

Storm King 591

Chapter 591: The Bull and the Serpent

Maia silently roared in frustration as this gargantuan horned serpent shrugged off everything she could throw at it. Every water dragon was torn apart by the serpent's own water magic, one even having been completely stolen from her as it was invaded by the serpent's magic power, then frozen in place in an insulting testament to her loss.

After less than a minute, it had become clear enough to Maia that even with the assistance of the fire demon, battling this creature on the ground was not going to work. So, she quit the field and retreated to Anzu, who carried her into the air. From the sky, she had rained her magic down upon the massive serpent as it slowly slid its colossal body out of the ground.

The demon seemed to come to the same conclusion as she did, for only a few seconds after she'd taken back to the skies with Anzu, yellow fire began to burn along its calves and shoulders, the latter of which almost appearing like stubby, vestigial wings. However, that fire seemed to carry a great deal of force, as the demon rose into the air with seeming ease and an obviously fine degree of control. It even had more than enough control to launch great lances of flame out of its arms at the serpent, scoring its flesh but inflicting barely any discernable damage.

Whatever this thing was, wherever it had come from, it was terribly powerful, and its body was extraordinarily tough. Its hide was thick and its body was strong, more than enough that it could concentrate on slithering its gargantuan form out of the ground even as Maia and the fire demon hit it from all sides, neither holding anything back as they launched the greatest of their magics at the monster.

Water dragons conjured from the lake, and flocks of bat-like wyverns formed of rainwater circled around Maia, diving in at the serpent whenever she saw an opening. The demon, meanwhile, took a more active approach, darting in and hitting the serpent's head with hellish dark-red flame with abandon, only dodging out of the way when the serpent retaliated with great blades of water assembled from the rain that continued to pour.

It became clear enough to Maia from the sheer fact that neither her power, nor that of the demon, seemed to be harming the serpent that it was time to go. Finding Leon was still the most important task in her mind, but that wasn't going to happen with this colossal serpent set loose upon the islands. With little fanfare, she stroked Anzu's feathers and the griffin unashamedly started to fly away from the battle.

Neither of them gave the demon much thought. They were unsure of its allegiances, and at the moment, if it was hostile to the serpent, then all the better. That would give them more time to prepare some kind of answer for that monster.

They didn't get far before the lake that filled the crater began to roil and churn, and a terrifying spike of magic power had Maia staring over her shoulder in fear. The serpent had largely ignored the demon's attempts to halt it, and after pulling its entire massive form out of the hole it had crawled through, it had slipped down into the lake. The demon now stood upon the shore of the island, impotently hurling fireballs at the serpent as it vanished beneath the waves.

However, the lake wasn't growing more energetic simply because the serpent had gone for a swim, but rather because it was *doing* something down there, but what that was, Maia couldn't be sure. All she could tell was that whatever it was doing, it was using more power than she'd ever seen one single being use at any one point. She wasn't even sure if her mother's power could compare to what this serpent was wielding.

At first, all of the power that the serpent was pouring into the lake just made it choppy and agitated, but as the waves grew larger and more violent, all of the water in the lake began to move in a counterclockwise direction around the central island. Only a few seconds after the lake started to spin, the rain and the clouds above started to do likewise, creating something of a watery vortex around the crater that Maia and Anzu only just managed to fly beyond before the wind speeds trapped them within.

Within that vortex, the storm raged on even fiercer, and given how wrathful it was outside of the crater, that was quite remarkable. Maia, unsure of what was happening, stopped messing around and immediately urged Anzu on toward Sigebert's flagship.

Behind her, even with the howling wind drowning out nearly all other sound, she heard a titanic crack. She didn't spare even a single second to look back and see what had just happened.

The wind picked up as Anzu carried her away from the crate, rushing back toward the crater almost as if some great eldritch thing were inhaling, filling their lungs with all the world's air. The rain outside the crater gradually stopped over the course of several minutes, but at the same time, the great vortex that the serpent had called forth expanded out to the crater walls. The black storm clouds descended from the sky, shrouding the crater from view. The clouds about the shattered island then darkened even further, plunging the entire archipelago into near-night conditions, with the only lights around being the lights of Legion ships, the burning pirate ships, and the occasional flash of dark red light as the demon continued to try to battle the great serpent within the crater, to what Maia could see with her magic senses as quite limited effect.

When Anzu landed upon the deck of Sigebert's flagship several minutes later, Maia found it in quite a state—along with the entire Legion fleet. The mighty fleet had been reduced to a little more than half of its full strength, but that was still quite a considerable number of ships, most of which had either come into the channel directly encircling the crater or were spread across several other key locations around the archipelago, locking it down against more mundane threats. And all of these ships were in relative chaos with all that was now happening. They seemed caught between retreating further from the crater, the source of all this strangeness, or stalwartly soldiering on until their mission had been concluded.

The sailors on the flagship's deck embodied this cautious and quietly terrified indecisiveness as they went about their duties on the still-slick deck, some manning the Flame Lances and training them vaguely in the direction of the crater, while others had set about preparing the ship to flee.

"Naiad!" Gaius called out as Maia slid off the back of Anzu and rejoined the rest of Leon's retinue. "Did you find Leon?!" the young knight asked in a slight panic. Beside him was a fifth-tier mage dressed in Legion colors—one of the higher-ranked members of the fleet, Maia presumed, though she'd hardly paid enough attention to such small fry to recognize her at a glance.

[No,] Maia succinctly replied before quickly explaining everything that had happened in as few words as possible.

Gaius almost physically reeled from her story of the demon, angel, and serpent. The entire fleet knew of the former two, or course, since they'd fought in the air and had been none too subtle, but it was another thing entirely to hear first-hand of their power. Her relaying of the serpent was of more concern, though, as the Legion knight ran off to report to Sigebert as soon as Maia was finished explaining what had happened.

"Shit..." Marcus exclaimed. He and the others had been listening in, and Maia had included them in her short story. Marcus glanced at the vortex of swirling black clouds that had engulfed the crater, barely visible in the storm as it was only by the lights of the Legion ships encircling it.

"You can say that again..." Alcander added. "I feel useless. How are we supposed to fight against something like this?!"

"We might have to get below deck and help out wherever we can," Alix said. "I still have some of Leon's explosive arrows, but if even Naiad couldn't scratch that thing, then I have no idea what I can do..."

As she spoke, a great wave of magic power washed over the entire island, sending the water beneath them into turmoil. At the same time, a great dark red pillar of demonfire could just barely be seen within the vortex by the higher-tiered mages, but it was quickly snuffed out as another, slightly weaker wave of magic power erupted from the crater.

A moment later, the horns of the flagship began to sound, and Gaius translated their meaning, "We're retreating. Whatever's going on is not something we can take right now. We're not ready for it..."

Maia wanted to protest. Leon was still within that crater somewhere... But after seeing the power of the demon and the serpent, she knew that this was the correct course of action. She could only clench her jaw and hope that Leon was still alive somewhere in there. Their connection was disrupted, so she couldn't sense him at all, but there was a tiny place deep in her heart that told her that he was still alive. She could only place her trust in that tiniest of voices and fall back with the Legion.

But if she saw even a hint of Leon anywhere, she was going to abandon this pathetic human fleet and go to him, no matter the obstacles in her way. She wasn't with him when he vanished, and she couldn't help but think if she had been, then he wouldn't have disappeared.

Slowly, the Legion ships began the arduous and lengthy process of escaping from the channel through the jagged waterways available to them, but after a couple minutes, a tremendous blast of magic power rocked the seas, sending the already turbulent waterways into absolute anarchy—many of the smaller Legion ships began capsizing, dumping their crews into the water. The larger Legion ships largely fared much better, but some had taken serious damage in the fighting, and with the water tossing them around into the rocks, they began to take on water and sink. Legion water mages did their best, but the rough waves consumed four war galleys.

Only a few seconds later, the walls of the crater, just barely visible to the naked eye through the whirling vortex of black storm clouds, began to shake as if it were being struck. The marines that had already landed were in a hurry to evacuate, but they were numerous, and their transports were not immune to the raging seas. One transport was thrown by the waves onto the rocks, while another had a hole

punched into its hull as it was tossed about by the rocky shore. The marines were unable to evacuate before whatever had been making the crater walls shake—Maia presumed it was that giant serpent—hit it hard enough to open huge cracks in the ground, into which many marines fell, and many more were separated from their transports.

Another titanic blow was struck against the crater walls, and not too far away, one of the more artificial portions of the wall began to splinter. Again, it was hit from within, and the wall was fractured, sending countless boulders sliding off its face and into the channel.

Maia, noticing this, didn't bother shouting much of a warning. She didn't think it would do much good if she did. Instead, she focused on conjuring a great water dragon to protect the ship.

"What's going on?!" Gaius shouted, seeing her do this.

[The snake is coming,] she growled back at him.

Gaius' eyes widened as he turned toward the command tower and frantically began to signal with his arms, but before he could say much, the wall of the crater started to crumble in earnest as it was struck again.

As the wall splintered apart, the fleet got a few glimpses of what was on the other side: dark green scales, an ivory horn that glowed in the gloom of the storm, and a pair of green eyes that glittered with malice. Killing intent flowed out into the channel like a tsunami, and many of the weaker Legion mages collapsed under its terrible weight.

"Shit!" Alix exclaimed.

"Are there any spare bows around?" Marcus called out to some nearby Legion marines as they helped the sailors prepare the ship for its immediate retreat.

"What in the hells...?" Alcander murmured as he stared in terror at the few murky glimpses of the serpent he got through the vortex.

The Flame Lances were still operational, and began to swing around in the direction of the crumbling wall. Maia could sense the weapons filling with magic power, but as the wall shook again, she didn't think it would be enough.

With one last strike, the serpent burst out into the channel, the crater wall it had broken through now nothing but dust behind it. The monster roared in challenge, a high-pitched shriek that tore through the ear drums of everyone who heard it, sending panic rippling out through the fleet.

Sigebert's flagship sounded horns again, but Gaius was too petrified to translate.

As the serpent slid over the remains of the wall and into the channel, the turbulent waters suddenly became much less chaotic—but in the worst possible way. Instead of tossing the Legion ships around randomly with little rhyme or reason, suddenly the water beneath the ships began to actively work against them. Great pillars of water exploded beneath the ships, sending many of the remaining smaller ships rocketing into the air and pushing the bigger ships into the rocks on the other side of the channel.

A moment later, the massive horned serpent erupted from the waves beneath one of the heavier war galleys only a hundred feet or so away from the flagship. It was so large that it was easily able to wrap

its titanic jaws around the sides of the ship and lift it into the air like a toy, its many teeth digging into the hull and overwhelming its defensive enchantments. The Legion sailors and marines aboard tried to resist, but their attacks did about as much to the serpent as Maia and the demon's had, and after only a few seconds, the serpent's jaws snapped the entire ship in half. Hundreds of Legion personnel fell into the water, where they were immediately pulled under the waves. A moment later, the serpent fell back into the sea, sending great waves rippling out from its impact point to buffet the nearby ships.

Again, the serpent burst from the water, and again, the Legion lost another war galley. This time, however, Sigebert's Flame Lances were finally at a good enough angle to take a shot. The powerful weapons spat red-hot molten stone at the serpent as it rose into the air, its jaws fixed around the second doomed war galley. However, much like the demon's attacks, the Flame Lance's shots struck the monster's hide and seemed to do little more than blacken its scales.

Though, it was an effective enough attack to draw the creature's attention, and as it fell back to the seas, the serpent turned its malevolent gaze in the direction of the flagship, and the water all around the ship immediately froze, causing the ship to come to a violent halt. Nearly everyone below the fifth-tier was knocked off their feet by the sudden stop.

But then, the serpent burst from the water again, only a few seconds after dragging the remains of the second galley down into the deep. The serpent crashed into the flagship, its jaws sinking deep into the hull around the ship's midsection. The beast thrashed about, ignoring it completely when Maia unleashed her water dragon upon it. The ship was tough and strong, but trapped in the jaws of such a beast, there wasn't much it could do; its defensive enchantments held out a little longer than those of the war galleys, but they were soon overwhelmed as the serpent shook and tore the ship apart.

A few horn blasts sounded from the command tower, and Gaius helpfully shouted, "Abandon ship!"

Maia's heart sank in panic and terror as she glanced out into the local waters. If possible, she did *not* want to touch these seas. Instead, she recalled her water dragon, ordered Leon's retinue to jump onto its back as she scrambled onto the terrified Anzu, calming him slightly with her touch.

Several nearby Legion ships rained their own artillery upon the serpent as it destroyed the fleet's flagship, but to little effect, and less than a minute after attacking, the serpent pulled back, the flagship's central half now little more than splinters of Heartwood, both of its Flame Lances utterly trashed.

Maia and Anzu took off from the deck as the serpent pulled back, with Gaius, Alix, Marcus, and Alcander atop the back of Maia's water dragon. With little word, Maia began to direct everyone away from the crater as quickly as she was able, taking full advantage of the serpent shifting its attention to the war galleys that had threatened it. As they retreated, the ice beneath the remains of the flagship swiftly melted back into liquid, and the ruined ship sank. How much of the crew survived, Maia couldn't say—she couldn't see Sigebert among those in the sea, and even if she could, many of them were being dragged under the ship by the currents in the wake of the ship's sinking, while others were being submerged by the immense waves kicked up by the storm.

None managed to return to the surface, as far as Maia could tell, and with every second that passed by, more ships joined their flagship beneath the waves as the serpent ran over the fleet, unstoppable in its power and unrelenting in its fury.

Chapter 592: Below the Isles

Gentleness.

Calmness.

He was wrapped in something soft and light, in a place that was absent judgment. A place of rest, where he didn't have to worry about anything else. A place where he didn't have to face the world, where he didn't have to own up to his mistakes, where he didn't have to face the consequences of his own weakness, or to feel shame for his failures. It was a place where he didn't even have to open his eyes.

He could just lay there, unmoving, doing nothing more than existing. Floating in an ocean of quiet darkness, where none could see him or speak to him or hear his words—if he even cared to speak.

But slowly, something began to nibble at the edges of his consciousness, some dull thumping sound in the back of his head, irregular and insistent. And it was growing louder in tandem with how conscious he was becoming of it. The more attention he paid it, the more insistent it was becoming.

But the dark called to him, promising him that he could lay down his sword, shrug off the unwanted weight of his lineage, and relieve the burden of being the last of his Clan. He wanted nothing more than to immerse himself in that darkness, where he wouldn't have to think about pirates or serpents or his recent loss or his many other losses...

He couldn't, though. He was now too conscious of the thumping in the back of his head, as if someone were knocking on the doors of his mind and shouting for his attention at the same time. The peace was disturbed, and it couldn't be regained.

With rising annoyance, Leon sighed and opened his eyes.

Or rather, he *tried* to. His eyelids felt as heavy as bricks, and opening them for any reason seemed almost beyond the limits of his abilities. This finally seemed to strike a chord within him, as his mind latched onto the idea that it shouldn't be this damned hard to wake the hells up...

Leon almost instinctively called upon his magic power, and it took him a moment or two of letting it course through his body, filling him with energy and vigor, before he realized that him having access to his power should've been surprising given his situation when last he could remember...

'Jormun!' Leon silently shouted as he bolted upright, his eyes flying open as silver-blue lightning rushed through his body and mind, annihilating all the physically debilitating effects that his body had been placed under.

Immediately, Leon settled into a powerful fighting stance, though he couldn't see or hear anyone around him. In fact, he couldn't see *anything* around him—he was in a black void, not unlike the abyss of teleportation tunnels. However, unlike the teleportation tunnels he had experience with, this one seemed oppressive, like it was pressing in on him from all sides. It didn't feel particularly dangerous, more like he was wearing a thick fur coat, or maybe like he'd been covered by a heavy blanket while he slept. Comforting while he'd been on the 'ground' with his eyes closed, but now something he found more than a little disconcerting.

Making him even more disconcerted was the thumping in his head, which had grown a little louder and more insistent now that he was awake. It still sounded like someone was trying to talk to him, but he couldn't make out what they were trying to say.

Leon was tempted to call out to this person to see if they could hear him when he spoke out loud, but the oppressiveness of the omnipresent darkness had him holding his tongue. He didn't know what was out there, but he began to feel a creeping suspicion that he wasn't alone out in this darkness. He didn't think it was the person trying to speak with him—though there were quite a few people that person could be, given how many beings were able to speak directly into his mind—but there was definitely a presence surrounding him, observing him, waiting for an opportunity to strike. If he had to point out any particular reason why he felt like this, he'd guess that it had to do with how the darkness around him felt kind of like some form of magic senses...

For the next few minutes, Leon slowly evaluated both his physical condition and his current situation. As far as he could tell, he was physically fine. The bindings that Jormun had placed upon him were gone, so he had use of his magic again. His soul realm still felt distant, though, and he couldn't project his mind into it, so communicating with Nestor, Maia, or the Thunderbird was still out of the question, unfortunately.

The last thing he could remember was falling down the pit that Jormun had pushed them into. At some point, Leon had hit something in the dark, something that felt a lot like he'd fallen through a web or thin screen of some sort, and been subsequently put to sleep, but it had been after many seconds of falling. He couldn't say for certain how far he'd fallen even before slipping into the darkness of imposed sleep, let alone after. Wherever he was now, however, did not seem to be underground, exactly. He supposed this place could've been anywhere, just filled with this strange darkness, but he felt it was more likely that at some point, he'd fallen into a teleportation portal.

At the very least, he and Jormun appeared to have been separated, for the pirate was nowhere to be seen, and Leon couldn't sense anything with his magic senses other than the darkness magic all around him.

With some effort, Leon began to channel his silver-blue lightning with greater power, enough to push it outside of his body. His form sparked and crackled with lightning, and arcs began to spring from him to the 'floor' of this space at greater distances. The darkness melted away from his power, but as soon as the lightning vanished, the dark rushed back in to replace it. Leon soon stopped this effort, for it quickly became clear that there was no way he was going to be able to push all of this darkness back with his power alone any more than he would be able to hold back the ocean with nothing more than a paddle.

As part of his self-evaluation, Leon made sure to raise his mental defenses. With so much darkness magic around, he couldn't be too sure of what he could perceive even though his body was flooded with the Thunderbird's lightning. Almost as soon as the protective magical shell formed around his brain, oddly enough, the darkness began to recede from him of its own accord.

This recession accelerated, and soon enough, revealed a vertical rectangle of light—the exit of this space, Leon presumed—about two hundred feet away, inviting him by its presence alone.

Leon took one last look around, but quickly began to run toward the light. He had no idea what was going on with him, or where he was, how long he'd been out, or what was going on outside. He had to return to the fleet, they were all in danger so long as Jormun was still active.

And Jormun *was* still active, as far as Leon was concerned. The pirate was nowhere to be seen, but until he lay dead at Leon's feet, Leon was going to refuse to believe any of this was over. And with him now in this teleportation tunnel, he had a terrible feeling that not only were things far from being over, they were about to get a *lot* worse.

As Leon stepped into the doorway of light, Jormun's claim that he'd succeeded in his mission rang in his ears, and he prepared himself for possible violence, and let his magic power inundate his body.

There was a great flash of light as Leon stepped through the portal, and a moment later, he felt solid ground beneath his boots.

He was in a cave, at what appeared to be a dead end. The stone all around him was the same black volcanic stone that he recognized from the Serpentine Isles, so he relaxed just a little bit with the assumption that he hadn't been teleported that far, but he got the sense that he was a great distance below the surface—the stone above him felt heavy, and his ears popped a second after stepping out of the portal.

The cave itself appeared completely natural, and possessed no decorations of any kind. There was just a long stone tunnel ahead of him that was angled slightly down, heading deeper into the earth.

There was no other way to go, just down, though that didn't stop Leon from taking a few minutes to explore this cave and confirm that there was nothing else around.

With some reluctance, Leon began to walk down the tunnel, lightning still dancing across his body as he moved, illuminating the otherwise pitch-black tunnel—not that Leon, as a seventh-tier mage, needed that light to see.

He walked slowly, with great caution at first. However, as he proceeded for seconds, then minutes, and then what seemed like at least an hour, Leon relaxed, letting his magic subside just a bit, though he kept his guard up as much as he could. The tunnel just went on and on, deeper and deeper into the bones of Aeterna.

Quietly, another noise began to build up in Leon's ears, eventually cutting through the muffled thumping he could hear in the back of his mind. Except this noise was somehow even stranger than that thumping, for it wasn't something he would've ever expected to hear down here.

He heard the distant fluttering of feathered wings.

He quickly halted for a moment once he became aware of the noise to recheck his mental defenses, only advancing again once he'd verified that the magic shell around his brain was still intact and that silver-blue lightning still coursed through his veins.

But he could still hear the flapping of wings, and it was slowly growing louder.

For some reason, though, as he walked, the flapping of those wings was pushed out of his mind. It was an important thing, but he didn't even notice it happen; one minute, he was concentrating on those wing flaps, and the next, his mind was wandering.

After a few seconds of thoughtlessness, Leon blinked in confusion and found his mind turning back to the battle he had with Jormun, displaying it before him in his mind's eye in vivid, almost otherworldly detail. He remembered every strike, every lightning bolt, every potent lick of flame. Most of all, though, he remembered Jormun moving faster than he'd ever shown himself capable of during the fight to slam the head of that bronze hammer into his stomach. He remembered being unable to do anything other than lay helpless on the ground as Jormun loomed overhead, and then the sharp pain and instant darkness as the pirate brought the hammer down upon his head.

Were it not for Jormun healing him immediately afterward, Leon guessed that probably would've been a fatal blow.

He'd lost that fight. Why he started it in the first place, he didn't consider, but every blocked lightning bolt, every missed strike, Leon could remember all of it in crushing detail. Every mistake he'd made during the fight ran through his head, highlighting his weakness and his inability to stand against Jormun.

A scowl formed upon Leon's face as he relived this loss, and soon enough, he found his mind turning even farther back, to his fight with Nestor. The dead man had made an absolute fool out of him, and just the memory of lying helpless in the dirt of his own soul realm, unable to move as Nestor piloted his physical body around, filled him with shame, depression, and fury.

Leon had to fight the powerful urge to smash something. The only things around were the floor, the walls, and the ceiling, and striking any of them with cathartic force would likely bring the entire tunnel collapsing down upon him.

Rage and humiliation and a hundred other similar emotions filled Leon's body, but not for long. All were eventually replaced with shame—shame in himself for getting himself into those situations, and in his power and skill for being unable to stop these men when the time came. That he was still alive was a miracle that he could not claim credit for.

His recollections didn't end there. He'd lost many times, and each and every time he'd ever lost ran through his mind. His meeting with Maia. His battle with the seventh-tier Talfar vampire, Bran. His duel with Hakon Fire-Beard.

His left arm ached as he thought about the battle with Amon's seventh-tier vampire, when he'd had to call upon the power of Xaphan just to survive. He remembered every time Trajan knocked him down in a sparring session, every loss he ever suffered to Valeria while they were at the Knight Academy, and his defeat at the hands of the alliance of trainees that had assembled against his Snow Lions.

Finally, every time his father had beaten him during their training. Every time, and there were *many*, easily more than a thousand. He recalled each and every time his father broke his guard or parried and riposted, or struck when Leon's guard was down. Each loss was a lesson, but each one brought more and more red to Leon's cheeks as they were paraded before his mind's eye, and the shame in himself and his power grew.

And then... he heard a voice. This was not one that ran through his mind, but rather one that echoed through the tunnel, clear as crystal even as distant as it was. Smooth, yet resonant. Rather masculine, but with an undercurrent of femininity. Above all, inhuman.

"This... is what you are..." the voice said, barely more than a whisper yet perfectly audible to Leon's ears.

As the words faded, the image of Jormun over him, his triumphant grin plastered over his face, his hammer raised in the moment before it was brought down. Leon's hands instinctively curled, trying to grasp the sword that was not there for comfort and security. But there was no comfort or security to be had, and all he could do was stop in place and let his magic flow through his body.

It did little to help.

His heart rate skyrocketed in the wake of that voice's statement, as did his shame. He knew that the voice was speaking to him, and he knew exactly why it was saying these things. Shame overwhelmed his mind, preventing him from thinking clearly or doing anything else save for standing there in the middle of the tunnel, petrified.

"This... is what you are..." the voice repeated, and Leon's mind was filled with more images, but these seemed almost prophetic. He saw himself as a slave, broken and battered after his failure to revive his Clan. He was dressed in rags, covered in dirt, utterly powerless, with no one left with him. He was so weak, barely able to raise his arm to beg for scraps from his master.

He then saw another vision, this time of him triumphant, a golden crown upon his head, and adorned in silver armor, his family at his side. Elise, Maia, and Valeria, all with his children, and Alix, Marcus, Alcander, Gaius, Nestor, Xaphan, and a million others, all bowing to him as he sat upon his throne. Only for all of it to fall from his grasp, his inability to rule after his conquest ensuring his downfall at the hands of a man wreathed in and obscured by flame—Kamran, Leon instinctively knew.

A third vision; he saw himself back in the Forest of Black and White, sixteen once again, running from everything he could sense in the forest. He was barely more than a mouse, unable to affect any kind of change upon the world. He'd never left after his father's death, and instead eked out a miserable existence in the place he once called home, running from everything within the forest that had even a modicum of power, surviving off of carrion and anything else he could scrounge up.

He knew the meaning in he was being shown. He was too weak to achieve his goals. Even if he did somehow manage to do so, he'd never be able to hold his gains. He was so weak that even if he'd never tried coming south, he'd have been nothing at all, just a worthless scavenger in a remote Northern Vale, less even than the barbarian he'd so often been called.

"This... is what you are..." the voice repeated a third time. "But... you could be *more*..."

Leon's eyes rose from staring at the floor, damp with unshed tears of helplessness, his heart heavy with shame, his body weak and shaking with fear, resignation, and just a hint of hope as the voice's statement echoed through this tunnel.

"Come to me..." the voice said, and Leon found himself already walking forward, drawn toward whatever this voice was promising.

He heard the flapping of wings again, and as he walked, he saw lying upon the ground a small brown feather flecked with gold—exactly the same as the Thunderbird’s, only much smaller.

As his eyes landed upon that feather, Leon’s mind was again filled with visions, of himself standing above everything, the true King of the Heaven’s as he’d so arrogantly declared when writing his Mana Glyph. All bowed before him, his family was strong and without equal, his father had been avenged, and the future of his children was secure. He reigned supreme as the most powerful, untouchable existence in the universe.

He saw himself again, this time standing victoriously atop a mountain of corpses. They’d come at him in numbers too great to count, but as his skin hardened into midnight-black scales, his eyes darkened to red-orange, and black fire erupted from his fingers, he slaughtered them all with ease. His power was unequalled, and none could strike at him again. None could take from him again, or deny his power.

He saw a third vision, of himself transformed. He was a new Thunderbird, his body reshaped, feathered, and cloaked in the darkest of storm clouds. His lightning rained down upon his enemies unceasingly, breaking their might and ensuring his victory.

“This... is what you could be...” the voice seductively whispered, the masculine tones fading in favor of something more overtly feminine, almost motherly, almost *familiar*...

At some point, a light appeared at the end of the tunnel, harsh and white, so much so that Leon had to squint. But his feet didn’t slow for a single second. He kept walking, unable to stop, and eventually reached the end of the tunnel.

He stepped out onto a relatively small platform at the top of an almost mind-bendingly long, winding staircase. He was about halfway up the wall of a cavern, but to call it a cavern would be to do the magnitude of this space a grave injustice—he’d emerged into such a titanic space that it beggared belief, a cavern so immense it was practically a whole other world.

At the bottom of the cavern was what looked to be an enormous city, so large that it completely covered the cavern floor. Hundreds of pyramids, made of jet-black stone and packed so tightly together that there was practically no room between them. The only real space of note between them he could see was at the bottom of the staircase, where a long uncovered hallway cut a path straight through these innumerable pyramids, leading to a gargantuan plaza that surrounded the biggest and most impressive pyramid of them all, a pyramid that had an identical twin somehow built and secured to the ceiling directly above it, mirroring it perfectly. The tips of these two pyramids almost touched, separated by a space of only about forty feet.

A bright beam of white light shot out of the tips of both pyramids, connecting them, and illuminating the entire ‘city’. Within that light Leon could sense... *something*, but he wasn’t sure what. It felt kind of like a natural confluence of magical energy, but there seemed to be some kind of will behind it. Something sentient resided within that light, something decidedly inhuman, and its attention was fixed squarely upon him.

“Come...” the voice said soothingly, invitingly, seductively, “come to me... Give yourself to me... and become all that you could be...”

Chapter 593: The Growing Storm

Leon froze at the top of the immense stairs, staring at the beam of light connecting the two great pyramids, a bright white halo around it almost making it seem like a small star that had been stolen from the sky and hidden down here. Something was in there, and it was staring at him with great expectation, and Leon couldn't help but assume that it was the thing that had been speaking to him this entire time.

He didn't move. The voice had compelled him to move through the underground tunnels somehow, but he resisted its allure this time. He simply stood at the top of the stairs, trying and failing to pry his eyes away from that light.

This was much easier said than done, unfortunately, and Leon almost felt like his eyes were about to bleed from the strain of trying to pry them away from such magnificence. There was something about this light that was just... *calling* to him, like it was an easy meal being paraded before a wild beast.

Leon clenched his jaw and, with titanic willpower, slammed his eyes shut. He projected his magic senses, hoping that he could get a better idea of his surroundings without having to look directly into that beam of light anymore. To his relief, he was largely successful, being able to perceive the world around him, with the beam so bright to his senses that he couldn't even see it.

However, he saw so much more, too, details that he'd missed in his first quick scan of the place.

He saw corpses scattered everywhere—skeletons of humans adorned the winding, switchback staircase, some looking like they had fallen as they walked down the stairs, others looking like they had been killed as they tried to crawl up. There were countless bodies here, but none were even remotely recent enough to still have so much as a scrap of flesh still attached to their bones. Whoever these people were had been dead for centuries, if not longer.

More eye-catching were the corpses that filled the plaza around the largest pyramid. There were countless in that large space. Closer to the outer edge, the corpses were smaller, perhaps only ten feet tall or so. Further in, they grew in size, eventually reaching almost thirty feet tall. Every one of them had been winged in life, with the smaller corpses having only one pair of wings, while they gained increasingly more pairs of wings the larger they got. The largest corpses boasted four pairs of wings.

Unlike the human skeletons that adorned the great stairs, which all seemed to have been struck dead in the midst of either ascending or descending the stairs, the corpses of these angels—for after what he'd seen Jormun summon, Leon could not think these skeletal corpses were anything but angels—had been laid out, deliberately placed. Interred here. From what he could tell by how their bones were now arranged, their arms had been laid across their chest, while their wings folded to cover their faces. Those with more wings had their lowest pair covering their feet, while those with more than two pairs of wings had their remaining wings spread out on the ground.

Not a single one had so much as a lick of magic power. Leon had the impression that these corpses had been down here for *much* longer than the living angel outside might've implied, probably since the end of the Primal Age, at least.

That much tracked with the feel Leon got from the rest of the cavern; the entire place felt ancient, like an ages-old city forgotten and lost to time. But the longer that Leon took to take it all in, the more he realized that this place wasn't as unfamiliar as it first seemed—Maia had described Saron to him, the

city of the river nymphs, and its description matched this place nearly perfectly, with the only difference being the sole fact that this place wasn't flooded.

Suddenly, as if to try and fix that discrepancy, the beam of light flickered, and the entire gargantuan cavern shook. The ceiling cracked open, and water began spilling into this massive chamber. However, while these waterfalls were objectively huge, in comparison to the cavern, they were quite small, and so hardly put the cavern in much immediate danger of flooding. The beam of light was still active and still quite blinding to Leon's magic senses, but to his physical eyes, it was also noticeably weaker, as if the magics keeping it active were slowly disengaging.

Which, Leon supposed, they probably *were*. And he felt like he already knew what was in there. It wasn't a Great Horned Serpent, as Jormun had led his followers to believe. Leon was inclined to believe that such a beast may have once lived, perhaps had even been in control of a significant part of the plane when the Thunderbird Clan arrived, but that was not what was imprisoned here.

Leon remembered the Thunderbird telling him of the servants of the Primal Gods, and why Aeterna was one of the twelve planes known as the Divine Graveyard. This plane was the resting place for the Primal Gods, some of the most powerful beings in existence.

And a prison, it seemed, as the subtle pressure that the thing exerted upon Leon with its attention seemed to insist.

"We are not... enemies..." the voice said, and Leon became suddenly *very* conscious of how long he'd been standing at the top of the stairs, not moving. He no longer felt much compulsion to continue, but whether that was because the being within that light consciously dropped the compulsion or if it was wearing off, he couldn't say. The voice, even without directly pulling him onward, was quite alluring anyway. It put thoughts into his head with speaking them aloud; it wanted him to head down into the city and go to the plaza. There, he would find his destiny, and more power than he could ever dream of—or such was the idea Leon found rushing through his head.

Leon took a moment to think. At the barest minimum, this thing didn't seem immediately overtly hostile, and he supposed he could count himself lucky for that. However, the magics keeping it in place were still there, though they appeared to be slowly unraveling—Jormun's rituals and blood sacrifices seemed to have worked, even if their effect wasn't immediate. Whoever had built this place had the foresight to give the unlocking process a long time delay, it seemed.

Taking a quick look behind him, his heart beating with fear and anxiety as the attention of this thing in the light pressed in on him with expectation, Leon noted with no small amount of disappointment that the tunnel had sealed itself—there was no going back through it, though there probably wasn't much point in doing so. He'd been teleported into it, and even if he could go back, there was no way out that way. He was trapped in this city, with this voice of a profoundly ancient and powerful being speaking to him. It seemed to be greatly interested in him, and though he doubted the man at the time, Leon was immediately reminded of when Jormun had told him his bloodline had drawn the Serpent's attention.

Before doing anything else, Leon quickly checked his soul realm one more time. Unfortunately, the connection through his heart still seemed strangely disrupted—magic was flowing between himself and his soul realm, so he didn't have much problem with accessing his reserves of magic power, but for

some reason, he couldn't get in contact with Nestor, Xaphan, Maia, or the Thunderbird. He was still frustratingly alone.

So, it seemed he had little other choice than to respond to the voice. There were few things he wanted to do less than walking down into the midst of those pyramids, so he could only hope for the slim possibility that this creature was reasonable.

"If you're not my enemy, then what are you?" Leon called out, though with some hesitation as he felt almost as much pressure from the sheer silence of this place as he felt from this being's attention. This place felt old and hallowed, and raising his voice felt wrong.

"A friend, I hope," the voice replied, and was immediately followed by the sound of flapping wings. A moment later, the small Thunderbird look-a-like flew right over Leon's head from behind.

Leon ducked low and had to fight the urge to conjure a lightning bolt; he was wound quite tightly, and the sudden appearance of the bird almost set him off.

But once his brain registered what he was seeing, he forced himself to relax, and the bird soared in a long arc around the stairs before coming to land not too far in front of him.

"I have aided you..." the voice said as the bird then vanished in a flash of light. "I have guided you... in your quest to kill the pirate..."

Leon scowled. "I'm fair certain that you've also guided that pirate..."

He wasn't expecting much shame from this thing, whatever it may be, but he also wasn't quite expecting its immediate and frank response.

"Yes, I did..." it said. "I am trapped here... and have been for so long... I needed to seize any... chance that I could to escape..."

"Working with Jormun, though..."

"The damage that pirate... can do is... limited..."

"The death toll he's responsible for is already measured in the thousands!" Leon protested, though he kept his voice controlled. It was subtle, but after that flickering, he could feel the power in the beam of light was slowly diffusing out into the rest of the pyramids, and even seemed to be swirling about the corpses of the angels in relatively small quantities. As they were speaking, *something* was happening, and he was certain that the things in these pyramids were starting to wake.

"A million is just a number," the thing replied. "What matters... is power... And power is what you seek, no?"

Images once more assaulted Leon's mind: his father, moments after the being stabbed by Jason Isynos' assassin, followed by Leon placing the last stone in his father's cairn.

"I will give you... all the power you need... all the power you could ever want..." the voice tantalizingly offered. "All you have to do..."

“Is serve you?” Leon asked, almost snarling at the distant beam of light. He was cautious in tone before, but this thing invoking Artorias’ memory was infuriating enough to abruptly override his fear and anxiety.

“To serve a God... is the natural place of humanity...”

“Eat shit,” Leon angrily growled. He didn’t want whatever this thing was selling, and he sure as hells wasn’t going to be signing over his free will to it. It may be foolish—he could sense a mind-bending amount of magic within that light, though from where it came from, whether it was from the thing within or the magic of the barrier, he couldn’t say—but he wasn’t going to bend his knee to this thing, even if it was exactly what he feared it was: a Primal God.

His blood boiled as the strange thumping in his head, seemingly earlier muted by the voice, grew louder and louder and an odd sense of pride in himself and his heritage roared to life. He was a scion not just of the Thunderbird—an august lineage all on its own—but also of the Great Black Dragon. He could feel it in his blood; he *wouldn’t serve*.

The voice was silent for a long moment, and when it spoke again, its smooth, soothing tones were preceded by another flickering of the beam of light, and another great crack opening on the ceiling, which allowed even more water to spill into the titanic cavern.

“... Humans...” it whispered in obvious consternation, “always so quick... to anger... and *rash action*... Our lessons were not taught harshly enough... And so must be taught again... and again... until they are drilled into the memory of... your entire species...”

The thing’s voice grew harsher and more bestial as it spoke, until it was growling with hate. A few flashes of killing intent leaked out of the beam of light, but that alone was enough to nearly drive Leon into catatonia.

Still, Leon didn’t for a moment feel like he’d made the wrong decision.

That belief was challenged as the magic swirling around the plaza suddenly froze for a moment and was redirected toward one of the larger corpses.

“You *will* serve...” the voice declared. “You *will* swear your bloodline to me... But fear not, for while you are weak now... ***I shall make you strong.***”

The magic condensed over one of the largest angel skeletons, one with four pairs of wings, and began to form into flesh and cloth.

“I will rend your flesh and twist your bones...” the voice declared.

Leon watched as muscles and robes formed over the skeleton, as the bones were covered with flesh and skin whiter than the fur of the Snow Lion he’d hunted so long ago.

“I will remake you... into the best version of yourself that you could be...”

As its voice began thrumming with power, the process of encasing the angel’s body in flesh finished, though its wings were still bare—covered in flesh, but bare of feathers. It was dressed much like the one that Xaphan had fought, in flowing white robes that concealed everything but its svelte, only somewhat

masculine form. Grasped in its hands that were still clasped on its unmoving chest was the hilt of another bladeless two-handed sword.

'And you will love me for it...' the voice whispered.

A moment later, a rune flashed above the corpse, and it began to violently twitch. The corpse and Leon were still separated by miles, but Leon could see every movement of its body with perfect clarity, and he could see the flesh of two of its wings rip and tear as pristine white feathers forced their way out through the flesh, though not a drop of blood was spilled.

Slowly, the angel rose to its feet. Only two of its wings were feathered—the highest one on its right, and the lowest on its left—while the rest hung limply, brushing the ground behind it, yet it didn't even seem to spare them a glance. It just slowly looked in Leon's direction, its eyes burning white within the black abyss of its hood, full of righteous fury, before the higher of its two feathered wings folded in and covered its face. Its lower wing then folded in, covering its bare feet from view. It held the bladeless hilt in its left hand, and a moment later, as its aura suddenly exploded out of its nearly-forty-foot-tall body, a huge twenty-foot blade of light flashed into place. Its aura rapidly climbed in power, starting in the first-tier but only staying there for the briefest of moments. It climbed to the seventh-tier with great alacrity, blowing past what Leon knew his own level of power to be, and only seeming to slow once it had become incomprehensible to his senses.

'Shit...' Leon thought, and the angel began to take slow, menacing steps in his direction. It was a straight shot to the stairs, down a wide street flanked on both sides by intricate murals, and the angel was starting to move faster and faster with every step.

There were at least ten miles between them, if not more, but it would be on him in only a matter of a minute or two at the rate it was accelerating. Leon clenched his jaw, unable to see any way he could win this fight. He lacked his most powerful weapon—his family's sword—and while he still had his bow and many spell arrows, he couldn't imagine they would have much effect on this creature, not with what little he could sense from its aura.

But as his mind raced trying to figure out a way to get out of this mess, his eyes drifted down to the emerald ring on his finger...

—

The remains of Sigebert's fleet that managed to limp out of the channels of the last broken Serpentine Isle were ragged and badly mauled. A paltry fifteen war galleys, four of which had been so damaged they weren't even capable of fighting anymore. Only one marine transport, carrying a mere half-battalion. Nearly all of the marines that had accompanied Sigebert's fleet had been deployed to islets around the caldera, or had been massing directly on the slopes of the caldera itself.

They had been easy prey for the monstrous serpent.

The second of Sigebert's dreadnoughts at least managed to escape largely undamaged, but unfortunately, without Sigebert himself around to issue any orders, there wasn't much will to head back within the Legate who commanded it.

Maia and the rest of Leon's retinue managed to reach the second dreadnought and link back up with the Legion as they made their escape from the massive serpent that had just practically devoured the entire fleet. They hadn't been able to much as scratch its scales, let alone do any meaningful damage to it. It had just run right over them, crushing their ships in its massive jaws, tearing them apart with water magic, impaling entire ships upon its immense curved horn, sweeping entire companies of marines into the seas with huge, summoned waves...

Maia shivered when she thought it, glad only for the fact that, for whatever reason, it hadn't followed them out of the broken remnants of the island.

However, that still left it doing *something* back near the caldera, around which the storm was still swirling. Outside of that, it had largely stopped raining, though the sky was still dark with storm clouds, the wind was still perilously strong, and the seas were dangerously choppy.

They had managed to escape the worst of what had just happened, but no one could get comfortable just yet, for as Maia watched on in fear, wondering just where in the hells Leon was in all of this, the storm suddenly surged in power as a titanic burst of water magic filled the swirling black clouds. And the clouds spilled out from the crater and began to consume the nearest islets. Just before these islets vanished from view, Maia could see them shaking apart, cracking and breaking and falling into the sea.

The wind suddenly changed directions, howling past them toward the mainland instead of rushing into the crater, and tipping one of the more damaged war galleys onto its side and spilling its contents of sailors into the sea, from which they did not return.

This controlled storm rushed outward, devouring the entirety of the broken island, only mercifully stopping once it had eaten every bare rock that had survived the island's previous cataclysm.

"Fuck!" Alix screamed, with her sentiment loudly shared by hundreds of others across the ravaged fleet. "What do we do now?! How are we supposed to fight this?!"

"Get ready for a last stand!" Marcus shouted back, his voice shaking but still full of bravado.

"Whatever's going on isn't going to stay here! It's going to spill out to the rest of the plane if it gets past us! We have to stop it here!"

"And we *will* stop it here!" Alcander responded, though his eyes were wide enough that Maia wasn't convinced he truly believed his declaration.

"With *what*!?" Alix shouted back, but before this exchange could devolve into hopeless argument, Gaius chimed in.

"We need to reach the command tower! Speak to the Legate in charge and organize what's left! Whether we retreat or stay and fight, we need a plan!"

The group agreed, and began to run toward the central tower of the dreadnought. Without Sigebert, *someone* had to step up and take responsibility for what remained of the fleet.

For Maia, though, she already knew what she was going to do. These seas were treacherous, and everything going on here had likely attracted the attention of greater things below the waves, but despite that, and despite the proven power of that horned serpent, she wasn't leaving here without Leon.

Even if everyone else ran away, she was going to find Leon, or die trying.

Chapter 594: Linking Back Up

The angel rapidly advanced, taking relatively small and slow steps, yet its sheer size still allowing it to cover a great deal of ground. From what little he could sense of its aura, Leon did *not* want to fight it, especially without his family's sword in hand.

So instead of fighting it, he channeled his magic power into the ring of invisibility on his finger and hoped that it would be enough to hide him from the winged creature.

Light bent around him, the emerald on the ring flashed with green light, and he vanished from sight over the course of several excruciatingly long seconds as he watched the angel approaching much faster than he'd have liked.

At first, it seemed like his last hope to avoid the reborn creature had failed and that he would have to engage the angel in battle, for it didn't even slow down after he faded from view. As it moved, however, it began to make strange bird-like noises, and speed up as it ran toward the foot of the stairs. Leon also felt its magic senses project outward, scanning the stairs and the area around it, searching for him.

This one simple use of its power was enough to give Leon chills. He didn't even want to think about what its attacks might do if its magic senses alone were enough turn his legs to mush.

But it seemed the angel couldn't see him, though it still rightly assumed that he hadn't moved from the stairs—he was halfway up an enormous cliff face, after all, the only way down was by the stairs or by risking a jump of several thousand feet. It sped up, apparently intent on cutting Leon off before he could reach the bottom and head out into the rest of the 'city'.

Leon forced himself to start moving. He couldn't allow himself to get trapped on these stairs, even if the angel couldn't see him, and neither could he allow himself to succumb to primal fear. He let the power of the Thunderbird fill his body once more, and as silver-blue lightning coursed through him, he calmed down and his mind focused.

He bolted down the stairs, avoiding the skeletons as best as he could. He wasn't too careful about not disturbing them, he just had to reach the foot of the winding stairs before the angel did.

He made it, but not with much time to spare, for the angel had already closed to within a mile of the stairs, close enough that it was raising its enormous blade of light and preparing for some magical attack that Leon didn't want to stick around to witness.

He didn't have many places he could go, unfortunately. The pyramids that made up this place were all built so close together that there weren't even alleyways, let alone streets between them. He supposed he could start climbing over them, but if he was right, then these were both tombs and prisons, and he didn't want to touch anything strong enough to hold a Primal God.

What he *really* needed was to find a safe place and try to fully reconnect with his soul realm. He could access his magic just fine, but he needed to consult with others—mostly the Thunderbird—about how to handle this situation.

He didn't have much time, so he just started running down the central street, toward the angel. Counterintuitive, perhaps, but he doubted it would expect something like this, and hoped the audacity of the move would give him some protection.

The angel continued to channel its power into its blade as it ran, though, and soon enough, the blade of light shone like the sun. Leon realized that he had to change tactics, for the angel was getting ready for some kind of wide-range attack, and so he swallowed his fears and anxieties and turned off the 'street'. He leaped right over the long muraled wall that flanked the street all the way to the central plaza and landed so smoothly on one of the terraces of the adjacent pyramid that he barely missed a step as he ran away.

Not even ten seconds later, the angel came to a halt and screeched in a terribly high pitch as it swung its blade in a vertical slash at the stairs, still hundreds of feet away from it.

That distance meant nothing, though, as a gigantic stream of light erupted from the blade, seemingly extending its reach until it was able to strike the entirety of the stairs with one swing.

Stone melted away in an instant before the burning white light of the angel's strike, making nearly no noise at all as the solid matter vaporized before it. The stairs ceased to exist, leaving nothing but black stone behind, much of it now glowing red and sagging from the heat.

To Leon's magic senses, the strike was almost as blinding as the beam of light that the Primal God was imprisoned within. He'd managed to run out of the direct blast zone, but he felt the heat and the wind and the magic power wash over him, negating his invisibility and hurling him off the pyramid he'd been running on. He spun through the air, completely throwing away all spatial orientation he had, until he slammed into a neighboring pyramid, then rolled down several terraces before his momentum came to a halt.

Once he finally did stop moving, Leon wasted no time hurling himself further down and squeezing himself into the crevice between the pyramid and its closest neighbor—he just barely fit. With his invisibility down, he'd have to rely on his old hunting skills to avoid this creature... assuming it was even possible to do so.

Leon pushed himself as far down as he could. He had his doubts that this stone was capable of giving him much practical cover, but it was all he had available to him. He restrained his aura as much as was possible and dropped into the ankle-deep running water that was slowly filling up the crevice. The cracks in the ceiling were still spewing copious amounts of water into the massive underground graveyard, but it appeared like it would need days, if not longer, to fill the place up entirely, or at least an hour or two until Leon could hide beneath it.

For now, he could only press himself down, retrain his aura, not move, and hope that the angel would miss him. If it noticed him, he was squeezed in and so helpless that it would find little difficulty in killing him.

A moment later, he felt the pulse of magic senses spread throughout the cavern, and he held his breath as he went completely still, his aura as constrained as he could make it. His throat was tight, he squeezed his eyes shut, and he didn't dare project his own magic senses. He just lay in the crevice,

straining his ears to listen to the angel, and hoped that he hadn't just met his end in the form of something so strong that he couldn't possibly hope to defeat it.

In the distance, he heard the angel making more vaguely-angry rolling chirping sounds, and the sounds were growing louder. He'd hidden himself well, and he didn't think that the angel had immediately seen him given the lack of urgency and almost questioning tone to the those chirps, but the chirping began growing louder as the angel turned and started walking back down the avenue, coming closer to Leon with every step.

He could see his ring was starting to glow with green magical light. It would be ready to be used again in less than four minutes, but that was more than enough time for the angel to find and kill him. He could only hide and wait.

The angel drew closer and closer. Leon's pyramid was large, but it was still near the avenue, near enough that the angel wouldn't have to work that hard to reach him if it was able to use that attack again.

As its cries grew louder, Leon grew quieter, silently pushing himself as deep into the crack between the two pyramids as he could and hoping with all he had that it was enough. If the roles were reversed, however, and the angel was trying to avoid him in the same way, he wouldn't be fooled.

At least, he didn't *think* he'd be. This angel, on the other hand, didn't seem entirely in control of its own faculties, yet Leon didn't underestimate it, for it had one of the most powerful and ancient beings that had ever existed in its corner. He felt a momentary flash of terror when he thought for a moment that the beam of light flickered, and he could only imagine that the Primal God within, a being so far beyond his comprehension and frame of reference that he could barely even imagine its level of power, was speaking with its reanimated servant, telling it exactly where he was.

The angel reached the point of the avenue that was closest to Leon, and Leon sucked in his aura as far as it would go, straining with every muscle he had to not let out even a scrap of magic power into the air. He was a seventh-tier mage, though, so it was almost akin to someone who weighed double what they should trying to suck in their gut; there was only so much he could do.

He heard the angel pause, and his heart almost skipped a beat when the angel cried out again in its almost ethereal cry, like that of a bird, but with a heavy reverb behind it. It sounded questioning, and he imagined that it was staring right at him, almost mocking him with how simple and practically childish his method of hiding was. His imagination ran wild, and he imagined the angel stepping closer to the mural, raising its blade, and bringing it back down, extending the blade of light far enough to cut through not only the pyramid, but also his entire body.

He squeezed his eyes as shut as they could possibly be and waited for whatever would come next.

Silence. Nothing moved save for the water around him. The angel stood just nearby, as if waiting for him to be a good little boy and come out from his hiding place and get a right good scolding.

And then it made an odd, high-pitched gurgling sound, ending on a rather low note that gave him the impression of sadness. Then it began to walk down the avenue again, making similar gurgling sounds, and leaving Leon unchallenged.

Leon didn't breathe a sigh of relief until it had gained quite a bit of distance from him, and even then, he was as quiet as he could be about it. He didn't move until his ring had finished recovering and he was able to cloak himself again, and even then, he continued to lay in the crevice, letting the oceanwater wash over him. However, the sense of relief at having evaded this creature flooded through his system, and he had some difficulty in restraining himself from making some kind of celebration.

He didn't want to move again until he could take better stock of his current soul realm situation. The thumping in his head had died down somewhat during the encounter with the angel, but now that he was invisible again and the angel had seemingly screwed off, the thumping was back. At this point, he could detect some definite patterns in it, leading him to conclude that it could only be from either Maia or one of the residents of his soul realm trying to reestablish contact with him.

He cast his gaze deep into himself, using his magic senses to examine his internal workings as closely as he could, looking for any sign of what was wrong, for that something was blocking him was the only conclusion that he could come up with for his current communication issues. He didn't find anything immediately, but he wasn't expecting to; if this were an easy fix, then the lightning that he'd been filling his body with almost constantly since he'd woken up probably would've fixed it by now.

He scoured his body, focusing mostly on his chest and heart, but not limiting his search to just those areas, for long minutes that felt even longer in these circumstances. The angel wasn't coming after him, but that didn't mean this Primal God was done with him. It wasn't speaking up for whatever reason, which made him more than a little nervous, but he didn't mind the quiet as he searching himself.

It took nearly half an hour of dedicated searching before he found anything, and when he did, he scowled and had to fight to keep himself from shouting out loud in frustration. It was so obvious, yet so well-hidden that he didn't think he'd ever have looked there if he'd found someone in his position.

In the depths of his hair, now fairly overgrown after months at sea, was a black rune—an *ancient* rune. It looked almost like it had been painted onto his scalp, but it was leaking fine black fog that was seeping into his skull. His anger quickly turned to panic when he noticed that particular detail. The rune was small, only about the size of the last joint of his thumb, but he didn't know how it had gotten there, or what, precisely, it was meant to do. He wasn't even sure if he *could* erase it...

But that sentiment was immediately quashed when, by instinct alone, Leon sent a quick burst of silver-blue lightning into his head and out of his scalp. A bright arc of lightning flashed through his hair, and in an instant, the rune was annihilated.

Immediately, Leon's mind was filled with the voice of Nestor.

[...ere you go! Just like that! Can you hear me, Leon?!]

Leon's opinion of Nestor was still quite low, and he didn't think was ever going to change, but he was touched a bit to notice a rather large amount of concern in the dead man's voice.

[Yes...] Leon whispered in his mind, as if nervous that the Primal God was able to overhear, [I can hear you, Nestor...]

[Ah! Thank our Honored Ancestor!] Nestor cried out. [I've been trying to speak with you for *hours*!]

[How long has it been since my fight with Jormun, exactly?] Leon murmured.

[Ugh, I'd say about four hours?] Nestor replied. [That demon's gone, and our Ancestor hasn't deigned to show up, so I guess it's just us.]

[Thank you,] Leon replied. [Now, please hold on a moment...]

[Huh? Hold on for what?] Nestor asked, his voice dripping with confusion.

Leon ignored his question, and shifted his attention to the connection between himself and Maia. He was immeasurably relieved and overjoyed to see that it was still there, letting magic power flow between their soul realms.

Leon didn't say anything to her, he just let his attention and feelings flow through that connection. He didn't need to say anything when his joy alone would do.

[Leon!] came the ecstatic reply from his river nymph lover. [Are you still there?!]

[I am,] Leon replied, a little louder than he did for Nestor.

[Where are you?! We need to get out of here as quickly as possible! This place has completely fallen apart since you disappeared...] Maia quickly filled Leon in on what had been going on above, from the appearance of the gigantic serpent, to the destruction of the fleet, to the remains of the island being consumed by the storm and the sea.

Leon was quiet for a long moment when she was finished, just processing what she had said. The only comforting thing she'd relayed was that she and the rest of his retinue, including Gaius and Anzu, were fine, if a little banged up and rather distraught.

But that wasn't the extent of his allies, and before any of them came his partner, the demon that had been with him for longer than anyone else. [Can you tell me more of that fire demon you encountered?] he asked.

Maia quickly relayed to him what she'd seen of the demon in greater detail than she'd just gone into.

[It was still in that vortex when last you saw it?] Leon asked, unable to keep the concern out of his voice.

[Yes, it was,] Maia replied, a little bit of confusion in her tone. [I don't know what might have become of it, but given what happened to the rest of the island, and the fact that it was alone with that leviathan, I don't think it's still alive...]

Leon frowned. He could feel the contract between them still active, like the connection between him and Maia, only a little different, a little weaker. Xaphan was still alive, but any more than that, he couldn't say. So, he put that information away for now.

[What about Sigebert?]

[Dead, most likely,] Maia matter-of-factly answered. [Probably went down with his ship. The seas are rough, and there are doubtlessly *things* from the deep that have awakened and come to the surface looking for an easy meal with all the Bulls falling out of their ships.]

Leon couldn't help but shudder at that thought. Krakens were bad enough, he didn't want to know what else might be down in the depths. The water was about as far from his domain as it could be.

[All right...] Leon quietly muttered, and he quickly filled Maia in on his situation. [... and I'm about as fine as I can be right now, but I don't know how I'm going to get out of here. There was a teleportation portal that led here, though, so I'm hoping there's going to be another that will lead out. I just have to find it.]

[I... can come look for you,] Maia hesitantly offered.

Leon could hear the sincerity in her voice, but that hesitation was caused by rather obvious and understandable fear. He didn't want her taking any risks for him, not when it would just put her in the exact same scenario he was in if she succeeded, two of them stuck down here instead of only one wouldn't help the situation.

[No,] Leon replied. [Too risky. You'd have to not only get past those things in the water, but that serpent, the demon, the storm, hope that the teleportation portal is still open, and that you can then find your way here. Better to stick with everyone else. Make sure everyone watches out for each other and let everyone know that I'm on my way back, but it may take a while. For now, just stay as safe as you can be, and stay alive.]

[I'll do my best,] Maia replied.

[And don't just look out for the others in our group,] Leon added. [Do what you can for the rest of the fleet without putting yourself or any of our people in danger.]

There was a long pause before she replied, [... If you insist...]

[Thank you,] Leon replied, and they said their goodbyes. If all went well, they'd see each other again, but they were both aware that the chances of that were lower than either would ever admit to each other.

For now, though, Leon simply took comfort in the knowledge that she and his people were still alive and well. He just had to find his way out of here before that could change.

[All right, Nestor,] Leon said to the dead man, [let's figure this out.]

And then, he sat up and started climbing out of the crevice. His ring was functioning again, the God was silent, and the angel had returned to the plaza. He finally had some space to work, and he and Nestor had to make use of it as well as they possibly could.

Chapter 595: Divinity Manifested

[All right, Nestor... Let's figure this shit out.]

The dead man's reply came after a long, pregnant pause. [I'll be honest here, Leon... You've really kicked a hornet's nest...] Nestor spoke calmly and carefully, but his voice was unmistakably tinged with a deep undercurrent of anxiety.

Leon glanced back at the obliterated staircase, and then at the angel that now mindlessly paced around the plaza, making those same, odd gurgling sounds as it walked between great rows of its skeletal kin. Then his eyes turned upward, toward the great beam of light that connected the two titanic pyramids at the center of the gigantic cavern.

[... I don't disagree...] Leon replied.

Suddenly, the beam flickered again, but this flickering seemed to have much less impact than the previous two did. It didn't break the ceiling or revive one of the dead angels; instead, it was followed only by the voice of the being inside, a self-proclaimed God of the Primal Age.

"Why do you resist, young human?" it asked, its voice soft and soothing in Leon's ears despite the ten or so miles between him and the great pyramid. "I wish not for your destruction, only to liberate you from the fetters that hold you back, just as I did for Jormun..."

Leon thought of the gargantuan horned serpent that Maia had just told him about. He'd thought that was Jormun, but that had been almost too ridiculous to voice out loud. This, however, strengthened his suspicion.

He didn't respond immediately, even though he wanted to. He was worried that the angel might detect him if he replied, but since it didn't seem to be able to see him with his invisibility ring active, after second of thought, he decided to risk it to try and pump a little more information out of this thing in the light.

"That serpent up top, that's Jormun?" Leon quietly asked, hoping his own soft, restrained tones were enough for the creature to hear.

"Yes..." the voice droned. The angel continued to pace and cry out, seemingly oblivious to the exchange happening much closer to the entrance.

"Is that what you want to turn me into?" Leon asked. "A giant serpent? You said you wanted to remake me..."

"No," the voice replied. "I would use the power in your blood to give you everything you've ever wanted. I would remake you into the next Thunderbird. I could even awaken your *other* bloodline..."

Leon suddenly clenched his teeth as a flood of emotions hit him. The Thunderbird had once told him that the Great Black Dragon was arguably the strongest Divine Beast to have ever lived, but that its power that had been passed down to him was kind of half-dormant. He'd somehow unconsciously tapped into it during brief moments of extreme emotional duress, but it was still out of the reach of his conscious mind.

For the most part, Leon had accepted the Thunderbird's word that it was beyond his grasp. He felt no small amount of anger and bitterness that there was a power in his blood that he didn't have access to, but he also recognized that there wasn't much he could do about it, at least for now.

That made this creature's offer rather tempting—to give him a power that he'd essentially written off for his immediate future was certainly something that appealed to Leon's desire and need for power. But he was well aware that no power came without paying a price, and this thing in the light had already stated its demand for him to serve it.

And that wasn't going to happen.

"You say that you want me to serve you, that you could awaken all the power within my blood," Leon whispered to the thing before turning his head toward the annihilated stairs, "but what that angel did doesn't exactly inspire confidence that you'd follow through on that offer..."

"My angel would not have killed you, even if it hit you," the being whispered back. Leon rolled his eyes, but when he glanced back at the stairs, somehow, without any sound, without any hint of magical shenanigans, the stairs were back where they were before, perfectly intact. Even the skeletons were back where they'd fallen.

"A... neat trick," he said, though even he could tell that his attempt to sound unimpressed miserably failed. "An illusion?"

"Nothing of the sort," the being replied. "They were merely... displaced, and then returned."

"My mistake," Leon replied. "I guess I'll up my consideration from 'neat' to 'mildly interesting'."

"You could learn many interesting things from me, I assure you of that," the thing seductively whispered, its voice taking on a slightly more feminine tone.

Leon blinked in abject confusion, hoping that what it was suggesting was *not* what he thought it was suggesting. For the sake of his sanity, he ignored the creature and turned his attention back to Nestor.

[What do you make of all this?]

Nestor thought for a long moment, before answering, [You are descended from two bloodlines, are you not?]

[Yes...] Leon affirmed; he'd never really spoken with Nestor about it, though he and Xaphan hadn't been too careful when they'd occasionally brought it up. For a long moment, Leon thought Nestor was going to ask what the other bloodline was, but instead, he abruptly switched topics unsettlingly quickly.

[From what I can tell, that beam of light is trapping the Primal God within,] Nestor said, his tone carefully controlled. [It appears to be failing, however. Whatever that pirate did has destabilized it, and it's allowing more and more of the Primal God's power to leak through. That's how it's able to speak to you, and how it was able to resurrect that angel.]

[Is there a way to stop that light from shutting down?] Leon asked.

[I'm sure there is,] Nestor replied, [but without getting closer, I couldn't say. It's dangerous, but I would say your best bet for finding a way out of this place would be up at the summit of that big pyramid.]

There was a longing in Nestor's voice that Leon could pick up on; nothing particularly threatening, but definitely something that had Leon's eyebrows rising. That longing made some degree of sense, though, given what he knew of Nestor's studies before his death.

The Primal God had fallen into ominous silence with Leon no longer responding to it, but fortunately, it didn't seem to be doing anything magical and the angel wasn't making for him, so Leon guessed he still had some space to figure out his next move.

Leon recalled that Nestor had originally been poisoned by a fragment of the moon that had somehow become so steeped in divine magics that it emitted those magics in enormous quantities. Leon could understand Nestor's logic that they would have to get closer to the beam to puzzle it out, but he also had a bad feeling that doing so would not end well for him. Instead, he evaluated his other options.

With Jormun somehow transformed by a Primal God into a Great Horned Serpent and wrecking things up top, he didn't have all the time in the world, but with a glance upward at the cracked ceiling that was still pouring water into the cavern, he wondered how long he might have to wait for it to fill before he might be able to swim out.

'Days, *probably*,' he guessed, and he immediately ruled out trying to swim to safety. He guessed he was *deep* underneath the bed of the Endless Ocean—how far, he couldn't say, but the prospect of trying to swim past whatever horrors that called the deep ocean their home did not appeal to him.

Thinking about it, his thoughts turned to how he'd been teleported here. There was a teleportation portal in that abyssal pit below the eighth island, and if he was teleported here, then he could be teleported back. He would just have to find the controls.

Unfortunately, the sheer size of the cavern was working against him in that respect. The controls could be anywhere, and if he tried to use his magic senses to look for them, the angel would more likely than not detect them, and then him. He had almost no chance of finding those controls without raising a giant flag over himself indicating where he was, making him easy pickings for that angel—and he did *not* trust the Primal God when it said that the angel wouldn't attack him.

As if he could read Leon's mind, Nestor said, [Any enchantment controls are likely to be found near the center of the cavern...]

Leon stifled a grimace. Right next to the most important prisoner was hardly the best place for teleportation controls, but given what he could sense about the flow of the enormous amounts of magic within the room, there might be something to Nestor's suggestion.

At the very least, he couldn't see anything else with his eyes—the walls of the cavern were largely bare as far as he could see, and none of the pyramids, not even those big ones in the center, had anything remotely resembling an enchantment control console.

He didn't think that this, for all its risks, was going to amount to much, but he had no other plan. With a deep sigh, Leon whispered back to Nestor, [Fine, I'll try and get closer to the pyramid. But I'm not going to get too close to that angel.]

[Nor would I encourage you to do so,] Nestor replied, his smile evident in his tone. [Angels are rather powerful beings; a few survived the great war that ended the Primal Age, and every time one pops up somewhere, there's always a great hunt to bring it down. An enormous amount of force is always required, for they're tough as nails and have incredible healing powers. If they're brought down, however, their feathers can be plucked and planted, growing some truly *divine* fruit-bearing trees.]

[I'll keep that in mind,] Leon whispered as he did exactly the opposite. The angels could shit gold and piss potions that increase the size of a mage's soul realm and Leon still wouldn't willingly approach them. That angel, obviously not even at full power by the state of its wings, rendering the staircase into at least temporary nonexistence had profoundly affected Leon; even if he had his sword and armor, he wouldn't be challenging this creature to a fight, for he knew he'd lose. He'd just have to live without the feather-fruit trees.

But that still left him with the problem of getting past the angel. He still had his ring of invisibility, but the invisibility it provided was fragile, and he could easily see it breaking when he got closer to that

beam of light, or even if he got relatively close to the pyramid and the light flickered again. He needed that angel to move if he wanted to feel at all safe getting closer to that great pyramid.

To that end, instead of immediately making for the center of the cavern, he instead took about ten minutes and went around to several other nearby pyramids, leaving a few spells behind at each one. There wasn't much he could do to conceal them, but he did his best by applying them against walls that weren't facing the central avenue and then around corners near the previous spells. By the time he was done, he'd laid at least three dozen spells for the angel to 'find', plus a few more to grab its attention.

Only once all of that was finished did he return to the avenue and begin creeping toward the central pyramid.

As he passed the murals on both sides, he went slowly enough that he was able to spare some time to examine them. He couldn't go into great detail in his examination, and for that, he felt no small amount of sorrow. But Jormun was still up top, transformed into a Great Horned Serpent, and he couldn't spare the time.

Still, though, the details that he did see were fascinating. He saw scenes of immense, larger-than-life figures slaying each other and lording over others. He saw great works built and destroyed, and other intricate things that were too abstracted for him to understand. At the very least, he recognized images of the Primal Gods and Devils; the former quadrupedal, with human torsos, and a prominent brow that extended past their eyes into a pair of large, curved horns; the latter rather nebulous, reflecting their more gaseous physical nature, with no legs, a head that looked more like a long bump on its shoulders or an extended neck, a single ruby-red eye, and long gangly arms with nine-fingered hands.

He saw many other creatures, too, and not all in familiar shapes. He saw great wolves and lizards, birds and rats, fish and squid, and all manner of things that he couldn't even begin to describe. Things with hundreds of tentacles protruding from their bodies, things that looked like sentient trees or some other kind of flora, and some that even looked rather human, save for singular characteristics that set them apart, like a human body and the head of a wolf, or a human face but the body of a lion.

It was only about halfway down the avenue that he started to see beings that he could confidently describe as being human in shape, further adorned in monochrome grey paint, and compared to the other creatures depicted on the murals, they seemed tiny, almost insignificant. They appeared, and for a short while, the murals were devoted to them, showing them building crude huts and tilling the land.

Then, as far as Leon could tell, the Primal Beings came, as did several other beasts—the only time he paused as he stalked his way down the avenue was when he noticed one section of the continuous mural that showed seven reptilian beasts flying above a human settlement, each one of different colors, with two pairs of wings and precious gems set into their eyes. He guessed these seven otherwise identical creatures to be the seven Great Dragons, and his eyes lingered on the one made of onyx that had rubies for eyes and a red-orange crystal set into its forehead.

'*My Ancestor, the Great Black Dragon,*' he thought, a feeling of awe blooming in his chest before being smothered by dismissal and rejection. The Thunderbird had told him that it had been affronted that his mother managed to have him with his father, and thus decided to deny his existence, suppressing the power that he would've otherwise received after awakening his Bloodline.

As far as he was concerned, the power was in his blood—it was *his*. Rejecting the legacy of the Thunderbird Clan and make his own way was one thing, but when he thought his own blood being suppressed, when he thought about the choice of using that power or not being taken away from him, he couldn't help but scowl in anger and frustration.

Leon quickly moved on, casting only one bitter look back at the image of the seven Great Dragons before turning back.

[Nestor, what do you make of all these murals?] Leon whispered to his dead kinsman.

[As far as I can tell, they seem to be telling the story of the universe,] Nestor explained. [At first, there were just the Primal Beings: the Gods, Devils, and Divine Beasts. After a while, other life began to appear, and gained power. These forms of life became the Ascended Beasts, and began to upset the natural order of power that existed in the universe. This upset was light and minimal until the advent of humanity. The Primal Beings sought first to subjugate humanity, but eventually, under the leadership of the Great Lord Khosrow, humanity managed to cast down the old order and build a new one in its place.]

As Nestor narrated the familiar story told to him years ago by the Thunderbird, and more recently by Justin Isynos, Leon paid a little more attention to the murals. He saw the Primal Beings raising up humanity, teaching them to build better and grander, but for the most part, this building seemed designed to extol the virtues of the Primal Beings, with humanity building not homes and farms, but great temples and statues. Then, after a while, the scenes shifted, showing humanity making great sacrifices to and for the Primal Beings. It wasn't entirely clear on the mural, but it seemed these sacrifices came at great cost.

The murals then showed the Primal Beings killing humans in great numbers and razing their settlements to ash. It only ended when one human, depicted in gold instead of grey, led humanity against the Primal Beings in open rebellion.

[What do you make of it?] Leon wondered.

[This plane is the Divine Graveyard, and this place is one of the places where the Primal Gods were interred,] Nestor said. [I'd think that these murals were created to show what was being kept here, and why. It shows the beginning of time, and the abuses of power committed by those who preceded us. It's a justification and a warning, I think.]

[A warning against this one,] Leon said as his eyes drifted back toward the beam of light for a moment before going back to the mural, which showed in a place of great prominence and detail, a group of humans carving apart one of the centaur-like Primal Gods. [Wonder why they didn't do to this one what they did to the others.]

[Maybe they couldn't kill it,] Nestor hypothesized. [The Primal Beings are strange and far more connected to the universe than we could ever hope to be. Perhaps, for some of them, killing was simply out of the question. I wasn't there, I can't say anything more than that.]

[Mm hmm,] Leon grunted back.

With the thought of what was going on back on the surface spurring him on, Leon kept moving down the avenue, not sparing the murals too much more thought. It was only when the countdown he was keeping started getting low that he jumped back over the mural and started moving over pyramids again.

Only a few minutes after that, an explosion rocked through the cavern, though the sheer distance and the sounds of water pouring in muted it somewhat; about three miles behind him, Leon could see a great column of orange flame bathing one of the smaller pyramids. He doubted that would be enough to actually damage it, but the explosion had its intended effect—the angel paused in its pacing and turned toward the fire in the distance. It shrieked loudly enough that Leon had to cover his ears even where he was, miles away, and then it began sprinting down the avenue toward the fire faster than Leon was expecting. It blew past him and kept going, moving so quickly that it would reach its destination before he could reach the plaza.

Leon silently swore and began moving again. At the speeds it was moving, it could probably verify that he wasn't around those pyramids and be back in the plaza in less than ten minutes, so that was how much time he had to investigate the great pyramid and see if Nestor was right, and the enchantment control consoles were around there.

He jumped back down into the avenue and began running as fast as he could without completely abandoning all attempts to remain stealthy. His heart raced with panic, knowing that it would only be one mistake before the angel would be on him again, and he didn't think he'd be able to get away a second time. Even when he stepped into the plaza, he neither slowed nor calmed down, he just kept running for the long stairs that ran from the foot of the pyramid all the way to the flattened top.

Leon hit the surprisingly human-sized stairs that led over the pyramid's huge stone bricks and started ascending as quickly as his lightning-enhanced legs would allow. Behind him, he could hear other muffled explosions as the angel tripped his traps, but he didn't dare turn around or project his magic senses to see. He doubted that his traps would work that well on the creature, but if they bought him even a second, then they were worth setting up.

He slowed as he drew closer to the top, but the light that was emitted from the pyramid lessened as he ascended. It was nearly blinding from the base of the pyramid, but as Leon neared the top, it dimmed until it nearly vanished completely, reduced to little more than a thin beam emitting from the simple stone altar at the top of the pyramid.

However, the beam of light and bare altar were the only things of note at the top. There was no furniture, no control consoles, nothing else that he could see that could be of any possible

Chapter 596: Divine Intervention

The centaur-figure exited the white portal and hovered there in the air as the portal dissipated into countless motes of white light, which then winked out of existence. Only then did it begin to descend, and as it did, its aura grew even more intense as its body twisted and bent out shape. Its hind legs snapped and shrank as the metallic sheen of its angular body dulled and its harder corners smoothed.

Leon was forced into a kneeling position as its aura settled around his shoulders, his terror and anger growing in equal measure as the Primal God descended upon his soul realm. Its existence was not one

he could challenge; for all that it had been imprisoned for the past who-knew-how-many millions of years, its power hadn't waned nearly so far as to make it even approachable by Leon.

Once it touched down, its four hooves had turned into two feet, and its centaur-like form had morphed into something decidedly more human, and had shrunk until it was only slightly taller than Leon. It landed not too far in front of him, and its cold gaze seemed locked upon him, for its head remained fixed in his direction.

Slowly, it began to stride over toward him, each step as menacing as if it were fully armed and armored and had declared its hostile intent.

Leon didn't wallow in terror, though. All of his senses were screaming at him that he couldn't possibly take this thing on in battle, but his heart raced with both terror and rage, and the memory of Nestor seizing his body flashed through his mind. He was *not* going to repeat that event, this thing would have to kill him first.

With each slow, ponderous step this thing took toward him, he summoned his power and fought off as much of his fear as he could, making more room within him for the anger that would give him the strength he'd need to resist.

The thing spoke as it approached, its voice resonant and androgenous, "I'm not your enemy, Leon... I only want the best for you..." As it took each step, its body continued to morph, the white metal of its skin vanishing completely as it came within six steps of Leon. With five steps left, its skin took on a fleshy, human look, as a green shirt of woven silkgrass appeared on its torso and a pair of brown leather pants sprang into existence to cover its lower half.

At four steps, its horns bent and curved inward, shrinking and molding over its face like a mask—a mask that very quickly took on features that were most familiar to Leon. Aquiline nose, strong jawline, dark brown hair and matching eyes...

At three steps, Nestor tried to do something, but whatever he tried to do failed immediately as the Primal God simply raised its hand and a flash of light sent Nestor's ruby flying across Leon's soul realm, vanishing into the vibrant multicolored trees of his mirrored Forest of Black and White.

At two steps, the Primal God's body stopped shifting, and it had taken on a fairly lithe, but powerfully built and familiar figure—that of a man who spent his life out in the wild hunting and training.

Finally, at only a single step away from coming into reach of Leon, the Primal God's body settled onto its chosen form, and for the second time in barely more than a week, Leon found himself staring into the face of his father, but this time worn by the being that had forced its way into his soul realm instead of a magical facsimile conjured from the depths of his mind by a sadistic religious test.

Unlike then, however, Leon's first response wasn't instinctive fear, revulsion, and deep, crippling sorrow, but instead his mind filled with wrath. Killing intent exploded out of his body in an unending torrent, and for just the briefest of moments, the Primal God's aura was turned away. It was only just long enough for Leon to put a little bit of strength into his legs and arms, and operating entirely on instinct, he surged forward, forcing his left leg to take a step forward and pushing himself out of his kneeling position. His right hand curled into a fist, and in his blind wrath, Leon barely even noticed that his fingers were coated in black flame.

He lunged with everything he had within him, aiming a punch hook for the mask of his father this thing *dared* to wear. His fist, covered in black flame, descended upon it with all the wrath and desperation of a dragon backed into a corner.

And it simply held out its left hand and caught his fist like it was a ball thrown by a toddler. Leon pushed back against it, but slowly, the black flame that wreathed his hand was suppressed and forced back, though not quite extinguished, and the Primal God's aura settled back around him.

"Good," it cooed, its androgenous voice dropping in pitch and tone until it became nearly indistinguishable from Artorias', with only a hint of resonance to speak to its falseness. "Get angry, little lion. Call forth your power, let it crash down upon me. With your invocation of the powers denied to you, this should go so much faster."

Pain suddenly wracked Leon's body, while at the same time, his soul realm began to shake like it was undergoing an earthquake.

Leon tried to summon his power to defend himself, but he could barely stand against the power of this primordial being, let alone call lightning from the sky. Pain was his world, and his power was beyond his control.

He began to scream; he couldn't help it. Whatever this being was trying to do, it involved tearing apart his soul realm at the seams. In the far distance, he was vaguely aware that the mountains surrounding his recreation of the Forest of Black and White were crumbling, cracking apart and dissolving back into the Mists of Chaos. He could feel the loss of every pebble, every grain of sand as if it were his own flesh that was melting in the light of this Primal God.

Leon mustered all the willpower he yet possessed. With all of his mental fortitude, he tried to pull away from the Primal God; it wasn't gripping his hand all that tightly, even a weak yank ought to be enough to free himself...

With what felt like a titanic pull that could've moved mountains, Leon leaned back and tried to rip his hand out of the grip of his father's imposter. The black flame died away, and Leon slid his hand free as his fist relaxed, leaving the Primal God's hand surprisingly burned and blackened, though it didn't seem at all in pain.

Leon stumbled back, falling backward onto the ground as the Primal God loomed above him, a slight smile playing across his father's lips.

"You struggle against the inevitable," it said in his father's voice. "You struggle against your own good. The universe has been without its proper custodians for millions of years, but now that I am returning, the proper order can be reasserted. Prosperity and righteousness can be brought back to existence, and if you but submit, then you shall be my right hand! You shall be the instrument I will use to dispel the grandiose delusions of your people and return them to their true purpose!"

Leon groaned, pain still wracking his body as his soul realm continued to dissolve miles away. Even worse, he could feel the foundations of the entire island cracking under the strain of this being's very presence. His soul realm was crumbling slowly right now, but he didn't need to have all the knowledge of the Thunderbird to know that this was only going to speed up the longer this monster remained within him.

But he couldn't stand against it conventionally. He was powerless before it as he was before Nestor during their first engagement several months ago; his power was effectively useless. He needed to find another way.

His mind raced, but nothing sprang to mind. This was a Primal God, and nothing he thought of seemed even remotely effective enough. This foe was just too far beyond him.

Unfortunately, he couldn't think of anything he could possibly do in time, and the God snapped its fingers as it contorted Artorias' face into a soothing, fatherly smile. Instantly, Leon felt all of his limbs seize up as an ancient rune appeared in the air beside the God. This wasn't the same as the rune Nestor had used to imprison him, but the effect was the same, and he fell to the ground completely immobile, his power lost to him.

As he laid there on his back, his blood boiling with wrath and fear, the Primal God sauntered over, that same smile on its stolen face beaming down at him.

"Fear not, little lion," it whispered. "Though the process may hurt, when it's over, you shall be the right hand of divinity!"

It then held out its hand, and Leon felt more power than he had in his entire soul realm erupt from the God's fingers and reach out toward him. As soon as it touched him, the pain he felt was doubled, and he felt like his blood was literally boiling in addition to the metaphorical sense.

But he couldn't scream. In fact, whatever the God had done to him made him relax as he laid on the ground as pain ripped through his nerves.

Soon enough, his entire existence became pain, and all of his other senses began to dim. For the third time in less than a day, he felt his consciousness fall away as he slipped into the merciful dark.

—

Leon's soul realm continued to break apart, shattering and dissolving back into mist. Distant mountains broke apart as his soul realm shook, and all that Leon had built slowly vanished.

The Primal God stood above Leon's unconscious form, the same smile plastered across the face of Artorias that the creature wore. It simply kept at it, only pausing for a moment when a speck of something dark appeared in the distance. But, as the speck grew bigger until it was identifiable as a dreadful storm cloud speeding toward Leon's soul realm from deep within the Mists of Chaos, the Primal God's smile turned into a deep, hateful scowl, and it stepped away from Leon as the young man's soul realm ceased to terribly shake.

By the time the storm cloud had filled the horizon and arrived at the island floating in the mists, Leon's soul realm had largely stabilized... only to start shaking again for a different reason.

Horrific bolts of lightning suddenly lit up the storm cloud as it spread across the sky, silver-blue in color, each one accompanied by deafening thunder. The stagnant wind within the soul realm began to whip and howl, and rain suddenly fell in great sheets that blanketed everything that Leon had built.

From within that dreadful storm came an equally dreadful screech of fury and death, and the storm was magnified by a deep, nightmarish cloud of killing intent. A moment later, a great bird came bolting out

of the storm clouds, her gorgeous brown and gold feathers alight with grand arcs of silver-blue lightning, her yellow avian eyes blazing with wrath and indignation.

If Leon were awake, he would've recognized her as the Thunderbird, but at least three times larger than her already giant raptor form usually was.

Not even a second later, her body vanished within a titanic bolt of silver-blue lightning. The Primal God had barely enough time to raise its arms in front of its face in defense of itself before the bolt fell upon it...

... and did exactly nothing. With clear confusion, the Primal God lowered its arms, only to realize that the bolt had merely passed by it, for it wasn't the Thunderbird's target. Instead, she now stood just in front of Leon's throne, standing protectively between Leon, who was now slumped across the throne still unconscious, and the unspeakably ancient deity.

"Thunderbird..." the Primal God crowed, its voice increasing in pitch back to its normal resonant, androgenous tones.

The Thunderbird, her bronze skin flashing with lightning, her pure white peplos dress billowing in the hurricane winds, her yellow avian eyes glaring down at the God like it was nothing more than an ant, snapped her fingers, and all the rain falling in Leon's soul realm vanished. The storm clouds and terrific winds remained, but the rain immediately ceased on her whim.

"You wear the face of one of my descendants," she sharply growled, her aura thick with tremendous killing intent, "but to my eyes, you look like Krith'is, the Flesh Ripper."

The easy-going smile the Primal God wore on Artorias' face thinned in displeasure, while at the same time, its head twisted slightly and bent in the tiniest of bows—it accepted the name that the Thunderbird ascribed to it.

"For what reason have you invaded this place?" the Thunderbird continued, her attitude imperious, her power radiant in its obvious threat.

"For why do you ask?" the Flesh Ripper inquisitively replied as its aura rose to match the Thunderbirds, and then surpassed hers in a subtle show of strength. "Surely, you have many descendants, I'm surprised you would waste your time coming to this one..."

The Thunderbird, uncowed, responded, "This one is my personal apprentice. He will do great things, of that I'm certain. The universe will bend to his whim, and through him, my name and my line shall know greater glories than those anyone else has ever experienced."

The Primal God gave the unconscious Leon a meaningful look. "Unless my eyes deceive, he appears to be drooling on himself."

The Thunderbird didn't verbally answer, but when an awesome bolt of lightning crossed the sky and shook Leon's soul realm with its thunder, her response was clear.

"You will have to pick another descendant to carry on your legacy," the Flesh Ripper continued, "for I'm pressing my claim upon this one. The power contained within his blood is of better use in my hands than

in yours. If you want him to truly accomplish the greatest of deeds and win the highest of honors, then you'd do well to step aside."

"You have no claim upon him, and I shall *not* step aside," the Thunderbird said as the lightning that danced across her body intensified.

The Flesh Ripper's smile turned dangerous as the features of Artorias vanished, replaced instead with the rapidly growing metallic horned centaur-like figure that was the Primal God's truer form.

"I did not fear you when you were intact," the horned deity growled. "I do not fear this shadow of you now."

"If you had the power to move me, you wouldn't have bothered with words," the Thunderbird said with arrogant smile. "You're crippled by time spent in your cage..."

"I'm yet more than capable enough to deal with an upstart sparrow," the Flesh Ripper shot back as it took a couple threatening steps forward.

"Maybe..." the Thunderbird conceded as her body posture suddenly relaxed. "... Maybe you *could* defeat me if we were to fight over my descendant..."

The Flesh Ripper paused, sensing a 'but'. Instead, a sudden flash of power lit up the Mists of Chaos like the sun itself had wound its way through space and into Leon's soul realm. Bright red-orange light filled the entirety of his soul realm, bathing everything within in its glory and might. The auras of both the Flesh Ripper and the Thunderbird utterly paled in comparison to its majesty, and just its presence alone sent the Mists of Chaos roiling away and scattered the Thunderbird's storm.

"... but I didn't come here alone," the Thunderbird whispered triumphantly as a single burning red-orange eye was revealed, surrounded by sparkling black scales. It was miles and miles away, and yet it still completely dominated the sky, speaking to the gargantuan size of the creature that was still largely obscured by the Mists of Chaos.

The Flesh Ripper didn't need the mist to part to know that creature's form, though. The ancient deity had seen it with its own eyes many times in the past, and always under the worst of circumstances. This time, it was Krith's turn to feel fear racing throughout its body.

The red-orange light emanating from the central eye of the Great Black Dragon grew brighter and brighter, and began to focus and narrow in scope until only the Primal God was within it. And then, a high-pitched whine began to fill the air as the Great Black Dragon's power spiked even higher, matched only by the Flesh Ripper's screams of pain and horror.

—

Leon found himself in a pleasant dream, surrounded by Maia, Elise, and Valeria back his villa in the Bull Kingdom's capital. They were having fun, eating and chatting, when suddenly Leon remembered what he was supposed to be doing. All the warmth he felt disappeared, his dream came crashing down, and his eyes opened.

He was still in his soul realm, and he laid upon the marble platform that supported his throne.

For just a moment, as he laid there, his eyes staring unfocused up at the clear light-grey mist that filled the sky and everywhere else in this strange space outside of his soul realm, he felt strangely at peace.

But then everything that had happened within the past day came crashing back in, and he jerked upright with an epic groan that managed to pack his anger, frustration, pain, and confusion into just a few seconds. He glanced around and, once he realized that the Primal God was nowhere to be seen, he relaxed.

“Fuck,” he murmured as his body practically lost all strength, the memories of being beaten and thrown around and knocked unconscious despite the power he’d attained so far hit him again and again. “Fuck! Fuck!”

He kept repeating curses as his hands went to cover his face, and after a few more seconds, his cursing devolved into wild screaming. He laid there like that for a long while.

His frustrated and pained screaming eventually petered out, and he just laid on the throne platform, limp, his hands still covering his face. He slowly became aware that the Thunderbird was present in her avian form, perched on the stone arch he’d built for her, but he couldn’t bring himself to care all that much.

It seemed she picked up on his current mental state, for when she spoke, the magically-conjured words that came out of her golden beak were dripping with trepidation, caution, sympathy, and motherly concern.

“Leon,” she whispered. “I understand that you’ve had a bad day, but the day isn’t over. You need to get back up, and we need to have a few words.”

Chapter 597: Searching for the Exit

The Thunderbird was urging Leon to get up, but he ignored her for a moment. By his estimation, both his magic body and his physical body were fine, though his soul realm had been severely damaged at the edges—he’d have to repair that damage before continuing to gain any power. However, for all that he was physically all right, he felt like he had a foot in the grave. He knew that he had to get up to continue dealing with the current situation, but he needed a moment to compose himself.

To that end, one of the first things he did was probe the connection he shared with Maia. It seemed that either whatever that Primal God had done to his soul realm had blocked him from speaking with her again, or he’d never spoken to her in the first place when they linked back up. He supposed everything he’d heard from her had probably been the Primal God spurring him to make hasty decisions by presenting something as an ongoing threat to his river nymph lover.

Or maybe it wasn’t just that; Leon had a bad feeling that even if there wasn’t a gargantuan horned snake laying waste to Sigebert’s fleet, there was still something terrible going on back at the island’s remnants. So, he quickly took a deep breath and focused on forcing himself to push all of dark thoughts down until he had a better time to process all of them.

He was ready in short order, but he could tell from the look of concern visible in the Thunderbird’s avian face that he probably looked about as well as he felt.

“You said we needed to have words,” he croaked. “So let’s have some words...”

If the Thunderbird thought he was going to continue after that, she was sorely mistaken, and it seemed that took her off-guard a little. There was a short silence between them as Leon laid back on the floor and stared up at the misty sky, wondering just how in the hells he'd gotten into this mess, and he wasn't in any particular mood to talk, or even to feign politeness. He hardly even cared that Nestor was still lost somewhere out in his soul realm.

"You just faced a Primal God," the Thunderbird whispered, though her alien voice was still perfectly audible to Leon. "You survived. That's no small thing."

"Can hardly attribute that to me. How exactly did that happen?" Leon asked as he shifted position so that he could look at the Thunderbird out of the corner of his eye. For a moment, he thought about the Primal God transforming to look like Artorias, and he wondered if he were truly looking at the Thunderbird, especially since he already knew from the look-a-like that the Primal God knew what she looked like. However, her aura was identical to how it always was, carrying that unique blend of lightning, wind, and water, along with a hint of something a little more special that he couldn't quite identify, but was probably what gave their lightning its mind-protecting properties.

She was the Thunderbird, there wasn't much doubt in his mind about that.

"The God that invaded here was well-known during the Primal Age," the Thunderbird slowly said, her voice tinged with both apprehension and maybe a layer of guilt. "He was known for taking apart living things and putting them back together in different ways. No doubt he'd describe what he did a little more elegantly, but he deserves no such courtesy from us."

Her feathers puffed out a bit in indignation and affronted pride, and Leon couldn't help but let a smile lightly grace his lips.

"He was originally responsible for the creation of angels, I believe. It seems he somehow survived the genocide of the Primal Gods and found a way to call you here and invade your soul realm."

"Where is he now?" Leon asked. He felt quite a bit of urgency fighting against his mental exhaustion when he thought about Xaphan, Maia, the rest of his retinue, and the Bull fleet, but with the Thunderbird here, he felt none when he thought about the Primal God. Just quiet anger and resentment.

"Gone," the Thunderbird replied. "For whatever reason, the humans did not kill him when they seized the Nexus. The Great Black Dragon fixed that error."

Leon nodded in acknowledgment before what the Thunderbird said truly sank in. When it did a moment later, he bolted upright and stared at her.

"The Great Black Dragon felt it rooting around in your blood, and took issue with that," she explained, though her tone was far less arrogant and didactic than usual. She sounded almost *soothing* as she explained what happened after she showed up. "If I fought that Primal God as I am now, setting aside whether or not I would even win, I think you would've been killed in the fallout. But the Great Black Dragon had no such issues. It smote that arrogant bastard with ease, eliminating it for good. You'll not have to worry about him ever again."

Leon stared at his Ancestor, his mouth agape. He briefly wondered just how a being in the same position as the Thunderbird could summon enough power to kill that monster, but for now, that question could wait. "So... the Great Black Dragon actually... showed itself?" he asked.

"He did," the Thunderbird replied. "Not for very long, and he screwed back off after his job was done, but he came here when he felt something trying to undo the suppression effect he placed upon your blood."

Leon's eyes drifted from the Thunderbird and ventured back out into the mists, slowly widening in thought and wonder. He wondered what exactly his life might've been like if his other powerful Ancestor acknowledged him, he wondered what he might accomplish if that power was his. He also wondered what his life might've been like if that overgrown lizard wasn't connected to him at all—he would've been killed by that Primal God, probably, but he also didn't think he'd even have been in that mess. The Great Black Dragon denied his existence and the power he inherited, but Leon's entire life had essentially been defined by his connection to the Divine Beast; so much so that he even just trying to contemplate his life without that connection was nearly impossible. If he'd been born at all, he probably would've grown up a proper son of House Raime, a noble of the Bull Kingdom, his father married to some other noblewoman. Everything would've been different.

In that case, he didn't think he'd ever have known the Thunderbird personally, met Xaphan, or Maia. He didn't like to admit it, but for as much as he'd gotten from the Thunderbird, the Great Black Dragon had arguably more impact upon his life.

But Leon pushed those thoughts out of his head as he turned back to the Thunderbird. He needed to compartmentalize until he could meet back up with his people. Already, the initial shock of his losses was wearing off, and his desire to return to Maia and the others was rising quickly, overpowering everything else.

"Is there anything of critical importance that we need to discuss?" he asked.

The Thunderbird's eyes narrowed for a moment. "That Primal God did muck around in your body a bit before Great Black destroyed him. I'm unsure how much he accomplished, but if you have something you need to do, I suppose this conversation can wait until a more opportune time. We need to evaluate your condition."

"I think it has to wait," Leon said as he turned toward his throne. "My body is still lying on top of that pyramid, I need to find a way out of it."

"That shouldn't be too difficult," the Thunderbird said as she closed her eyes. "It looks like that the Primal God was able to interact with the enchantments within this tomb from his own resting place, so finding the enchantments that control this place shouldn't be too difficult for you."

Leon, before he forgot, waved his hand, and Nestor's ruby flew out of the woods by Leon's Mind Palace and landed back on his stand.

"What is going on?!" he shouted as soon the ruby touched down.

"Later," Leon growled as he sat down on his throne, and a moment later, opened his eyes with his mind back in his physical body.

He was still lying where he'd fallen at the top of the pyramid, but as if to underscore how much time had passed, when he glanced back down at the plaza, the entire place was starting to well and truly flood. About two feet or so of water now covered the entire floor, though strangely, the many thousands of angel skeletons that decorated the plaza remained right where they were, unmoving.

It was a little harder to see them, though, because the great beam of light that had once connected this pyramid to its counterpart hanging from the ceiling had vanished—presumably shut off now that its occupant was dead. More comfortingly—and, at the same time, more *chillingly*—about halfway up the pyramid's large central staircase was the dead body of the angel that the Primal God had resurrected, looking like it had fallen in the midst of a mad scramble to climb the steps. Its body was still largely intact, though all of its feathers had vanished, and its flesh was slowly dissolving into motes of light. It was going slowly enough that Leon guessed the entire massive cavern would flood before it finished dissolving, but Leon only registered that it was dead before turning his attention back to his surroundings.

[All right,] he said to Nestor and the Thunderbird, [what am I looking for?]

[No consoles in sight?] Nestor asked, his tone impatient and affronted from how Leon had treated him, but at least cooperative.

[None that I can see,] Leon replied.

[A place like this wouldn't be controlled through consoles,] the Thunderbird replied. [It likely uses ancient runes in its design.]

As she said this, Leon heard Nestor groan.

[What am I missing?] Leon asked.

[Control consoles are the best way to control enchantments using modern runes,] Nestor dejectedly explained. [They're precise and static—easy to use, but locked to one position. The control schemes used for ancient runes are as esoteric as the runes themselves are, more about sensing and manipulating the flow of magic in an entire area instead of using a tiny spark of power to activate a runic glyph. *Much* more intensive and difficult to manipulate using your own magic power.]

Leon nodded, but as he did, a loud cracking sound resounded through the cavern as the already destabilized roof became even more so, and another great torrent of water began to fall through a new crack.

[That's all very interesting, but I think you should just stick to what I need to do,] Leon said to Nestor.

[Spread out your magic senses,] Nestor instructed, and Leon immediately complied. [Don't focus on the material things, though; instead, focus your scans on the magic in the cavern, and how it flows.]

Leon did so, but it was hard to just ignore everything else. His efforts paid off, though, and he could sense the magic in the air—it wasn't so much a cloud as it was an ocean. Instead of billowing together, flowing all in one continuous way, there were many currents and eddies flowing throughout the cavern. Most of these currents flowed into the uncountable number of pyramids that had been scattered about this massive cavern, with at least four or five currents of magic flowing into each.

The great pyramid, however, had many more than that, and all of them converging somewhere within the pyramid, as far as Leon could tell. It was like all of this magic was just flowing through the black volcanic stone and sinking deep into the pyramid.

[Do you sense the currents?] Nestor asked.

[I do,] Leon said.

[Good. Now comes the hard part. Have you ever seen someone play a string instrument? Like a violin or something like that?]

[Yes.]

[Then you'll be fairly familiar with this concept. Basically, think of these currents like the strings on those instruments. You have to reach out with your magic power and 'pluck' the currents to control the enchantments they're connected to. But you can't just pluck senselessly; much like an instrument, if you just start messing with its strings without rhyme or reason, you won't make music, and if you pluck the currents of magic created by an ancient rune, you'll very easily kill yourself in some unspeakably horrific way. And what you need right now will be fairly complex. You're going to need to not only identify which 'strings' you need, but also 'play' them properly to get the desired effect.]

[That... makes sense, I suppose,] Leon said as he frowned, his eyes darting around the cavern as he took in the thousands and thousands of currents of magic power flowing through the air, let alone any that might be in the walls or flowing through the pyramids.

[You can narrow it down, though,] Nestor hurriedly explained, his tone somewhat conciliatory, as if he understood exactly how Leon was feeling. [You need teleportation, so focus on its three main components: light, lightning, and darkness. If you can sense one of these strings of power with just those magical elements, then that's probably the one you need. Personally, I would focus my search on any strings that are not connected to any of these pyramids, for any teleportation enchantments would have little need to be connected to prisons. If that fails to turn up any promising leads, then focus first on the biggest pyramids and work your way through the smaller pyramids until something catches your eye.]

Before Nestor had even finished talking, Leon had already started scanning through the currents of power. Most ambient magic power was utterly chaotic in its flow, and without taking much time to examine it, the flow of power within this cavern felt much the same way. However, the longer that Leon took to examine it, the more respect he felt for whomever had set it up, for it was masterful work. He would've expected something like this to be all tangled up, with the 'strings' of power constantly crisscrossing and twisting around each other. However, the more he looked at it, the more it made perfect sense. The pyramids weren't built haphazardly, and neither were the enchantments that flowed through them; they weren't *quite* laid out like a grid, but they were close and had much the same logic to them. It was easy enough to pick out those currents that didn't flow into the pyramids, for they were largely confined to the upper third or so of the cavern.

Once he detected that, Leon started to analyze their magics in greater detail. He focused mostly on simply identifying their element; most were related to earth, water, and darkness magic. He assumed these were mostly just structural enchantments to keep this immense cavern from collapsing upon itself, and to keep water out—not that it seemed to be doing that good of a job, though Leon could see

that there were great holes torn in the 'web' of enchantments from where the ceiling had been cracked by the Primal God.

He quickly found a stream of magic power that felt to his magic senses almost identical to the still, silent, and stifling spatial tunnels that he'd experienced, and he figured that was what he was looking for. He could sense the trademark mix of lightning, light, and darkness magic within as well, but that sensation was weaker than other teleportation enchantments he'd seen—since this was apparently a result of ancient runes rather than modern runes, he supposed that was to be expected, but it still threw him off a bit.

As he was about to tell Nestor what he'd found, another thunderous boom resounded throughout the cavern, and another crack opened in the ceiling, increasing the torrents of water spilling in. Even worse, Leon felt the attention of something dark on the other side of that crack, as if there was something large and powerful investigating where all this water was going.

[Think I found it, Nestor, but let's hurry up, I don't think I'm going to be alone down here for much longer,] Leon said as he shivered in dread. He could still vividly remember making eye contact with Jormun's kraken, and he didn't want to repeat that experience with something that lived even deeper in the Endless Ocean.

[That's unfortunate, because we've reached the hard part,] Nestor said. [You have to figure out how to pluck this string in the exact way that will force it to teleport you out.]

[How in the hells am I supposed to do that?!] Leon shouted back in growing anxiety. He took a glance down at the plaza and saw that the water was rising much more quickly than it had been initially. Even as high up the great pyramid as he was, he guessed he had no more than about a half hour before the entire pyramid would be beneath the tide.

[Compare the string to the others,] Nestor hurriedly explained. [Look at how it flows! Get an idea of how strong the current is supposed to be and look for places that don't match that pattern!]

Leon surveyed the entire stream of power that was within range of his magic senses—the cavern was more than large enough that even with his range of roughly twenty miles, he still couldn't fit the entire cavern into his magic senses. However, that was still enough space for Leon to analyze the flow of magic and look for any irregularities.

Fortunately, he didn't see many. There were a few places where the stream tightened and sped up, and a few where the stream expanded and slowed down. Leon quickly pointed these areas out to Nestor as he kept a nervous eye on the rising water.

[It's hard to say what's the best course of action,] Nestor mused, to Leon's mounting frustration. Being away from Maia, and in this situation had him itching to leave as soon as possible. [The general rule of thumb is that the narrower a flow like this is, the more recently it was used. However, we can't say what that thing was doing before you arrived, or even what it was doing while you were out.]

[It wasn't doing anything after it foolishly invaded Leon's soul realm,] the Thunderbird declared. [It had no opportunity to.]

[So that just leaves what we know,] Leon responded. [And what I know... or what I *think* I know is that its last use of teleportation magic was moving me to that small cave and then leading me here, so its last use of teleportation magic won't be too helpful. What I think I need...]

Leon trailed off as he began examining the stream of magic in more detail, taking in everything he could about how the magic flowed and interacted with the other countless streams of magic in the cavern. If he wanted to leave, he figured the best way to go about it was to try and follow wherever the Primal God had sent Jormun, and that meant he'd likely need the second-to-last use of the teleportation enchantment, which he managed to locate in fairly short order.

With one last glance down at the water, noting that it had now risen high enough up the pyramid that the skeleton of the angel that the Primal God had resurrected had wet toes, Leon reached out with his magic to the stream of magic power that represented the teleportation enchantment.

[How do I do this?] Leon asked as his element-less power started to wrap around the stream.

[We have to be carefu—]

[Just pluck the string, it shouldn't matter how much strength your use.] the Thunderbird answered, cutting Nestor off. [Just manipulate your magic like you would another limb.]

Leon's mind focused as his body tensed up in strange exertion. It was hard going, he'd never tried something like this before, and there were more than two miles between him and the spot he'd identified, but he was a seventh-tier mage and this didn't have the same intensive power requirements as a fight, so he managed fairly well despite the difficulty.

However, just as his magic power was tightening around the string—it seemed almost solid and resisted his magic power's natural attempts to mix with it, leading to a strange sensation in his fingers where he could almost *feel* the stream of power like it was an actual string of an instrument—an enormous tentacle of inky-black darkness burst from the crack in the ceiling where Leon had sensed something's attention.

Leon's eyes widened, and without any further hesitation, he used his magic power to jerk quite hard on the string of power. He had no idea what would happen next, but he placed his faith in Nestor and the Thunderbird, trusting that they knew what they were talking about.

Immediately, it seemed that his faith was rewarded as the string vibrated in response to his clumsy handling, and the magic power that he'd projected from his body began to vibrate in turn. He felt his body then begin to shake in response. He soon found himself shaking so hard that he found it difficult to keep his eyes open or his teeth to stop chattering.

In the distance, he could see with his magic senses the black tentacle of darkness magic forcing itself further and further into the cavern, and the dark shape of something behind it large enough to stop up the ocean water and with a great enough aura that he couldn't identify it, but before he could get any more details, a sphere of darkness appeared from nowhere and wrapped around him, and he found himself whisked away to he knew not where.

Chapter 598: Placing Trust in the Dead

Leon twisted and turned through another teleportation tunnel until he landed on solid ground so suddenly that he immediately lost his balance and fell on his ass.

With a grunt of surprise, he quickly oriented himself with the dark place he now found himself in and pushed himself to his feet.

Once again, he found himself alone in a dark cave, but unlike after being pushed into the pit by Jormun, this cave was much, *much* larger. It was just as empty, though—or so it first appeared.

[You all right, boy?] the Thunderbird thundered into Leon's mind.

"Yeah," he instinctively responded out loud as he turned in place as he took in everything that he could see and sense. "What happened?"

[It appears that the enchantment that you activated lacked a target, so it simply grabbed you instead,] Nestor explained. [Hard to really say for sure without actually being to see what happened, but I would hazard a guess and say that you'd have to pluck that string of power in a different way than you did to designate a target, and without a target, the enchantment was designed to teleport the user. Pretty standard design, to be honest.]

"Makes sense," Leon whispered. "Kind of hard to wrap my head around it without being able to see the runes and know what they're doing."

[And such is just one of the many reasons why the ancient runes are hardly used anymore,] Nestor replied. [Though, you'd do well to study them, they're far more powerful than modern runes if used correctly...]

"I think you've made that abundantly clear already," Leon growled, his mind quickly turning back to the events at Nestor's lab. Nestor wisely stopped talking, and Leon turned his attention back to the cavern he now found himself in.

The cavern was shaped like a tall cylinder, and he stood in the center, with all the black stone walls about two hundred feet away, and so smooth that they could only have been created, not formed naturally. The ceiling, meanwhile, stretched so far above him that not even with his magic senses could he see it. He took a few seconds to inspect the walls both nearer to the ground and higher up with his magic senses, but it soon became clear that they were bereft of any details that might catch his eye.

The floor, however, was where his interest was captured.

The black volcanic stone didn't immediately make it apparent, but there were shallow grooves carved into the floor by obviously magical means—they were too even and precisely carved to have been done by hand or nature. As Leon bathed the area in his magic senses, he quickly realized that he stood in the center of a large array of several huge, terribly intricate enchantments, each one made up of thousands of runes. Unfortunately, he couldn't make much sense of them, for they were mostly made of more ancient runes. The modern runes that made up part of the enchantment array were almost entirely relegated to the outer edge of the room.

"What is all this?" he asked aloud. He felt Nestor's own magic senses project out of him, though the dead man's range was awful. He didn't feel it, but he assumed the Thunderbird was doing the same and inspecting the area around him.

[It's not a training center,] Nestor observed. [I can't see the whole thing, but I can also rule out anything designed for war, defense, or manufacturing.]

The Thunderbird was silent, and with not much else to do, Leon crouched down and caught his breath. He'd told the Thunderbird he was fine, but that was mostly just physically. He still couldn't contact Maia, and the anxiety was starting to get to him. He stood back up after taking a few deep breaths, though—he needed to get to her and the others, and crying on the ground over his mistakes and failures wasn't going to make that any easier.

Turning his attention back to the few parts of the array that weren't made of ancient runes, he noticed something right away.

[There's a lot of light runes here,] he observed, going back to speaking with his soul realm residents mentally. [Maybe this place was built for medical purposes?]

[Light runes aren't just used for medical purposes,] Nestor said. [When used by a warrior, light can be a dangerous weapon, and it can greatly heighten the speed of its user. Light is also a great defensive option, if you know how to use it. To heal is only one narrow aspect of its applications, and even then, it's just an offshoot of what light magic truly excels in: interacting with the body.]

[How do you mean?] Leon asked, thinking he understood but asking for clarification anyway.

[You know that darkness magic is unparalleled when it comes to interacting with the mind, correct?] Nestor asked, taking on a didactic tone.

[I'm well aware of that, yes,] Leon replied with little patience in his voice.

[There're no opposites when it comes to the magical elements, but in this case, I think that saying that light is the opposite of darkness is not unwarranted,] Nestor lectured. [Just as darkness can influence the mind, light magic can influence the body in all kinds of ways, not just with healing magic.]

[Interesting,] Leon conceded, [but that hardly narrows down what these enchantments are used for...] His tone was more bitter about the situation than accusatory against Nestor, but the dead man got defensive anyway.

[Without being able to see it, there's not much more I can do,] Nestor said.

[You're not leaving my soul realm,] Leon shot back.

[Wasn't asking to, just pointing out my limitations!]

Suddenly, the Thunderbird spoke, and the other two duly shut their mouths.

[This is blood magic,] she murmured, though her inhuman voice still resonated within Leon like the rumbling of distant thunder. [I'd also say this is a three-dimensional enchantment, the whole thing is just powered down right now. If it were active, then there'd likely be runes floating through the air. These enchantments on the ground are little more than anchors and channels for magic power.]

[Is there a way to turn it on?] Leon asked.

[You want to turn on a mysterious enchantment that does who-knows-what and is strongly connected to light magic?] Nestor asked in alarm. [Unwise.]

Leon remembered that Nestor originally died due to poisoning by light magic, but he felt that was different—he wasn't messing around with a chunk of rock that had been filled with divine power.

[There's nothing else here!] Leon protested as he raised his arms to futilely gesture at the walls. [I don't have my flight suit, and this is all that's here! No doors! No ladders! No other enchantments or anything else magical that I can see! So, yes, I'd like to activate this and see what it does and if it can get me back to my people and out of this hole.]

When he was done, he took a deep breath. Failures and time spent away from his friends and family while a watery hell was likely being released on the surface was testing the limits of his patience. He was keeping himself in check as much as he could, but his heart raced so fast that he could hear the blood pumping through his head as clear as day.

[All right, all right, no need to jump down by throat,] Nestor muttered. [I'd be willing to bet that something like this is self-powered, so you're not going to find a power source—you are the power source.]

[So I should be able to just activate it myself?] Leon asked.

The Thunderbird answered, cutting Nestor off just as he was about to respond.

[This thing... It looks rather familiar.]

She went silent for a long moment, during which neither Leon nor Nestor spoke a word.

When she spoke again, she said, [Leon, I don't think this is a dangerous thing, but I would still highly advise caution when dealing with it. I can't sense anything else in your vicinity that can help, but such a thing as this was likely built by the Primal God—I can see traces of its power in the stone. This place... was not built for you. Do what you must... but use caution.]

Leon gravely nodded, taking the Thunderbird's words to heart.

[In that case,] he replied, [I'll try whatever I can, first.]

He was a seventh-tier mage, there had to be *something* else he could do. The walls were too smooth to climb, but maybe he could use his strength to carve handholds. He instinctively flexed his right hand, calling upon his family's blade, but when it didn't appear out of his soul realm, his mood instantly dropped a notch. Still, he quickly ran over to the wall and felt around.

Unfortunately, the stone was hard and dense; he felt like he might be able to punch and kick and blast a few good handholds from the ground, but the ceiling was more than twenty miles away—and for all he knew, it could be much more than that—and he wouldn't have the space or the leverage to do that further up. Climbing was out; he'd need another way.

He returned to the center of the room and stared directly up, his seventh-tier eyes straining to see anything in the gloom. The place wasn't completely pitch black, so there had to be light coming from *somewhere*... Unfortunately, he couldn't see anything; there were no visible light sources, despite the dim light that was undeniably present.

Leon conjured a ball of fire into his hand. He did his best to make sure that he packed it with enough power so that it would burn for a long time, and then used as much of his strength as he dared in such an enclosed and subterranean place to fire it straight into the air.

He watched it rise like a ball of molten stone fired from a Flame Lance, casting a great deal of light into the cavern. Not as much as a flare would've, but even with his bow, a flare would've only been able to travel a mile at most up the shaft. His fireball rose higher, and higher, and higher, and higher. He watched it until it became little more than a tiny speck far, far above him, shining like the Nexus in the night sky.

And then it winked out, and Leon had only learned that the shaft was almost unfathomably tall.

Still, he decided to try one last thing, and only if that failed would he try the enchantment on the floor.

Leon gathered his magic power, preparing himself to use magic that he'd only used on rare occasions; his magic power blew through his body like an unceasing gust of wind, and his element-less power became that of wind magic. Wind then began to gather around his legs, rising in a small cyclone in the same manner that Leon remembered Nestor had used when his magic body invaded Leon's soul realm. Leon doubted his ability to fly without Anzu or his flight suit, but he'd give it a try in any way he could.

Leon packed his legs with power and jumped. He easily cleared a hundred feet and kept going, while at the same time, he pushed his meager skill in wind magic to the limit as he tried to keep himself not only aloft, but also rising.

For a moment, he thought it might work; he rose up quite high, and he could feel his wind magic giving him a boost, but then he began to slow down, and then when he wasn't able to properly adjust his wind magic, he found himself suddenly being knocked off-kilter and spinning through the air until he fell back down to the cavern floor.

Being a seventh-tier mage, the only thing hurt on impact was his pride, and for the first time, he was glad Xaphan wasn't with him. He didn't think he'd ever hear the end of the demon's mocking if he'd seen Leon's disastrous attempt to fly unaided, especially since Xaphan had demonstrated that very power during his fight with the angel.

'Xaphan...' Leon thought as he pushed himself back to his feet, brushed himself off, and glanced upwards. *'Yet another reason to get out of here as soon as possible...'* He was sure that Xaphan had beaten his feathered opponent, but his need to get out of this place only grew as he thought about his demonic partner still fighting while he was down in this abyssal pit screwing around with wind magic trying to fly.

Still, Leon gave his flight idea three more tries before he abandoned it—two with wind magic before it became clear that he had neither the power yet to keep himself aloft with anything resembling control, and once more with fire magic, with the hope that its explosive power would be the key he needed.

He got some good experience from the attempts, but other than that, his only reward was a few bumps and bruises and redoubled remorse for letting that female fire mage destroy his flight suit. He hadn't the time or the materials to try and repair it, let alone create a new one, but he resolved to make that a priority once he got out of this place.

If he could get out of this place.

[See anything new?] Leon asked his soul realm residents as he went back to the center of the cavern, feeling slightly dejected at his failed attempts, though given how the day had gone, not too surprised that he'd failed.

[Nothing on my end,] Nestor said, [but our Ancestor flew off a little while ago, said she'd be right back.]

[Just flew off? Without any other explanation?] Leon asked.

[That's right,] Nestor confirmed, sounding just as confused as Leon did.

Leon paused a moment as he thought about. The only thing he could think of that the Thunderbird would need to fly out for was the Great Black Dragon—then again, he also wasn't sure what the appeal of being out in the Mists of Chaos was, so maybe there was something else out there that needed seeing to. Either way, a quick scan of his soul realm showed Nestor to be correct: there was no Thunderbird in sight.

[I guess she'll come back when she feels like it,] Leon said with some bitter resignation. [That just leaves what to do about this damn thing.]

[I'll help if I'm able,] Nestor offered, though given his physical situation, Leon knew it to be little more than an empty offer.

Still, he was grateful, and he thanked the dead man, then knelt down in the center of the great enchantment array.

He reached out with his power and tentatively let it begin to interact with the runes inscribed upon the floor. However, despite his caution, as soon as his power began to interact with the runes, the response was immediate and dramatic. The thousands of runes began to glow with power and sucked up every last spark of power that Leon released from his body.

Leon panicked a bit, not expecting that immediate and strong of a reaction, and cut off the flow of his power. However, before he did, he could see the walls vanishing into pitch-black darkness magic, and additional runes forming in the air above him.

[Looks like our Ancestor was right on the money,] Leon said to Nestor as the cavern quickly returned to normal as the magic in the runes faded.

[I saw,] Nestor whispered. [I wasn't able to see much, but I'd say this is definitely the work of more ancient runes.]

[Did you see anything dangerous?] Leon asked. [Anything that might shed more light onto this thing's purpose?]

[No,] Nestor admitted.

Leon frowned, but there was no other way out of this place that he could see, and his need to return to Maia and the others only continued to grow. He supposed he could wait for the Thunderbird to return, but he still couldn't shake the terrible feeling that time was of the essence. If that brief update he'd

received from Maia had been accurate and the Legion fleet had been ravaged by Jormun in the form of a massive, terribly powerful serpent...

Leon began to reach out with his magic power again, not willing to wait any longer. He continued to do so with great caution, and he held back considerably, but his magic power began to flow into the enchantments again. Once more, the countless runes began to glow with arcane light, and the walls were covered in darkness. In only a matter of seconds, the walls had given way to an abyssal darkness that had Leon almost feeling like he was standing on a lone stone platform hovering in a featureless black void, not dissimilar to a spatial tunnel, though without the oppressive and stifling atmosphere.

A moment later, countless thousands, perhaps millions, more runes began to take shape out of light in the air. As they winked into existence, Leon found himself marveling at the scale of the enchantment he was seeing, and how these runes formed great arcs of light connecting parts of the enchantment on the ground and pushing the entire enchantment array into the third dimension and proving the Thunderbird almost prophetic with her analysis.

This time, as the walls faded away into darkness, causing it to seem like he was standing upon a relatively small stone platform in the center of a black void, Leon quickly glanced at the runes on the ground and noticed something new there: a familiar bronze hammer that was so large as to be unwieldy in the hands of a mortal; an onyx bracelet; and a leatherbound book with robust sealing enchantments etched into its cover.

'Jormun's things,' Leon thought, and he greedily reached out with his magic and stuffed them all into his soul realm.

If he needed any proof that this was where Jormun had been sent, then this was it.

He cut off the flow of his power once more, and he watched as the titanic enchantment scheme quickly faded and the cavern once more returned to normal, leaving Leon staring disbelieving at the floor where those three items had just been.

"Did that... was that real?" he wondered aloud.

[Seems like it was,] Nestor replied. [I guess that pirate beat you here, and if that guess is true...]

[Then I think we might know what this enchantment is designed to do,] Leon finished. Jormun had been human before falling into the pit, and now, he was apparently a gigantic serpent. Something happened here that turned from the former into the latter, and it was no great stretch of the imagination for Leon to guess that the blood magic enchantment array with hundreds of light runes was the reason for that change.

But if that were also true, then this might not be a real exit. Jormun had found some way to ascend back to the surface, but that wasn't necessarily the work of the enchantment array.

Nestor was silent for a long moment, and Leon didn't say anything else, either. After several long seconds, though, Nestor said, [This enchantment is most definitely blood magic, our Ancestor's keen eyes didn't misread the signs. This thing is designed to interact somehow with people like us—or, I suppose, like *you*, given that I now longer have a body. It stimulates power within the blood, but I can't

say if it's even compatible with you. It looks exceptionally complex, and things like these are often tailored to specific physiology.]

[Our Ancestor said that it was safe for me to use...] Leon murmured, but he also remembered when he'd been told that the visions and instincts he'd been feeling since arriving at the Serpentine Isles was probably because of something—the Primal God, he now reasoned—had been stimulating his blood.

Even if this enchantment could stimulate his blood, that didn't make it a good thing.

[I would hesitantly agree,] Nestor said, the hesitation he claimed he felt practically dripping from his voice and making Leon feel quite uneasy.

[Then I should continue?] Leon asked, though he already knew he was going to do so anyway. Despite the risks, his situation hadn't otherwise changed—he still needed to get the hells out of this place by any means he could, and this enchantment was the only thing around that had even a sliver of promise at doing so for him.

He really didn't want to activate this enchantment, but the thought of Maia up top battling a giant serpent, the thought of Anzu at her side, and the thought of him stuck down here in this abyss was convincing him to place his trust in the Thunderbird and Nestor's speculation that this wasn't a dangerous enchantment.

[I'm not going to make a recommendation,] Nestor said with almost aggressive resignation. Leon could almost see him backing away with his head bowed, eyes closed, and hands raised as if he were showing that he wasn't participating in whatever was going on here. [Our Ancestor told you to do what you had to do, and as far as I'm concerned, you need no other advice.]

[You're a truly opinionated man,] Leon drily stated. [I'm glad to see your passion and expertise shining through.]

[Being an expert on enchantments doesn't make me the font of all knowledge on them, especially when they grow this complex!] Nestor shot back. [I can't even see the whole damn thing! Something like this, designed for blood magic by a *Primal God*, is something that I'd need time we don't have to examine it and get a good idea of what it's supposed to do!]

Leon sighed, all the excitement at finding Jormun's hammer and the other two objects having faded. [Well, it hardly matters; I don't think I can power this thing on my own. It hardly seemed close to being fully powered the last time, and I poured a lot of my power into it. If I push this too hard, and it leaves me too drained to fight...]

[You have alternatives,] Nestor replied.

Leon was about to argue back that he didn't, until he realized what Nestor was talking about. And he wasn't happy about it at all. He'd resolved to never use it, to get rid of it. It was a relic of his Clan that had been put to terrible purposes and could be an awful crutch that might stymie his growth.

Leon quickly located the power crystal he'd taken from Nestor's lab, still stored in his soul realm in an almost forgotten location within his vault. It wasn't too big, perhaps about the same size as both of his legs put side-by-side; glowing a faint yellow-white, indicating it was still flush with power.

But Leon bit his tongue on his instinctive rejection of Nestor's idea. He had his pride and his desire to do things on his own, but in the past couple months, he couldn't deny that maybe his initial rejection of his Clan after his possession by Nestor was a little overzealous. He didn't want that power crystal to become a crutch, but if he could gain some benefit from it in this situation, letting it open a possible route to free him from this place to return to his people, then letting his pride demand that he not use it was a little foolish.

Without a word, Leon closed his eyes in distaste as he conjured the power crystal from his soul realm.

Anything else he might have wanted to do or ask Nestor was pushed out of his mind as soon as the power crystal touched the stone floor, for the enchantment array suddenly activated with a speed that it hadn't when Leon had been powering it; the thousands of runes on the ground instantly began glowing, the walls vanished without a trace as darkness magic consumed them, and enormous bands of light appeared above Leon, reforming the gigantic array of modern runes in the air, far more than had ever appeared while Leon was using his own power for the enchantment array. He'd intended to try and activate the enchantment as slowly as he could, and to remove the crystal if he noticed anything strange, but the enchantment array simply sucked down the crystal's power too quickly.

The power crystal at his feet sputtered, and in less than a second, its internal light cooled to a duller yellow-orange, indicating a massive drop in contained power, and one that wasn't even close to being done, yet. As more and more runes of multi-colored light flashed into existence above him, Leon watched the power crystal drop even more to a fuller orange, and then to a dark red.

He couldn't watch further, for he started getting a strange feeling in his body as the enchantment started to finally interact with him. He had no idea what was going to happen, and he trusted Nestor and the Thunderbird when they said that this probably wasn't dangerous, but he couldn't help but feel significant fear at what was going to happen.

He was expecting a teleportation portal to eventually appear, at which point he'd leap through it without so much as a glance backward. But none appeared, and he could only hope with more and more of his being that Nestor and the Thunderbird weren't wrong in assessing the danger of this enchantment.

It started with some itchiness in his skin, which he hardly noticed until it had spread across his entire body. This itchiness soon became painful, and he watched with horror as his skin started to split open like old leather. This pain then sank deeper into his body, and he felt his organs begin to shift around in his body, and then his bones began to break and twist.

He tried to scream in pain, but his body was soon drained of energy, and he collapsed to the ground, unable to move, or to express his pain at all as the enchantment went to work on his body. His mind was so preoccupied with that pain that he couldn't regret his choice to activate this enchantment; he couldn't even notice as brown feathers flecked with gold spots sprouted from the cracks in his skin. He barely realized his chest was expanding beyond the limits of even the most mightily built men, or as his fingers were forcibly retracted into his body, or as his arms were bent, broken, and twisted into new shapes. He didn't notice his body as a whole rapidly growing and tearing out of his clothes, or his feet erupting from his boots as they were twisted into talons covered in glittering black scales.

He simply felt like he was burning alive, and he couldn't even scream.

His hair soon fell out, replaced with more black scales. His skull shattered and reformed, becoming more angular and slightly narrowing his vision. His mouth was pushed forward, and hardened into a golden beak that sparkled with silver-blue lightning. The scales that covered his head soon swept down along his rapidly-thickening neck, soon meeting his feathers and seemingly going to war. His scales pushed down over his still-growing shoulders, forcing the feathers to molt, only for those scales to crack and break apart for more feathers to push through. The scales pushed again, but were broken up by feathers before moving past Leon's rapidly-growing chest.

After several rounds of this, the scales stopped pushing and retreated to his neck, but the feathers that continued to sprout across his body took on a pitch-black hue, losing all the brown and gold that had previously adorned them.

The last thing Leon felt before he lost his human mind to all the pain and the new sensations and instincts that flooded his body was the pain finally spreading to his eyes. He didn't realize it, but his bright gold eyes had begun to darken to a vibrant red-orange color.

Chapter 599: The Black Eagle

Leon's soul realm was in turmoil. The normally stagnant air had been whipped up into a furious tempest, and lightning rained from the Mists of Chaos to strike the distant mountain peaks, shattering stone and sending Leon's stored magic power into swirling chaos.

Nestor watched as much as he could from the ruby, but most of his attention was on Leon himself. The storm in Leon's soul realm was hardly less interesting than what was happening to Leon's physical body.

The young man's form was bending and twisting in painful ways, growing and being sculpted by the arcane energies of the enchantment array into something inhuman, yet familiar. It was easy for Nestor to see what Leon was becoming after a short time—his form largely resembled a bird, though there were many elements there that were even stranger than what he might've expected had he known this was going to happen.

Leon and the demon had rarely been overcautious with their words around Nestor; he knew that Leon possessed some other Ancestor in addition to the Thunderbird, but even after some pointed questioning, Leon never gave Nestor any concrete information. It became undeniable to Nestor when he saw the red-orange light following the Primal God's attack on Leon's soul realm, but even then, he'd never been able to see what had produced it through the cover of the trees that the Primal God had thrown him into.

He still didn't quite know what else Leon was descended from, and while he was grudgingly coming around to the idea that it just didn't matter since it wasn't around in Leon's soul realm and he didn't seem to be using his second Ancestor's power, he could clearly see that the dormant power in Leon's blood was coming out in this transformation.

For a while, Nestor tried to get through to Leon, but he stopped after Leon didn't respond multiple times. He could do nothing more than watch Leon's transformation with morbid fascination. It had long been canon within the Thunderbird Clan that such transformations, while possible for a few other Inherited Bloodlines, were completely impossible for theirs.

And here he was bearing witness to the falsehood that that belief turned out to be. He was worried what effect it might be having upon Leon's mind, but there was nothing he could do about that.

As the transformation began to slow, the Thunderbird came tearing out of the Mists, the storm that raged within Leon's soul realm parting around her as if it refused to sully her with its power. She swiftly descended upon Leon's throne platform and shifted into her human form as she alighted upon the ground.

"What's going on?!" Nestor couldn't help but shout out, but the Thunderbird seemed to ignore him as she approached the throne, where Leon's magic body now limply lay—as it always did when his mind was in his physical body rather than in his soul realm.

She took a gentle seat upon the arm of the simple black chair—the armrest was thin and looked uncomfortable, but her bronze features didn't even twitch as she turned in Leon's direction. She took ahold of Leon's magic body and pulled him over to her, until his head rested upon her thigh, and she in turn laid her hand upon the side of his head. Only then did she respond to Nestor.

"He discovered something that I'd not thought possible," she said, and Nestor could see that the transformation stopped. Not because the Thunderbird was here, though, but instead because it seemed to have finished; Leon now lay upon the black stone floor of that cavern, wings spread, his avian body now enormous and covered in black feathers and black scales. "He'll need some help," she continued, and Nestor felt the flow of magic around Leon's throne subtly change. The Thunderbird wasn't doing anything particularly magically intense, but she was still doing *something*.

"Is... Is any of this of concern?" Nestor asked nervously after a few silent moments.

"The storm?" the Thunderbird asked as she cast her gaze around at Leon's soul realm. "Yes. It's growing his soul realm at a dangerous pace. If left unchecked, it could damage the connection between here and his physical body that would take years, possibly even decades to heal. But his body and mind are more fragile than his soul realm right now after that transformation. It'll take some doing, especially since this is something I've only just confirmed is possible, but I think I can stabilize him."

"Just confirmed?" Nestor asked, seeking clarification. However, the Thunderbird ignored him and continued with whatever she was going with Leon.

Nestor had no idea what that was, but after some waiting, he watched as Leon's avian body began to twitch, and the Thunderbird said, "He's in a new form, and unfortunately, we can't wait for him to learn how to move on his own."

"That's what you're doing?" Nestor inquired. "Teaching him how to move like you do?"

"Among other things," the Thunderbird said.

Nestor detected some iron in her voice, and he wisely went quiet. Much like usual, there was simply nothing he could do. He could only watch as Leon, in his new avian form, wake up, struggle to get upright, and then launch himself into the air as if he'd been doing it all his life. He flew a few circles around the enchantment array, and then in a terrible show of power, silver-blue lightning erupted from his feathers in a manner identical to the Thunderbird, and tore the entire cavern to pieces. The enchantment array was annihilated, and as the cavern began to collapse upon itself, Leon wordlessly

began to fly up the shaft toward the ceiling, miles above him, lightning pouring out of his body all the while.

—

Xaphan stood upon the island at the center of the storm. The wind whipped around him, stretching the fires that covered his body for dozens of feet. The rain poured down upon him, but all that water had little to no effect upon those very same fires. He didn't pay any attention at all to the storm, for as fierce as it was, he was beyond caring about weather.

Rather, he was far more concerned with how the ground beneath him never once ceased to shake after the storm pulled in and surrounded the remains of the eighth island. With his magic senses, he could see the outlying islets breaking and crumbling under the power of the storm and these earthquakes and falling into the sea. After several hours, nearly all of the islets had vanished beneath the waves; even the great crater walls surrounding this lake were growing unstable and were about to crumble as well.

Nowhere could he see the cause of all that destruction; the horned serpent that had emerged from the remains of the boxy structure was somewhere under the waves outside of the fracturing crater walls, but he knew not where. If worse came to worst, he knew he could always fly away. Enough of his powers had returned to him that he was capable of flying for at least a few hundred miles at a time, but he didn't immediately do so.

And the reason was simple: Leon had yet to show himself. Their contract was still active, and unless it dissolved and Xaphan knew that the young human was dead, he wasn't going to leave until Leon had shown himself.

The demon felt like kicking the human's ass for losing like that and making them both look bad; Xaphan had defeated his opponent, but Leon had fallen to his. He couldn't help but click his tongue at such a result, but he also felt no small amount of shame at the same time. He'd promised to help Leon win, and to protect him against threats he couldn't face. He'd certainly done that in killing that angel, but that Leon had still fallen anyway just meant that Xaphan hadn't done his job well enough.

He'd let his partner down, and now he didn't know where Leon was or what was going on with him. Xaphan couldn't leave until he knew Leon was all right.

Of course, this wasn't because he actually *cared* about the boy, he just found Leon's soul realm a convenient place to recover and to learn a few things from the powerful beings that occasionally visited. No, that would be silly, and beneath an exalted Lord of Flame like himself. Or so he told himself.

And so, he stared out at the turbulent lake as it was shaken by both whatever was shaking the island's remnants and by the storm, all while the storm raged around him. He couldn't jump into the ocean to find and contend with that serpent—such would be asking for death—but he felt utterly useless just standing there. He just didn't know what else he might be able to do until the serpent showed itself again.

Again, he contemplated leaping down the abyssal pit that the serpent had jumped out of, but he detected spatial magics many miles down, and he knew that jumping down there would be a terrible idea. Anything strong enough to construct and control such enchantments was not a being that he could take on right now; especially not if they could summon angels, as well.

However, as he hurriedly glanced over his shoulder at the pit, he realized that there was a building charge coming from deep within it; magic power was gathering, indicating that the spatial enchantments were about to activate...

Xaphan spun around and called upon his magic, letting his demonic power feed the flames that covered him. Whatever was coming, if it were hostile, would regret challenging him, for he was a Lord of Flame, and there was no enemy he could not defeat. Eventually. With enough time and preparation.

Suddenly, a titanic aura burst from the pit, one that equaled, if not surpassed, his own, and lightning began to strike all around the edges of the pit, shattering the edge and sending tons of rock and rubble falling into the abyss. He took a few steps closer and assumed a defensive stance, his fires burning with a ferocity that was worthy of his demonic heritage, and readied himself for whatever came out of that pit.

After a moment, though, what came out of the pit surprised him so much that he almost froze up—a thin bolt of silver-blue lightning came rocketing up from the depths of the pit and vanished into the swirling storm clouds above. So powerful was this bolt of lightning that just about every drop of rain within and above the pit was flash-boiled.

'Leon!' Xaphan thought, and another bolt erupted from the pit as dozens more bolts of golden lightning struck the edges of the pit, preventing Xaphan from getting close.

But then, he saw something emerge from the depths of the pit and come barreling up toward the surface, something alien and utterly foreign to him.

It was a giant bird of prey, perhaps four times as tall as Leon was, and with a wingspan wider than the width of a Legion dreadnought. It looked rather like a crow, with feathers as black as the midnight sky, though its eyes burned a furious red-orange and its talons were as black as his obsidian skin. Its head from shoulders to beak was covered not in feathers, but in sparkling black scales, while its golden beak sparkled not from its color, but from the silver-blue lightning that danced across it. From its feathers, meanwhile, came countless tiny licks of fire, each one as black as the feathers they were birthed from.

Xaphan's eyes went wide, immediately recognizing this creature as some twisted form of Leon. Others might think it a stretch, but he knew of Leon's dual heritage, and he saw both in this creature as it came flying up the pit like a bat out of the hells.

It didn't slow as it burst out of the pit. It didn't so much as blink as the golden lightning that fell at the edges of the pit began to strike it instead, and even seemed to revel in each strike.

'Definitely Leon,' Xaphan thought to himself as he took a few tentative steps forward. Even with all of this, what surprised him most was the aura that poured from the creature that Leon had somehow become—it was eighth-tier, without a doubt, and encroaching upon the ninth. And it even seemed to be growing even stronger with every bolt of lightning that struck its body.

With rapidly growing panic coursing through his body, Xaphan focused his mind and his magic and attempted to reach out to Leon through his mental communication technique. However, his greetings were answered with nothing but silence, the bird not even slowing down or turning its head as it rocketed up into the clouds.

But Xaphan wasn't going to be left behind at this point. Now that he knew where Leon was, he was going to follow—he could figure out how and why this happened later, and if it could be reversed. What was far more important was ensuring that Leon, in whatever mental state he was in, didn't vanish into the storm.

He leaped into the air and used his fire magic to propel him even further, on a course to follow Leon wherever he went in this form. Soon, he, too, rocketed into the clouds.

—

The situation for the Legion at the remains of the eighth island hadn't improved in the hours since the appearance of the gargantuan horned serpent. No survivors had been located of the ships that had been lost, and there was significant disagreement among what remained of the Legion leadership as to what they should do without Sigebert or Leon. Most seemed to want to leave and come back with reinforcements from the remaining two fleets.

Gaius did his best to dissuade them, but all he managed to get them to agree on was to wait one more day. Apart from that, he couldn't think of anything good in their situation, other than the fact that the swirling storm that had utterly engulfed the island's remnants hadn't spread since its earlier expansion from merely covering the walls of the caldera. This spared them from the storm that had wracked their fleet since their arrival, as this one had largely concentrated around the island, but it also acted as a great shield preventing anyone or anything from re-entering the area of the eighth island.

Even if they could get access to the island, though, Gaius didn't know what they would be able to do. That serpent had already shown itself more than capable of utterly wrecking their fleet even without the use of its magic, just relying upon the power of its body alone. Not even with Naiad could they seemingly hope to stand much of a chance.

As he stared off at the distant storm, Gaius wondered how they could win. Without Leon, without Sigebert, without Sigebert's flagship... It pained him to admit, but he couldn't see a way out of this without first retreating and acquiring the assistance of the other fleets, but that would mean leaving Leon and any other potential survivors to die, for it would take many days before they could return, and who knew what that serpent would do in the meantime.

Within the swirling clouds and rain of the storm, Gaius could see the occasional lightning strike. He didn't put much thought into it, lightning was hardly uncommon within severe storms. But he started to pay attention when it began to grow more intense and frequent, and his heart plummeted, fearing it to be a sign that the storm was about to grow bigger and more severe.

But then, almost like being in the perfect place to see a spider's thread when the light hits it right, he saw a thin line of bright silver-blue within the storm. He blinked, and it was gone.

But then it happened again, and he was paying enough attention to identify it as silver-blue lightning.

Without another thought, Gaius turned around and began running down the deck. He had to find Naiad and the fleet's remaining leadership.

Leon was alive in that storm, and he was still fighting.

—

Ever since it had woken, the Black Eagle had been terrified. It held an awful memory of agony within its bones, and it knew not why. All it knew was that it had somehow found itself deep beneath the earth. It tried to rise, but its limbs felt wrong and didn't move the way the Eagle wanted them to.

It didn't spend too much time thinking about why that was, it was too consumed by the primal terror of waking at the bottom of an abyssal pit, surrounded by darkness and strange magic, and not knowing why it was there. It flailed about, trying and failing to control its own limbs in an attempt to escape however it was able.

After several minutes, its body calmed somewhat as a soothing sensation entered its mind. It was still terrified, but as its mind was filled with new instincts and muscle memory, it suddenly knew exactly how to move its limbs properly.

There were no thoughts to ponder its situation; there were no real thoughts of any kind in its head. It simply acted upon instinct, and that instinct demanded a return to the open sky. With a great beat of its wings, it had risen into the air and broken the pit with lightning and thunder, and with a few more, it had soared up the shaft.

Miles were risen in mere moments, and soon enough, it had flown straight out of the mouth of the pit, lightning streaming behind it, collapsing the pit as it departed. Any magic power the Eagle spent during its rise was immediately returned to it as it entered the storm. The lightning that struck its body filled it with delightful magic, and the wind and the rain and the clouds were its natural home. Its primal terror vanished as the Eagle itself vanished into the clouds.

It was vaguely aware of some fiery being attempting to follow it. Its predatory impulses demanded that it turn and confront this impertinent being, but there was a small part of the Eagle that felt this thing was familiar, and even friendly. It refrained from attacking, but the Eagle paid no more attention to the fiery being, and instead focused on figuring out where it was.

It vaguely remembered that it had an enemy around here, some reason for why it had risen, but it took a long moment before it realized what that enemy was.

Far below, on the other side of the storm clouds, it caught a glimpse of deep, sea-green scales, and the white flash of an enormous ivory horn as one of the small handful of islets below cracked and crumbled into the seas.

This was its enemy. This creature of the sea. The magic it possessed was inundating the sky—it had called the storm!

Fury lanced through the Eagle's mind. Serpents were creatures of the sea and the dirt. They had no business in the heavens, where the Eagle made its home—where the *Eagle* was Lord.

The Eagle unleashed a terrible screech, and the world resonated with its power. The rain that swirled around this section of the sea halted and the wind slowed. The clouds that had descended and shrouded this region began to rise as the Eagle seized back its rightful domain.

But a moment later, the enemy showed itself without its watery cloak; the Great Horned Serpent erupted from the waves, its aura staggering, its horn glowing, its emerald eyes narrowed in fury. It

roared at the heavens, and the storm returned. The rain began pouring, the wind began howling, and the clouds again descended.

Without missing a beat, the Eagle flapped its wings, and a bolt of silver-blue lightning gathered in a nearby cloud and less than a second later, accompanied by an ear-splitting clap of thunder, struck the Great Horned Serpent. The serpent shrieked in pain as scales were torn from its hide, and the light that illuminated its horn dimmed just a little bit.

But then, with a great wave of magic, millions of drops of rain halted in the air, and then were hurled back up at the Eagle like needles.

The Eagle shrieked again, though, and the rain was merely absorbed back into the lowest cloud layer. However, the serpent had taken this opportunity to sink back beneath the waves, where the Eagle's lightning could not easily chase it, and where the Eagle's senses could not easily track it.

The few islets within this great storm had been shaking when the Eagle had emerged from the pit, and they began to shake even more, being consumed by the waves after only a few more seconds.

The Eagle largely felt nothing but contempt; this was a paltry show, and it did not scare the Eagle. However, on the last island to break and fall—which happened to be where the pit had been located before the Eagle destroyed it—buried within the stone rubble, the Eagle's eyes caught the flash of a blade as it sparked with lightning. A moment later, that sword passed beneath waves.

It was a simple weapon, and surely no match for the Eagle's razor-sharp talons... but the sight of the blade as it fell into the sea filled the Eagle with righteous fury and indignation, to pile onto the wrath it felt for its domain being trampled upon.

Far beneath it, the seas began to twist and turn, and then a depression formed within the spiraling storm. This depression rapidly grew and grew, until the Eagle was staring down

Chapter 600: The Eagle and the Serpent

Xaphan watched as the Black Eagle descended into the maelstrom, each beat of its mighty wings hurling its magic into the air, seizing control of the storm around it. The serpent may have conjured the storm—or, perhaps more accurately, the powers that backed the serpent—but with every wingbeat, the Black Eagle was seizing control.

The demon of flame was a goodly distance from the surface of the ocean, and the Eagle by extension, but even from where he hovered in the sky, he could feel waves of killing intent radiating from the Eagle. So wrathful was it, so intent on slaughtering that serpent, that such intent was overpowering even its stupendous aura.

This winged form of Leon Xaphan estimated to be in the ninth-tier, or equivalent to it, after absorbing so much lightning. This sent a shiver of fear running down the demon's spine—not fear of that bird turning its power upon him, but rather what that kind of growth might do to Leon. Already, Xaphan could see this shapeshift or whatever had happened to Leon having a dreadful effect upon the young boy's mind, but combined with a soul realm that had been irreparably damaged by dangerously-rapid growth...

Xaphan once more told himself that his concern was merely for his safe haven, and that his concern for Leon was more akin to that of a human's concern for a pet rat, but regardless of what he told himself,

he soon found himself rocketing after the Eagle. The demon could feel the response of the serpent resonating throughout the maelstrom, and he knew that it wasn't going to back down from this fight; the demon wasn't going to sit this fight out, either.

The Black Eagle dove into the maelstrom, the ocean spinning all about it for miles, forming a great depression thousands of feet deep. It was deep enough that Xaphan could sense the attention of other things from the watery abyss, but they didn't seem intent on getting in the way of the fight, so he put them out of mind and focused on the serpent as it swam around the edge of the maelstrom.

Xaphan's ever-burning fires stretched and whipped about as he entered the maelstrom's downdraft. The wind took hold of him and sucked him deeper into the great oceanic vortex.

Below him, he watched as the Eagle beat its wings and sent streams of lightning into the walls of the maelstrom. The lightning spread out ineffectually across the water's surface, but the demon could see at least a few arcs reaching the serpent within.

The serpent contorted in pain, a delightful expression from the perspective of the demon, who'd barely managed to scratch its scaled hide during his bout with the monster. However, with the water in the way, it didn't seem like the Eagle would be able to do much appreciable damage.

Fortunately, it seemed the serpent wasn't going to just swim about within the maelstrom's walls and let the Eagle slowly whittle it down.

With a furious roar, the serpent erupted from the maelstrom's walls, its jaws wide, its many teeth glittering in the intense light of the Eagle's silver-blue lightning and Xaphan's more distant orange fires. It moved far quicker than a being of its size should've, and the Eagle was forced to rapidly climb with a few quick wingbeats to avoid the serpent's mammoth jaws, every tooth within its maw bigger than the Eagle's entire body.

The Eagle responded with a hail of lightning bolts from its wings. The serpent's scales were scorched black where it was hit, but Xaphan didn't see the bolts penetrate its hide.

A moment later, the serpent contorted itself, and flung its head backward and upward, aiming to impale the Eagle upon its great curved horn, which was honed to a tip fine enough to stab even something as small as a human.

The Eagle tucked in its wings and rolled through the air, effortlessly dodging the monster. Then the Eagle gave a thunderous cry of war and instead of using its lightning, it dove in at the serpent's exposed body, raking the monster with its fearsome talons. Unlike its previous lightning strike that had to fight through the water to reach its foe, the Eagle's claws tore clean through the serpent's scales and ripped through its flesh. Unfortunately, the serpent was huge and powerful, and so even as large as the injury was, it was next to nothing compared to the enormity of its body; worse, only a few drops of blood were spilled before the injury began to rapidly close.

The Eagle peeled off as the serpent began to shake and bend back toward the maelstrom's wall. As it dove back into the safety of the ocean, the serpent continued to shake and send ominous vibrations through the sea, detectable even through the storm ravaging the water.

A moment later, huge tendrils of water whipped out of the maelstrom's walls, forcing the Eagle to dodge and weave through the air, but not so quickly that it wasn't able to blast a few apart with lightning.

After escaping the watery tendrils, the Eagle climbed higher, rising to about the top quarter of the maelstrom, where the water was at its widest. Once there, it spared Xaphan only a single almost dismissive glance before turning its attention back downward.

Xaphan didn't detect even the faintest of recognition within its gaze, but he decided to try and connect with the Eagle again anyway. However, his attempts fell on deaf ears, for no matter how hard he shouted through the binding power of their contract, the Eagle continued to ignore him in favor of whatever it was doing.

Soon getting the message, Xaphan stopped and turned his attention back downward, where the serpent was still swimming through the maelstrom, its power reaching throughout the seas. Above the demon, the Eagle flew about, its power soaring through the skies. Within just a minute or two, the rain had ceased to fall, while the ocean calmed.

Xaphan knew neither of these to mean either the Black Eagle or the Great Horned Serpent was going to back down—if anything, this seeming calm only struck the demon as building pressure, with both preparing for the next round, and when that began, everything would kick off once more.

He was about to fly over to the Eagle and try to reason with it—whatever had transpired to turn Leon into that thing had clearly affected his mind, but Xaphan still felt like he could get through to the young man and they could coordinate a better strategy to bring an end to that serpent. However, before he could start making his way over, he sensed another presence piercing through the cloudy wall that separated this place from the rest of the ocean. A moment later, he watched as, flying out of the deep black clouds, came the shining white form of Leon's griffin, and riding upon his back was the familiar figure of his fish girl.

The two were flying a little cautiously, and Xaphan could see the griffin hesitate a moment as the true scope of what was happening within the storm was revealed to their eyes. Without needing much more, Xaphan took off in their direction instead of the Eagle's.

The two saw him coming, and the fish girl reached into the seas with her magic and conjured a powerful water dragon from the rain to fly beside her that he knew could give him a run for his money if they came to blows. So, he halted his approach and reached toward the fish girl with his magic power, focusing his abilities to connect with her mentally.

[You, Leon's mate!] Xaphan sternly said to her, his voice radiating confidence and power.

[Who are you?!] she shouted back, her tone matching his.

[I am an ally of Leon Raime!] Xaphan declared. [That black bird is what Leon has somehow become! It's preparing to battle that horned serpent, but I fear he may not win this without assistance! We are the only ones here with the power to aid him! We must work together!]

Xaphan could feel doubt and suspicion radiate from the fish girl almost as strongly as her aura and killing intent.

'She'll attack me without a moment's hesitation if she felt it necessary...' Xaphan realized as a smile briefly graced his obsidian lips. *'But she won't.'*

Xaphan's belief proved prophetic when the fish girl retracted her aura slightly, and her water dragon assumed a more defensive form. The griffin was still staring at Xaphan with suspicion, and he wasn't moving forward, instead using his wind magic to hover. However, he relaxed when the fish girl ran her fingers through the feathers of his neck.

[Do you have a plan?] she asked.

[I think I do,] Xaphan said. [As he is now, Leon had some difficulties dealing with the serpent when it was in the water. So we need to get it out of the water. Leon's strong enough to cause it appreciable damage, which we were unable to do.]

The fish girl slowly nodded, and with a signal from her, the griffin began to slowly fly in Xaphan's direction, and the maelstrom behind him. Xaphan turned around and began to fly back that way as well, hoping that in showing the two his back, they might realize that he truly wasn't their enemy.

When he reached the lip of the maelstrom and found himself above the great pit of the sea, he saw that little had changed in the few minutes he'd been gone. The Eagle was still circling in the top quarter, its brilliantly-shining red-orange eyes tracking the serpent as it swam around the edge, while the serpent kept one of its sea-green eyes on the Eagle at all times. He could feel the tension between the two, and knew that it wouldn't take much for that tension to burst.

That moment came less than a minute after Xaphan and the fish girl arrived above the maelstrom.

The Eagle's wings constantly sparkled and crackled with lightning, but in just a moment, they stopped, and instead became enveloped in powerful currents of wind. The sucking vortex of the great maelstrom suddenly reversed and began to pull at the water, forcing it to rise, while Xaphan and the white griffin were buffeted hither and thither by the strength of the Eagle's wind magic, both barely able to prevent themselves from being blown completely clear of the maelstrom.

As powerful as this was, though, the Eagle couldn't counteract the maelstrom entirely, Xaphan could tell, but that didn't seem to be its goal. Instead, he felt his power concentrating at the level that the serpent swam at, and he realized that Leon was trying to pull the serpent from the water.

[The bird needs help!] Xaphan shouted at the fish girl.

She didn't waste a moment, and her water dragon dove into the wall of the maelstrom as the griffin simply concentrated on not being hurled away by the Eagle's windy tempest.

Within the maelstrom's wall, the serpent writhed and roared, its distorted voice causing the entire sea to vibrate. But little by little, it was being forced out of the water and into the air.

After half a minute of struggling, the serpent changed tactics, and roared once more, causing the ocean to again form hundreds of watery tentacles that reached high into the sky toward all four of them. Xaphan responded with a storm of fire. He spared not a single spark of magic power, and the maelstrom was covered in a calamitous sea of dark red demonfire.

A moment later, the serpent's watery tentacles burst through this shield, but they were far less numerous than before. Xaphan only had to dodge three strikes, while the griffin and fish girl only had two to contend with. However, the three of them were mostly afterthoughts, and just above Xaphan's shield of fire the Eagle dodged and weaved about, wrapping itself in a bubble of pulsing air that kept both the serpent's tentacles at bay whenever they drew too close, and Xaphan's demonfire.

The serpent, meanwhile, continued to be sucked out of the maelstrom, and Xaphan could see at least part of the sea pushing against it, forcing it out into the air—the fish girl's magical influence, he guessed.

The serpent contorted its immense body, and the bird had to beat its powerful wings to dodge out of the way before it could be impaled upon the serpent's massive ivory horn. It responded with a shriek of fury and raked its talons across the serpent's body as it flew about, opening objectively large, though relatively inconsequential tears in the serpent's scaled hide.

Xaphan saw this as his chance; the serpent's attention was locked upon the Eagle. He dropped like a meteor, the fires of his body growing more intense with every passing millisecond.

The demon of flame hit the side of the serpent where the Eagle had parted its scales with an ocean-rattling explosion of demonfire, and the serpent's body shuddered in pain. It screeched, and the wall of the maelstrom surged out to envelop Xaphan and his fires, but the demon rocketed back into the air before he could be consumed. His demonfire continued to burn within the serpent's wound, though.

A moment later, a water dragon more than three hundred feet long erupted from the maelstrom wall and dove many of those very same spots, ripping and tearing into the flesh of the serpent.

The serpent writhed in agony, and the maelstrom began to quake. The demonfire on its body was extinguished in an instant, and the water holding the fish girl's dragon together lost all cohesiveness as her magic was scattered to the winds.

For a moment, Xaphan and the Eagle made eye contact, and staring into those red-orange eyes nearly had Xaphan lost in a vision of black flame. However, a moment later, the Eagle blew right past him, the wind magic in its wake pulling him like a loose leaf higher into the air.

Not a second later, the wall of the maelstrom blasted apart, and serpents of all shapes and sizes in numbers beyond counting shot toward where Xaphan and the Eagle had just been.

Below them, Xaphan could see another water dragon gnawing at another of the serpent's relatively small wounds, opening it even further and keeping the serpent from healing, but then the serpent whipped its massive head back, cutting the water dragon in half with its horn, and the fish girl above grimaced in pain.

The serpent dove back into the walls of the maelstrom, though this time it was now streaming blood behind it as it swam.

The Eagle shrieked, and flew even higher, eventually blasting past the fish girl and the griffin, the wind magic in its wake dragging Xaphan along for the ride. Below them, the water shook and the maelstrom tightened, causing it to spin even faster. The surface of the ocean rippled, and then the serpent came erupting out of it, its enormous frame rising into the air and rapidly gaining on the griffin and fish girl as they followed Xaphan and the Eagle higher into the air.

Xaphan pivoted to look downward as he was dragged along by the Eagle and let loose with a thin laser-like stream of demonfire. That fire splashed across the serpent's face, but the titanic monster didn't even blink. Its jaws opened as it closed on the griffin, and only with a panicked beat of the griffin's wings was it and the fish girl not swallowed by the immense reptile.

The serpent glared up at the Eagle, and the Eagle glanced back downward, returning the creature's glare. Their killing intent clashed in the air above the ocean, dropping the temperature within the cloudy vortex far enough that Xaphan could see the steam of the fish girl's breath. The demon then felt a charge building in the air as the Eagle's power gathered within the clouds as he relinquished control of the wind within the maelstrom.

The serpent's eyes flashed with emerald light, and the ocean water around it formed hundreds of spikes that it launched up at them with terrible force. Xaphan, the Eagle, and the griffin all dodged with the best of their ability, but the serpent kept up the barrage, and eventually, one of them took a glancing hit—the griffin cried out in pain as one of the water spears clipped one of its wings. Thanks to its wind magic, it wasn't knocked out of the sky, but its speed and maneuverability were drastically reduced.

Only a second later, Xaphan was forced to project a shield of fire, as he could feel himself tiring and slowing down, which resulted in a few close encounters with water spears.

The Eagle fared the best of them, weaving in and around the water spears with seeming ease. However, as soon as the griffin cried out, the Eagle shrieked in fury, and the clouds above instantly darkened. Rain began pouring in quantities equal to the storm of the past couple days, and the fish girl took the opportunity to create a dozen small water dragons that she sent plummeting back upon the serpent.

However, it was the Eagle that made the bigger move. It turned into a steep dive, and plunged toward the serpent, which was still sticking its head out of the ocean. Bolts of lightning thicker than Xaphan's body began to fall from the sky, striking the serpent's body and opening new gashes on its hide.

The serpent ignored these wounds and matched the Eagle's shriek with a roar of challenge, and ocean water began to crawl up its scales, then freezing into icy armor. Its wounds were blocked, and the Eagle's lightning was drastically reduced in effectiveness.

The Eagle itself hit the serpent's head with all the force of a furious god before the ice could reach its skull. The serpent screamed as its face was bloodied, but its icy armor prevented the Eagle from moving down its body and slashing away with his claws.

However, with a surge of power, hundreds of arcs of silver-blue lightning shot out of the Eagle's black feathers and even more golden lightning fell from the heavens and danced across the serpent's body, rending huge holes into that armor.

But a moment later, the serpent's eyes flashed with power again, and a huge torrent of water exploded out of the ocean, rising like the javelin of an ocean god to meet the thunderbolt of a sky god.

The Eagle had raked its way down the serpent's body, and so was too close to the surface of the water to dodge soon enough. This massive spear of ocean water hit it, and it vanished within. The spear rose for hundreds of feet, so high it passed into the lowest of the storm clouds, where it was suddenly struck by a dozen bolts of golden lightning, which caused it to evaporate and free the Eagle.

Xaphan could immediately tell that the Eagle had come out the worse in that exchange. Its body was too darkly colored to see any blood, but it flew off-balance, and one of its wings was slightly bent. Its aura, too, flagged slightly as it righted itself within the clouds.

The serpent finally allowed itself to sink back into the ocean, its baleful gaze locked upon the Eagle. Both sides were injured, but as the magic power in the area continued to build up, Xaphan could tell that the final moves were about to be played; the maelstrom had picked up even more, and was spinning with terrific speed, so whatever the serpent was doing by spreading its power throughout the ocean, it looked to be about to be finished.

He hadn't the slightest of ideas what the serpent was doing, but he sensed that there would only be one more exchange. They had to make this count, or else the serpent was going to finish whatever it was doing, and there would be no stopping it then.