

Storm King 741

Chapter 741: Speculation

When Leon bolted outside, his weapon drawn and armor donned, he found that the horn hadn't been sounded for nothing: a dozen plant giants, each one twice as large as a stone giant, had surrounded the outer wall of their camp and were steadily advancing toward them.

Each one's proportions were subtly different, but they were all roughly human in shape. For all their minor differences, however, they were all made up of tangled vines, fallen trees, and thick clumps of leaves. None of them radiated an aura—not that Leon expected them to, at this point—but he noticed that one of them was considerably more colorful than the others, with bright red flowers and white and pink mushrooms growing over its constituent logs.

This one unusual plant giant was the only one not moving; the rest were taking long, pondering steps toward the wall.

"Halt!" a sixth-tier Evergolden mage shouted.

Leon almost burst out laughing at the ridiculousness of the order, but the fact that none of the other Evergolden mages stopped moving told him all he needed to know: the order wasn't expected to be followed, they just needed to say it to justify to themselves what was about to happen.

Besides, it wasn't like making the demand was going to do them any harm, so he supposed there wasn't any reason not to try.

As Leon began running for the wall, his retinue came bolting out of the villa from several sides and joined the rest of the Evergolden mages in charging at the wall, ready to defend their camp.

The first blow came just as Leon leaped and landed on the ramparts—the first plant giant came to a halt within its arm's reach of the wall and used its forward momentum to swing into a massive punch. The giant was large and undoubtedly strong, but Leon was still startled to see the wall nearly crumble when it made contact. The entire wall shook and shuddered under the impact, and several of the lower-tiered mages lost their footing.

Any possible ideas that this wasn't an attack vanished under that blow. Magic began to fly, and the giants found themselves the target of a withering fusillade of elemental magic.

Leon himself launched himself into the air, spent a moment hovering as lightning surged through his body, and then he struck the nearest plant giant with a bright silver-blue lightning bolt. The wall again shook, but this time it was the force of the accompanying thunder that caused it. The struck giant immediately burst into flame, and one of its arms was severed and almost entirely dissolved into ash.

For just the swiftest of moments, Leon's eyes narrowed. Just like the goat men, these giants seemed quite strong, but then proved themselves fragile. That had just been his opening move, and yet the giant had been horrifically maimed.

Despite that damage, though, the giant continued lumbering on, seemingly heedless of the fire that raged about it.

The floral giant, however, pulsed with potent and surprising power, and when it raised its hand, three bright red flowers bloomed along its arm's vines. A moment later, the burning giant was quenched, leaving it horribly burned, and its arm still severed, but no longer actively burning.

Leon glared at the floral giant, feeling a hint of indignation at this thing that would douse his magic. So he reached up into the sky, his power causing a large cloud to gather above the camp. At the exact same time as a flash of light from Cassandra bifurcated a giant with a beam of white light from head to waist, three bolts of silver-blue lightning fell from the cloud, one striking Leon's first target, and the other two the floral giant.

The first giant disintegrated, falling into a heap of charred ash at the foot of the wall. The floral giant fared better, but still not fantastic, as Leon's magic ripped through its body and scorched everything it touched. Vines burned away and charred wood hit the ground, but the giant, as a whole, remained upright and mobile.

The wall, on the other hand, shuddered and cracked under the weight of Leon's magic, with the top half of the section directly under where Leon still hovered crumbling. An Evergolden earth magic came sprinting over, shouting as she did, "Watch it! Don't destroy our wall!"

Leon, thusly admonished, scowled, and hit the floral giant with two more lightning bolts, though he kept them a little more contained this time. And this time, the giant hit the ground, as dead as he figured these creatures could be.

The other giants fared little better in this time. Leon's retainers, armed with their magic and his spell arrows, cut down three more giants, while Cassandra and Maia handled two each. The Evergolden escorts took care of the rest by blade and magic, and five minutes after the alarm was sounded, the camp fell silent as everyone stared off into the trees, waiting for anything else to come running out and threaten them.

Leon inundated the forest with his magic senses, looking for anything at all that might be watching them. The forest was characteristically devoid of anything notable, but Leon still inspected the place as thoroughly as he could, anyway.

Speaking for just about everyone, Cassandra shouted in disbelief, "Was that it? The wrath of the Prota Forest, and only a handful of weak giants?!"

Leon founded himself rather agreeing with the Princess. Given the forest's reputation, he'd truly been expecting something different, and while they'd been violent, these past few days hadn't quite been what he'd been expecting. They were harassed, to be sure, but hardly at every turn, and when they were attacked, their foes were dealt with easily enough.

Still, what the forest had displayed was more than enough for him to understand why no human settlements had been constructed within. If all of these attacks were happening with some kind of central intelligence, then it would be easy to hit anyone trying to build a village while avoiding more powerful mages who might be able to protect them.

Of course, that still left the question open of why that intelligence might be attacking them right now, though Leon suspected that it was because they were getting close to it in the center of the warded zone. However, he was still flabbergasted that the resistance had been so lackluster. The goat men,

plant giants, wolves, and all the rest all at once would've been such a greater threat that he couldn't help but wonder just why they were all coming at them piecemeal.

With a sigh, he landed upon the freshly rebuilt wall. Whatever the reason, the fact was that they *were* being attacked a few at a time, and that made their jobs much easier.

When he glanced around, though, he realized that 'easier' didn't necessarily mean 'easy', as several weaker members of the Evergolden escort had been wounded, and one had been quite grievously savaged, with her chest and left arm looking like they'd been crushed entirely. The Evergolden healers were doing their thing, so Leon didn't think he needed to step in, but he didn't envy their pain, either.

Once everything was truly over, Leon made the rounds checking up on his retinue. Fortunately, everyone was just fine—in Alcander and Alix's cases, even a little disappointed that the fight was over so quickly. Leon and Cassandra then met up on the walls to make sure they were on the same page as the other regarding the results of the battle.

When that brief meeting was over, Leon made his way to Helen and Anna, both of whom were busy with the most intact of the giant corpses.

"Hard at work, I see," Leon said when he arrived.

Anna was crouching by the giant's head, which had been torn free of its body by one of Maia's water dragons. Her snapper was nearby, while Helen was cutting the giant's body open.

"Just seeing what can be seen," Anna said.

"Anything stick out at you, yet?" Leon asked.

"Nothing over here," Helen responded as she gritted her teeth in exertion and forced open some of the vines to expose the bone-like tree branches and logs beneath.

Anna took a moment to think as she poked around in one of the holes gouged by the teeth of Maia's water dragon. "Maybe... I *might* have something," she said, and Leon hurried over to her side.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Take a look at this." Anna held several small vines within the wound open, revealing what seemed to be a wooden skull—or at least, something that served the same function as a skull. It was a hard shell buried within the vines, no larger than that of a human's. Part of it had been cracked open, revealing some kind of glossy black flesh within.

"What in all the hells is that?" Leon exclaimed. He'd skinned plenty of animals before in his youth, so such sights hardly turned his stomach. However, this was so alien and unexpected that he couldn't help but feel a little revolted.

[Have either of you seen anything like this?] Leon asked his soul realm passengers.

As Xaphan and Nestor peaked out of his soul realm, Anna replied, "I have no idea what this is. It's soft like flesh, but dry and absent anything that can be thought of as blood. As far as I can tell, these things have no dedicated sensory organs, either, but I'd have to make a much more in-depth dissection to verify that, and that'll take time."

“Take however much you need,” Leon said. “Just be careful. Remember that the local fauna have been trying to spray us with that green pollen. Make sure you’re as sterile and protected as you can be.”

Anna smiled as her hands flashed with light magic, and then she twirled her knife in one hand and forceps in the other. “I’m well protected, no need to worry about that.”

Leon nodded, then shouted to Helen, “That goes for you, too!”

Helen didn’t even look up from her own dissection, but spared the time to give Leon a thumbs up.

As the two continued working to dismantle the giant, Nestor finally responded to Leon.

[I’ve never seen such things before, this is far outside my area of expertise.]

Xaphan’s crackling voice immediately responded, [Then why don’t you shut your mouth and let an adult speak.]

Nestor grumbled incoherently, but he went quiet.

[Good,] Xaphan replied. [Now, Leon. I think I was right in assuming that this is a hive mind you’re dealing with.]

[What makes you say so?]

[That thing in the giant’s head, it channels will and thought. It’s essentially a receiver of transmitted magic—darkness magic, in particular. These giants, assuming they were all the same, were little more than puppets being controlled from elsewhere.]

[So these giants are entirely artificial?] Leon asked.

[I would say so,] Xaphan confirmed. [You might have to ask the chattering ghost if you want to know more about how they operate, but that shiny black thing is most definitely a medium for darkness magic, and for exerting control over a puppet—or, maybe to make it a little clearer in your jargon, a *golem*.]

[What do you think about that, dead man?]

Nestor audibly scoffed. [An *organic* golem? Ugh, disgusting. An utterly absurd waste of magic talent. Stone and steel are infinitely more pliable and durable than wood and vine.]

[That’s hardly in question,] Leon responded. [That’s not what I wanted you to assess, though.]

Nestor sighed, sounding more than a little offended. [I refuse to call these things golems. The candle called them ‘puppets’, so let’s go with that. These ‘puppets’, then, were woefully inadequate. They exerted some physical power, but they crumbled under the weight of even the mediocre mages accompanying you.]

Leon agreed with that assessment, for the most part. [How about the actual way these things work? What can you tell me about that?]

[I'm not sure what I can say,] Nestor said. [All golems need power sources and processors. Wisps serve as both, but more primitive golems can use magic-storing gems and highly advanced enchantments to perform rudimentary, highly repetitive tasks. If these things are golems, then...]

As Nestor trailed off, Leon felt the subtle flutter of his magic senses cover the dead giants and probe in as far as they could, spilling past the openings made by battle and by Anna and Helen. After a few seconds of inspection, Nestor continued.

[Those black *things* in their heads likely act as both power source and processor. Where a wisp would autonomously power and control a golem frame, this... power receiver? That sounds about right... This power receiver essentially does the same thing. These things have no built-in power source, so whatever's controlling the golems not only has to control them all at once, but also provide them with power.]

Leon's eyes narrowed in thought, and he began to pace around the dead giant. [Could... the same be true for everything else?] he wondered.

[What do you mean?]

[Everything else we've encountered in this forest,] Leon explained. [None of it has emitted any aura, not even in those brief moments when they've obviously used magic power. It's as if they're completely magic-less beings, fading into the background of the forest. Maybe that's exactly what they are, and those rare times when they use magic, maybe it's from whatever's controlling them?]

[How would that be possible?] Nestor wondered in turn. [I've never heard of anything that can simultaneously control a dozen golems, let alone that massive congregation of eagles you encountered on the first day, yet do so with such efficiency as to evade the senses.]

Leon frowned as he paused in his pacing. [I suppose that's what we'd have to accept, isn't it? Either there're multiple things controlling everything we've encountered, or the thing that's controlling everything has capabilities beyond what you've heard of, Nestor.]

Before Nestor could respond, Xaphan quietly interjected, his tone dripping with smugness. [I've heard of beings that can puppet frames in numbers beyond counting.]

[Oh?] Nestor sarcastically responded. [Well, by all means, please share!]

[The Primal Gods and Devils could, with ease,] Xaphan said, and Leon's blood ran cold. He didn't want anything to do with Primal beings—the one time below the Serpentine Isles was more than enough for him.

[Gods and Devils,] Nestor practically spat. [Poor examples given their power. That's like saying a mountain has many rocks.]

[You asked for examples, and those are two,] Xaphan shot back. [But if you insist on eating shit, by all means, I shall continue shoveling. There are many beings in the universe, and they often come to demons for aid or power. Some come to us that are... disunited in mind, shall we say? They operate in a decentralized state, with their minds spread between many different bodies. There are others than can take control of something's brain and use it for themselves. Still others can dominate someone else's mind entirely, allowing them to keep their autonomy, but overriding their will entirely. I couldn't give

you any examples, Leon, that you'd recognize. The dead man might, *might*, but I doubt it, so I'll not waste my time.

[Regardless, after everything I've seen, I'd be more than willing to guess that there's just one being controlling everything in this forest. Nothing here is autonomous, everything is directly controlled by one overarching mind. The nature of that mind, and its limits, I can't even guess at. But that's what it is.]

[Everything in this forest...] Leon murmured as his eyes strayed from the dead giant to the grass and shrubbery around the camp. The scars of the first fight with the bulbous vine had almost entirely vanished in the couple days since, with the forest rapidly growing in to repair the damage. His eyes then drifted further out, to the trees around the camp. He'd seen a tree move during the fight with the goat men, but not since, though he knew that tree sprites were in the forest.

[Yes,] Xaphan said, almost as if he could hear Leon's thoughts. [*Everything* in the forest.]

[It can't be *everything*,] Nestor protested. [That's too much for one mind to handle, even if everything has been dominated!]

[A thing doesn't need a mind to be controlled,] Xaphan retorted. [This forest feels wrong, and I've felt such a thing before, when such a creature attempted to contact me, desiring knowledge of fire and how to protect itself against fire. Everything in this forest, flora and fauna both, have been dominated.]

Leon stared at the nearest tree—a tree about sixty feet tall held up by almost paradoxically thin, stilt-like roots. [This is...] Leon said, for a moment decidedly not believing Xaphan. However, before he could finish the thought, he had to stop to think again. [If you're right, Xaphan,] he continued after a moment, [and I'm not saying I believe you, but if you're right, then why the hells isn't this intelligence resisting us more fervently? A couple attacks a day, on average, and attacks that're easily dealt with? When it controls the entire forest, right down to every tree and blade of grass? Why would it even allow us to continue as we are?]

[Do I look all-knowing to you?] Xaphan replied. [I can't tell you the innerworkings of such a fucked up mind. I've already said all I can say. Proceed as you please.]

[Maybe it's best if you don't speak anymore, then,] Nestor grumbled. [Honestly, Leon, the idea that one mind is controlling *everything* in this forest is ludicrous. Such a thing isn't even possible in the Nexus.]

Still frowning in thought, Leon pointed out, [You said yourself that the reason the research facility was established here was to research something special that drew the attention of our Clan's top minds, right?]

[Yes, but I would've been informed explicitly about what they found, and if they'd found a creature that can control so many different bodies, then I would know!]

[Would you, though? By your own admission, you didn't care about what was going on here, and you devoted all of your attention to the moon stone back in the north. I'm sure you received reports of what was going on here, but did you ever read any of them?]

Nestor went quiet, but that in itself answered Leon's question, he felt.

After a moment, Leon sighed and conceded, [This is all speculation. For now, let's focus on getting into that warded area. Do either of you have any ideas?]

[I'm formulating a few theories,] Nestor said.

[I've got a few ideas of my own,] Xaphan replied. [Burning this entire forest down, for one...]

[Let's assume that's possible; would that be wise?] Leon asked as he glanced at the closest trees again. [Wouldn't such a destructive tactic invite more active resistance? I mean, maybe what we've endured so far is the limit of what can be thrown at us, but I'm not convinced. I think there might be more going on here than is immediately apparent, or that whatever's in charge here doesn't necessarily want us dead. But burning down a huge section of the forest might be more than can be tolerated.]

[I'd like to see them resist when this forest has been rendered ash and charcoal,] Xaphan murmured, but Leon just rolled his eyes and ignored the demon.

He supposed, whatever the reasons for what was going on, the resistance thus far had been manageable. But if he wanted any answers—or anything else from the research facility, besides—then he'd have to get into that warded zone.

Chapter 742: Personal Scouting

Leon stared out into the forest, his frustration great, as was his anger.

Three days had passed since they'd been attacked by the plant giants, and yet, nothing of real note had happened. They'd been attacked twice more by plant giants and wolves, respectively, and fought them off both times. Another Evergolden warrior had died, and most of the rest had been injured, as had Gaius, Alcander, and Anna, but they'd survived those attacks.

However, Leon was still rather flummoxed that the attacks were coming so disjointedly. He was still of the mind that if all this force had been concentrated, then they would've been forced to call their expedition off. As it was, the attacks were anger-inducing, but otherwise not much of a problem.

Not that he would've ever said so in the open. The Evergolden escorts weren't enthused that they were remaining in the forest since they'd lost two people in the week they'd been in the forest, and he knew that one way to piss them off was to brush aside their comrades' deaths.

During all of this, none of them remained inactive, though. For the most part, the Evergolden warriors remained in camp, making sure that they still had a fortified location to fall back to, if they should need it. Meanwhile, Leon, his retainers, Cassandra, and a couple of her escorts continued to probe the warded region. In that time, however, they'd found no weaknesses they could exploit, and were rapidly running out of options.

They couldn't tunnel in—an Evergolden earth mage had confirmed that the region was too heavily warded to try that. If they did, they'd soon find themselves buried alive, or worse.

They couldn't fly over the region, as when Marcus tried that, he found himself rendered unconscious and teleported to the ground.

Throughout all of this, the forest remained silent and aura-less, giving them no clues at all as to how to get past these wards.

Even more concerning, the Thunderbird herself couldn't help much. While she was incredibly knowledgeable regarding enchantments, she claimed that she had no special interest in the art, and that Nestor likely knew more than she did in most fields. The only thing she was able to add to their working theories was that she suspected the wards at the core of this zone were created with ancient, not modern, runes.

And Leon wasn't that familiar with ancient runes. He'd studied them a bit, to be sure, but modern runes were so much more practical to work with that his studies had never been particularly in-depth.

So, Leon was frustrated. He wanted to get into this warded zone, he *needed* to, but no matter what he tried to think of, nothing quite seemed enough. The problem, he thought, lay in his unfamiliarity with these wards. So far, he hadn't personally tested them out, he hadn't tried to walk through, and he was getting more and more tempted to try—and his temptation had started quite high.

And so, as he stared into the forest, he decided that now was as good of a time as ever. If they waited around too much longer, they'd eventually be overrun by the otherwise invisible denizens of the forest, their fatalities adding up. If they waited too much longer, Heaven's Eye might not be waiting for him when he returned to Occulara...

So, Leon ignored the protests of his retainers, secured around his waist a rope, and started walking into the warded zone.

His armor was on, his defenses active. Xaphan and Nestor were both paying attention, adding their senses to his. Whatever was going to happen, none of them wanted to miss it.

Leon strode into the forest, not so much confident as he was provocative and spiteful. The forest had defied him enough, and he dared it to continue.

The forest seemed more than willing to take up the offer, as Leon noticed the mental defenses on his helmet flare to life. He couldn't sense much magic in the air, but once he realized that something was up, he took a moment to stop and examine his environment further.

And once he did, he found that he could actually sense a few wisps of power, a few stray aetoi of darkness magic pressing in on his helmet, as soft and subtle as a spider web clinging to clothes.

When he sensed this, he couldn't help but feel some real admiration for whomever had set up these wards. Enchanting was an art, and this warding scheme, at least in execution, was nothing less than a masterpiece.

Without hesitation, he conjured his anti-darkness gem and activated it. A wave of magic swept out from him, and for a moment, the thin, nearly imperceptible strands of darkness magic that had wrapped themselves around his helmet looked like they were going to resist, but then they snapped, and Leon was free.

So, he proceeded onward. However, he'd barely taken two steps before his helmet's wards flared to life again as more darkness magic attempted to get past them.

Again, Leon used his anti-darkness gem, and again, the strands of darkness affecting him were severed. And this time, he was only able to take a single step before they snapped back into place, threatening to sneak past his defenses and enter his mind, clouding his thoughts and confusing him.

Leon used his anti-darkness gem again, but this time, the strands held. Leon tried again, and again, they resisted his magic. So he tried using his lightning, and this time, the darkness was torn completely asunder, leaving him to continue unfettered, though no less wary.

As he proceeded, he made sure to keep an eye on his surroundings, and on everyone behind him. The darkness wards were clearly not the only wards the zone had, and if he didn't want to get lost in illusions, he needed to make sure that everyone around him remained consistent, ensuring that he was anchored in reality. So far, he could still see everyone else, and they appeared to be able to see him, and he hadn't noticed any changes of the sort that had made the illusions obvious when he'd used a glowing stone to probe them.

He kept trudging on in the thick primeval forest, moving over roots, through thick shrubs, and between tall, sturdy trees. Lightning danced across his body regularly, staving off the darkness magic that threatened to test his defenses. He didn't stop again until he felt a subtle surge of magic, and he lost sight of the rest of his party.

Leon immediately froze, but his power raced through his body, ensuring that he was ready to fight if need be. A quick inspection showed him that the rope around his waist was still there, and a quick tug showed that it hadn't been severed anywhere, but after about twenty feet, it disappeared.

[Did either of you sense anything?] Leon asked the spectators in his soul realm.

[Light magic,] Xaphan immediately responded.

[The illusion surrounding you has strengthened,] Nestor added. [These wards are a cocktail of different magics, all designed to confuse and disorient.]

Leon nodded, but he backed up anyway until he reached the point where the rope vanished. He took another step, but unfortunately, he didn't step out of the illusion. He didn't need Nestor to tell him that that meant the cast illusion wasn't strictly limited by range, and was probably moving with him. That was both concerning since he was the target of the illusion, and extremely enticing as a display of power and skill in the enchanting arts.

Leon's heart raced, his eyes were wildly darting around to every shadow, and he was braced for anything, but at the same time, he couldn't help but admire the handiwork before him. He could only sense the barest hint of magic power, and he guessed that if he weren't actively looking for it, then he would've missed it entirely. A true master was responsible for this, someone who might even surpass Nestor...

There wasn't much else to do except to continue. Well, he *could* turn around and try to make his way back to the party—he was only about a thousand feet or so into the forest—but he didn't do this just to turn around at the first real obstacle. He wanted to see everything that the wards could show him, so he continued.

Leon proceeded onward, the illusion around him remaining stable for a good clip, and the darkness that attempted to worm its way into his mind continuing on without change. However, after another five hundred feet or so, things began to change. The illusions around him started growing more intense, and the darkness magic pressing in on his defenses received a huge boost in power. He was forced to channel his lightning quite intensively now to stave off the darkness, while the illusions around him

made the trees look like they were shaking, the bushes and shrubbery look like they'd sprouted legs and started dancing, and like the ground flexed and rippled like water.

Leon almost lost his balance as everything he saw told him that he was moving in ways that he wasn't.

After taking a few moments to get his bearings, however, Leon adapted, and kept on moving.

[Wonderful work,] Nestor murmured. [Simply wonderful... Such subtle workings, yet such a pronounced effect...]

In response, Xaphan sniped, [Are you going to keep sucking off whoever made these wards, or are you going to try and help?]

[Nothing I can do, I'm afraid,] Nestor replied, not rising to Xaphan's barb. [Work of this complexity can't really be undone without being able to see it.]

[Ah, so you're useless. It's good to recognize your failings...]

[I'm only as useless as you are, demon.]

As his companions descended into bickering, Leon turned his mind to the problem in front of him. He hadn't yet been teleported, thankfully, but he didn't know how much longer he could continue in the warded zone. So, he decided to test something that had been running through his head.

He conjured his anti-light magic gem into his gauntlet and activated it. He didn't expect it to do much since the wards here were so much more powerful and advanced than his enchantments, but he was hoping he could at least disrupt the enchantment for a moment or two. He didn't think he'd need any more than that.

But more than that was what he got, as a wave of magic power washed out from him, and the forest changed in the wake of that wave. The big things remained the same, such as the trees around Leon, the bushes and ferns, the flowers; but what *did* change was what Leon could suddenly sense. Appearing as if from nowhere came the sounds of birds, the buzzing of insects, and the glow of magic power. All that had made this forest so quiet and stifling was banished, revealing the true forest beneath, teeming with life.

And then the illusions snapped back into place as the power behind Leon's antimagic pulse died out.

Leon was left speechless at the change. Only a couple hundred feet of the forest had been revealed, but the reveal itself showed so much that even his bickering passengers had been struck speechless.

Without hesitation, Leon used his antimagic again, dispelling the illusions around for a moment to get a better look. This time, however, he backed it up with a great deal more power.

His pulse swept outward, revealing again all that the illusion wards had obscured. It swept over a motionless plant giant, looking like it had frozen in place as it strode through the forest, stripping away the illusion that had made it look like a tree. The wave crashed down upon an old corpse laying in a ditch—the remains of some large beast, rotting in the daylight, swarming with carrion insects. His antimagic pulse then, for just a fraction of a second, hit a particularly large tree with a black trunk, branches covered in ethereal, translucent leaves, and with six-fingered hands carved around the base of every branch. As soon as his magic touched this tree, giving him just the momentary glimpse, the tree's

spectral leaves flashed with magic power, and his magic pulse was immediately canceled out, and the illusion snapped back into place.

'That tree...' Leon thought, captivated by what he'd just seen. 'So much power ran through it... Was it some kind of hub for enchantments? If I were to cut it down, what might happen? Could I subvert the wards from there?'

When it came to modern runes, Leon was confident that if he were to find anything that might pass for a control console, he'd be able to shut down any enchantment. However, when it came to ancient runes, he wasn't so sure, but he started making his way in the direction of that tree, anyway. With the illusions back in place, it looked like any other tree now, but Leon didn't for a moment lose track of where it had been.

At least, he didn't *intend* to lose track of it, but as he approached the tree, the forest started to shake again, and as Leon stumbled, his eyes fell to the ground. When they turned back up only a fraction of a second later, everything around him had changed. He was still in the forest, but clearly in a different section.

[Remarkable,] Nestor whispered. [Such subtle teleportation, too. My admiration for whomever set up these enchantments continues to grow. Leon, even if all the research at the old Clan facility has been destroyed, just getting a look at the runes that create these wards would be of immense value...]

[Yeah,] Leon said with some uncertainty. He agreed with Nestor wholeheartedly, but at the moment, he was a little more concerned with where he was. The rope that had been attached to his waist had been severed, leaving him without his bearings. He projected his magic senses, but it was almost as if he were standing in a completely different forest, now. Everything his senses were telling him indicated that he was no longer in the Prota Forest, and his pulse was rapidly accelerating.

He quickly used his antimagic enchantment again, and while it worked again, this time it only managed to spread out for about a hundred feet before the illusions snapped back into place.

[Be careful with that,] Xaphan warned him. [It seems like these wards are adapting to your probes, somehow...]

[Maybe wisps monitoring the enchantments?] Nestor wondered aloud. [These are certainly not running mindlessly; there's some kind of intelligence actively monitoring this, I think.]

[A disturbing thought...] Leon replied as he glanced around. He was of the opinion that anything powerful enough to set up these wards would be more than strong enough to have put in more active defenses. As it was, the wards were now as suspicious as the constant attacks had been; frustrating, but not nearly as devastating as they could've been.

In other words, whatever was behind all of this was holding back, and he didn't know why.

[Do you think I should try again?] Leon asked as he prepared to activate his antimagic once more, and with a great deal more power.

[I can't predict what'll happen,] Nestor replied. [Just know that you're probably poking something right now, and they might poke back. This teleportation might even *be* them poking back.]

Leon frowned, but when he projected his magic senses again, he had to stifle his growing anxiety at how unrecognizable his surroundings were.

[I say go for it,] Xaphan said. [If they didn't want you to go trooping through their forest, they should've put up a sign or something.]

[I think all the wards is sign enough, demon,] Nestor tiredly responded. [Honestly, what a stupid thing to say. And you were a Lord of Flame, too. No wonder you were so quickly usurped.]

The two began bickering again, and again, Leon tuned them out.

With more confidence than he felt, Leon held out his hand and used his antimagic again. The strongest pulse yet erupted from him, and just as it did before, the illusion was forced back. The pulse spread out, revealing more and more of the forest he now found himself in, and in nearly all respects, it looked nearly identical to the Protia Forest, so he calmed himself by telling himself that he was probably just in a different part of the large forest, in another heavily warded area only a few hundred miles away from where he started. He couldn't quite bring himself to believe it, but he repeated it to himself several times to stave off his growing panic.

He found it far more convincing when his antimagic swept over a small crater in the forest. The nearby trees had been stripped of bark, the ground had been broken and cleansed of all plant life, and lying in the center of it all were the remains of five plant giants, all looking like they'd been utterly savaged by something, just barely recognizable despite the damage they'd sustained.

And Leon thought he saw the culprit: a mantichore, laying in a pool of blood, its golden-brown hide ripped and rent, three large tree branches sticking out it like arrow shafts, one of its wings broken and hanging at an odd angle, and one of its ram's horns snapped off. It was motionless enough that Leon almost thought it was dead, but he could see its chest gently rising and falling as it tried to take in a few shallow breaths.

Before Leon could evaluate its condition any further, the forest's illusions snapped back into place, concealing the dead plant giants and the heavily injured mantichore.

With nothing else to go on, Leon began making his way in the mantichore's direction. He kept himself on the lookout as best as he could for anything popping out of these illusions that would get in his way, but his path was as clear as it could be in such a dense forest. Fortunately, nothing jumped out at him, and he found himself much calmer when he reached the clearing. At the very least, he was hoping that he might find some answers investigating the remnants of this battle.

Chapter 743: Key to the Forest

When Leon reached what he assumed was the site of a battle between plant giants and the wounded mantichore, he immediately used his antimagic again. He didn't need it to be in use for long, but he wanted to confirm what he was about to do.

As expected, the remains of the plant giants and the still-breathing mantichore were revealed for a moment before the illusion snapped back into place, hiding what he knew was there. So, when he approached the large pile of dirt and shrubbery that the mantichore was being presented as, he reached out for it. For a moment, he wondered if this really was an illusion as his fingers brushed against the

leaves and detritus of the illusory forest floor. It all *felt* solid, strangely enough, and he wasn't sure how his tactile senses were being fooled.

However, as convincing as the illusion was, it was still an illusion. It resisted his touch slightly, almost like a sheet of the thinnest cotton or silk, and then it snapped, causing the illusion to fail, revealing the heavily wounded manticore, still lying there, bleeding from numerous gashes in its hide, breathing so shallowly that it almost seemed dead. Encouragingly, the illusion didn't snap back into place this time, leaving the manticore exposed to his eyes.

[Leon,] Nestor said with great trepidation, [what are you planning?]

Leon, his hands still extended toward the manticore, paused. [These things seem hostile to the giants,] he explained. [Assuming Xaphan is right and this forest is being controlled by some overarching intelligence, I think these manticores might be resisting it.]

[And you're going to try and help this one, on the off chance that it might feel some bestial gratitude toward you?] Nestor asked.

[That's a little dismissive, but you've got the right of it.]

[You don't even know how powerful this thing is, or if it's even sapient!]

Xaphan then interjected before Leon could respond. [I think you should try it, Leon. You haven't been getting very far on your own, so why not?]

[Hmm. My thoughts exactly,] Leon stated, and before Nestor could continue arguing, he lightly brushed his hands against the bloodied golden-brown fur of the manticore and whispered a plea for help to the tau pearl. The pearl was only too happy to oblige, and shining white healing magic flowed down through Leon's arms, out from his fingers, and into the manticore.

[Reckless child,] Nestor murmured, but Leon ignored him. Instead, he focused on directing the tau pearl, ensuring that the manticore's most grievous injuries were healed first.

It didn't take long for all the damage to be healed. The tau pearl was powerful, and with the backing of an eight-tier mage, the manticore was healed in less than ten minutes. Leon was gratified to see the beast's shallow, labored breathing calm down significantly, but it didn't wake just yet. So, Leon sat on one of the fallen plant giants. It had looked like a fallen tree until his ass made contact, but the illusion failed as he sat back.

With something to wait for, Leon began to ponder his current situation. He didn't know where he was, he couldn't see the camp, and he was surrounded by powerful illusions. Having had some time to think, however, he realized that he had enough information to formulate a theory, and had some ways to try and get his bearings if that theory turned out to be right.

First, though, he asked Nestor, [Hey, dead man. Were you paying attention to the teleportation that got us here?]

[Of course I was,] Nestor replied.

[How powerful was it?]

Nestor paused a moment, and the reason why became clear when he asked in confusion, [What do you mean? Power can mean several different things, and it would behoove you to be a little clearer.]

Leon sighed in muted frustration, then asked, [In your opinion, have we traveled far? Do teleportation enchantments have distance limits? Is this specific kind of teleportation familiar to you?]

[How familiar are you with teleportation?] Nestor asked.

[Aside from the experiences in the Serpentine Isles, I've seen some bent space in Xaphan's prison, and my father told me about a sphere of darkness conjured by a crystal of some kind that my mother and her clansmen used to leave this plane.]

[I see. Well, it should come as no surprise that, yes, teleportation has limits. Generally speaking, that limit is magic power. The farther away something is, the more power you need to get there.]

[How much power?]

[That depends on the method of teleportation. For example: those enchantments that you saw in the candle's prison were connecting two fixed points, and those points weren't that far apart. Once the connection is established, there isn't much power needed to maintain it, but the initial cost to establish that spatial link is fairly high—maybe about as much magic power as an average sixth or seventh-tier mage has in their soul realm, I'd estimate. But again, it's hard to estimate without knowing the exact distances.

[Something like this crystal thing your mother used is another thing entirely. I can't imagine many such artifacts exist the universe, and those that do would be jealously guarded. You see, teleportation artifacts that can move someone across a plane are rare, but those that can move through the Void itself are even rarer. I think that that crystal would only have enough power for five or six people to travel from here to the Nexus, *maybe*. Again, it's hard to tell. All I can say is that our Clan didn't have artifacts like that, but then again, we didn't really need them given the size and strength of our ark fleets.

[For the most part, teleportation is something done solely to move around a plane, not through the Void. When you *have* to move between planes, then using dedicated engines aboard large arks is the way to go about it. That way, you're dealing with moving something of a fixed size, and the magic requirements can be met more easily without relying on what a mage has in their body. But it would still cost an ocean of magic power.

[To put it in perspective, our ark fleets arrived at this plane via teleportation, but once they arrived, none of our arks were allowed to teleport again, and had to move about the plane with their standard engines. Teleportation on such a large scale requires great resources and planning.]

[Undeniably interesting,] Leon said, genuinely meaning the words, [but what about how I got here? Would I be safe in assuming that didn't require much power?]

[Well, let's look at it, then. This forest's teleportation is clearly a defense mechanism, and not teleporting between two fixed points, so that dramatically raises the magic power requirements. We also can't say exactly how far you've gone, but since you're still in this same general region, I should

think that this teleportation probably cost a large amount of magic power, though not an unreasonable amount.]

Leon nodded. [I was thinking that maybe we haven't been teleported as far as I might've assumed, and that the forest's illusion enchantments are just getting in the way of that...]

As he spoke, he did what he realized he should've done to begin with, and began feeling around in his soul realm for his connection with Maia. At this point, finding that connection was practically second nature, but when he grasped it and tried to get in contact with his river nymph mate, she didn't immediately respond.

That greatly concerned him since, in his experience, their connection kept them in contact over distances greater than the breadth of the Prota Forest. However, given the illusionary nature of the forest he found himself in, he supposed he wasn't that surprised.

He spent several long minutes trying to get in contact with Maia, and just when he was about to give up for the time being, he felt the connection flicker in response.

Maia's sonorous voice filled his head, barely audible as if whispering from across a large room, [Leon? Can you hear me?]

[I'm here, Maia,] Leon replied, a smile blooming across his lips.

She didn't verbally respond, but, though muted, he felt a wave of relief travel through their connection.

[You disappeared,] Maia said. [We don't know where you are...]

[I'm still in the forest...] Leon replied, quickly giving Maia an update as to just what had happened following the moment when he'd lost sight of the rest of the expedition.

[We're keeping an eye out for you,] Maia replied. [We can't see you, though. The red-eyed one is particularly upset.]

Leon smiled bitterly. [I think she's just paranoid I'm going to steal whatever she's dreaming is within the research facility. I don't think I could do that even if I tried, though—getting into the place, I mean. But I've learned quite a bit about the powers protecting this place, and we can go over them once I get back.]

[How long until then?]

[I can't say, so it might be best to head back to camp. I'll try and get back before the day is up.]

Maia wasn't too happy with that answer, that much Leon could feel, and after a moment when he presumed she was relaying his words to everyone else, she replied, [Elise and Valeria want you back before then. So do I.]

Leon's bitter smile softened, but just as he started to respond, he noticed the manticore's breathing start to speed up, indicating that it was close to waking up. So, Leon quickly said, [I'll do everything I can, of course. This manticore is about to wake up, and I should focus on it right now, but I'll check in with you regularly.]

Again, Maia paused, and when she replied, she simply said, [You'd better. We're waiting for you.]

Leon sent back his love, which was returned, and he focused on the manticore.

As with everything else in the forest it didn't seem to have any aura, so as it started to rouse itself, Leon got to his feet and assumed a more defensive posture a fair distance away. He didn't draw his sword or channel too much of his power in order to not spook the manticore, but he kept lightning coursing through his body and his sword on standby, just in case the manticore turned out to be less than amenable to reason.

Or if it turned out to be completely incapable of reason, which was always a possibility. Leon was confident that it was strong enough to have a good chance at sapience—the plant giant corpses around it testifying to its power—but he knew that he could be completely wrong about everything to do with this situation.

As the manticore rose, it seemed a little dazed. Its leonine head moved slowly, and as it pushed itself up onto its paws, it started to walk in very slow circles around itself, inspecting its body. It didn't even seem to realize that Leon was there. It beat its wings a couple of times, testing its strength, then leaned in to lick at its hide where some of its most vicious wounds had been. The way it bent its head spoke to Leon that it thought that it still had both of its horns, but the tau pearl had been unable to replace the horn that it had lost. It took several licks for the manticore to realize that it only had one horn left, and it immediately stopped inspecting its hide and began pawing at the broken stump on its head.

And only then did it realize that Leon was still standing right there, several dozen feet away.

The manticore froze for a moment, its burning red eyes locking onto him as it assumed a threatening posture. It spread both of its wings in an obvious attempt to make itself look bigger, and its massive scorpion tail curled up over its body, ready to strike at Leon with this venomous natural weapon.

Leon didn't make any threatening moves, but stood his ground. He stared right back at the manticore, doing his best to project all the confidence that he didn't feel in the face of this unknown threat.

And it seemed to work. The manticore, perhaps a little unnerved at Leon's behavior, seemed to shrink back a little bit under the pressure of his attention. Leon wasn't trying to exert any pressure with his attention, aura, or otherwise, but he was still a little tickled to see such a massive creature, replete with natural weapons, shirking away from him.

[Any advice for breaking the ice?] Leon asked his passengers.

To his surprise, it wasn't Nestor or Xaphan that spoke, but the Thunderbird, whose arrival he hadn't even noticed.

[Use your darkness magic,] she said. [This creature has no capacity for human language, so you must use communicate in a way that it *can* understand.]

Leon followed her advice, and reached out with his darkness magic. His heart beat madly as he halted his channeling of lightning magic, but the manticore fortunately didn't justify his fear or paranoia.

When Leon's magic reached out to touch the beast's mind, it recoiled as if physically struck, and instinctively growled at Leon. However, after a moment, it shrunk back a little more and eyed him warily, and Leon couldn't help but read a little bit of intelligence in its gaze.

Leon whispered into its mind, doing his best to convince it that he meant it no harm.

[You can't say it like that,] the Thunderbird admonished when he was done.

[How do you even know what I said?] Leon asked, a little annoyed. His words and intentions were sent to the manticore only.

[I don't need to hear your words to know what you said,] the Thunderbird sagely replied. [You have to be stronger. Lord yourself over this beast, make it understand that it stands in the presence of someone infinitely its greater. It will submit, as all such base animals do.]

Leon frowned deeply, and was grateful the manticore couldn't see past this helmet. [I think I'll work up to that,] he tensely said.

The Thunderbird hummed in reply. [Do what you will, make your own mistakes. Just know that wild creatures respect strength, not compassion.]

Leon didn't think the manticore was necessarily wild, but he didn't want to get into that argument right now. Instead, he did his best to reassure the manticore that he was no threat, and in fact, was a friend, having healed the manticore of its wounds. He didn't communicate with words, but instead visualized what he was explaining and attaching emotions to the images before sending them to the manticore. This was the first time he'd ever seriously tried to communicate in this way, and he wasn't sure if it would work.

Despite the Thunderbird's warnings, the manticore seemed to respond to Leon's cajoling, and relaxed little by little. After about ten minutes, its posture had relaxed, its eyes, though still trained in Leon's direction, were no longer locked on him, and flitted around their surroundings.

Recognizing how well this was going, Leon continued on this same course, and after another ten minutes, the manticore had relaxed enough to take a few steps toward him, and to not be alarmed when he took a few steps toward it. And then they took a few more steps toward each other, and then a few more again. Soon enough, they were standing in front of each other, Leon's eyes about level with the manticore's lower jaw, only about half a dozen steps between them, and Leon's helmet back in his soul realm just in case in tried to communicate back to him in kind.

The manticore then made a few subtle hums and puffs, encouraging signs if the usual behavior was anything like the lions that Leon was more familiar with. He took another chance and held out his hand, and the manticore leaned in to give him a few inquisitive sniffs. It then tentatively licked his knuckles and pulled back.

All tension between them then evaporated, and the manticore sat down, its gaze still turned toward Leon, but now filled with curiosity and gratitude. Leon got the impression that it was waiting to see what he would do next.

So, he decided to ask a question, and did his best to ask if the manticore had fought the giants, hoping that the intelligence it had shown so far was enough for it to respond in some way.

As soon as the question was asked, the manticore growled and glared at the heap of logs and bushes that Leon knew obscured the remains of the plant giants. Leon didn't need to speak manticore to understand that it hated the plant giants, and it had, indeed, been the one to fight them. However, any other nuances that the manticore might've tried to express were lost on Leon, as it while it attempted to communicate with him in the same way as he was, with its magic reaching out towards him, he couldn't get much more than a general impression of what it was trying to say. Still, it was an answer, but he would have to content himself with nonspecific answers.

With his first answer, Leon then began to ask more questions of the manticore. He tried to refrain from asking anything so specific that it would require shared language between them to explain, but the manticore patiently listened to Leon's attempts to commune.

It couldn't explain the 'political' situation of the Prota Forest well, but Leon got the impression that manticores and plant giants were enemies—possibly even manticores and all the other beasts of the forest. However, it was able to express its utter hatred for plant giants again.

Leon's questions about the research facility were a little more urgent, but when he asked, the manticore stared off into the trees for a moment, then turned back to him. A few growls and a feeling of fear told him that the manticore knew of the place, and that it was incredibly dangerous.

Leon asked if it could lead him there, or if it couldn't, if it knew a way past the wards that he might use. He didn't expect much, but what he got blew him away.

The manticore, instead of answering, began to pace around him—not threateningly, but after a few steps, it disappeared, and then reappeared a few steps away. It then disappeared after a few more steps, only to reappear a second time a similar distance away.

It circled Leon, slowly becoming invisible, then visible again, and Leon took it in as best as he could.

[It's showing you the wards,] the Thunderbird whispered, though Leon didn't need to be told.

[Fascinating,] Nestor said as he watched the manticore. [It has some control over the wards, yet it isn't connected to the intelligence guiding these floral constructs or any of the other beasts you've encountered? How is this possible?]

[I don't think that matters all that much,] Leon whispered as he intently watched the manticore. [Just pay attention. If it's thorough enough in its demonstrations, then we might be able to figure out how to get past the wards...]

Nestor wisely shut his mouth, and he, Leon, Xaphan, and the Thunderbird quietly watched the manticore vanish and reappear again, with subtle threads of magic visible to them all weaving around the manticore every time.

When it was done, Leon had a wide smile on his face. With what they'd just witnessed and learned, they might just be able to get past the warded zone's defenses, with a little preparation...

Chapter 744: Truth

Leon had a wide grin on his face as he made his way back to the camp. The entire demonstration that the manticore had put on had lasted for more than an hour, and with so many powerful eyes watching

it, and Leon's antimagic enchantments helping them to analyze the flow of magic around the creature, they were able to figure out just what it was doing when it disappeared and reappeared.

As a result, Leon and Nestor were able to throw together a few spells that mimicked what the manticore did, and when he used the first one, he couldn't help but grin like a madman.

In short, the entire forest, not just the blatantly warded zone, was under the influence of powerful enchantments. Confirming what he'd tested earlier, illusions upon illusions had been layered upon one another, blocking not only the flow of ambient magic from sight, but also all the local fauna. The reason why the forest seemed so dead and lifeless, yet had so many monsters and other creatures regularly showing up, was because just about every creature in the forest was hidden by these illusions. When monsters appeared as if from nowhere, they were appearing out of this illusion, for it seemed they couldn't stay hidden when fighting.

When Leon used the first spell, allowing him to see through these many layers of illusion for a short period, it was like finally turning on the lights in a pitch-black room; suddenly, everything became visible.

Or at least, *almost* everything.

He could see foxes running through the brush, hear the birds chirping in the trees, the bugs buzzing as they went about their day, deer lazily picking through bushes and grass, and all the other normal things he expected to see in such a dense forest.

He also saw plant giants standing like statues in a rough circle around the warded zone. Packs of wolves roamed this perimeter, as did predatory cats, large boars, and huge flocks of eagles. In fact, there was so much concentrated power around the warded zone that he could scarcely believe it—there was more than enough to overwhelm their expedition, and at the very least, force them out of the Protia Forest. The thousands of plant giants that he could count alone would've been sufficient, as far as he was concerned, and yet all of this power hadn't been turned in their direction. Instead, they'd merely been harassed, and while they'd taken some fatalities, it was so far beneath what could've fallen upon them that Leon could only stare in disbelief at what he could see.

After a while, when he'd processed what he was seeing, he began to concentrate on what he couldn't see rather than what he could. Most notably was the warded zone.

The warded zone was even more heavily enchanted than the forest as a whole. These enchantments were like a magical dome covering the warded zone. Leon was still in this zone, letting him see that this dome was, like the illusions on the rest of the forest, multilayered. He could see a thin, translucent barrier surrounding the outer perimeter of the warded zone, which he guessed would've been completely opaque from the outside, much like the next layer of wards, which shrouded the inner zone from view in a dome of pure white light.

He couldn't see the interior of the zone, which included the site with abundant stone at the surface that Cassandra had attempted to investigate a couple days ago.

Less obviously, he also couldn't see hide nor hair of any more goat men that he'd been attacked by. There weren't any villages, any sign of civilization hidden within the forest, so the only places that he supposed the goat men could've come from were either underground, or within the inner warded zone.

Given that the goat men had sank into the earth after he'd killed them, he supposed the former was more likely, but that meant they were effectively impossible to find.

It was a grim thought. It served as a reminder that even though he and Nestor had managed to finally penetrate the illusions enshrouding the forest, there were still things within it that evaded his magic senses. Notably, he couldn't see any more tree sprites, hidden as they were within trees, nor could he see any more bulbous vines of the sort that had occupied the first stony site that his expedition had investigated.

Still, he'd discovered so much that he still wore a huge grin as he ran back toward the camp. If the theories that he and Nestor floated around were true, then they could penetrate those last wards around the interior of the warded zone and finally get a good look at what all of this magic was meant to hide.

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"It's about damn time you got back!" Cassandra shouted as Leon jumped over the camp's walls. "I almost thought I'd have to head out there to find you and lead you back by the nose!"

Leon just chuckled, in too good of a mood to rise to Cassandra's challenge. Instead, as his retainers and family came pouring out of his portable villa, he stepped right past the Princess, which she didn't seem to appreciate, though he didn't stop.

"Leon!" Valeria shouted as she ran to him, throwing her arms around his neck. After a moment, she stiffened, then released him and stepped back, a quiet, dignified smile on her face as she assumed a more graceful air.

Elise and Maia weren't so reserved, each pulling Leon into a tight hug, which he was more than willing to return. The rest of his retainers were just as happy, though only Anzu expressed that joy physically, nearly barreling Leon over in his joy at Leon's return.

Once all of that was finished, Leon hurried everyone inside to share with them the results of his scouting in the warded zone. Cassandra was still a little aggrieved at having been brushed off, but with the promise of information on the warded zone dangled in front of her, she quickly moved on.

In Leon's dining room, his retinue, along with Cassandra and the leaders of the Evergolden escort, sat down to go over what Leon had found.

Leon quickly informed them of the layers of illusion cast over the entire forest, and the strong likelihood that it was the result of powerful ancient runes within the inner warded zone. His spells that temporarily allowed him to see through these enchantments amounted to a single ancient rune, the rune for 'truth'. However, even with his eighth-tier magic and skill in enchanting, these spells were only temporary. To get something more permanent would take a little longer.

More concerning, however, were the teleportation enchantments protecting the warded zone. Unfortunately, Leon didn't have much of a solution for dealing with them, so they were going to have to try and live with them as they came.

With all of that out of the way, Cassandra only had a few more questions.

"What happened to that manticore?" she wondered. Leon was surprised that that was her first question, but he quickly answered.

"It left," he said. "It wasn't looking to start anything with me, and neither was I, with it. Once it paid me back for healing it, it departed—I assume to go about its own day, or to find its family, or whatever else a manticore does."

Cassandra frowned in thought. "It's curious that these manticores seem to be hostile to the giants," she said. "Did you find any more information on that?"

"No. As far as I can tell, most of the animals in the forest seem to be left alone, and leave the giants alone, too. It's only the manticores that appear to resist the giants. Then again, if we're right about all of this brain mold being evidence of mental domination, then perhaps it's only the manticores that are strong enough to resist. When I broke through the illusions, I noted that most of the manticores in the forest are around the sixth-tier range, though the giants and many of the other strong-looking animals, had no aura to speak of, even with the truth rune active."

"Then their lack of aura isn't an illusion?" Cassandra asked.

"Not that I can tell. It's more that they all have those power receivers, and only have the power given to them by whatever's controlling them. So, without excess magic power, they have no aura."

"... Huh..." Cassandra leaned back in her seat, her eyes glazed over in contemplation.

As the Princess turned that over in her head, Valeria spoke up with a more relevant question. "Do you have any ideas for giving all of us a more permanent ability to see through these illusions?"

"I do," Leon replied as he gave her a glowing smile. "In fact, it might be something that I add to our armor's enchantment schemes going forward, depending on how useful it turns out to be."

As he spoke, Leon retrieved from his soul realm a few rough sketches that he and Nestor had made after the encounter with the manticore. Scrawled upon them were plans for extremely simple iron amulets inscribed with the truth rune, along with modern runes designed to aid in the flow of magic power into the ancient rune.

"These *should* work," Leon said. "Assuming we make and use them properly, anyway..."

"Why wouldn't they?" Gaius asked. "Admittedly, my interest and skill in enchantment has always been limited, but my understanding is that ancient runes are powerful, aren't they? Is there some reason why their use is limited?"

"Ancient runes aren't used that often for a reason," Leon explained. "Modern runes have defined uses that don't change based on who's using them. A fire rune will function exactly the same in my hand as it would in yours, assuming all else is equal. Ancient runes, however, can be incredibly powerful, hilariously weak, or somewhere in the middle depending on who uses them. Modern runes basically only require magic power to function, but ancient runes require willpower and imagination. You have to have a clear idea of what you want the rune to do, and have the will to get that rune to impose itself upon reality. Ancient runes can be incredibly powerful, but that unpredictability was a real problem, which is why they've been replaced by the much more reliable modern runes."

“So, we get to the real issue, here: how can we use this ‘truth’ rune to cut through this illusion? Well, once we get these amulets forged, we’re going to have to do a bit of training with them; since the illusions are also the result of ancient runes, we’re going to be contending with the will of whatever put them there.”

Cassandra started paying attention again shortly into Leon’s spiel, and when he was finished, she leaned forward and said in a rather dismissive tone, “You were able to cut through the illusions without much trouble, I’m sure the rest of us will be fine.”

Leon smiled bitterly at her, his golden eyes narrowing into something like a glare. “As you’ll recall, I wasn’t able to penetrate the deeper wards. We still don’t know what’s waiting for us further in the warded zone. And these ‘truth’ runes won’t do a lick of good against the zone’s teleportation enchantments, let alone those enchantments that are designed to affect and confuse the mind. The difficulty of summoning the willpower to resist the inner wards with darkness magic clawing at your skull and the knowledge that you could be whisked away to who-knows-where shouldn’t be underestimated.”

Cassandra smiled back, her expression more arrogantly confident than worried. “I’m sure we’ll be fine,” she repeated.

For a long, uncomfortable moment, Leon considered arguing with her. However, with the way she stared at him, as if she were daring him to start an argument, he decided to let her and her people do whatever they would.

He did have to acknowledge a hint—or more—of regret in letting her in on the purpose of this expedition, though if the research facility’s defenses were even more robust further into the warded zone, he couldn’t deny the dark thought that maybe that little mistake would just solve itself. He had the dark premonition that the Princess was probably going to lead her people to doom.

After a couple seconds of staring at the Princess, Leon just said, “Do what you will.”

The Princess’ smile widened, and she leaned back in her seat, looking quite pleased with herself.

Leon then turned to his retinue and dismissed them, their meeting effectively over. For now, he and Valeria had a lot of work to do.

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Leon stared at what had been accomplished in the past couple of days. He’d scraped together enough iron to forge crude arm rings for the entire expedition, and he and Valeria had then inscribed them first with the truth rune, and then with a couple more enchantments to aid in channeling power to the rune and focusing the mind.

It had taken two days to finish, and that was with Nestor aiding Leon in the rings’ design. Valeria had struggled a bit to understand just what the enchantments were doing, though, since she didn’t have Nestor there to directly question, but by the end, Leon was confident that both of them had a reasonable idea of just what they were doing. As far as he could tell, all of the rings had been forged and enchanted as well as could be expected so far from civilization.

During this time, the camp was attacked thrice more, but the results were the same as most of the rest of the attacks, with the plant giants and goat men who participated being slaughtered to the last. The expedition only took nonfatal casualties, and with the strength of their healing magic, they didn't lose a single person.

Unfortunately, they couldn't let that lull them into a false sense of security, especially since they still needed some time to practice with their new gear. Using ancient runes was a far cry from using modern runes, which didn't require much cerebral input on the part of the user. Ancient runes, however, required a focused mind and a focused will.

Among Leon's retainers, Helen, Gaius, Anshu, and Marcus took to the rune quite well. Elise, Maia, and Valeria all did, too, to Leon's immense relief. Anna, Alix, Alcander, and Talal all had more difficulty, however, and needed quite a few hours of practice before they were able to reliably use their iron rings.

Something that greatly helped in this regard was the mask that Leon had won from Cassandra following the wyvern hunt. He hadn't used it much, but it had been enchanted to aid focus, keeping the mind on task. While his retainers were practicing with their new accessory, he'd tested the mask out, finding that it worked fairly well. He considered himself a fairly focused person, though, so the utility the mask provided him was fairly limited. For his retainers that were struggling with their truth rings, however, the mask proved quite valuable, and it was only after passing it around a few times that they were able to get a handle on their new ability.

At the same time, Leon noticed that the Evergolden escorts were practicing with their rings, though not quite as intensely as Leon's retinue was. For the most part, this didn't strike him as too dangerous since most of them were still going to remain back at camp, but what was more concerning for him was the fact that he didn't once see Cassandra practicing with her ring—not that he saw much of her in this time, anyway. She seemed mostly content to remain in her palace-tree, only stepping outside for a couple hours every day to make the rounds and speak with her people.

Eventually, though, the time for practice had to give way to the time for execution, and on the morning of the fourth day after Leon's return to the camp, everyone who was going along with him assembled before the wall.

Elise and Talal were staying behind, though the rest of Leon's retinue were going along with them. Of the two Evergolden escorts, one was going to stay behind to secure the camp, while the other was going to accompany Cassandra on this—hopefully—last leg of their expedition. Everyone had their truth rings, and everyone who was going with them could use them with some degree of competence.

Not all of them could completely see past the forest's illusions, though Leon hoped the sheer number of truth runes guiding them would make things easier on the group as a whole.

Using their runes, they left the camp, everyone now able to admire the forest, now so obviously full of life where before it had seemed so dead and lifeless. The illusions had been peeled back, revealing not only all of the animals that called this forest their home, but the enormous dome of pale blue light in the distance that didn't give way to their truth rings.

The warded zone, within which lay something that deserved such protection—or so Leon hoped. Within it may even lay the answers to all the strange happenings going on in the forest so far, or just

confirmations of what had already been theorized. Regardless, Leon knew that heading in there would likely be exceptionally dangerous, so he called their expedition to a halt near the borders of the warded zone.

"This is it," he told everyone. "If anyone has any misgivings, or wants to turn around and head back to camp, this is the time to make your voice heard."

"As if anyone would turn around at this point!" Cassandra excitedly exclaimed, though Leon didn't see the same enthusiasm in the faces of her people. "Let's just get in there and see what this damned forest has been trying to hide, already!"

Without waiting for a response from Leon, Cassandra donned her helmet, her escort doing likewise, and started trudging into the forest toward the warded zone.

Leon sighed in exasperation and glanced at his retainers. "Any of you want to back out?"

"Fuck no," Alcander said, speaking for everyone else.

"Good," Leon said with a smile, seeing none of the reluctance in his people that he'd seen in the Evergolden warriors. He turned back toward the warded zone and led his people to follow the Princess and the Evergolden escort. "Now, let's see what we can find..."

Chapter 745: Inner Warded Zone

Leon remained vigilant as he and his people followed closely behind the Evergolden warriors. Their truth rings were active, dispelling all illusions before them, but they did nothing to help fend off mental attacks, and the high probability of being teleported away wasn't something they could easily, if at all, combat.

So, it was with more than a little apprehension that they passed through the rough outer boundary of the warded zone. Instantly, the opaque wall of light in front of them vanished, revealing the outer warded zone.

There wasn't much to see, however. The warded zone was quite large, and the outer zone, as far as Leon could see, was simply room for the zone's many wards to layer upon each other, and to act as an obstacle in and of itself, forcing anyone trying to penetrate the wards to walk miles and miles through potentially hostile territory.

The inner warded zone was much smaller, only about ten miles from east to west and about seven from north to south. That part of the zone included the site that Cassandra had tried to scout out, so Leon assumed that was the remains of his Clan's research facility.

Onwards he led his people, keeping careful watch over the ambient magic and ensuring that his own truth ring remained active at all times. It was slowly but steadily growing harder to do so, though. Ancient runes were reliant not only upon magic power, but the willpower of the one using the rune, and since the illusions of the warded zone were themselves created with ancient runes, Leon, armed with his truth ring, was contending against whatever was maintaining these wards. And, if Xaphan's theory was correct, that thing was probably the central intelligence that had magically dominated the minds and bodies of just about everything within the forest, including non-sentient things like trees. By all accounts, this warded zone had been here since the time shortly after his Clan's fall, too.

Something that could occupy the forest for eighty-thousand years, evading the prying eyes of the Sacred Golden Empire and not letting even stories of its existence, only that of its dominated minions, escape its wooded dales, was something that was not going to be easy to counter, Leon knew.

His suspicion grew more and more prophetic as they advanced, and the wards on his retainers' helmets activated, protecting them from mental attack, and their truth runes flickered, the magical light they glowed with struggling in the face of their opponent.

Leon himself felt increasing pressure, as if something existed just out of sight and was pressing on his eyes, narrowing his vision. However, every time he shifted his gaze, whether or physically, magically, or metaphorically, he'd see nothing. Whatever was there, if it was anything at all, evaded his discovery, but the pressure continued to grow, and his ability to maintain his truth rune grew more and more strained.

After about twenty miles, their group approached the great walls of the inner warded zone. The white light that made up the dome shone brightly as it reached toward the heavens, exerting great pressure just by existing. The greater pressure by far, however, was upon their truth runes. The illusions returned with increasing frequency, and several times, Leon and Cassandra had had to physically stop one of their number from leaving the group as the mental attacks found purchase within their subordinates' minds.

However, for all that, they'd made it through the forest and now stood close to the foot of the inner zone's dome-shaped magical wards.

Leon was tempted to suggest they stop to rest, but his pragmatism prevented him from doing so. It was hard enough to keep his people moving in the right direction, and he had lightning that could free the mind from magical influence. His people were growing more and more strained the longer they stayed in the forest, and while they'd lost no one yet, the longer they stayed in range of these wards, the longer they were vulnerable to it. The best chance they had to find an opportunity to rest was to pass these inner wards and hope that these defensive enchantments relented once they were inside.

Of course, Leon was sure there'd be other, more active defenses inside, but they'd deal with that when they came to it.

Cassandra led the way right up to the ward's wall, and only stopped once there. She glanced back at Leon, her face largely hidden by her helmet though Leon could still see her eyes slightly squinted with the effort of maintaining her own truth ring and mind-shielding wards.

"Ready?" she shouted to him, her tone still energetic and challenging despite the pressures they were under.

Leon glanced at his people.

Anzu he was most worried about, as he wasn't sure how the griffin would adapt to using his ring. However, he was pleasantly surprised to see that Anzu was doing quite well with his truth ring secured around one of his front talons.

Most of his retainers were likewise doing well enough, but Anna, Alix, and Alcander seemed to be having some trouble. In the case of the latter two, it was mostly just fatigue building up; they were generally a little flightier, and didn't focus as well as everyone else. However, when they glanced at him and nodded, he knew they were still good for a while yet.

Anna, however, was another story—she herself was doing just fine, especially given the trouble she'd had using the truth ring initially. Rather, it was her Attican Snapper that was having more and more difficulty. Leon hadn't given it its own truth ring as it wasn't nearly intelligent enough to use the thing. But Anna had dominated the creature with her onyx bracelet, giving her complete control over its mind.

That control clearly had its limits, though, as the creature seemed to be affected by the mental intrusions of the zone's wards, and keeping it moving in the right direction was clearly something that Anna was struggling with. For all its bulk and physical might, the snapper was probably going to be nothing more than a liability in combat, Leon realized. He had half a mind to order Anna to return to camp with the beast, but at this point, he didn't think that was strictly necessary.

"You doing all right?" he asked Anna, just in case.

She smiled at him, her lips thin from the mental strain, and replied, "Doing just fine."

"You look about ready to keel over," Gaius said in a worried tone, and Leon noticed his eyes flitting over toward Alix as well. Alcander, it seemed, didn't warrant too much concern on Gaius' part, though Marcus was already by his friend's side, checking in on the large man.

"I'm doing better than I look, I'm sure," Anna said, waving off everyone else's worry, including that of her sister. Alix didn't say anything, but she nodded along with Anna.

So, trusting his people to know their limits, Leon turned back to Cassandra and said, "We're ready."

The seventh-tier Evergolden mage, it seemed, had checked her own people in the same time, and after she nodded to Cassandra, the Princess grinned like a madwoman.

"Then let's get to it," she said, and she immediately began striding toward the white wall only a few hundred feet away, its shining light visible even this far away in the dense, primeval forest.

When they reached it, Leon couldn't help but marvel at the expression of power. He could hardly imagine just how much magic power was flowing through the ancient runes that had created this thing. The ongoing power costs had to be enormous.

He didn't get much time to ponder it as the Princess barely broke stride as she reached for the light wall.

"Your Highness!" the seventh-tier Evergolden mage called out, causing the Princess to freeze, her fingertips mere inches from the wall of the dome. "Who knows what this thing can do! We should treat it with more are!"

"I agree," Leon said, joining the seventh-tier mage. Without waiting for the Princess to say anything, he conjured his telekinetic stone into his gauntlet and grabbed a small pebble from the ground. It was lightly dusted with moss, but was otherwise clean enough. Leon sent the stone flying through the barrier, though he intended to maintain his hold over it as long as he could. To his surprise, the barrier didn't break his hold over the stone.

[Interesting...] Nestor murmured from within his soul realm. [It seems the barrier isn't physical, but is instead merely concealing what lays beyond it. Bring that stone back here, let's see what's become of it.]

Leon complied, but when the stone reappeared, he was shocked to see that it had been completely cleansed of moss.

"It cleaned it?" Alix asked, sounding rather out of breath.

"No," Leon grimly responded. "It destroyed all of the moss on the rock."

[I agree,] Nestor said, his tone just as grim.

"How do you know that?" Cassandra demanded. "Did you sense something happen? Or are you just familiar with these kinds of defenses?"

"I just used my eyes," Leon easily responded as he pulled a long weed out of the ground. It was about three feet long, and using it like measuring stick, Leon stuck it into the barrier. He'd intended to hold it there for a couple seconds, but the plant matter essentially vanished as soon as it came into contact with the barrier, accompanied only by a quiet sizzling sound. The weed's stem was left slightly smoldering and much shorter.

"Shit," Marcus whispered, and it seemed his sentiment was shared amongst everyone else, from what Leon could see.

"Best not touch the barrier," Leon said to the Princess, brandishing the now much shorter weed as proof.

For her part, while her expression was obscured, she took a few quick steps away from the barrier and appeared to eye it warily.

"Well, what are we supposed to do now?" Helen wondered.

Leon pondered her question. The light was clearly not physically blocking anything, but it burned fiercely enough to completely incinerate plant matter. He wasn't familiar enough with light magic to know all of what it was capable of, but he *did* have an anti-light magic gem, which he immediately conjured into his gauntlet.

Without waiting for anyone else, Leon activated the gem and directed it against the barrier.

The barrier flashed even brighter for a moment as Leon's magic washed over it. As far as Leon could tell, the barrier *was* weakened, but it was still strong enough to maintain itself. Only a moment after using the gem, the barrier looked like it hadn't been hit with anything at all.

"Maybe if it were concentrated a little more," Valeria thought out loud.

"Maybe..." Leon concurred.

[Nestor, what are you able to see?] he asked. [Is this made with an ancient rune, too?]

[Undoubtedly,] the dead man replied. [Such defenses are powerful, but prone to failure under persistent pressures. You'll not be able to bypass this shield by going around, over, or under it, but brute-forcing your way through isn't out of the question.]

[If it's made with ancient runes, can an ancient help?]

[Don't mistake ancient runes, boy,] Nestor admonished. [They're enchantments like any other, just less precise and more limited in scope, if more powerful. Ancient runes can't only be countered with more ancient runes; modern runecraft can do whatever you need it to.]

[I hardly think we have much time to devise a strategy for that,] Leon replied as he glanced around at his fellows. The Evergolden mages were clearly rapidly growing tired, and the flickering of their truth rings were growing more intense. He guessed that they'd probably have to turn around if they weren't able to get through this barrier in less than fifteen minutes. It was hardly as much time as he would've wanted, but that's what he was comfortable with waiting.

[Ugh, the impatience of youth,] Nestor blatantly derided. [Fine, fine. Open yourself to me.]

Leon, for just a moment dropped his mental defenses. His armor's defenses could handle things just fine, but he was now powerful enough in darkness magic and mental defensive techniques that for his soul realm passengers to impart their knowledge to him now required his consent.

As his defenses went down, he felt a quick, sharp pain in the front of his brain, which immediately faded as the most complex ancient rune he'd ever seen appeared in his mind.

Ancient runes weren't like modern runes, which were fixed and static. There were only a set number of runes, though just about anything could be achieved by combining them in certain ways. In that way, they were much like letters, and even formed the basis for all the written languages that Leon had seen. Ancient runes, however, were another story. Every concept had its own bespoke rune, meaning there were a theoretically unlimited number of runes that existed, each one representing every concept and idea that could possibly be imagined, and all those that couldn't. Given the way that ancient runes required intent and willpower to function, though, most of these runes overlapped with simpler designs.

For instance, if Leon wanted to open a lock, he could simply use an 'open' rune. However, a rune for 'open lock' also existed, and would probably work much easier than the simpler 'open' rune, requiring less willpower for him to exert and lowering the power requirements to open the lock.

The rune he now saw pictured in his mind was quite complex, far more so than he'd been hoping for. He supposed he could use an 'open' rune—he already knew what it was, having used it during Nestor's brief mental invasion when the dead man had invaded his mind back in his lab—but against the specific and directed ancient rune that would be required to forge this barrier, he doubted he had the magic power or the power of intent necessary to break through. To break through this obstacle, he'd need something more directed and specialized.

"Give me a moment," Leon said as he knelt on the ground, "I might have a way to get through this thing, I just need to whip up a spell..."

As Leon cast his consciousness into his soul realm, he heard Cassandra complaining, "If you could do that, then why did you wait until now to make it?!"

The first thing he did when he reached his soul realm was to roll his eyes, but he didn't have much time to waste on the Princess, and so jumped up and ran over to his work tables and started on inscribing the rune Nestor had given him onto spell paper.

The rune was complex, but Leon's hand was practiced, and he was motivated. Less than ten minutes later, he was back in his physical body, the spell in hand.

"What is that?" Cassandra asked as Leon stood up.

"A key," Leon replied, not intending to get any more specific, and he ignored the Princess' attempts to get him to explain.

He walked over to the edge of the barrier and held out the spell. He couldn't press it against the barrier without it getting incinerated, so he held the paper about half a foot away, and then channeled his magic power into the spell paper.

The curving, flowing rune on the paper flashed with power, and Leon focused his mind on boring a hole into the side of the barrier. At the same time, he activated his anti-light magic gem with his other hand and focused its power on the area of the barrier right in front of the spell he was holding up.

The surface of the barrier in front of him began to flicker as magic power crashed down upon it, causing the smooth surface of the light barrier to ripple like liquid.

But it didn't fail.

Leon concentrated, pushing with all the willpower he could muster, silently asking and ordering the barrier to fall before him. He didn't expect the barrier to respond, but after a moment, he felt his magic being pushed back as something began to resist him.

Any doubts of an intelligence of some kind being within the barrier faded from his mind as the warded zone's defenses began to actively resist him. The magic powering the barrier pushed back, exerting great pressure. However, he could feel the barrier starting to give way, regardless.

After about ten seconds, the barrier cracked. At twenty feet long, it was a small crack compared to the entirety of the barrier, but a crack was a crack. Two seconds later, another crack appeared, making an X right in front of Leon. And then a third crack appeared a second later, and then a fourth.

At fifteen seconds, a section of the barrier about ten feet wide shattered in front of Leon, exposing what was beyond for them to see.

Leon didn't pay much attention, but he guessed it must've been spectacular, if the gasps of surprise from behind him were any indication.

"Get through!" he shouted, his voice straining with exertion as he kept the spell and antimagic gem going. The spell, however, was beginning to gray, the magic flowing through the paper causing it to start burning. "I can't hold it much longer! Get through!"

Everyone began rushing past him, with Anzu and Alix the last to go. As she passed him, Alix shouted, "Last one! Just waiting on you, Leon!"

Leon gasped, then ran forward, the spell bursting into flames in his hand. Without the spell, it was only his antimagic gem keeping the hole open, and even with it being more directed, it wasn't enough. The barrier flashed with power, and Leon dove headfirst into the hole, his heart racing from the labor he'd just undergone.

As he passed the plane of the barrier, he tucked and rolled, and just barely managed to get inside before the barrier slammed shut behind him.

Leon rolled to his feet, and immediately froze at the sight of what was before him, just past a few hundred feet of quickly thinning trees and other flora.

Instead of a densely packed wooded region, as he was more expecting, with profound secrets secreted away in its darkest corners, he found himself standing at the edge of an enormous bowl-shaped depression, resembling a crater in the forest floor. The depression was enormous, spanning at least five miles wide in every direction.

Rising from the center of this depression was the single largest tree he'd ever seen, reaching at least half a mile into the air. It didn't seem to have one main trunk, with dozens of smaller trunks splitting off only a couple hundred feet off the ground, causing the tree to appear wider than it was tall.

The tree itself was black, with bark the color of the night sky, and sparkling with something that resembled stars, too. A dense cloud of ethereal blue leaves surrounded the tree, each one translucent yet giving off faint blue light that radiated mind-bending magic power. Coursing through around and through the leaves were enormous bands of multicolored light, forming what Leon could recognize as ancient runes of titanic complexity within the branches. He counted at least a dozen of the massive ancient runes at the top of the ethereal tree, but he was certain that there were far more.

Surrounding this tree were a dozen more trees, each sprouting from twisting, tangled masses of roots at least fifteen feet thick that arced above the forest floor dozens of feet in the air. These trees, while immense, looking tiny compared to the great tree in the center, with their branches and leaves bending inward as if reaching for the great tree. These trees were a little more mundane, with brown bark and green leaves, though they still positively glowed with magic power to Leon's magic senses.

More concerning, however, were what lay at the foot of these trees: hundreds of wooden huts, none taller than three stories—villages that looked like they could house thousands of people. Walking through the streets of these villages were goat men, though none engaging in anything that Leon would consider normal villager behavior. He couldn't see any farms or commercial zones, these goat men were simply walking through the streets and occasionally walking into empty buildings—there weren't any anti-magic sense wards set up, so Leon could see that nearly all of these buildings were empty. Only a few were inhabited, and even then, only by goat men who'd laid down on the wooden floor and appeared to be sleeping.

Additionally, standing almost invisibly amongst the throngs of goat men, and among the twisting roots of the smaller great trees were hundreds of plant giants. They didn't seem to be doing much other than standing guard—or so Leon assumed—but their sheer numbers were intimidating enough.

"What is all th—" Leon began wondering aloud, but he caught himself when he realized that he was alone. No one else stood

Chapter 746: Finding the Research Facility

Leon's blade appeared in his hand in a flash of light and lightning danced across his body.

The rest of his companions were gone, and he hadn't even sensed it happening. Panic at the uncertainty of what had just happened flooded his mind for a moment before he mastered himself.

In an instant, he did two things. The first was project his magic senses, hoping that if his people were around, then he'd be able to find them. Secondly, he conjured his anti-light magic gem and activated it as powerfully as he could, and with the widest range possible. The wave of magic power exploded

around him, but nothing was revealed, showing that his people hadn't disappeared due to the layered illusions that filled the Prota Forest.

Likewise, his magic senses turned up nothing but what he could already see. At the very least, though, the distant plant giants and goat men walking around amidst the primitive village hadn't broken step and appeared to be going about their business as usual. Leon also couldn't sense anything else hostile around, leaving him well and truly alone at the edge of the warded zone.

[Did either of you notice anything?] Leon asked his soul realm.

[Light, lightning, and darkness,] Xaphan answered. [Spatial magic. Your people were teleported away.]

[But where?] Leon wondered as he sought out his connection with Maia. Fortunately, it was still there, alleviating his worry just a little bit, but the fact that he couldn't sense where she was in relation to him wasn't helping.

[That's impossible to say without analyzing the specific teleportation runes,] Nestor explained.

[Then, do I have to get up there?] Leon asked as his eyes turned in the direction of the great ethereal tree at the center of the warded zone, and the massive glowing ancient runes snaking through its branches and translucent blue leaves.

[Get up where?] Nestor asked. [I can't see what you can...]

Leon quickly described what he saw.

[No,] Nestor replied, though his tone didn't inspire much confidence. [At least, I don't think so... By the sounds of it, I think that what's happening is just an application of the facility's teleportation enchantments. Again, I can't say for certain without seeing the actual enchantments, but... I can't imagine using an ancient rune for this sort of thing.]

[Ancient runes *can* be used like this, though. Don't you remember that graveyard for the Primal Gods?]

[The one there was much lesser in scope—teleporting fewer people over shorter distances. Find the research facility, I'm almost certain that that's where the controls for these teleportation enchantments can be found. And, if you're lucky, where you'll be able to find some information on where your companions have been sent.]

Leon frowned in frustration. He almost had the thought of leaving and getting reinforcements, but he couldn't know what was happening with his people, and that meant that time was of the essence. Besides, as he glanced backward, he noted that the light barrier had snapped back into place, sealing him into the warded zone unless he wanted to crack through it again.

So, he bit his tongue, fought down all of his anxiety regarding his people, and turned his attention back to the warded zone.

The small grove of immense trees covered quite a bit of land within the warded zone, but it was still only a fairly small area compared to all the land covered by the light barrier. The site with a large amount of local stone that was within the warded zone was to the west of the grove, he knew, so he had to head northwest.

Before he left, he focused his magic senses on that region of the forest and found it quite flat. Only a few gentle hills and valleys, which made it surprisingly easy to see the research facility.

Or rather, what was left of it.

It looked like in the past eighty-thousand years, the facility had been cut in half by a river, with numerous stone columns poking up from the fast-flowing river that Leon saw. Additional ruins could be seen thrusting up from a pair of low hills on either side of the river and the ruins within, their stones worn smooth by water and wind and time.

Concerningly, as Leon continued to examine the surroundings, he noticed several plant giants, all larger than the ones he'd seen before, patrolling the hills.

Seeing no other option, Leon took off for the hills.

His destination wasn't that far, and he was motivated; he came within physical sight of the hills in a matter of minutes, and as far as he could tell, he hadn't been seen.

[It doesn't look like any of the Clan's defenses are up,] Leon observed as he came to a halt not too far from the foot of the hills.

[What do you see?] Nestor asked. When Leon finished describing what little he could see, Nestor speculated, [Most of the active defenses were probably taken when the Clan left the plane. It looks like you're going to get lucky, boy, and not have to face any of our most fearsome weapons. If you're *really* lucky, then you might not even have to fight any golems.]

[I think I'll try and refrain from jumping for joy just yet,] Leon said as the plant giants walking around the hills paused and began to slowly turn in his direction. He gripped his sword a little tighter and began to prepare himself to fight. However, before he could move, he felt a slight pulsing in the ambient magic power around this area. It almost felt like someone was turning an enchantment on and off in a rhythm, but before he could start trying to analyze it, the plant giants began to walk in his direction.

Leon briefly contemplated the wisdom of fighting the golems, and of launching the first strike. However, with thousands of goat men and hundreds of plant giants nearby, let alone whatever else might be hidden nearby, he decided to hold back for the moment. He turned and ran back a ways, conjuring his invisibility gem as he did and fading from view behind a shroud of darkness.

As he became invisible, he noticed the plant giants come to a halt, but not return to their patrol. He took this to be a good sign, but didn't let it go to his head—the goat men had already shown that they could strike at him despite his attempts to remain invisible.

However, with what seemed to be some allowance for thought, Leon came to a halt about a quarter of a mile from the hills.

Once there, he turned his attention back to the strange pulsing he'd noticed earlier. It was incredibly weak, but just about nothing in the forest emanated much magic into the environment, leaving the warded zone's ambient magic levels quite anemic. As a result, even this weak pulsing was fairly noticeable now that Leon had keyed himself into it.

He couldn't say what was causing the pulsing, only that it was primarily light magic and that it came from a few hundred feet away from the hill on the west side of the river. A little more concerningly, the pulsing seemed to be coming from underground.

[Seems like something's still active down below,] Leon said to Nestor. [Any ideas how to get down there to the lab proper to check it out?]

[You've been practicing your earth magic, haven't you?]

Leon grimaced, but asked in response, [I was hoping for something like a backdoor, or maybe a hidden tunnel that came out nearby that I could use...]

[Why would we have a hidden tunnel?]

[An emergency exit or something?]

[... I suppose you make some sense, boy. But no, this lab wouldn't have needed anything like that, and it would've just been a security vulnerability if we were ever attacked by a competent earth magic. However, with how decayed the upper lab is, I can't imagine that you would have much trouble boring into the lower lab with even your paltry skills in earth magic. Well, maybe. If the walls are still intact, then you'll have to find another way in.]

[Your confidence in me never fails to astound, dead man.]

[And it never fails to surprise, seeing just how easily you're left astounded, boy.]

Leon went quiet as he darted to the foot of the closer of the two hills and knelt on the ground. He called upon his slowly-growing skill in earth magic and, intending to send his magic into the soil and try and scout out the surroundings that way, found himself suddenly thrust into the air as the ground beneath him practically exploded.

Before he even hit the ground, a mass of roots came spilling out of the hole in the ground, whipping into the air and trying to ensnare him in their deathly grip.

None of these roots gave off any magic power, but Leon was still surprised to see them immediately rendered into ash when he instinctively called upon his fire. He swept his arm outward as he fell to the ground, and a wave of fire ended the threat that the roots posed.

However, while the roots had been destroyed and nothing more came from the ground, Leon's invisibility had been disrupted by his magic, and when he glanced back at the top of the hill, he saw the plant giants there turning back in his direction.

'*Shit,*' he thought as the giants began lumbering towards him. The only thing that he could say was fortunate about this was that the vast majority of locals hadn't been stirred up by this quick exchange.

Yet.

He needed a couple minutes to enshroud himself in invisibility again, and he didn't have that much time. So, he straightened himself out and channeled his fire once more. He didn't want to use lightning as, while his most powerful offensive magic, it was loud, bright, and nearly impossible to use both stealthily

and powerfully. He couldn't gauge the plant giants' strength without an aura, so he had to use his full power here, and to not attract any more attention, he needed to use his fire.

Leon didn't wait for the giants to come to him. The closest giant had barely come halfway down the hill before Leon threw a small, but bright orange fireball into the air. The fireball drifted toward the hill almost lazily, and then, after traveling about fifty feet, detonated, sending a vast wave of fire rolling up the hill. Still backed with Leon's power, the plant giants were submerged within the flame, and as the fire died down, there was little remaining but a few charred husks on the side of the hill, now stripped bare of all vegetation.

The plant giants patrolling the hill on the other side of the river didn't fail to notice this, so Leon leaped into the air, flew over as quickly as he could, and tossed a few more fireballs, incinerating the giants to the last.

When he returned to the ground, he checked on the great ethereal tree and was gratified to see that everything seemed fine there. However, given the roots beneath the ground, he knew that he wasn't quite safe.

Still, everything fell still and silent, and he was left alone, at least as far as he could tell, among the paltry few ruins sticking out of the ground.

[Thoughts on this place?] Leon asked.

[It's not fared as well as other ruins of your Clan,] Xaphan observed. [Honestly, this is more of what I would expect of such old and unmaintained facilities. That what you've found before this has been so intact is a miracle.]

[Indeed,] Leon agreed.

[don't make such quick judgments,] Nestor admonished. [This is just what's on the surface.]

[Do you know what used to be here?] Leon asked.

[Open your mind to me,] Nestor 'requested'.

Leon scowled, but acquiesced, and a moment later, Nestor sent him several images showing the research facility back in its day. It appeared much the same as Nestor's personal training facility in the Border Mountains back north—what the stone giants living on the edge of the Bull Kingdom called 'the Cradle'. It was a cross-shaped building, with a large central dome and four wings branching off. The walls weren't the shining white stone that he was used to, but were still quite impressive with many tall, narrow windows set within blind arcades. The ceiling had been heavily decorated with statues of who Leon could only assume were heroes and other famous people of his Clan, while above each of the tremendous doors at the ends of each wing was a large statue of the Thunderbird herself.

When Leon turned his attention back to the ruins, just about none of that was visible. Just two hills bisected by a river with a few pieces of barely-recognizable rubble sticking out.

[It's seen better days,] Leon sarcastically said.

[If I had to guess,] Nestor replied, [I'd say most of it has been buried.]

[I'd agree,] Leon said. [I'm sure the building collapsed, and as the river changed course, the rubble was all covered in dirt. Or maybe it was destroyed and buried deliberately. Who can say?]

[Maybe there's something beneath it that can,] Xaphan offered. [Do be a good little human and see if you can find a way down, my curiosity's been piqued and I need to see what else is here...]

[As you wish, oh high and mighty demon,] Leon growled. [You might actually be acting a little *too* high and mighty, though; it's not like you're a Lord of Flame or something.]

Xaphan made a disgusted noise, but didn't otherwise respond.

Leon made a quick circuit of the two hills, but he wasn't able to find anything that indicated a way down below. After the vine attack, he was wary of trying to dig down again, but with the weight of his anxiety over where his people were, he was sorely tempted to try it anyway.

He was just about to ask for a suggestion when he noticed the magical pulsing again. It was still dreadfully weak, but its pattern had changed. Now, it was a constant rapid pulsing, and Leon got the impression of something that had noticed his brief clash with the roots and was now trying to get his attention.

The pulsing wasn't coming from directly under either of the hills, but Leon walked over to it anyway—or at least, to directly over where it was emanating from. He then inundated the area around him with his magic power, analyzing the pulsing as much as he could.

He wasn't able to notice anything new, but he did confirm that it was artificial, not a natural occurrence.

So, he carefully began to seep his magic power into the earth once more. His alertness never dropped, and he was always at the ready to leap away from anything that might jump out of the earth.

His caution paid off, as the ground began to shake beneath him again, and he was easily able to throw himself out of the way of another mass of tree roots exploding from the ground, and quickly burned them all away.

The roots had burst from the ground directly over where the pulsing was coming from, which gave Leon an idea, though not one that excited him any.

If the roots weren't continuing to come, then there was a strong possibility that they were dead. And if that was the case, then he might be able to use the tunnel they bored to access whatever was beneath the surface.

But heading down below the ground wasn't an appealing thought, and given the way that his Clan usually built their important structures, then the facility was likely a fair ways down.

Still, Leon cautiously walked back over and took a good long look at the remains of the roots. He'd burned them away completely, practically cutting them off completely at the surface and leaving what remained behind a smoking, charred husk.

Leon poked at it with his earth magic, waiting for any response. When none came, Leon knelt down and physically started poking at the roots' remains. All he got for his trouble was an ashy gauntlet.

So, with the need to find Maia, Valeria, Anzu, and the rest of his retainers in the forefront of his mind, Leon started to more actively use his earth magic, and started trying to follow the roots' route through the ground. He was just waiting for anything else to come surging out of the earth, but now, he was left alone.

The root tangle was thick, and following where it came from was easy, even for his weak ability with the earth element. The roots didn't come directly from where the pulsing magic was coming from, but it was fairly close—about sixty feet from the surface, and about a hundred feet away.

With a better idea of where he was going, Leon started to apprehensively carve out a tunnel from the earth. He reinforced it with stone as best as he could, but making it entirely of stone was still incredibly difficult and power-intensive for him, so he had to content himself with making the tunnel primarily of dirt.

He carved the tunnel at an angle, following the root tangle as best as he could, but about thirty feet down, he hit bedrock and had to start carving into stone. He was happier about the added stability, but his progress slowed.

Every second that passed by he was consciously aware of, the idea that his people were struggling against dire threats raising his heart rate and playing havoc with his emotions.

Soon enough, however, he hit shiny gray metal—the telltale sign of an important building to his Clan. A smile bloomed across his face as soon as he hit this material, but that smile soon thinned as he realized that he couldn't easily bore his way past.

For a moment, he thought that he might be able to use whatever hole that the root tangle had created, but when he expanded the tunnel to include the entire circumference of the roots, he realized that the thicker tangle that had bored through the earth separated into much smaller individual roots this far down.

However, after some thought, he realized he could still use them.

He conjured his thin fire blade gem into his gauntlet and began to cut. He started first with the remains of the separate root tangle. With his small fire blade and his fire magic, he cut away what was poking through the gray metal wall. He then turned the blade against the wall itself, and while his progress went much more slowly, he was still able to cut through.

The wall was thick, but any enchantments that had once flowed through it were long dead. Under the weight of Leon's power and fire blade, he'd cut a new, larger hole he could fit through, using the holes already made by the roots to save on time.

With a little more fire to burn more of the roots within the chamber, Leon finally managed to wiggle down into the room below.

What greeted him wasn't anything that he'd prepared himself for.

The room appeared almost completely empty of furniture, everything having likely rotted away in the millennia since the facility's construction. However, nine skeletal corpses littered the floor, most of their bones having turned to dust. The skulls were still there, though, and it was from them that the vines came from.

The skulls were *old*, but they still bore some signs of what had happened. Scowling in displeasure, Leon realized that the vines had burst outwards from the skulls. He couldn't help but think of the brain mold they'd discovered earlier, and he wondered if this was some later stage of that affliction.

Regardless, he flooded himself with his magic power, ensuring that he wasn't contaminated with anything, and then weighed his next move. He was at least now within the research facility. Now, he just had to find his people, turn off the wards that were keeping them separate, and then loot this place for all that it was worth.

Chapter 747: Apati

Leon's anxiety for his people was immense, but his curiosity was powerful, too, and with the threat that the roots posed, he couldn't help but take a moment to investigate them before trying to continue further into the research facility. He knelt down by the largest one left—all had been quite thoroughly devastated by his fire, but there was still more than enough left to examine.

The one he chose was still about ten feet long—or, at least, ten feet of root was still sticking out of its attached human skull. Its end was scorched black, but the closer to the skull it went, it lightened into a healthier brown. The root was frozen and emitted no magic power, but Leon still maintained a healthy doze of caution as he knelt down before it.

[What are these things?] he asked those still with him.

[A parasite of some kind,] Xaphan immediately answered, his crackling voice laced with disgust and disdain. [Burn it all away, leave nothing behind.]

[A good idea,] Leon whispered in reply, though he made no moves to do so immediately. [Are these researchers?] he wondered.

Leon wasn't expecting an answer given the advanced state of decay—there was quite literally only a few bones and dust left, after all—but Nestor furnished him with one anyway. [Doubtful,] the dead man said. [The minds stationed here would've been evacuated. To do otherwise would be unthinkable—even those who evacuated from this plane after my father's death would've made room for these people. I would chalk these bones up to be a skeleton crew of slaves left behind to maintain this facility in case of our Clan's return.]

Leon frowned, but didn't immediately respond. He simply examined the skull as best as he could. He was no medical professional, but as far as skulls went, it didn't look that bad. Given how old it had to be, he found that in itself to be noteworthy. The only damage to it that he could see was the missing lower mandible and the hole that the root had made as it smashed through the top of the skull.

[What's more,] Nestor continued, [I can't imagine that any of my subordinates would've been so foolish as to handle dangerous material like this without the proper precautions. If they were left in charge of this place, then whatever these things are, they would never have gotten free.]

[I'm sure,] Xaphan spat. [If there's one thing your people excelled at, it was building prisons. But you also can't say what happened here, though, can you?]

[We also excelled at putting things in prison that deserved to be there,] Nestor shot back, completely ignoring Xaphan's question, and Leon felt a brief flash of anger run through his contract with Xaphan.

[Anyway,] Nestor continued, [I would put money on these being slaves. They were either test subjects, or after they were left here on their own, they showed just how worthy of their station they were by messing around with things beyond their ken, infecting themselves with this stuff when they did.]

Leon quietly nodded. He could easily see what might've happened: those left behind might've accidentally released something dangerous that his Clan's researchers were studying, and whatever they released then got loose into the forest somehow. It then formed some kind of central intelligence—if Xaphan's theory was correct, anyway—and spread itself throughout the forest. However, it didn't appear to spread any further than that, and remained in the Prota Forest, living unseen thanks to its powerful ancient wards.

[What's wrong?] Nestor asked, pulling Leon out of his thoughts. [You don't have something terribly naïve to say to all this? I was hoping you were going to get indignant about the Clan's practices... Are you finally coming around to understanding your true place in the world? Above that of the unwashed, illiterate masses?]

He sounded disappointed, but Leon didn't care. [I've made my feelings on our Clan's practices well known; do you need me to constantly repeat them? This doesn't surprise me, dead man, but I think I'm starting to grow used to the ways our Clan ruled.

[And, for what it's worth, those who now inhabit this plane are quite clean and literate. Maybe you should get out more—oh, wait, I forgot for a moment that *you can't*.]

Nestor clicked his tongue—or mimicked the sound—and went quiet. Leon just turned his attention back to the nine roots and the remains of the nine skeletons. He took it all in for just a few more seconds, then stood up and filled the room with blazing fire. The last vestiges of the roots were incinerated, and the skeletons were rendered ash. When the fire died down, the room was completely empty, save for a door to Leon's right.

Leon sighed, then made his way over to the door. What had happened here was likely terrible, but he couldn't dwell, not when his people were still missing.

When he reached the door, he was genuinely surprised to find that the runic circle next to it was still functioning. He pressed his hand against it and the trapezoidal door slid into the floor, revealing a bright corridor behind it.

'This place still has power?' Leon thought in amazement.

Indeed, as he stepped out into the corridor beyond, he felt like he was stepping back into the top floor of Nestor's lab, which had been quite well maintained by his golems. The trapezoidal walls his Clan loved were aglow from the white fires burning in the corridor's lower corners, filling the corridor with soft, indirect light. Spiraling down from the top corners, giving the corridor the illusion of being square-shaped, were murals of projected light depicting various events in his Clan's history that he had no hope of actually identifying. Heroic figures facing down hordes of 'unwashed masses' as Nestor had just so generously called them, his Clan easily distinguishable as they stood over their conquered foes. Beasts and men of all shapes and sizes knelt before his triumphant clansmen, subjugated.

Other murals showed alien landscapes and scenes of such idyllic beauty that he could scarcely imagine them as real places. Only the Forest of Black and White could compare to the panoply of colors in the depicted palaces and gardens, in Leon's experience.

What was a little more disorienting was that the ceiling had been enchanted to resemble the sky as it was above the ruins, and the resemblance was perfect. 'Natural' light thus spilled into the corridor, giving it an open feeling, greatly alleviating the cramped and tight feeling that being underground might otherwise give.

What left him speechless even more than the beauty of the decorative enchantments, however, was the power that he could sense flowing through the walls. These projected murals weren't just a result of some lucky piece of magical engineering that had managed to not decay with the rest of the facility, for if what Leon could sense was accurate, there was enough power flowing through the walls that he had to assume a significant portion of the rest of the facility was intact.

"Wow," he whispered aloud. But he quickly shook himself out of his slight fugue and focused. He'd originally found the facility thanks to the pulsing magical signal that he'd noticed, and even though there was a lot more magical interference down here thanks to all the active enchantments, he could still feel the pulsing signal from not too far away.

[Our Clan's engineering at its finest,] Nestor said in bragging admiration as Leon started hurrying down the corridor. [Look at all of this, Leon. Look at what we were able to build, and how long it's lasted, even with substandard maintenance. We conquer because we're strong, and a place like this, even if it's not meant to be seen by the common folk, is an expression of that strength.]

[Yeah,] Leon replied, not really paying any attention. [If you don't have anything useful to share, I'd prefer if you didn't distract me by waxing poetically about our right to conquest. *Do* you have anything useful to share?]

[Understanding our power and the ways we expressed it *is* useful, you fool,] Nestor grumbled, but he didn't say any more.

[I'd tentatively agree,] Xaphan said, surprising Leon enough that he paused as he carefully made his way down the corridor. [There's a certain logic to building grandly whenever possible. Such a visible expression of power can do wonders for your reputation. It makes you look strong, and if you look strong, then people will follow you. Build grandly, and people will be cowed and impressed. They'll do what you want them to do that much easier. I'll not harp on too much about it, Leon, but know that whatever you build represents you. And me, by extension, so when you get around to building, make sure it's worthy of us.]

[... I'll keep that in mind,] Leon responded, taking the matter a little more to heart with his demonic partner weighing in. [Now, can I continue, or are you two going to lecture me some more?]

[You *need* a good lecturing or a thousand,] Nestor growled.

[Keep going,] Xaphan said. [Find whatever it is you're looking for here, then leave. And burn that tree down before you go, I guarantee you that it's the source of all the problems this forest has been facing.]

[I wonder...] Leon responded without elaborating as he continued down the corridor.

He didn't have to go much farther before he found himself at an intersection. He had three other ways to go, and while he could see doors on either side of the branching hallways, he decided to go right, choosing to continue following the pulsing signal.

Leon continued down the hallways for a few more minutes, finding nothing new of note. However, out of curiosity, he poked his head into a few more rooms. For the most part, what he found was profoundly disappointing—a whole lot of nothing. At its most insulting, he found nothing but dust and darkness, but in two rooms he found more skull roots and had to burn them to ash. One room had even collapsed, and evidently the nearby river had found a way in. Leon had to use his water magic to prevent the entire research facility from being flooded before he was able to slam the door shut.

Still, he'd dreamed big when he envisioned what he might find within the research facility, and all of this nothing had him feeling fairly dejected. It seemed that all physical records of what had taken place here had been either taken around the time that his Clan left the plane, or had rotted away in the meantime. Even the lab equipment that he might've expected to find in any of these rooms was nowhere to be found.

Finally, he approached the area where the pulsing had come from. It had taken surprisingly long given how close to it he'd started, with his point of ingress being at the extreme edge of one wing of the facility, and the pulsing coming from a parallel wing. But, eventually, he found the room that he was certain the pulsing was coming from.

The hallway leading up to it was smaller and far less decorated than the others, with Nestor telling Leon that he'd entered the maintenance section. There were no labs ahead, but at this point, Leon was hopeful that he could at least get a look at some of the lab's remaining enchantments while he was there, and maybe he wouldn't have put his people into grave danger for nothing. The maintenance section was more conventionally shaped than the rest of the facility and had none of the decorative enchantments lining the walls with murals or showing the sky on the ceiling. However, the doors were much more securely locked, which Leon found out when he attempted to enter the room that he could feel the pulsing coming from.

[I think I can get through this,] Leon said to Nestor, [but can you shed any light that might speed this up?]

[Why don't you try to get through it first?] Nestor said challengingly.

Leon, barely able to contain his frustration and impatience, simply replied, [My people are still missing.]

He didn't say any more, and he luckily didn't need to, as after a moment of letting his words and tone sink in, Nestor guided him through the unlocking process. Leon had to remove a nearly invisible panel from the wall nearby, and from there it was a fairly simple matter of adjusting some enchantments to get the door open.

What awaited Leon on the other side of the door was a dark room, lit only by a number of glowing runes covering several control consoles.

[A control room?] Leon wondered 'aloud' as he walked in, but before Nestor or Xaphan could respond, a voice suddenly shouted from just to his right.

“Someone? Oh, my senses did not deceive! A rescuer has arrived!”

Leon spun on the spot, his sword appearing in his hand as his lightning raced through his body. However, when he laid his eyes on the thing that had made the voice, he paused and didn’t attack.

He stared down at another skeleton, its skull busted open by a thick root. The skeleton, like most others, was little more than dust aside from a few fragments and the skull itself, and the root had twisted and bent and thrust itself into the wall through another wall panel.

“Greetings!” the voice said again, and Leon saw the root vibrate slightly in time with the words.

The voice was friendly enough, though, so Leon relaxed a hair and asked aloud, “Hello?”

“Yes, greetings!” the voice repeated. “If it be no trouble, could you—oh, where are my manners? Apati is my name!”

Leon frowned as he took in the sight, not trusting any of this for a moment. However, to Nestor he asked, [What... What?]

[I don’t recall any ‘Apati’,] Nestor said, his tone judgmental. [Then again, I hardly kept track of anyone except the highest ranked of those stationed here. This place had a staff of thousands, including the slaves.]

[Uh huh,] Leon grunted. [Just skimming over the talking plant, are we?]

[It’s not entirely a talking plant,] Nestor admonished.

[Yes, human,] Xaphan added. [Concentrate your senses; you’ll notice that here’s a magic body encased within that thing.]

Leon did as suggested, and he did detect a presence around and within the root. It wasn’t much like anything he’d ever sensed before, but it felt to him like a mass of magic power was clinging to the root, growing into and within it just as the root seemed to have grown within and out of the skull.

“Has my form taken you aback?” Apati asked. “I understand, but I didn’t think that I was the only one...”

“Who are you?” Leon asked.

“My name has been given already...” Apati replied.

“Yes, but not *who* you are,” Leon shot back. “Your position and reason for being here, what were they?”

“I held the honor of being Chief Essential Technician here!” Apati declared.

“‘Essential’?” Leon asked.

“Yes!” Apati replied.

More helpfully, Nestor explained, [Most technicians maintaining facilities like these aren’t ‘essential’ and can be replaced at any time for any reason. Those few who can’t be replaced so easily usually maintain and operate very specialized equipment, or are otherwise *essential* to the running of the facility.]

Leon hummed as he processed that information. “So,” he said to Apati, “you were one of the important staff members here?”

“Yes, I was!” Apati replied, the root vibrating a little more excitedly now. “This research facility couldn’t have continued if it weren’t for me!”

“That’s interesting...” Leon said, though he greatly doubted this. “What... what is all of this?” He gestured to the root, though a moment later felt a little foolish, for he could see no eyes on the root.

Apati, fortunately, seemed to understand what he was asking anyway.

“Things at this facility were fine until we heard about King Jason’s assault on the Grave Warden’s palace... some time ago. I don’t know how long, but it’s been quite some time. Most of the staff departed after the devastating results of that attack came back, taking just about everything they could that wasn’t nailed down. A skeleton crew was left to destroy everything else. I was in charge of that crew. Some of the experiments that were being conducted here breached containment, and this is the result. By the way, I don’t suppose you could tell me how long it’s been? Or... your name, maybe?”

Leon almost responded immediately, but then he took a moment to think it over. This was one of the facility’s original inhabitants, so he wondered if he shouldn’t alter his intended introduction a bit.

“I’m called Leon,” he said. “I’m a member of the Thunderbird Clan, and I’ve come to reclaim this facility for the Clan.”

As proof, he conjured a little bit of the Thunderbird’s power, letting it arc around his fingers.

“Oh, happy day!” Apati replied. “I’ve waited so long here for rescue that I’d lost all hope! Honestly, it’s been so long time has practically ceased to mean anything at all!

“Well, things were pretty bad,” Leon said a little awkwardly. “But better late than never, right?”

“Right you are, my Lord!”

Leon clamped down hard on his urge to correct the root-man. He could endure the form of address for now.

“So,” Leon said as he knelt down next to the root—though not *too* closely, and he made sure that his body’s defenses were up and prepared to resist anything that might at all that might try to harm him, “how much is left here that can be salvaged? Do you know? Can you even move as you are, or do you need some help?”

Apati replied, “I managed to attach my magic body to this cerebral root that killed me, but I can attempt to attach it to something else. The root might become hostile the moment I release control, however...”

“I can deal with it,” Leon said confidently as he prepared his fire scalpel. He’d cut the root to pieces before it could move as soon as Apati wasn’t connected to it anymore.

“I was a *little* more concerned with my being, my Lord,” Apati explained. “Your power and safety are clear, but I don’t want to be caught up in anything; I daresay that a stiff breeze would be the end of me right now! I need a vessel to attach to, or I’ll cease to be!”

[I wouldn't trust him,] Nestor advised, [but it looks like if there's anything at all to be found here, then this is our best chance to find it.]

[Agreed,] Xaphan added. [Just... don't bring him in here. Keep him out there.]

[That's the plan,] Leon said as he conjured a small emerald from his soul realm.

"Would this be sufficient?" he asked.

"Temporarily," Apati replied a little cautiously, though Leon understood that. Nestor's ruby had required some work done on it under the direction of the Thunderbird to properly contain the dead man, and this emerald was wholly unenchanted.

Leon explained with some embarrassment, "I'd prepare it better, but I'm in a bit of a hurry; my comrades were separated from me, and I need to find them."

"No need for that, my Lord!" Apati replied. "It'll do, then! Please, help me, and I'll do everything within my power to aid you in your search for your comrades!"

Leon grimaced slightly, but Apati wasn't a threat as he was. So, he laid the emerald on the floor and scooted it a bit closer to the root.

Apati didn't wait for long, and, with Leon watching in fascination, carefully disentangled himself from the root and darted into the emerald, which began to glow with arcane light. The root began to writhe, and Leon waste no time in cutting it to pieces, then using his lightning on the remains.

"Now, then," Apati said, his voice now coming from the emerald, "we have some work ahead of us, don't we?"

Chapter 748: Finding the Expedition

"None of this is usable, I'm afraid," Apati said as Leon stood up, the emerald the dead technician now inhabited in hand.

"Why not?" Leon asked as he glanced around at the small handful of control consoles scattered around the room. "They still have power, don't they?"

"They would've helped early into the outbreak," Apati explained. "This is a secondary maintenance and security section, controlling things like ventilation and security barriers for this wing of the facility. What we need right now is to get to the main control center. From there, we can get the entire facility well in-hand."

Leon frowned lightly, but began making his way out of the control room. "You're very lucky, you know. How did you manage to get that signal out?"

"It wasn't easy. My main priority was ensuring that that cerebral root didn't get out of hand and kill me."

"Is that what they're called? 'Cerebral roots'?"

"Yes. A rather apt name, if I do say so myself. Anyway, I was able to alter some of the enchantments to flare up in a repeating pattern, which was made much more noticeable with the rest of the facility now offline."

"Not a lot of magic in the air above ground, either," Leon remarked.

"All the better," Apati responded. "I have to say, I'm glad that someone finally came, I've quite lost count of the days. Could you tell me how long it's been?"

Leon frowned a moment, wondering how to answer. Depending on the man's life experience, it had been a monumentally long time, and he was quietly impressed that he hadn't gone completely insane in the time since. However, in the end, he decided to be honest.

"Eighty-thousand years," he said.

Apati was quiet for a long moment, clearly processing what Leon had just said. After that moment, he simply said, "Oh."

For the next few minutes, Apati spoke only to guide Leon through the branching facility toward the central control room. It was a surprisingly complicated thing, though, as many parts of the facility had collapsed or flooded.

After a while, the inevitable happened, and Apati guided Leon into an atrium filled with cerebral roots and their skulls.

As soon as the door opened, the roots flexed and began swinging wildly at Leon, who sprang into action. Lightning coursed through him, and shortly after, out of him. Six large cerebral roots were rendered into ash in a moment, and then after another moment, the remaining half dozen were likewise destroyed.

"Well done," Apati exclaimed once it was all over. He'd spent the exchange in Leon's hand, but it seemed that it had been enough to pull him out of his quiet fugue.

Leon hummed in acknowledgment, then strode into the room. The cerebral roots had been destroyed, but the twelve skeletons that they'd taken root within were still there, surrounded by several columns and bathed in the light of the ceiling enchantments.

As he crouched down next to the closest skull, Leon asked, "Can you tell me more about what happened here after the Clan started to pull out?"

"I'll fill in any gaps I can," Apati helpfully replied. "When the order was given to evacuate after the deaths of Jason Keraunos and his children, the researchers were the first to leave. They took just about everything they could, abandoning the security detachments who remained and the staff of slaves who lived here."

"How many were there in each group?"

"About two hundred security personnel and maybe ten times that many slaves."

"So many?"

"There was a lot of sensitive labor that a place like this needed, and not enough technical golems to take care of it all."

"So these slaves were trained and educated people?"

"Yes, mostly pulled from the local 'elites' that lived here before they were brought under the aegis of the Clan. They could read and were intelligent enough to follow orders. Some were even trusted enough to run experiments on their master's behalf."

[Heh,] Nestor scoffed. [Idiot thing. No slave should ever be brought so close to such sensitive material.]

It seemed the dead men were in agreement as Apati felt the need to add, "A foolish notion; I made sure the slaves were put into their proper places as soon as I could."

"Uh huh," Leon grunted.

"You don't approve? I assure you, it was necessary. Slaves tend to get ambitious if they realize they outnumber you. Discipline is always of great importance, especially in the times we were facing. It will never do to allow insubordination to fester."

"Unfortunately, it seems I wasn't harsh enough in my methods, for this outbreak was the fault of an overeager slave."

"How did that happen?"

"As educated and trained as they might've been, it seems that some of the enslaved assistants weren't able to follow containment procedures—though, what can you really expect from such backwards provincials? They had no consideration for proper procedures, and after trying to make sure they were all corralled properly during the evacuation, I can't say that their deaths were any great loss. I honestly don't know the details about the initial outbreak, though, I was hardly even aware that there was much of a problem until people started falling over dead and having cerebral roots spring from their skulls."

Leon bit back on some choice words he had for Apati and kept himself focused on more relevant questions. "When they did, you tried locking this place down?"

"I did, but I clearly failed."

"Were there other specimens and experiments that got loose here?"

"I'm sure there were, but by then, my physical body had died and I was trapped within that maintenance station."

"That's unfortunate," Leon whispered as he straightened up. "I was hoping for good salvage."

"If anything's been saved, it would be in the control room," Apati assured him. "Most sensitive information that wasn't taken by the researchers upon their evacuation would've been held there. If there's anything at all that survived, that's where it'll be."

Leon was about to respond when Nestor said, [Why would that be the case, and not the main security station?]

Leon repeated the question, and Apati explained, "The security station was lost during the outbreak."

Doubt started creeping into Leon's mind and his gaze narrowed. It seemed he wasn't the only one feeling that way as Nestor grunted, [What?]

Speaking for them both, Leon inquired, "How would that work? I'm a little confused on the timeline of events, here."

"It was standard procedure," Apati claimed. "As I was trying to contain the outbreak of cerebral roots and keep the rest of the specimens being experimented on here from being released, sensitive materials were moved to the most secure location we had: the control room."

[Why not just pack it all into someone's soul realm and have them book it?] Nestor wondered.

Before Leon could start asking more detailed questions, Apati asked him, "Leon, I have a favor that I was wondering if you would entertain?"

Leon didn't immediately reply, busy as he was saying to Nestor, [These people sound incompetent. Can we be sure that this guy is who he says he is?]

[He... *does* sound a little familiar, but it's been so long it's hard to tell,] Nestor said. [At the very least, the top-ranking people would've left, so if this guy was left in charge, then he would've been in charge of the dregs of the facility's staff. Incompetence, as jarring as it is to hear, wouldn't be unexpected.]

Leon scowled and finally replied to Apati, "What sort of favor?"

"This is incredibly embarrassing for me to admit, but there is something that I was hoping you could check in on. When this place was fully staffed, there was a lab whose security I was supposed to guarantee. Do you know what tree sprites are?"

"I'm familiar with them, yes."

"Good, then I don't have to explain too much. Well, we found a particularly dangerous and powerful one in this forest. It's quite possibly the biggest reason we built this place here—still only one reason among many, but the biggest."

"Most powerful tree sprite, huh?" Leon said. "I can't see how power alone would make a tree sprite particularly worthy of study, was there something about this one in particular that made it stand out, aside from its power?"

"I can't say that, my Lord. All I can say is that it was powerful, and the researchers studying it could barely contain their glee at the thought of how it would revolutionize nature magic as we know it. I'm afraid that it might've gotten loose. Could you check in on its containment lab?"

"Is it on the way?"

"Yes."

"Then I suppose I can stick my head in there and see what's what."

"I'm thankful. Honestly, I always found this thing to be quite off-putting. It was violent and lashed out constantly. The effort I had to expend to ensure that its containment was never breached always left me quite exhausted..."

"I have a question, Apati."

"I'll answer what I can, my Lord."

"Were there teleportation enchantments included in the defensive wards of this facility? On approach, I lost my team to an unexpected teleportation..."

"That's terrible... and very concerning; there were a few teleportation enchantments included in this facility's suite of enchantments, but they were decommissioned before the facility fell. You don't know where they went?"

"The forest is completely enshrouded in powerful illusions that fool even my magic senses. Locating them is my top priority, but that's proven to be difficult so far. I was hoping that this place might have something that could help."

"There are sensor and alarm enchantments that might still be functional..." Apati said. "It's not guaranteed, but using this facility's enchantments, we should be able to find your team! I might even be able to reactivate some measure of teleportation functionality!"

Leon smiled and doubled his efforts to get them to the control room, setting aside any remaining questions he had, for the time being.

Thusly motivated, he sped down the halls, and considered himself fortunate that one winding route Apati had him take was free of debris and collapsed ceilings. Along the way, he stopped to check on an important-looking door behind which once lay the lab that contained the powerful tree sprite, but upon opening it, Leon found the entire room collapsed. Nothing but stone and earth lay on the other side, so Apati, somewhat disturbed, proceeded to guide Leon onward toward the control room, though not before reiterating just how dangerous he thought the tree sprite to be. Apati guided him to a magic lift that unfortunately didn't work, but Leon was able to use his fire scalpel to cut a hole through it and fly down the shaft all the way to the lowest floor.

"There are a few defensive enchantments on the door, but with your blood, they shouldn't be a problem," Apati said as Leon found himself in front of a massive trapezoidal door.

His words proved accurate as Leon went over to the door's control runes and they shocked him with a tiny lightning bolt, much as the defensive wards in his family's archives back in Teira had done. He sensed some shift in the flow of magic around him, but the door didn't open.

"It's not opening?" he said in mild confusion, his impatience growing as he started pacing in front of the runic circle. The central control room shouldn't be too far within, and if it was the key to him finding his people, then he *needed* to get through.

"It takes a bit more," Apati said in a conciliatory tone. "It should open with a maintenance code, though..."

Apati guided Leon through a quick code, tapping the runes within the runic circle in proper sequence which, combined with his Thunderbird blood, should get the door open.

And, a moment later, the door slowly slid down into the floor.

Leon didn't waste a moment, leaping right over it rather than waiting for it to open completely. What he found on the other side wasn't that shocking: a long hallway in typical trapezoidal shape, with tall columns holding up the enchanted ceiling. There weren't any projected murals on the wall, but there were several more door branching off to the side.

The door he most wanted was the one at the very end of the hallway, though.

Leon ran for that door, and much like the one at the bottom of the lift shaft, it read his bloodline with a tiny bolt of lightning, and Leon was able to get it open with the proper code from Apati.

What awaited him on the other side was quite familiar: a massive spherical room, the inner surface covered in millions of shifting runes glowing in the dark like stars. However, unlike the other control rooms that Leon had seen like this, large sections of the runic array were frozen, flickering, or outright dark. By his estimation, almost half of the tremendously complex runecraft covering the surface was either dead or malfunctioning.

The door let out near the top of the sphere, with a long curving staircase descending to a platform in the very center of the sphere, lined with several dozen enchantment control consoles, and with a crystal at least the size of one of Leon's portable villa's modules glowing bright yellow in the center. By that color, Leon could tell that the facility still had plenty of power remaining, likely helped out more than a little by the sheer desiccation of its enchantment scheme reducing power requirements.

"Looks like it's still up and running," Apati observed as Leon leaped right down to the central platform rather than descending the stairs.

"Where are the sensing enchantments?" Leon demanded to both Apati and Nestor.

"I believe the ones on the far side of the platform," Apati replied.

[Or the ones on your right,] Nestor countered.

Leon froze, unsure of who to believe. However, when he took a closer look at the control consoles, it seemed that Nestor was the one who telling the truth.

"It's not these ones?" Leon asked Apati suspiciously as he stalked over to the consoles that Nestor had pointed out.

"Oh, of course!" Apati responded. "Pardon me, I was mistaken. This isn't really my field of expertise, I have to admit..."

[Those enchantments he directed you towards control the facility's defense systems,] Nestor whispered. [Weapons, golems, barriers, all the defenses, both active and inactive, that could be controlled in this way could be controlled from that group of consoles,] Nestor explained.

Leon frowned, his need to find his people momentarily set aside as he stood staring at those consoles.

"Why were you directing me there, Apati?" Leon asked.

"I was—" Apati began before suddenly going silent. Leon was almost concerned until it became clear a few seconds later that the dead man had just been thinking something over. "Look, my Lord, this place was my responsibility. Its destruction is on my shoulders. I was... hoping that you would reactive the

defenses here and clean up this infestation. I can't let this place go without at least trying to make up for my failure to keep it secure."

"A noble goal, I suppose," Leon said, though not sounding at all convinced. "Quite a few people died here, though, but however much of that is your fault is debatable."

"The lives of slaves are hardly worth much," Apati dismissively replied. "My failure to secure this facility during its decommissioning is a stain on my honor that cannot be understated. I *must* rectify this mistake, *please!* I beg you, my Lord, allow me to cleanse this facility of the fruits of my failure!"

Leon's frown deepened several times during Apati's spiel, but he had to admit, if there were any defenses remaining in this facility, then he wouldn't mind seeing if they still functioned. The forest outside was dangerous, and securing this facility for a more in-depth study had great value.

Adding even more temptation, Apati said, "If there're any remaining research notes or materials, then I can ensure they are found and delivered to you, my Lord. I just need to see if certain security features of this facility still remain active."

[He's talking about maintenance golems,] Nestor guessed with a tone of certainty. [They'd be about on par with the Librarian in power and utility, or at best, those labor golems you found. There might not be any left, though golems built for low-level maintenance are hardly worth enough for evacuating researchers to bother taking them with—especially if they were in a hurry.]

"Let's see what we can see, first," Leon said as he turned back to the sensor console. There was something off about Apati, the man's lie hadn't exactly endeared him to Leon even if Leon could respect his motives. His *stated* motives, at least. Still, if what he was saying was true, it was something that Leon couldn't afford to turn his back on, not when his people were still missing.

As his thoughts turned back to his retinue, Leon started activating the sensor enchantments as Nestor called them out.

A series of screens materialized over the consoles as light projections, and with the control consoles, Leon could control what the screens displayed. Each one was like having an eye out in the forest, but these eyes weren't in fixed positions, and Leon was able to get just about everywhere within the forest scanned with enchantments that, as far as he could tell, somewhat mimicked magic senses.

He would've been far more fascinated and asked many more questions about these enchantments had his missing retainers not weighed so heavily on his mind. For now, he was just thankful that they seemed to be working.

However, they didn't seem to be finding much. The expedition's camp was still in good order, with the escort squad, Elise, and Talal all remaining back there, but there was neither hide nor hair that he could see of his missing people, Cassandra, or the other Evergolden squad.

There were a few holes in the enchantment's range, though—most notably, the goat man village built around the massive trees in the center of the inner warded zone. No matter how he tried to manipulate the enchantments, Leon simply couldn't get a good angle on any of those trees.

And as these implications entered his mind, his blood began to run cold.

'They were teleported into that village...' he thought.

Finally, after long minutes of scanning, the console returned with an alert: at least a few humans had been found. When he beheld the images called up on the screens, his blood ran cold. His people were still alive, but if he didn't get moving soon, then that could change very soon. Already, several members of the escort squad were dead, and most of his retinue were bleeding from deadly injuries.

All thoughts about the exploring the facility were driven from his mind. He'd found his people within the grove of massive trees, and he needed to get to them now.

Chapter 749: Butting Heads

Valeria stared in confusion at the sight around her. Just a moment before, she'd been walking through the forest with Leon and the others, and another moment, she was in a dark room with wooden, but organically-shaped walls all around her. What little light there was in the room came from a few thin branches high above her with a few small translucent leaves glowing a gentle blue.

"Leon!" she called out as her heart leaped into her throat. Her glaive was already out and her armor donned, so she crouched down into a defensive posture.

It was obvious she'd been teleported, but unlike the other teleportations that had taken place during this expedition, she hadn't been dropped out somewhere else in the forest. She didn't even know where she was, or if she was even still in the Prota Forest anymore.

She guessed that she was, but for all she knew, she could've been teleported halfway across the plane.

At the sixth-tier, her magic senses didn't hold a candle to Leon's range, but she could at least fill the room. Moments after doing so, she sighed in frustration; the room lacked any obvious doors or exits. Even the ceiling above the ethereal leaves was blocked. There would be no other way out other than going through the walls.

So, Valeria approached one of the walls, choosing the one right in front of her for the sole reason that it was the closest.

The wooden walls were filled with magic power—earth, light, and water, as far as she could tell, the three elemental components of nature magic. They were flowing in patterns that were barely discernable. She could tell they were some kind of enchantment, but her skill in the art, despite advancing by leaps and bounds through working alongside Leon for this past decade, was still inadequate to parsing what her senses were telling her.

To put it more simply: she wasn't going to get out of this place by subverting wards. Since there were no other options available, that left pure brute force.

Her heart beat hard with concern for her companions, and especially for Leon, though she trusted in everyone's power and discretion to see them through whatever this was. However, that didn't mean she could relax—it was actually the opposite, as she considered herself at least partially responsible for everyone given her status in Leon's retinue.

She called upon her magic power and her physical strength, and replaced her glaive with a hatchet she kept in her soul realm. It was hardly a match for Alcander's war ax, but it was meant to chop wood. Given her circumstances, that made it quite possibly more valuable.

With a few mighty swings, Valeria struck the wooden wall, barely making anything more than a dent. Her hatcher, despite being backed by her sixth-tier strength, had bounced off the walls like they were made of metal, not timber.

'Probably to do with the magic in the walls,' she reasoned. Had she the ability to, she would've tried to cut off the flow of magic to the enchantments in the walls, but she didn't have that ability. Even the water magic in the walls was beyond her ability to control, though that didn't stop her from trying, at least.

She gritted her teeth and prepared to use her magic power, hoping that her water and ice magic would be enough to get her through the walls and to whatever was outside. Then, hopefully, to the rest of the retinue.

'And Cassandra and her people. I suppose. If I must.'

Valeria fought to keep the smile off her normally-stoic face at the idea of genuinely forgetting Cassandra here. She'd give a mountain of silver to see the Princess' face if she were to be left behind. Valeria's professionalism precluded that, of course, but it was fun to daydream.

Valeria rained blows upon the wall in front of her, while conjuring water to flow over the wall at the same time, searching for any possible cracks. Even a few microcracks might be enough for her purposes.

It took nearly three dozen blows before her hatcher finally started to chip away at the wall, and when she noticed it, she immediately stopped, letting the hatchet fall to her side.

She examined the chip in the wall, noting that there were a few tiny cracks at the edge, where the hatchet had first chopped into the wall. With a wide grin, Valeria conjured a few drops of water and filled the crack as much as possible. Her strength as a sixth-tier mage was great, but her magic power was much greater; she hoped it would prove enough. When the crack was filled, she immediately froze the water, and was gratified to see the crack widen ever so slightly. She then melted the ice, and then filled the now-slightly bigger crack with more water and froze it again. Again, the crack widened ever so slightly.

Valeria stepped back and began to use her power in earnest, covering the crack in water and manipulating it like a shovel: digging into the crack in the wall, then freezing it when she couldn't dig in anymore. Soon enough, the crack started growing big enough to see with a mortal eye, and then even bigger.

Eventually, she found some kind of natural fault line within the wood, and with a loud crack, a huge crack was opened after one particularly brutal freeze.

Her grin widened at seeing her progress. She didn't know big the hole had to be to lead her out of this room, but she fully intended to find out.

However, it wound up that she didn't need her power to break through, for not even thirty seconds after the bigger crack loudly opened, a bright white blade of light sliced into the wall, and Valeria

instinctively threw herself back. Fortunately, the blade came in at such an angle that it wouldn't have posed much threat to her even if she'd stood still—only if she'd been pressing her face right up against the wall. More fortunately—or, perhaps less so—she recognized this particular blade of light as being the enchantment placed upon Sunlight.

The blade started slowly cutting through the wood, and in a matter of a dozen seconds, a hole had been carved into the wall, now showing itself to be more than six feet thick. As the piece of wood in the center of the hole was pulled outward, Cassandra's smug countenance was revealed.

"Look at you, Val," she said, her voice dripping with condescending triumph, "I was seriously worried that you might've been rendered helpless. I'm so glad to see that you're all right."

Valeria bit back on a venomous reply. This wasn't the time for it.

"Have you run into anyone else?" she asked as she approached the hole, cooled its smoldering edges with a quick shower of water, and then hauled herself through.

Cassandra, looking a little nonplussed at her refusal to rise to her bait, still replied with Imperial poise, "No. I've only just gotten out of my cell a couple of minutes ago, and almost left before I heard some noise coming from here. Good thing I stopped to check, isn't it? You might've not gotten out..."

As Valeria straightened up on the other side of the hole, she glanced to her right and left. She and Cassandra stood in a fairly narrow hallway just wide enough for them to comfortably walk side-by-side. Much like her 'cell', as Cassandra called it, the walls were dark wood and completely unadorned, though filled with magic power, while the matching ceiling was obscured by glowing translucent leaves. There wasn't much light emitted by those leaves, but that hardly mattered to one of Valeria's power.

Finally turning back to the Princess, Valeria politely said, "Thank you." She'd debated undercutting her gratitude in several ways, but decided in the end to just keep it simple. This wasn't the time to get into a pissing match with the Princess over a little rudeness.

For her part, Cassandra seemed to accept her thanks, giving her a simple nod, then asking, "Any idea where we are?"

"Inside of a tree, maybe?" Valeria wondered aloud. "I'd figure you and your people would be the experts here."

Cassandra shrugged. "I'm not that great at nature magic, honestly..."

Valeria stifled an exasperated sigh and went back to evaluating their surroundings. Judging by how the magic flowed, the power source for the enchantments in the walls was above them, and the hallway was long enough that there could be other cells further down on either side.

When Valeria mentioned this, Cassandra's eyes widened as if she hadn't thought that far, and before Valeria could so much as utter a word of warning, the Princess started cutting into the walls with little rhyme or reason.

"What are you doing?!" Valeria shouted, shouting uncharacteristically as Cassandra plunged Sunlight into the wall.

"Looking for the others," Cassandra replied as she began to saw another hole in the wall.

"You could kill someone doing that!" Valeria responded.

"They might die waiting," Cassandra countered.

The rough circle she'd made was quickly finished, but when she tried to pull the chunk of wood out of the wall, it refused to come. From what Valeria could tell, it was still attached in the back, showing that there was no cell behind it, only more wood.

"Maybe... just stop to think for a little while?" Valeria asked. "You could hear it when I cracked my wall, so it stands to reason we should be able to communicate with anyone who's been imprisoned."

Cassandra lightly frowned and didn't respond, which Valeria considered about the strongest admission the Princess was capable of making that she was in the wrong.

"Come on," Valeria said. "I'm a water mage and you're a light mage. If nothing else, we should be able to track the water and light magic in the walls and see where they're being directed. That should lead us *somewhere*, at least, even if not to the rest of the expedition."

Cassandra sighed, but didn't argue, and when Valeria pressed a hand against the wall, Cassandra did likewise.

If Valeria's theory was any indication, then there weren't any more people imprisoned in this hallway. She could vaguely sense the magic surrounding her cell to be stronger than what was in the wall, but only then did she realize that she didn't see any other holes in the wall indicating where Cassandra came out. When she asked the Princess about this, Cassandra replied that she'd come from further down to the left of Valeria's cell, which curved out of view.

So, when they decided to move, they went right, and Valeria, just to make sure, quickly used her truth ring. Nothing changed, showing that there weren't any illusions active around her at the moment.

"Hmm," Cassandra hummed as they reached an intersection in the long wooden hallway. They'd followed the hall for several minutes and hadn't found anything else, but since the hall was curved, Valeria estimated that they'd already turned at least ninety degrees. If they kept going, they might even reach their cells again.

As Valeria quietly tried to evaluate the directions, she noticed that the hall to their left, the direction opposite the curve of the hall, seemed to be much more magically active.

Without even consulting with Valeria, Cassandra turned left and kept going. "Let's go this way," she said with a wide smile on her face.

Again, Valeria was momentarily annoyed, but she didn't say anything this time, simply following the Princess and trying to keep an eye on their surroundings.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself," Valeria said as they continued down the quiet halls.

"This is fun, isn't it?" Cassandra gleefully replied. "Such a place, I can't wait to see what lies at the end! There's so much power here, it has to be good!"

"Maybe a little more caution is warranted? We don't want to go rushing into anything unprepared..."

"Eh, we'll be fine," Cassandra replied with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"A few of the people you've brought to this forest are already dead," Valeria reminded her.

"Hardly my fault," Cassandra petulantly responded. "They fought well, but were still brought down—"

"They're *your* people," Valeria insisted, cutting the Princess off. "They're *your* responsibility. If they don't come home, then that's on *you*. And three are already lost forever."

Valeria bit her tongue to keep from going off, but she was frustrated with the Princess. She had all of Leon's recklessness, but with none of the guilt that kept him from taking things too far with his own people. She felt like she could've ranted for quite a while at the Princess, but she tried to keep in mind their current situation, which wasn't conducive to heated disagreements. But still, she didn't want the Princess to lead them to their deaths.

"Listen, Valeria," Cassandra said just as Valeria was about to suggest they keep going, "people make mistakes. I can't prevent people from making mistakes. I do what I can for my people, but if they screw up, then that's their problem, not mine. I may be their Princess, but that doesn't mean that they—or *you*—can foist their own responsibility to themselves, onto me. Besides, I *am* their Princess, so they have responsibilities to me that they need to fulfill, too."

Valeria bitterly smiled and briefly wondered how Leon would handle this.

'Probably just glare and remain silent,' she thought with some consternation.

Out loud, she merely said, "To die for another person is a choice, not a responsibility. I'll not speak to the sense of duty that might've led those warriors of yours to lay down their lives, but I'll tell you right now that you haven't done a thing to convince me to die for you. And that's what people have done *for you*. All I can say is that if I were in your position, I would try to do something that would make their deaths worth it."

"What do you think I'm doing? If we turn around, then their sacrifices will be meaningless! At least if we continue, then we might find something at the end that'll make this worthwhile!"

"A gamble, and one that conveniently lets you do what you wanted to do in the beginning. What will you do if we end this expedition empty-handed? Three people are dead already, and we don't know where everyone else is—they could be dead, too, for all we know."

Cassandra smiled thinly. "Having fun, judging me?" she asked. "Second-guessing a Princess is cheap from a distance. I wonder what *you'd* do in my situation? Turn tail and run away at the slightest sign of danger? I didn't think you quite so soft-hearted..."

Valeria returned the thin smile and replied, "Leon's retinue followed him out of loyalty—loyalty that he's done his best to earn. Your people followed you because you requisitioned them, like new gear. Out of duty, not loyalty."

"You must have gotten to know my people well over these past few days," Cassandra responded sarcastically, her smile turning more challenging than angry. "You say 'duty' like it's something terrible. You say that my people are only acting out of duty, but do you really know that? Those who I chose to

act as my escort are pulled directly from the Imperial Guard, they aren't slaves or conscripts. This is what they signed up for, and the option to quit is always on the table."

"So they signed up to serve their Empire, and found their service rewarded by being assigned to a brat who led at least some of them to their deaths? They placed their lives in your hands, and you're wasting their blood and sweat."

"I'm their *Princess!*" Cassandra shouted.

"You're their Princess because they, and others like them, have decided that they're willing to die for you. Personally, I would consider that a heavy responsibility, not a privilege to use to fulfill my own desires to adventure."

Cassandra's eyes narrowed in fury. "You don't know the first thing about me," she growled.

"I've spent long enough in your company to have formed an impression," Valeria coolly replied. "And I have to say, while I can respect your skills in the ring, I haven't seen many redeeming qualities in you. You're an entitled Princess who has little concern for the well-being of others. And if you don't try and have a little respect for your own people, you're only going to get more of them killed."

For just a moment, killing intent laced Cassandra's aura, but as quickly as it appeared, it was gone.

"We're just talking past each other," she declared. "We can set this aside for the moment. Right now, our priority is getting out of here."

"I'd say that our first priority is to find our companions," Valeria countered.

"Yes, and *that*," Cassandra spat. "That was *implied*. The idea that I would leave anyone behind is ludicrous!"

"When it comes to you, I think it needs to be said," Valeria pressed. "An implication won't cut it."

"Maybe you should try listening and comprehending what someone is saying rather than getting bogged down in semantics," Cassandra vehemently said, and without waiting for Valeria to continue, resumed walking down the hall.

Valeria followed, but didn't feel very good about their whole exchange. She supposed it really wasn't her place to be pointing out what she thought were flaws in others, and Cassandra did have a point in that she didn't know what the Evergolden escorts might be thinking, or why they were here. She was making her own assumptions, too...

While she considered this issue, Cassandra suddenly stopped in front of her, almost causing Valeria to walk right into her from behind.

"Hear that?" Cassandra asked, and once she pulled herself out of her thoughts, Valeria heard heavily muted, indistinct shouting. "It's coming from over here," Cassandra said, walking a few more paces down the hall and rapping on the wall to her right.

Without much hesitation, Cassandra raised Sunlight and once more cut into the wall, though Valeria noted that she took a few more fractions of a second to aim her strike and make sure that her blade wasn't going to emerge very fast, or at a dangerous height on the other side.

Still, Valeria began hammering on the wall with the meat of her palm. "You could've tried warning them," she stated.

Cassandra spared her a glare before she began cutting the wall open again.

This time, it really was a cell they'd found, and once a hole was cut, Alcander poked his head out of the cell.

"Val?" he said in amazement. When Cassandra loudly cleared her throat, he added, "And... Your Highness... Ah, thanks for that, I was starting to think I was never going to get out of here!"

A quick glance into his cell showed Valeria that he'd been trying to burn his way out, and had probably started shouting in frustration or perhaps was trying to get someone's attention. Regardless, it had worked, and now their ranks had swelled to three.

Now, they just had to find everyone else, and then figure out how to get the hells out of this place.

Chapter 750: Fighting Their Way Out

Valeria wasn't quite sure how she ought to feel. Looking around, she took great comfort in the fact that, after their wanderings throughout... *wherever* they were, she and Cassandra had managed to find the rest of their people. Everyone save for Leon had been found and sprung from their cells.

However, while that, by itself, was great and worth celebrating, they hadn't run into a single hostile in that time. The wards running through the walls remained static defenses, and those defenses were easily cut through by Sunlight. Nothing yet had appeared in their way to present a more active obstacle.

And that was something that had Valeria on edge, let alone the fact that Leon was still missing.

"Still thinking over the next steps?" Marcus asked as he came over and stood at her side. Now that everyone except Leon had been found, they were taking a bit of time get more organized in the narrow hallway. Cassandra was seeing to her warriors, while Valeria had taken charge of Leon's retinue. For the most part, though, she didn't have to do much except make sure that Anzu and Anna's Attican Snapper weren't going to get in their way. Given the size of the two war beasts, that wasn't an easy thing to do.

In response to Marcus, Valeria nodded. Perhaps sensing her worry, Anzu brushed up against her from behind and quietly chirped. He sounded just as sad and worried as she did, and she couldn't help but turn around and give him a few head pats in turn.

"I've been thinking," Marcus said, "but I haven't come to any conclusions. Why are we being attacked?"

"Can't say," Valeria replied. "It's strange though, isn't it?"

Marcus nodded. "If someone went to the trouble of imprisoning us, then why just let us escape without any effort to stop us?"

"Why would they bother?" Gaius called out from behind Anzu. "We've been wandering these halls for more than an hour! There doesn't seem to be a way out, so why should they care?"

"There's always a way out," Cassandra shouted from farther behind Gaius. "If we got in here, then we can get back out! We just have to find a way!"

No one responded to the Princess—perhaps out of some measure of respect or awkwardness due to her rank—but Valeria knew that they were all aware that they'd been teleported, and that the only way to escape wherever they now found themselves was likely by being teleported out. After a considerable amount of time spent wandering in these halls, she could easily believe that there weren't any physical ways out.

Related to that, over the course of freeing all of their comrades, she and Cassandra had essentially explored everywhere that they could reach. Short of trying to cut this entire place down, there were no more places left for them to explore.

During the next several seconds, an awkward silence fell upon their group. No one had any real ideas for how to get out of their dark, cramped prison, though it seemed that Cassandra had been waiting for someone to speak up and offer an idea. When none came, she finally said, "Fine, then. I guess we're going to have to do this the hard way."

Without waiting another moment, Cassandra pushed her way past everyone, crawled up and over Anzu, and then strode out in front of Valeria. With a provocative smile, she brandished Sunlight and activated its blade of light enchantment again.

"The wards in the walls can't stop me," she said. "So, we cut through. I'll allow you to pick the direction, Valeria."

Valeria stared at her for a long moment, but since she had no other ideas, she pointed up. "The magic powering the wards is coming from above us," she explained. "It stands to reason that there's something above, then. Whether or not it's something that humans can use I can't say."

[There's much above us...] Maia whispered, taking Valeria by surprise. The river nymph had been beside herself with worry for Leon when they'd found her—she'd been fairly easy to find since she'd smashed her way out of her cell, and none-too-quietly—but in the hour or so since, she'd calmed down quite a bit. She hadn't spoken much, but she'd provided Valeria with some relief by sharing that her connection with Leon still existed. She couldn't sense his direction, but he was alive.

"How do you know that?" the only seventh-tier among the Evergolden mages asked, her tone much more professional than Cassandra's.

[I can sense the water,] Maia explained. [There's a great deal flowing in patterns above that feel like more rooms.]

"How clearly can you sense these rooms?" the Evergolden mage asked. "Can you lead us to the best place to come up?"

Maia nodded.

The seventh-tier Evergolden mage then looked to Cassandra and gave her an imploring look.

"Fine, then," Cassandra said. "Naiad, where do we need to go?"

With Maia's direction, they moved through the halls, passing by several places where Cassandra had carved holes into adjacent chambers. Several of them Valeria had been surprised to find empty,

suggesting that this place hadn't been built for them, but existed for some other purpose. What that purpose might be, she couldn't say.

Only a few minutes later, Maia called them to a halt.

[Here,] she said. [There's a large space above where no water magic flows. It feels like a big room.]

Valeria was about to suggest they get into a better formation just in case there was something dangerous above, but before she could, Cassandra said, "Sounds good," and activated her light blade enchantment. With Sunlight and her eighth-tier power, she carved a huge fissure in the ceiling, burning away the leaves and cutting clean through the wood.

What lay beyond didn't seem to have any natural light, but Cassandra's blade was more than bright enough to show that there *was* a huge room above. With a few more swings, the hole above Cassandra widened, and the Princess leaped up through without hesitation.

"Your Highness!" the Evergolden squad leader called out in alarm. "After her!" she shouted to the rest of her squad, and everyone began practically pushing against Leon's retinue to get them to move.

Annoyed but not wanting to leave the Princess to her own devices, Valeria jumped up, her sixth-tier strength easily allowing her to clear the hole and land in the chamber beyond. The rest of the retinue quickly followed, though Anna's Attican Snapper required a little more time.

What awaited them was a large space big enough to assemble a battalion of Bull Kingdom soldiers within, with a ceiling about forty feet high. Other than that, it was hardly that remarkable compared to the hallways below them. The chamber was empty and dark.

When everyone managed to get out of the cramped halls, they all breathed a quick sigh of relief, though the seventh-tier Evergolden mage looked more livid than anything. Valeria took some vicarious thrill in seeing the older woman glare at the Princess and barely resist tearing into the Princess—not that Cassandra looked at all chastened, and seemed far more taken with examining the room they now found themselves in.

Before anyone could say anything more, however, a sudden welling of magic put them all on edge, and a light suddenly broke through the darkness as the wall split open. What spilled through was copious amounts of natural light, and a horde of plant giants.

"Form up!" Valeria shouted, and Leon's retinue sprang into action, the Evergolden squad not too far behind.

"Let's go!" Cassandra roared in glee, and charged. With her speed, only Leon could've moved quickly enough to hold her back, and he was gone.

A moment later, Cassandra was upon the plant giants, swinging Sunlight and cutting them to pieces. The plant giants wasted no time responding, swinging their enormous wooden limbs to try and stop the Princess' rampage. A few of the bigger ones were covered in looser vines and thick coats of mushrooms, and Valeria had to suppress a smile when she saw one particularly thick vine catch the Princess and throw her against the ground.

The plant giant responsible was unable to capitalize as the Evergolden mages caught up to their Princess and laid into them. They cut the giants down to size, but more kept spilling in through the huge crack in the wall. Valeria was unfortunately unable to see how many could be out there.

However, that didn't stop her from leading Leon's retinue in reinforcing the Evergolden mages. As much as she was put off by Cassandra, she knew that they weren't going to get out of this mess without each other.

Emphasizing that point, the screams of an Evergolden mage pierced through the din of battle as a pair of vines wrapped themselves around her torso and hips, and then tore her in half with seeming ease.

A moment later, another Evergolden mage was knocked to the floor and stomped on, leaving her bloodied and motionless before the giant responsible was cut in half.

Valeria herself swung her glaive, conjuring a wave of ice that impaled the nearest giant on a dozen icy spikes, but another replaced it as it fell to the floor. She swung again, sending an ice spear piercing clean through the giant's midsection, not killing it but at least slowing it down.

Maia and Cassandra were having the most luck, which was hardly surprising, but Valeria was dismayed to see that they were being slowly pushed back, and casualties were mounting. Marcus was hit by a swift punch from one of the giants and flew about thirty feet back, hitting the ground with a cry of pain. Helen was picked up and squeezed nearly to death before Anna leaped off the back of her snapper and cut right through the giant's arm holding her sister. Helen was released, but it looked like at least one of her arms, and who knew what else, was broken.

They didn't have the time to apply healing spells as more and more plant giants spilled into the chamber.

Finally, the massive water dragon that Maia was using reared back, mostly solidified into ice, and then crashed down into the opening. Massive spikes and blades erupted from its body, cutting and stabbing the giants in its way.

"Follow the dragon!" Cassandra shouted. However, as she made to do so, a plant giant that she'd sliced in half proved itself not quite dead as it grabbed her by the leg and swung her into the air. The seventh-tier Evergolden mage sprang forward and cut the giant's arm off, and Cassandra hit the ground so hard that she cried out in pain.

"Your Highness!" the squad leader called out in concern as she rushed to her Princess' side, but just as she reached her charge, the floor split open and a root thicker than Valeria was tall impaled the woman right through the chest as if her armor wasn't even there.

The woman gasped in surprise, and then went limp. Cassandra just stared at her subordinate, only moving again when another root erupted from the ground and pierced through Alcander's midsection, causing him to scream in pain.

"Al!" Alix shouted, and she ran forward, golden lightning dancing over her body. She reached Alcander, grabbed his dropped ax, and then swung its head into the root, cutting right through it and catching Alcander as he fell.

He wasn't dead, but that probably wasn't going to last for very long.

“Move!” Valeria screamed. “Get outside! Follow the dragon!”

Anzu was suddenly there with her, and with a determined chirp, he snaked beneath her legs and practically flipped her up onto his back. Several of Maia’s water dragons did likewise with the fallen, pulling their bodies into their watery forms and slithering toward the opening that Maia’s ice dragon was maintaining.

However, as they ran towards the opening, the crack in the wall began to close. In response, Maia conjured a wave of water that slammed into the crack, which then froze, forcing it to remain open with a gap near the bottom. They just had to get over a small hill of ice that kept the floor from rising or allowing another root through.

Throughout all of this, Valeria kept her eye on Cassandra. The Princess had gotten moving again, fortunately, but she kept pace with the dragon that held the body of the seventh-tier mage instead of running forward.

When their group emerged on the other side of the crack, they found themselves standing at the base of an enormous tree reaching thousands of feet into the air. However, it was dwarfed in size by another tree not too far away, around which several more ‘smaller’ trees were arranged. Nestled within the tangled roots of these gargantuan trees were huts filled with plant giants and goat men, most of whom were now turning their attention in the group’s direction.

Luckily, they found themselves close to the edge of the forest proper.

“Get to the tree line!” Valeria shouted, and she directed Anzu to start running away from the titanic ethereal trees. Everyone, including the remaining members of the Evergolden squad that could move, followed. They were all weighed down by injury and carrying their dead and incapacitated companions, but they made good time, and though the entire village of goat men and plant giants were starting to move in their direction, they didn’t seem to be moving nearly fast enough.

However, the slight glimmer of hope that Valeria allowed herself to begin feeling was immediately dashed when the ground opened up beneath their group and vines thicker than her hips whipped out, slamming into Gaius and an Evergolden mage hard enough to knock them down and keep them down.

Maia’s ice dragon reared back and prepared to strike, but, roaring in rage, Cassandra moved first. With a flash of white light, she appeared in the small crater where the vines continued whipping around, trying to strike at their party. Valeria was barely able to see what happened next as Cassandra’s power spiked and drowned out all visible light around her. It was like a star had fallen to the earth for a moment, and when her light magic died down, the vines had severed at the base and burned. At the center of the small crater, the eye of a bulbous vine poked through the dirt—or, at least, the remains of an eye, having been thoroughly burned by Cassandra’s furious power.

“Anshu!” Valeria shouted, and when the Indradian looked to her, she pointed at Gaius, who appeared unconscious and bled profusely from his nose and mouth. Understanding her order, Anshu, with only the slightest of scowls, complied, leaping over to Gaius and slung the younger man over his shoulder. Another Evergolden mage did likewise for their group’s wounded member, who was in a similar state as Gaius.

They began to frantically move again, while Maia conjured a few more small water dragons that she dedicated specifically to carrying their wounded and dead. They'd barely managed to get the dragons loaded up, however, when half a dozen plant giants supported by more than a hundred goat men suddenly erupted from the ground all around them. At the same time a pair of large, gnarled trees just beyond the group at the tree line began to shudder, and Valeria immediately knew that they were possessed by tree sprites. As if to prove that things could always get just a little bit worse, deafening avian cries filled the air as thousands of eagles flooded the sky, preventing them from even trying to fly away.

They were surrounded, and without even an order, they closed ranks. Maia's ice dragon and smaller water dragons surrounded them, acting as their first line. Then came everyone who could still stand, protecting their wounded and dead in the center of their formation.

And they stood there, staring back at these monsters, as more and more plant giants and goat men emerged from the ground, thickening the line of enemies between them and escape. They were completely boxed in, and even with the strength of two eighth-tier mages on their side, Valeria wasn't certain they'd be able to fight their way out of this.

And yet... she noticed that they weren't attacking. They simply stood against the party, preventing them from continuing their escape. They seemed to just be staring at them.

For a moment, Valeria wondered if, maybe, just *maybe*, there could be some arrangement made, some negotiation that could be attempted that might extricate themselves from this predicament. Even with all of this power, she couldn't sense anything from any of them, so their numbers were all she had to go with, but she assumed that the party was at least matched in strength, if not exceeded given just how many enemies they were now surrounded by.

Before she could float that possibility, Cassandra sprang into the air, her body radiating such an aura of killing intent that the air dropped in temperature. She swung Sunlight in a vertical slash, and a wave of light washed out from her and crashed down upon a third of their foes. Goat men dropped dead, their bodies torn to pieces. Plant giants fared better, but most in her range were still struck hard.

Cassandra didn't wait for them to respond, though, and struck again, hitting their enemies behind them, and then conjuring half a dozen orbs of light the size of her torso around her, which began firing off dazzling beams of light into the air, cutting dozens of eagles to pieces.

And like that, any potential truce between their groups was shattered. The plant giants charged, the eagles dove, and the goat men started launching crude arrows, spears, and even themselves at their party. Maia's dragons snapped and whipped around, but they were worn down by the onrushing tide of bodies. The ice dragon was the first to fall, crumbling under the sheer weight of all their foes. The water dragons were next, though all of Maia's constructs took hundreds of their foes with them.

Once the way was clear, the survivors of the party started fighting again, using magic and steel with all the skill they could call upon. Cassandra was forced to the ground, bloodied by the eagles even though she still wore her armor. Anshu fell when a plant giant exploited an opening after the Indradian had struck down a larger giant; he was slammed into the ground like a child's toy, and held there by the weight and power of the giant. Whether or not he survived, Valeria couldn't tell.

Helen fell next, followed by Anna and her snapper when the beastmaster cried out in anguished anger.

The few remaining Evergolden mages didn't fare much better, succumbing to the endless hordes that infested the Prota Forest, which continued to hurl themselves at the expedition, heedless of the mountain of bodies they had to crawl over to do so.

It seemed like this was the end. Valeria couldn't see any way out of this, but she fought with all she had. If she was going to die, she was going to do so with glaive in hand and magic upon her fingers.

And, as she remembered gold eyes and strong hands upon her, with the face of the man she loved in her mind.

She heard Alix cry out in pain beside her, and Anzu shuddered and collapsed. As she fell from the griffin's back, she swung her glaive, cleaving three goat men around her in half at the waist. But at the same time, a plant giant just ahead of her threw its wooden fist forward. Valeria, still righting herself from Anzu's fall, couldn't respond in time.

This was the end. The fight was over. They'd lost.