dragons erupted from the ocean and interposed itself between Leon and Jormun, letting his lightning strike its head, flow through its body, and dissipate out into the ocean through the serpent's tail.

Leon pushed and pushed, stretching his power to its limits, but it was futile. A few seconds later, having done nothing to destroy that serpent, Leon stopped and hurled himself back, Jormun's laughter ringing in his ears even as the female fire mage stared death at him, still behind her water wall.

"I'm not going to kill you, Leon!" Jormun shouted. "I'll see you further on!"

Leon gritted his teeth, but he could feel his limbs slowly getting heavier. He was running low on magic power, and he needed to find a way out of here as soon as possible. In the distance, he could see Sigebert's flagship and several other large Legion ships moving rapidly in their direction, but they weren't going to beat Jormun's ship anytime soon. Leon could do only one thing, and he did it without any more hesitation, leaping with as much power as he could spare at the moment.

His blade vanished back into his soul realm as he extended his arm, placing himself completely at the mercy of his griffin and former squire a few hundred feet behind Jormun's ship. Even with all of his power, he couldn't jump quite so far, and if Anzu wasn't able to close that gap, then... he supposed he'd have to *very* quickly start swimming toward the nearest Legion ship.

Fortunately, Anzu squawked in panic, and with a mighty beat of his wings that practically sent a shockwave through the air behind him as he invoked his air magic, he closed with Leon. Alix then reached out for him as he was about to sail past, and their hands made contact.

For a brief moment, with all the sea spray and the sweat of the battles, Leon thought he was going to slide right through her grasp, but she squeezed his hand until he started to lose feeling in his fingers and pulled with a tremendous roar of exertion. With one hand, she caught Leon and hauled him onto Anzu's back.

"You reckless bastard!" Alix shouted, to Leon's mild amusement. "Are you ever going to stop doing shit like that?!"

Leon could only shrug before turning his attention back to the battle at hand.

Jormun was still standing upon the deck of his ship, grinning like a madman at Leon as his ship rocketed away, buoyed as it was by the gigantic wave that Jormun had summoned. Behind them lay the Legion ships, many of them still reeling from Jormun's breakthrough and the appearance of the terrifyingly-strong krakens. Most of the war galleys were ponderously turning around to try and give chase, but Leon knew that it was futile. They weren't even close to being quick enough to catch the ship of a seventh-tier water mage on the open ocean.

It hurt to admit, but Leon knew that the battle was over. Jormun was effectively home-free, and not even the might of the Legion dreadnoughts was going to stop that.

It was a tactical victory, and one reinforced when Leon saw one of Jormun's krakens already being hauled out of the water, its body acting as a pincushion for dozens of gigantic harpoons. They'd killed many of Jormun's pirates, and lost a comparatively small number of marines, sailors, and ships in the process. Leon had even killed Jormun's seventh-tier light mage.

However, they'd failed to achieve their aim: Jormun had managed to escape the battle, and now, he knew they were onto him. Leon couldn't imagine he was going to be screwing around with them anymore.

But, for all that, Leon took some consolation in knowing that his tracking arrow was still embedded in the hull of the pirate's ship. For how much longer that could go on, he couldn't say—at some point, Jormun would have to find it and do something about it—but for now, Jormun couldn't get far.

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Leon and Alix landed upon the deck of Sigebert's flagship and were immediately greeted by the frustrated faces of the comrades they'd left behind. Maia was, perhaps, the most subdued of them all, but Leon could feel her displeasure at having been left behind. Given how active the female fire mage had been, though, he was glad he didn't put her at risk by bringing her along.

Leon and Gaius then went to Sigebert so that Leon could give the Fleet Legate an update, while Alix and Anzu rested with the others back on the deck. By the end of the report, Sigebert had come to the uncomfortable conclusion that they couldn't immediately pursue Jormun, not with the casualties they'd taken. They'd need several long hours before the fleet could regroup and tend to their wounded, as well as investigate the caves that Alix had caused to collapse—Alix had already told Leon that there were several pirate ships in each of the caves, so they were probably already hard at work trying to dig themselves free of the cave-ins that she'd subjected them to.

However, Sigebert agreed with Leon that they had to pursue Jormun as soon as was feasible. They weren't sticking around the fourth island for long. Dealing with its inhabitants was Basina and Theuderic's job. Sigebert would send them a report of what happened, but then it was back to the pursuit.

When he left the command tower, Leon found himself strangely grinning. Sure, it hadn't been the win he'd wanted, but the next time would be different, and they'd at least made some progress this time. Jormun had eaten more losses today than he had in any of their other engagements.

'Yes...' Leon thought to himself as he stared Jormun's ship miles in the distance, still riding that wave that was putting ever more distance between them, *'I'll get you next time...'*

—

"Move quickly!" Jormun shouted as his crew streamed off his ship and onto the desolate spit of rock to the southeast of the final island in the Serpentine island chain. They weren't going to any of the Islander settlements on this island, their business was not with the humans of the island. Instead, their goal was

on this barren mountain rising out of the sea—or perhaps ‘rock’ might’ve been a better word for it, for to call it a mountain would be generous to the point of charity.

But it was here, at a small flat platform at the rock’s base that Jormun knew he had to perform the final ritual. Everything had already been prepared, there was just one more step, and then he could finally return to the place of his dreams for the last time, to the place where he’d first heard the Serpent whisper into his mind, the place where he began this journey that would culminate in his rise to divinity.

Jormun quashed those thoughts. This wasn’t the time to be distracted by yearning and nostalgia, not when he was so close. Not when everything had nearly been derailed by the Bull Kingdom acting with uncharacteristic decisiveness.

Pulling him out of his quiet reverie, Friga came walking down the gangplank to stand next to him, her wild bright red hair matted and damp from the spray of the ocean, her usual exuberance equally dampened.

“... Andoral’s dead,” she whispered in pain. “Rolf’s not looking much better. That Leon Raime did a real number on a lot of us...”

As she spoke Leon’s name, her tone turned bitter and resentful, and her aura was laced with a considerable amount of killing intent.

Jormun did his best to look apologetic and sorrowful, and he laid his hand upon her shoulder, but his insincerity must have been a little too obvious, for Friga brushed his hand away and growled, “Andoral’s dead! And you don’t even look like you care!”

“Andoral was my friend!” Jormun growled back as he pushed Friga away from the end of the gangplank and closer to the edge of the ocean, where they could talk with a little more privacy. Jormun could feel many eyes upon them, and many an ear, as well. “I care *plenty*, don’t you *ever* question that!”

“It might do you well to show it, then!” Friga shot back. “We just got torn apart out there! How many ships did we lose? Twenty? More? How many krakens do you have left? And then Andoral... Rolf...”

“We’ve taken losses,” Jormun admitted, though his patience was being tested, “but our holy mission *must* continue. Those who gave their lives did so in support of this quest. The Serpent will be released, and we will be rewarded as we deserve! It hurts to know that we’ve lost those we care about, but I’m focusing on this mission to honor their sacrifice, and to ensure that it wasn’t in vain! The Bull is after us, now, with the color red filling its eyes. Our losses were severe, but hardly crippling, so we must move with haste, or all will be lost.”

Jormun wanted nothing to do with any of this. If he could slaughter the rest of his crew and just be done with them, he thought that he would in a heartbeat with how patience was being tested. It would be so much easier than having to deal with their meaningless opinions when there was still work to be done.

But, alas, they still had their uses, and he couldn’t just get rid of them yet. And that meant he still had to play the part expected of him.

Jormun took a deep breath, and then softened his tone, though he spoke with a tone so sincere that he was certain he could even fool a god.

“This was a bad day, Friga. No doubt about that.”

Jormun knew that wasn't true, everything that had been lost was insignificant to him. Pieces that had their uses and had been expended well. However, their loss did mean that the game was coming to an end...

“We need to buckle down and finish this. Vengeance will come after, once the Serpent has been released and we've been rewarded for our service. They'll chase us, that'll be our time.”

Friga sighed, and for the first time since he'd met her all those years ago, practically buried in the hold of a trade ship she'd stowed away on as it left Kraterok, she looked defeated.

“I'm with you,” she whispered. “Others might not be. Promises are one thing. Nearly all of the crew are true believers, and they won't leave for any reason. Others bought your promises of the Serpent when you had all five islands in your grasp, a fleet, three krakens, and three seventh-tier mages. You've lost so much of the power you once had... many of those who haven't sailed with you for decades will start deserting come sundown.”

“Kill the first ones that try to desert, that'll keep the rest in line,” Jormun ruthlessly ordered. He had other orders for her, but as he turned his eyes to the small ship rapidly approaching the island, the words died in his throat as a look of glee momentarily crossed his face. He suppressed that look as quickly as he could—he understood that such unbridled happiness wouldn't be received well after the beating that his followers had just taken, even if that beating was, in the end, meaningless.

But aboard that ship was the key to the last true hurdle between him and the power that he'd longed for so badly that he'd spilled oceans of blood to acquire it. The power that he'd been denied for no other reason than the weakness of his Ancestors. Once this key was turned, there'd be no stopping him, no matter how fervently the Bull followed him.

Aboard that ship—a small vessel, barely big enough to have a crew of half a dozen—was a man with golden hair, bound and gagged, his eyes filled with hate, but his resistance utterly crushed by the tortures that Jormun had inflicted upon him over the last couple of months.

The Prince that Jormun had stolen from the Bull, and behind him, the rune-inscribed planks he'd be tied to in only a few minutes, and a box filled with the knives that Jormun would need to finish his work. He just had to lift this final seal, and then head south, through the shattered remnants of the Serpent's Tail, those last three islands in the chain that had been annihilated by the Penitent Paladin all those decades ago.

Leon would follow him, as would the Bull. Leon would follow him right to the doorstep of the Serpent, all of Jormun's obligations would be met, and his power, so long denied him, would finally be his.