

Storm King 581

Chapter 581: Anshu Bodhi Rahulani

With the fourth of the Serpentine Isles at their back, Sigebert's fleet made fairly good time. That didn't quite make up for the late start, though, for it had taken the entire rest of the previous day following the battle to clean up. All of the krakens that Jormun had unleashed upon them had been hunted down or scattered—the two that had helped to cover his escape had been strung up above a pair of the larger war galleys as grisly trophies. The pirates in the caves that Alix had sealed had also been dealt with thanks to Legion engineers collapsing the entire caves instead of just the entrances. No Legion troops were ever put in harm's way.

However, for those successes, severe casualties had also been reported. More than two thousand injured, and at least a quarter of that number dead. Four war galleys were destroyed completely, three more so severely damaged that they were no longer battle ready. Several more had taken lighter damage, and Legion engineers were busy patching up those holes. Several dozen of the smaller ships that made up the fleet were now decorating the bottom of the sea.

Still, Sigebert's fleet was a powerful thing. Both dreadnoughts were still completely functional and in perfect condition, and dozens of war galleys were still at Sigebert's command. Their engagement with Jormun had been a victory, but given that Jormun had gotten away, Leon still couldn't feel that good about it.

He spent much of the remainder of that day resting in his quarters, quietly mourning the loss of both his armor, and his flight suit. If things kept going like this, he'd have precious little left to defend himself with. He might even have to go hat-in-hand to the flagship's quartermaster and beg for some loaner Legion equipment, and that was *not* something he wanted to do.

He supposed that he'd have to make do with what he had or rely more heavily upon his skill in battle to survive. He was fairly confident after his last engagement when he'd managed to kill Jormun's light mage, but the fact that he had yet to truly battle the pirate himself was worrying him a little. He didn't like that uncertainty, he had no idea how well he'd fare in a fight with the man, but at the very least, he knew that he would be at a disadvantage. If they were on the water, Jormun would have all the seas to fight Leon with, while if they were on land, Jormun had that massive hammer that had once been the possession of a vassal Despot of Jason Keraunos, the last Storm King.

But Leon also had his Adamant blade, his bow and all the accompanying spell arrows, and even access to demonic magic, should the need for it arise. Xaphan's power was still a little too much for him to handle, however, and his left arm ached when he considered the possibility of invoking eighth-tier magic with only seventh-tier strength to control it.

While his body rested, Leon's mind was constantly whirring with possibilities to make up for these shortcomings. Enchantments filled his mind, and how he might make use of them. He hadn't the time to make anything truly extraordinary, but at the very least, he might be able to make a few more spells. He also had a few more unenchanted silver bands that he could inscribe enchantments onto.

As he thought about those, he was also reminded that he still had a weapon that he'd never tested before ready and waiting for use. Leon was loath to test it in battle just in case it didn't work and people

died because of that, but if it did, then he might be able to cancel out at least a portion of Jormun' water powers. About the only he knew for certain was that the silver band would likely break upon its first use, giving him just one shot. With the rest of silver bands, he might get one or two more.

However, early in the morning of the next day, after the fleet had already gotten underway toward the last of the Serpentine Isles, Leon was interrupted in his enchanting work by a lady knight, a young-seeming woman with fifth-tier strength and the insignia of a Tribune upon her uniform.

"What is it?" Leon asked as he met her in his cabin's common room, with Alix, Marcus, and Alcander alongside him. They were fulfilling one of the most important jobs an entourage could: be seen with their leader, giving him more authority than he might otherwise have. Maia, however, didn't much care for any of that, and so she was draped over Anzu in the griffin's cell, quietly reading and generally ignoring everything else that was going on around her.

"I'd like to ask for your help," the knightess said. "It shouldn't take long, perhaps an hour or two. Is this a good time?"

"That depends on what kind of help you need," Leon replied with a wry smile. "I'm not about to go and clean the privies, but if this is important enough, I'll certainly give it it's due consideration."

"Thank you," the knightess said. "We're not going to ask you to help clean the privies, though I'm sure that those who were assigned those duties would've been ecstatic for the help. Instead, I was hoping to speak with you for a few minutes about that prisoner you took during the battle."

"Ah," Leon said as he remembered the dark-skinned man he'd pulled from the wreckage of one of Jormun's ships. The man was clearly not of Serpentine Islander descent, and he'd been dressed magnificently. That, combined with his fifth-tier strength, had led Leon to assume he was someone worth capturing. "Is there an issue with him?"

"Nothing too important," the knightess hurriedly explained. "He's just not cooperating. Sir Sigebert believed that this man may have insider knowledge of what Jormun's plans are on the next island, and what kind of forces that the pirate still has at his disposal, so he ordered the man interrogated. That job was assigned to me, but I haven't been getting anywhere with him. I was hoping that he might be more willing to speak with the man who saved him instead of me."

Leon's grin turned a little bitter and self-deprecating. "I... I'm not good at this sort of thing," he admitted. "If you need someone stabbed or fried, I can do that without much issue, but asking me to help with an interrogation is... well, I don't think I'll be as helpful as you might think I'll be..."

"He's not even giving me his favorite color, he could do nothing but tell you to fuck off and you'll still be more successful than I've been—he won't even spare me the words," the knightess replied with a shrug. "Most of Sir Sigebert's other knights are off doing other things that the fleet needs seeing to before we catch that fish-fucker again. No one else is going to have the time to speak with him, so if you're not going to help, we're just going to have to end the interrogation."

"You don't have to twist my arm, I'll help," Leon playfully replied. "Though, just out of curiosity, if he doesn't give me anything, what'll happen to him?"

“Headsman’s been earning his keep these past few hours—that man was not the only pirate we fished out of the seas, and they’ve all been sentenced to death by Sir Sigebert. If he doesn’t say anything to save himself, he’ll just be one more pirate on the block. He doesn’t seem to care, though, he barely even acknowledges my presence when I go and see him, even when I threaten him with this.”

Leon nodded. “Take me to him.”

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The brig on Sigebert’s ship was, like all the rest of the cabins onboard, small and cramped, though the prisoner Leon had taken—perhaps due to his status as a fifth-tier mage—had been given one of the larger cells. It was just barely big enough to accommodate a bed, a toilet, and a washbasin.

However, when Leon arrived at the brig, the man wasn’t in his cell, and instead, the knightess escorted him to a nearby interrogation room. They didn’t enter immediately, but instead worked through their strategy first.

“... and he hasn’t given you anything, yet?” Leon asked. That was basically what the knightess had already told him, but he wanted confirmation before heading in.

“Not even a name,” the knightess replied. “He’s barely even spared me more than a few cursory glances, let alone engaged with my questions on any meaningful level.”

Leon nodded. “How far is this going to be taken? Is this going to get rough?”

“I don’t expect it to be,” the knightess answered. “Not a lot of point in beating him, so we generally avoid doing that. If he doesn’t talk, then so be it; to the headsman he’ll go.”

Leon shrugged and nodded. “All right,” he said. “I honestly don’t think I’ll be of any help, but I’ll do what I can.”

“I think if you take the lead, you’ll do fine,” the knightess countered. “You saved his life. That has to count for something.”

Leon shrugged again, and the two entered the interrogation room.

The room was utterly bare, bereft of anything that could even remotely be considered decoration. In the center of the room was a table with two chairs, with the prisoner already sitting in one. Surrounding him were four guards, each holding onto the end of a chain that glowed with magical runes inhibiting the prisoner’s use of his magic. These chains were connected to manacles around the man’s ankles, wrists, and neck.

The prisoner himself was looking surprisingly well given the state he was in the last time Leon had seen him. His golden armor and silk clothes had been exchanged for a gray one-piece outfit that had no more decoration than the interrogation room, and his fancy sword was nowhere to be seen, but he otherwise looked quite well. When he briefly glanced at the door to see who was entering, his eyes were bright and intelligent; his straight black hair was fairly long by the Bull Kingdom’s standards; his strong jawline was covered in black stubble; his ebony skin seemed healthy and absent visible wounds; his body still radiated the robust aura of a fifth-tier mage, even if it was being kept in check by the Legion restraints.

The knightess walked over to a corner and leaned against a wall. Leon noted that the man didn't once look at her—he only looked at Leon once before turning his eyes back to the wooden table in front of him, but he at least acknowledged Leon's existence. The knightess got no such courtesy.

Leon quietly sighed and took the other seat.

"Can you give me your name?" he neutrally asked.

The dark-skinned man blinked, but otherwise neither moved nor spoke.

"Have you been treated well?" Leon inquired.

Again, silence was his answer.

"I see, that's how it's going to be," Leon said as he smiled with resignation and slouched down in his chair, letting any pretense of formality vanish. "That makes things easier, I guess. I've a few more questions for you, and if you don't want to answer them, that's fine. We don't *need* your answers. When I'm done, these guys holding your fetters will escort you to the headsman, and all of this can be over. Sound good?"

Leon detected a few fluctuations in the man's aura, and his eyes casually flitted all over the table, but other than that, the man remained silent.

"All right, then let's continue," Leon said with dissonant serenity. "What has Jormun been up to on these islands?"

No answer.

"What sort of things was he doing on that island in particular?"

Nothing.

"How many pirates does Jormun still have at his beck and call?"

Silence.

"How many of your fellow pirates were killed when the caves they were waiting in were collapsed?"

That finally got a reaction, muted though it was. The man's face momentarily began to contort in a light scowl, but he quickly mastered himself and maintained his stoicism. Leon had to respect him for that, though he did note that the man scowled precisely when he was called a pirate.

'Seems like he doesn't like that label,' Leon thought to himself. *'I can lean into that, I think.'*

"What was your position on your ship? You seem quite capable, and you were clearly well-equipped; you must've been a high-ranking pirate among the others on your ship."

Again, the man twitched when Leon called him a pirate, and he decided to call him out on it this time.

"You don't like being called a pirate, do you? Does it irk you that you're being lumped in with them?"

The man's stoic façade cracked just a little bit, and he glared at Leon before averting his gaze again.

"What would you rather I call you?"

The man grimaced, but didn't say anything.

"You can call me Leon, if you please. Are you even capable of speech? Is that a power at your command?"

"Do I look like an unthinking beast to you?!" the man suddenly shouted, his eyes blazing with white light as he tried to rise in anger, but the four Legion marines holding his chains kept him down in his chair. His voice, while raised, had also been quite deep, though instead of the usual gravelly nature of voices that deep, his was much smoother and more suave. He, at the very least, had the pride of a nobleman, which, in Leon's mind, would certainly explain his dislike of being called a pirate.

Leon didn't even flinch in the face of this outburst. He just sat in his chair, smiling at the prisoner as the chains did their job, swiftly suppressing his magic and forcing the arcane light in his eyes to fade.

"You look like a man who lost a battle," Leon quietly stated, which seemed to replace much of the man's affronted anger with surprise. "Though, I have to say, you're looking at least better than you did when I fished you out of the wreckage of your ship."

One of the man's eyebrows rose slightly, and he asked, "You're the one who saved me from that disaster?" He spoke with a fairly thick accent that hadn't been immediately apparent when he'd shouted. Leon couldn't place the accent, but the man was obviously fluent in this language given his confidence in speaking it—Leon understood that the Bull Kingdom didn't have its own bespoke language, and instead used Aeterna's language of trade for everyday communication. That other places often had their own casual languages used amongst their people was something that Leon was still getting used to—he might've been able to pick up on Jormun being Turiel if he'd been able to notice the man's lack of unfamiliar accent.

"Yes," Leon answered. "I was pursuing Jormun, but when the man escaped, I decided to take a quick detour. I noticed that you were still alive, and given your attire, thought you must've been important. So I grabbed you and made for the surface."

The man lightly frowned, but he nodded in acknowledgement. "I saw you fight. It was quite a magnificent sight. Very spectacular. Might I know your name?"

"I don't know, how many names do you know?" Leon asked with a grin. "My name is Leon Raime."

"I am known as Anshu Bodhi Rahulani," the prisoner stated with pride dripping from his voice.

"A grand name," Leon politely responded. "Is there more to it? Does it carry any special meaning?"

Anshu smiled. "I am Anshu. My father was Bodhi. Our family, the Rahulanis, are descended from Rajahs of the Indra Raj."

"You're a Prince?" Leon asked in surprise. He knew that the Indra Raj was a large and prosperous nation *far* to the south. Both it and the Bull Kingdom occupied the extreme western edges of the continent of Aeterna, but whereas the Bull Kingdom was secluded in the north, the Indra Raj was its mirror in the south. However, whereas the Bull Kingdom was isolated by the Border Mountains, the Gulf of Discord, and the deserts south of the Samar Kingdom, the Indra Raj was heavily connected to the trade network of the entire plane. Not many nations on the continent could hold a candle to the power

of the Four Empires, but if there was one that could, Leon had always heard it said that that one was probably the Indra Raj.

Of course, he'd never met someone from there, and it was thousands and thousands of miles away, a terribly prohibitive distance even by the standards of powerful mages or Heaven's Eye, so his information was likely decades, if not centuries out of date, if it were ever accurate at all.

Anshu paused a moment before answering, "No, but we are distant relations to the current Rajah."

"Interesting," Leon said. "And how is it that a relation of the Rajah is this far away from his home?"

The pride on Anshu's face slipped just a little bit.

"One of my cousins... got too close to one of the Rajah's daughters. He was caught trying to climb through her window one night, and the Rajah was so insulted he exiled my entire family."

"That's... quite the extreme reaction," Leon whispered.

Anshu shrugged. "The Rajah did what any man would do if he caught someone attempting to seduce a woman of his household, I hold no grudge against him. My fool cousin on the other hand..."

It was Leon's turn to shrug. "Mighty generous of you. Were I in your place, I think I'd hold a grudge for a *very* long time."

"As would be your wont," Anshu replied.

Leon nodded, and the two were quiet for a few long seconds before Leon turned his attention back to the point of his visit.

"So, listen... I need to know what Jormun's specific plans are. I know what his goals are, but knowing *how* he's going about them would be most helpful, and how much support he still retains. Any information you can provide in that vein would be appreciated."

Leon glanced back at the knightess who was lightly smiling, though the smile seemed a little bitter. Leon guessed that it was because Anshu was speaking so readily with Leon, whereas she hadn't even gotten a single word out of him.

"It's worth noting," Leon continued, "that if you don't cooperate, then the Fleet Legate—the admiral of this fleet—will likely sentence you to death as a pirate. It won't matter how well you served Jormun or how he recruited you; you'll be made a head shorter in short order. Giving us the information we request will go a long way to convincing the Fleet Legate not to send you to the headsman."

Anshu briefly glared daggers at the knightess before turning back to Leon.

"I'm not opposed to giving that information," he said.

"You seemed like you were opposed earlier," Leon couldn't help but mutter.

"You sent a woman to speak with me," Anshu replied, his tone fairly flat as if he were stating something eminently obvious. "I was insulted. It's no shame to answer your questions after your victory, but to speak with an unmarried woman outside of the home would tarnish my honor greatly."

Leon reeled a bit from that explanation, and he detected a few brief hints of killing intent winding their way through the knightess' aura before she clamped down on it. She'd been casually leaning against the wall throughout the short interrogation, but now he heard her shift her position into one that was both more formal, and more hostile.

"I see..." Leon whispered, not bothering to hide the shock and judgment on his face. "That's a... well, that's an opinion you have, I guess. I'm not entirely sure how to respond to that. I'm not even entirely sure I know what you mean..."

Leon thought he knew what Anshu meant, but he gave the man the benefit of the doubt.

His charity was immediately rewarded with disappointment when Anshu said, "A woman's place is at home raising her husband's children, or helping to raise her younger siblings. Not out on ships away from her father, brothers, or husband. It's certainly not fighting in wars, either."

"Yeah, I thought that's what you meant," Leon replied. "Seems a bit weird to me; this far north, women have the right to do just about anything men can."

"No society is perfect," Anshu replied with a shrug.

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Chapter 582: Finding the Prince

Leon spent a great deal of time speaking with Anshu, and the man gave Leon exactly what he wanted: an explanation as detailed as he could give of Jormun's specific plans. And they were exactly as ambitiously deranged as Leon had believed. Jormun had promised all of his followers that he was bringing some mythical sea god back from its long imprisonment. Anshu insisted that he was following out of honor for some huge, undefined favor that Jormun had rendered him and that he didn't believe in all of that religious nonsense.

But there were many among Jormun's fleet that did.

More concerning was what Anshu revealed would happen on the fifth island: Jormun would sacrifice Octavius at the southernmost place on the island, supposedly where the Three Heroes had struck the Serpent down thousands and thousands of years ago—at least, according to some of the Islander myths they told themselves. Jormun had the crews of his ships believing that once Octavius was sacrificed, the final seals of the Serpent's cage would be undone, and their god would return to the world of the living. It would cast the entire plane down into the sea, and then make the Islander peoples the rulers of the resulting ocean.

Leon wasn't sure how much of that he could believe. It sounded a lot like a story that Jormun was using to keep his people in line and believing in his goals. However, Jormun had essentially admitted most of these claims to Leon back in the temple, among a host of other ramblings. What Leon focused on was the bigger piece of information that was easy to lose in the minutiae: Jormun's people believed that once Octavius had been sacrificed on the fifth island, and all the rest of their seals had been undone, then the release of the Serpent was guaranteed.

And according to Anshu, all the rest of the seals had been undone. Great amounts of blood had been spilled on each island, enough for the power that blood contained to release the great seals that chained

the Serpent within its watery prison deep below the islands. Leon felt no small amount of horror when the realization hit that not only had Jormun confessed that this was his plan back in Kraterok—saying it almost off-handedly as Turiel describing ‘rumors’ of Jormun’s activities—but that he’d also gotten the Legion to participate, too. Those blood sacrifices were, in no small part, accomplished thanks to the Legion slaughtering the Islanders who resisted their advance.

Once the interrogation was done, Leon rushed to Sigebert with the knightess right beside him. They gave the Fleet Legate their reports, and Sigebert took them seriously. The fleet was already moving as quickly as they could to the next island, but their course was slightly adjusted to take them directly to the spot Anshu had told them that Octavius was to be sacrificed.

Unfortunately, Leon didn’t think they’d make it in time. Jormun had had more than a day to prepare, and it seemed like this last act needed less prep work than the rest. Only Octavius, with his powerful blood, was needed. Jormun only needed to spend a few minutes on that island, and once it was done, he could go wherever and do anything he felt like. The only saving grace was that Leon’s tracking spell continued to work. It pointed them in the same direction that Anshu had directed them towards, lending further credibility to the man’s words.

And so, they moved as quickly as a couple hundred ships could, hoping against all odds that they might make it in time to stop Jormun and retrieve the Prince he’d stolen.

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It was a chilly day when Leon stepped out of the rowboat and onto the shore of the fifth island, the last of the Serpentine Isles that had been left intact after the Penitent Paladin had swept through more than half a century ago. Those islands further south were little more than jagged rocks and uninhabitable cliffs, the shattered remains of islands once teeming with life in countless forms.

The fifth island was much like the first four: rocky, and very vertical. There wasn’t much flat land anywhere, and the landscape only grew more broken the further inland it was, being so covered in volcanic mountains and dense jungle. It was beautiful, a vision of a wild paradise that Leon would’ve otherwise spent at least a few minutes admiring.

But he was in no mood for such things. He knew what he was about to see with his own eyes, for he’d already seen it with his magic senses, and it killed any enjoyment he felt at being in a new place so full of wilderness.

As if reflecting Leon’s mood, the sky, which had nearly always been perfectly clear since their arrival, had turned overcast, with dark storm clouds ominously rolling in from the south, the strong winds that brought them howling and screeching in Leon’s ears. The ride from Sigebert’s dreadnought to the shore of the island had been fairly uncomfortable, with the ocean itself seemingly resisting them with powerful waves that battered the rocky coast as if the Endless Ocean were trying to sweep the entire island beneath its surface.

There was a storm coming. Leon could feel it in the core of his being. It was like the big storms that used to stimulate his blood, before he grew powerful enough to ignore their effects.

But this, he couldn’t ignore. His blood sang in the wind, even as dissonant dread settled into his stomach, weighing it down like he’d swallowed a boulder. As he strode across the rocks toward his

destination, flanked on both sides by anxious Legion marines, a deadly serious Sigebert, and all of his retinue, silent and looking vaguely disturbed, Leon's eyes drifted out to sea, where he could see a great sheet of rain more than a dozen miles in the distance, and it was rushing in their direction.

He hoped that this was natural. He hoped this storm didn't mean anything other than it was simply time for rain—the jungle on the island couldn't have gotten there without copious amounts of rain, after all.

But Leon knew that this was wishful thinking at best.

Not too far ahead, Leon and the rest of their group could see it, the result of their failure. A figure had been tied to a similar-looking structure—three beams of wood nailed together in a star shape. This figure looked thin, covered in blood, and unmoving. His blond hair was practically plastered against his head by the strength of the wind, while his handsome face was locked in an expression of terrible pain and terror.

It took a few minutes, but soon enough, they drew close enough that even a mortal could've clearly recognized the form of Octavius, the Prince that Jormun had kidnapped from his cell in the Royal Dungeons the day before his execution. The Prince that had ordered the death of Trajan, and whose vanity had led to a civil war that led to the deaths of thousands and nearly tore the Bull Kingdom apart.

And here he was, right before their eyes. Leon could see horrendous gashes all over his arms and legs; some that looked practical for the purpose Anshu had described, cutting deep into the Prince to sever critical veins and arteries, while others seemed like they had been inflicted in pointless sadism.

Whatever else he was, Leon knew that Octavius had been a fifth-tier mage. He could've survived even a bad cut that severed his most critical arteries, with his natural healing abilities sealing up those wounds before he could bleed out. He would've been weakened, but he would've survived. But these wounds, Leon guessed, had been slashed open repeatedly, inflicted again and again until the Prince had been completely exsanguinated.

Octavius was now little more than dry meat. His flesh was bone-white, while actual bone was more than visible where it looked like someone had flayed much of his flesh. The only part of his body that seemed intact, lacking any obvious evidence of a wound, was his head. It seemed Jormun wanted him identifiable, for some reason.

But the Prince was dead. He lacked even the tiniest hint of an aura, and he wasn't breathing. Leon didn't need to go over there to tell he was dead.

Leon slowly came to a halt on that tiny peninsula, the land bridge behind him so shallow that it would probably be submerged come the rising of the tide. He stared at the Prince, the others slowly stopping just as he did once they caught up to him. A few of the Legion marines swore and decried either Jormun's barbarity, or his audaciousness in attacking a member of the Bull's Royal Family. A few averted their gaze. A couple stared in horror or fascination.

Sigebert was one of those who swore aloud and began to walk toward the body, followed closely by several Tribunes.

"That fucking pirate..." the Fleet Legate whispered, his tone shaking with rage and indignity, "when I get a hold of him, I'm going to tear him limb from limb..."

“Wait!” Leon suddenly shouted, causing Sigebert and his followers to immediately pause.

“What is it?” the Fleet Legate asked as he glanced back at Leon.

“After everything we’ve been through, let’s take this a little slower, yeah?” Leon said. They couldn’t move too slowly, his sense of dread grew in proportion with his storm-sense. He occasionally glanced out to the south, in the direction of the shattered islands—and the direction of the incoming storm.

As much as natural storms calmed him, he didn’t want to be outside when this one hit. But there was something about this set-up that disturbed him, and his instincts were screaming at him to take this slowly.

“There’s a strong possibility that the body’s been trapped,” Leon explained, and Sigebert and his people glanced back at Octavius’ corpse before backing away.

“Shit...” Sigebert murmured. He turned to one of the marine Tribunes and ordered, “Get some of your people who specialize in enchantments up here. Be sure they know what they’re dealing with.”

The Tribune scurried off, but Leon didn’t pay him much mind. On first inspection, this tiny peninsula seemed hardly worth noticing at all, and was notable only for the corpse of Octavius that had been left upon it. But the more Leon let his senses wash over the rocks looking for traps, the more he could feel some kind of power lingering within the rocks. It wasn’t much, but it was disturbingly similar to the power he’d felt within the serpent statue back on the second island.

It seemed like this place had been touched by divine power at some point, and that divinity hadn’t yet dissipated into its surroundings.

Or maybe this was lingering power left over from Octavius’ sacrifice. Leon couldn’t be sure, all he knew was that there was power here, and at the very least, it didn’t seem immediately dangerous.

Leon began to slowly walk along the edge of the peninsula as closely as he could. He circled Octavius’ corpse, inspecting it from every angle. His hunting instincts were screaming at him that this was bait, but for all he knew, this could also just be Jormun wanting to send them a message, or a myriad other reasons.

Leon kept his eyes open for anything that seemed hostile—any change in the ambient magic power that would indicate the activation of a trap, both around Octavius and around himself. If he were in Jormun’s shoes, he would’ve not only trapped Octavius’ corpse, but he would’ve laid a few traps around the edge of the peninsula, too, just in case someone tried what he was doing.

But nothing happened. Leon circled the corpse until he could see the back of the crucifix. That was where the enchantments had been placed upon the previous crucified corpses that he’d seen, so it stood to reason that this would be no different.

Sure enough, Leon saw a number of runic glyphs that he recognized as explosive enchantments placed upon the back of the wooden beams that Octavius had been tied to, subtly glowing with light, just waiting for someone to approach Octavius and activate them.

Strangely enough, these explosive enchantments weren't hidden in any way, and to Leon's eyes, they were quite hurriedly inscribed. There was even one that didn't look properly drawn, and was likely not even functional. Either someone had been incredibly sloppy, or Jormun was in a terrible hurry.

Given these past couple of days, Leon strongly suspected it was the latter.

He glanced over his shoulder at the approaching storm, knowing that Jormun was in the same direction. He imagined the pirate looking back at him, grinning like the madman he was. It infuriated Leon, and for just a moment, he was struck with a vision. He imagined himself tearing into Jormun, rending his flesh with fang and claw, tearing his body to bloody ribbons with strength that was utterly inhuman.

When Leon blinked and averted his gaze, he glanced down at his arms and almost shouted in surprise and panic when he saw they were covered in black scales, glittering in the daylight even with the sky completely overcast. But then, he blinked again, and his body was back to normal, without a hint of scales anywhere that he could see.

Leon took a deep breath and stepped away from the shore, his heart racing, a drop of sweat beading up on his brow. He quickly checked his mental defenses, and seeing that they were still completely intact only marginally calmed him down.

There was something about these islands that were screwing with his head, and it was starting to cause him no small amount of stress. Worse, it seemed to be getting stronger the further through the island chain they traveled.

Turning his attention back to Octavius, Leon conjured a small bolt of lightning and tossed it at the back of the crucifix. His aim was perfect, and the explosive enchantments were destroyed without being triggered.

"We're good," Leon said, his voice as steady as he could make it. One last time, he glanced out to sea before turning away. He couldn't help but feel like he was running out of time, and that maybe he was already too late. But what specifically that feeling was referring to, he couldn't quite say.

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"Technically, our mission is over," Sigebert quietly stated.

He, Leon, and several dozen other high-ranking members of his fleet had gathered in his meeting room to discuss their next steps. They had Octavius in custody—or what was left of him, anyway. Their initial reason for being deployed to the Serpentine Isles was over. Basina and Theuderic might still need some help securing the islands, but Sigebert's fleet would be perfectly within its rights to return home.

But Leon wasn't going to have any of that. The storm that he'd seen rolling in had arrived, and it was fierce. Many of the smaller ships had to be tied down to the bigger ships so they wouldn't capsize in the giant waves being kicked up or blown over by the storm's tremendous winds.

"We can't leave," he growled. "Jormun is still out there."

"To the south, correct?" Sigebert said.

"Yes," Leon confirmed. "It doesn't seem like he's still on any of the inhabited islands, and has taken refuge in the shattered islands."

"And we don't know where..." Sigebert murmured as he turned his gaze to an old map of the Serpentine Isles, one old enough to still show the last three islands in the chain.

"He could be anywhere," one of Sigebert's Tribunes stated. "He's a pirate, such creatures don't necessarily have to stay in their bases. We've driven him off from the Isles, we don't need to stick around."

"Look outside," Leon said with a graveness that had the Tribune noticeably shivering. "Do you see the storm outside? That's not normal! Whatever Jormun's doing, he's not leaving! Not yet!"

"There's nothing strange about a storm upon the Endless Ocean," another Tribune countered. "Jormun's goal was to unleash some old god. This preposterous mission was doomed from the start, this storm means nothing and is completely unrelated."

Leon scowled. Sigebert's flagship was only being lightly buffeted by the waves, but even that much was startlingly indicative of the storm's strength. To him, it felt like something was waking up, like something more was coming. This storm was just a precursor.

Leon didn't bother trying to refute the Tribune's comments. He had no proof, and he wasn't going to try and justify his feelings somehow. He hadn't the kind of rhetorical powers to pass his feelings off as facts.

"Sigebert," Leon quietly whispered as he leaned forward onto the table they all stood around. "You saw what Jormun did back at the ritual site. You know the kind of forces he commanded yesterday. He has more. This isn't over. He's just regrouping. This will never be over until he's been hunted down and permanently dealt with. He only left Octavius there because the Prince was no longer of use, but his plans are continuing."

"That doesn't mean much," a third Tribune said. "I say the pirate is just admitting defeat. He executed Octavius horribly as a warning to us against pursuing him, while also returning the Prince to us. Good riddance to the traitor, I say, but our business in these Isles is over."

Sigebert stared at the map for a few seconds more as silence fell upon the meeting room. With a sigh, he turned back toward Leon, who was barely keeping himself in check despite his rapidly rising anger and frustration over the lack of vision that these Legion knights had.

"Our mission is over. We have Octavius. We can return to the King with pride."

Leon's fists began to ball up. He thought it would be suicide, but if Sigebert didn't order the fleet to continue on, then he would grab Maia and Anzu and head out to hunt Jormun down himself. He wasn't going to leave things like this. Even if it killed him, he had to stop Jormun.

"However," Sigebert continued before Leon could interrupt, "I agree with you, Leon. Jormun must be stopped. We *must* hunt him down and end him."

"But—" the third Tribune began before being cut off by the Fleet Legate.

"'But' nothing! It doesn't matter if Octavius was a traitor, he was still a Prince of the blood! He was for *us* to punish, not for that lowlife pirate! We no longer have a practical reason to hunt that pirate down, but he has impugned the honor of the entire Kingdom! What's more, our honor has been tarnished, for we could not bring the Prince back alive!"

“Leon,” Sigebert said as he straightened himself out. “I will order the fleet to continue on. We will kill Jormun before any more damage can be done.”

Leon smiled, but as the storm outside raged, he wasn’t sure if that was still even possible.

Chapter 583: Scrambling to Catch Up

The remnants of the first shattered island struck Leon as surreal. The sixth island had certainly been destroyed when Penitent set off the volcanos in its interior, but what was left was a twisted warren of thin waterways and small saltwater lakes. Great spires and huge ridges of bare, black rock jutted out from the steaming sea like the mangled teeth of some fallen titan. Some were quite big, enough to almost be considered mountains. Others were much smaller, barely large enough to be seen above the waves. There wasn’t so much as a blade of grass to be seen anywhere upon them, though no small number of places to hide. There weren’t even any birds around, nor even fish or seaweed that Leon could see—this place was well and truly lifeless.

Even with his magic senses, Leon could barely see anything as the fleet drew closer to the remains of the sixth island—and Anshu hadn’t been this far with Jormun, so the information he’d given the Legion wasn’t of much use in locating Jormun now that they had moved past the inhabited islands. The storm from the previous night had cleared up, but the sense of dread it had instilled in Leon had not, and neither had the thick cloud cover above. More ominously, a deep, thick fog had descended upon the seas, though from where this fog had come from, Leon couldn’t say. He could easily imagine that this fog was just a result of the gently steaming waves as they were heated by countless underwater volcanic vents that had been torn open by Penitent so many years ago.

He didn’t think that this fog was that natural, however. Every time the thought occurred to him, he could only envision the look of terror that had still been frozen upon Octavius’ face when the Prince had been found, and the deep gashes in his legs and arms through which all of his blood had been drained.

No, Leon could feel that whatever ritual Jormun had performed over these islands was wrapping up. He was almost finished, and the world was responding to the magics he was weaving.

Despite the vociferous objections during the meeting the night before, it seemed that the rest of the crew aboard Sigebert’s flagship felt the same way. As the fleet drew closer, Leon took his usual spot near the bow of the ship, a place where with his senses he’d usually be able to hear quite a bit of chatter amongst the crew, but on this day, he couldn’t hear that same chatter. There were still a few people speaking, but their conversations were almost entirely work-related. The ship, and from what Leon could tell from his place on the deck, the entire fleet, was subdued and dreadful.

Leon’s usual group was there with him at the bow, but they were all uncharacteristically quiet, as well. Even Maia was silent, though for her, that was hardly unusual. Only Gaius seemed brave enough to speak.

“Are we getting closer?”

“We should be,” Leon replied. He’d long since given the tracking spell to the flagship’s command staff so that he wouldn’t have to constantly be giving them directions, but that also had the side effect that he couldn’t just check it whenever he pleased. He and Maia still had their magic senses, but such powers were hardly infallible, and there was an entire broken island to cover—and that was discounting the

possibility that Jormun had hidden himself somewhere that magic senses couldn't reach. He'd already displayed the ability for his ship to submerge itself, so he could quite possibly be anywhere within those rocks.

They had one saving grace, though, and that was that the waterways carved by the destruction of the island were, for the most part, wide and deep enough to admit even the two dreadnoughts. There wouldn't be a repeat of the battle at the fourth island, the Legion would be able to bring their full might to bear upon Jormun.

The flagship shuddered as Sigebert led the way into the narrows of the island. Leon knew him to be rather irate that he hadn't been able to do much during the last battle, and after having lost so many ships and people, he wanted to lead the way this time. Leon fully approved of this strategy, especially since it meant that he, given he was standing at the bow, would be the first even among them.

A dangerous position, maybe, but one that Leon wouldn't give up. Not when the weather was so strange, and Jormun still unaccounted for.

The fleet slowly sailed into the fragmented husk of the island. Many other ships were spreading out to encircle the island as best as they could, while others started exploring the rocky maze from other angles.

They pushed deeper and deeper into the watery passages, until all they could see was black stone, rough waves, and gray fog.

Leon's eyes darted every which way, searching for anything that might indicate hostility. He saw both far too much, and barely anything at all. His magic senses could cover a significant percentage of the broken archipelago, so much that he couldn't possibly keep his attention on all of it at once. Making matters worse, the fog wasn't still; it billowed and flowed with the strong winds that blew through the channels, constantly tricking Leon's brain into thinking he was seeing something of note moving out of the corner of his eyes, when it was only a few wisps of fog.

They kept pushing, slowly working their way through these many saltwater passages, flanked on all sides by tall, oppressive, dark-as-night stone. There were a few lakes around, including about half a dozen that Leon, after some examination, guessed to be the old calderas of the volcanos that Penitent had set off to destroy the island. He didn't think that much of them at first, but as the fleet pushed further in, and the places where Jormun might be hiding seemed to be getting rarer and rarer, Leon began looking more and more at those lakes.

They were near the center of the broken island, with so many channels cut between them by the island's destruction that they were almost one large sea. They were the reminders of what had happened here, of how the island had been obliterated and its people killed.

To Leon, these lakes seemed like the perfect place for Jormun to go, if he were even here at all. They were so symbolic of the destruction that the Bull had wrought here that Leon didn't think it could be passed up. Jormun had exactly that kind of flair for the dramatic.

"Gaius," Leon murmured.

"Hm?"

“Send word to Sigebert. Have us make for the interior of the island as fast as is practical.”

“Uh, I’ll pass that along,” Gaius said as he started to signal to the command tower. Leon was more than a little gratified when Sigebert’s response was a simple acknowledgment and agreement. He wasn’t up to trying to phrase his suspicions in plain, rational words.

As they sailed on, the tense atmosphere grew even more so. *Something* was going to happen here, everyone could feel it—Leon most of all. He could feel the familiar power in the air of another incoming storm, this one more powerful than the one before, and he started to grow restless. He tapped his fingers on the bow’s guardrail, he shifted his weight around, and his eyes darted around with increasing frequency.

After several minutes, Leon took a deep breath and forced himself to relax as best as he could. He closed his eyes and relied entirely on his other senses to perceive the world. He needed to be on top of his game, and mentally exhausting himself before even reaching the battle just wouldn’t do.

Slowly, Leon began to calm down. However, almost as soon as his mind began to relax, a bright golden bolt of lightning fell from the clouds in the sky and hit one of the lakes. It was so far away that the thunder hadn’t even reached the ship before Leon’s eyes slammed open and turned in the direction of the lake. He couldn’t physically see it with so many cliffs and rocky spires in the way, but his magic senses were more than keen enough to notice it.

‘*That’s it...*’ Leon thought, taking the lightning bolt as a sign of Jormun’s presence. This was seemingly confirmed when a second bolt of gold lightning struck the surface of the lake, ignoring completely the many rocky peaks that surrounded it.

Leon scanned the lake in as much detail as he could. He already had a good idea of what was around it from his previous scans, but this time he went in for as much detail as he could see.

Immediately, this paid off as he detected a cave on the jagged edge of the crater-lake. This was hardly unusual for such a broken place, but what made this cave stand out was that it was right off the water, was large enough to just barely fit Jormun’s ship by Leon’s estimation, and had been warded against magic senses. It was fairly subtle, with the wards located a fair ways past the cave’s mouth, but Leon felt it when his magic senses were scattered after brushing up against those defenses.

There was no doubt in Leon’s mind, now. Even if Jormun wasn’t there right this very instant, it was more than likely a place that he used.

“Gaius,” Leon said as he turned around, “I’m going scouting.”

“You’re... what?” the Legion knight responded with confusion.

Leon just walked right past him and nimbly climbed onto the back of the waiting Anzu, who happily chirped and spread his wings. The griffin was more than ready to head out into the sky.

“I can’t stand this waiting, and I’m pretty sure I just saw Jormun’s hideout,” Leon explained. “We’re already on the path there, so there isn’t much of a need to change course, but Jormun’s pirates will have more than ample opportunity to launch ambushes or hit-and-run attacks between here and there.”

“You’re not... going to be attacking them alone, are you?” Gaius asked.

Silently, Maia whispered the same question to Leon.

"I'm not intending on attacking anyone," Leon said as he quickly strapped himself into Anzu's saddle.

"Still, Alix, want to come with?"

"Me?" the young former-knightess asked.

"You're my best archer," Leon replied with a smile.

"Wait, huh, what?" Marcus sputtered, acting like he'd just been slapped awake. His eyes went wide and the smile of someone profoundly surprised and a little offended appeared on his face. He clearly objected to Leon's statement, but he didn't want to immediately start something with Alix.

"If Alix doesn't want to come with, you can very well take her place," Leon baited.

"Oh, no, I'm not sitting this out!" Alix shot back as she hopped onto Anzu's back right behind Leon and began to strap herself in and check her bow and quiver.

"I'll... humbly refrain from issuing a challenge, then," Marcus said as his eyes drifted toward Anzu.

Leon smiled, knowing that if it didn't mean riding the griffin, Marcus may well have argued that he was the better archer—Leon knew that his skills were nothing to scoff at, but he needed someone who could fly and shoot, and that wasn't Marcus.

Maia, on the other hand, stared at him, her face frozen. Leon could feel her dislike for this plan like she was hitting him over the head with it, but he needed her here.

[Just like last time,] he whispered to her. [I need you here. I'm not attacking anyone, but I need to stay in contact with the ship.]

[Then stay here,] Maia insisted. [These people have their own scouts. Let them risk themselves. Stay here.]

[No can do,] Leon replied. [I can't just sit and wait. I'll be fine, I'll stay near the ship.]

Leon could see the muscles in Maia's cheeks flexing as she clenched her jaw several times in frustration. But she agreed, and Gaius began to hurriedly signal Leon's plan to the command tower. He could fly ahead, marking their path with bright yellow flares, while any hostiles he might see would be marked with red flares.

Only a few minutes later, Leon was flying over the broken island, Anzu able to effortlessly carry Leon and Alix through the air. That greater perspective, though, wasn't much greater than from the deck of the ship. The fog was just as thick several hundred feet in the air as it was down below. It made for a rather unsettling sight, as if just about anything could be hiding within that swirling fog.

Still, Leon began to scout out the nearby remnants of the island, getting close enough to visually clear them before Sigebert and the fleet could sail past and possibly spring a trap. This wasn't perfect by any means, as the first island had shown quite well that Jormun had the capacity to hide within rock if he needed to, but it was better than going in blind.

Leon popped off a few yellow flares as he flew, ensuring Sigebert knew which way to go even in this thick fog.

About ten minutes after taking off, Leon finally found someone: a single man, crouching near the edge of a cliff, mostly hidden from view by a rocky protuberance from the wall of the cliff. Leon pointed him out to Alix, then fired off a red flare.

The man, seeming to realize that he'd been seen, jerked himself away from the edge of the cliff and began to run away. But he was a fourth-tier mage, he had no chance of escaping from Anzu while the griffin was in the air, and soon enough, Leon had ridden him down. He wasn't even able to fight back before Anzu had knocked him over and held him down with his claws digging into the man's back.

Leon lightly leaped down from Anzu's back and strolled over, telling Maia what he found as he did so that she could then tell Gaius, who could then pass it on to Sigebert.

"Who are you?" Leon asked, letting his aura and killing intent soar over the man.

The man paled and shivered, but after taking a few deep breaths, he turned his head to look over his shoulder in Leon's direction—just from the way Anzu was restraining him, he couldn't look Leon in the eye.

"I am one of the men who will rule this plane!" he declared, but his voice was strained as he tried and only partially succeeded in drawing in enough breath to get the words out with a griffin standing on his back.

"Funny," Leon drily stated. "Where's Jormun and the rest of your people?"

The man choked out a few chuckles. "Gone," he sputtered as Anzu shifted his weight. "My captain has succeeded, Bull Slave. The Great Horned Serpent's release is inevitable, now! Before the week is done, you and your entire Kingdom will drown with its coming!"

"Where have they gone?" Leon asked, his eyes narrowing as his body began to fill with lightning.

"Onward," the man said with a smile of triumph. "To the end. To the doors of the Great Horned Serpent's cage. There, they will greet our God upon its return, and usher in a new age!"

Anzu shrieked threateningly and snapped his beak at the man below his claws, but the man just began to laugh hysterically.

"It's too late!" he shouted in between guffaws. "You've already lost! It's over!"

Leon scowled as he glanced back toward the lake. Another bolt of lightning had fallen into its waves in the exact same spot that the previous two had, and the power in the air he felt was only getting stronger. The storm that had rocked the Isles the day before was only a harbinger of something worse. Another storm was building, and it could quite literally brush all of civilization off the face of Aeterna.

Leon ended the man's laughter with a quick blast of lightning, knocking him out. Sigebert might have a use for him, but Leon was done with his rantings, even as brief as they were. He hauled the man onto Anzu's back, made a quick flight back to Sigebert's flagship to drop him off, and then got back to scouting.

—

It took only a couple hours for Sigebert's fleet to begin spilling into the lake that had attracted those lightning bolts, and Leon had wasted no time in getting an expedition of marines organized to assault the cave that had been warded against magic senses. It was essentially a long tunnel that bored into one of the larger cliffs that bordered the lake, with a sizable waterway to allow a ship the size of Jormun's to sail through—much like the underground river by the Serpent's temple, Leon noted. Much like the temple, they found a small harbor and a few tunnels that led to more caves not too far in.

Their progress had not been contested even once. It seemed like the man that Leon had taken prisoner was the only living person on the shattered island that wasn't part of their fleet. Not a single pirate was found within the cave, though they found some evidence that it had been inhabited only recently, and that whoever had been here had evacuated rather quickly. The biggest surprise, however, was in one of the tunnels furthest from the dock. Unlike the rest of the caverns, this one wasn't largely empty save for a few bits of detritus left behind by the evacuated residents, but filled with runic glyphs. Every surface in the cavern had been covered in thousands of deeply-carved runes, spiraling and weaving through each other for some purpose that Leon hadn't been able to immediately discern.

That purpose soon became clear, however, as the runes flashed with light, and another bolt of lightning fell from the sky outside.

After not too much longer, Leon was forced to conclude that the prisoner he'd taken hadn't been lying; there was no one here, they'd all moved on. When Leon checked in with the tracking spell, it showed that while they'd reached the lake, Jormun was still further south—probably at one of the last two shattered islands.

'Probably the last one...' Leon thought to himself, though he couldn't be sure, not until they sailed there.

With some disappointment, Sigebert ordered the fleet to move on, not wanting to waste any more time on this place. However, before he left, he ordered the Legion engineers to destroy the enchantments that had been left behind, and in the course of collapsing the cave, a discovery was made.

Below the waves, in the very center of the lakebed, were three ships, sunk fairly recently, though likely before the Bull Kingdom's first expedition sent to the Isles more than a year ago. The lightning bolts that periodically fell upon the lake were not doing what lightning usually did and spreading across the surface of the lake, but instead was cutting straight through the water and striking these ships.

Upon closer inspection, it was found that hundreds of bodies filled their hull, and it looked the ships had been burned by something other than the lightning. These bodies had been wrapped and carefully placed, so that ruled out the ships being violently sunk; it seemed clear to Leon that this was just another sacrifice, another blood ritual for Jormun to complete his plan. These ships were old enough that there was still some doubt among others in the fleet, but not in Leon's mind.

There wasn't anything they could do about it, now, though, other than sending down more Legion engineers to shift those ships around and remove the bodies. They couldn't burn too much time on it, though, not with how clear it was becoming how little time they had.

They had to catch up to Jormun, and fast. At Leon's urging, and with vastly fewer complaints than after they'd found Octavius the day before, the fleet moved on, making a beeline for the eighth island, the

last of the islands in the chain, the island that had once been the tip of the Serpent's Tail and the last that Penitent had destroyed during his campaign. They'd make a quick pass at the seventh island, but Leon knew they'd not turn up anything. Jormun was at that last island, and they needed to find him and put an end to this as soon as they possibly could.

Chapter 584: Favor of the Serpent

The seventh of the Serpentine Isles was largely the same as the sixth: ruined in just about every way, reduced by the forced eruptions of its volcanos into an archipelago of bare, lifeless black stone.

The Legion took little time to explore the place. Leon's guess that Jormun had retreated all the way to the final island seemed to bear fruit, as the tracking spell indicated that the pirate wasn't here.

As the fleet moved on, only once sending back reports of their movements to Basina and Theuderic who were finally moving on from the third island, it began to rain once more.

And it rained quite hard, the black clouds sending great sheets of water crashing into the sea, seemingly seeking to submerge the shattered remnants of these islands below the raging waves of the Endless Ocean. Lightning was soon terribly frequent, striking the seas, the rocky spires of the broken islands, and even a few of the bigger Legion ships enough times that even with the storm clouds blotting out the sun, the sea was never dark for long.

Leon spent nearly all of his time above deck, accompanied not even by Maia. The sailors and marines who would've otherwise been going about their duties had to retreat below as the winds picked up and the rain grew worse, but for Leon, he couldn't think of a place he belonged more in these last relatively peaceful moments. His blood rushed through his body, carrying his visceral joy to every corner of his being; the power of the Thunderbird within him flared and danced in ecstasy with every drop of rain that hit him, every gust of wind that blew past him, every lightning strike that illuminated him, lifting his spirits and banishing the dread and darkness that had infused his mind ever since he'd found the ritual site on the second island.

Despite everything going on, as he stood at the bow of Sigebert's flagship, completely alone, in the dark, soaked to the bone and buffeted by winds, illuminated only by lightning strikes, he felt like the happiest person alive. Within that storm, it felt almost effortless to switch from lightning magic to wind, then to water, and then back to lightning. With the power of the storm suffusing his being, he could dry himself with water magic, switch to wind to weaken the wind battering him, and then switch back to water to erect a rain shield before another drop could touch him.

He didn't do that after the first hour or so. He felt better with the wind in his hair and the walls of rain slamming into his body. He was a seventh-tier mage; this storm was powerful, but it wasn't a threat to him. He let it hit him with its terrible wrath, and his blood sang in response.

And yet, even with all of this joy, he never forgot the reason that this storm had appeared, and he was greatly looking forward to finally encountering Jormun again. With the amount of magic that his body was absorbing and producing with the storm all around him stimulating his blood, he felt like he could take on Jormun's entire fleet singlehandedly and win. Everything that Jormun had done to conjure this storm would be rendered meaningless, even ironic, as it filled Leon with the power to defeat the pirate.

The storm didn't weaken one lick as the fleet slowly approached the final of the Serpentine Isles, the looming shadow in the distance that was the broken corpses of the mountains that once proudly rose from the waves; majestic; stark; beautiful; dreadful. This island's husk was bigger than the previous two, though no less navigable by the Legion ships. There were just so many more places for Jormun or his ships to hide, and to plan ambushes and traps.

Although, on the surface, as Sigebert's ship drew closer and closer, bringing the island within range of Leon's magic senses, he could see that Jormun didn't seem to be bothering with duplicity. There were dozens of ships making their way to small lakes and sailing into and out of small caves scattered across the archipelago, more than Anshu had told them about—Jormun had clearly hidden some things from those that had allied with him, or he'd called up more people to bolster his last stand after Anshu had been taken captive. Whatever the case, their numbers still paled in comparison to the Legion fleet that was descending upon them.

About five miles from the northernmost reaches of the island's remnants was one of the large lakes that had clearly formed in the caldera of a huge volcano, completely separated from the rest of the ruined island by the caldera's walls. Within that lake were more than three dozen additional ships, including Jormun's own, which was docked at a huge stone pier. Set into one side of the inner walls of the caldera that proudly rose from the crashing waves were dozens of large stone barracks that looked they could house twenty people apiece.

Most notably was the center of the lake, which, strangely, had a small island in its exact center. Given how perfectly centered this island was in the lake, Leon couldn't possibly imagine that it was natural, and it was more than big enough for a large, plain, two-story, boxy building to have been built upon it. It was warded against magic senses, but emanating from that building was an aura of such...

Leon found himself unable to describe what he felt when his magic senses brushed against that building. The building itself was devoid of art or architectural flourish, being nothing more than a square, roughly two-story construct built out of the same black stone as made up the rest of the archipelago, but when Leon felt the resonance in his spine and perceived that boxy structure, he almost felt like he was in the midst of drowning in magic. Such a deep, rich tapestry of magic twisting and swirling around itself; Leon could sense traces of all the elements within that cloud-like aura, though he noted that lightning was the least represented, and darkness and water combined made up perhaps three-quarters of what he could feel.

He had little idea of what to make of that, and when he asked Nestor and Xaphan, neither could give him much insight without getting a look at what was going on within that building. The only thing either of them could say was that Jormun was probably playing with powers far beyond those he should have, if he were involved with whatever had created that aura—there was no doubt in Leon's mind that he was.

With a sigh, Leon scanned the archipelago one last time before carefully walking across the soaked deck of the ship. His reverie was over, and it was time to get to work. At the very least, the raging storm had ensured that he was not only topped up on magic power, but he felt almost invincible.

He was ready to face Jormun. He couldn't possibly be in better shape to confront the pirate.

—

Leon's report to Sigebert was received with much gratitude. With the storm outside making the seas particularly treacherous, the lighter scout ships were having more than a little trouble just sailing out to the archipelago to see what was going on, let alone communicating with the flagship. Leon's magic senses were saving the fleet a great deal of headache coming up with ways to head in and secure the shattered island.

And there was no longer any doubt that it had to be done. The ominous storm was enough already, but Leon's report just emphasized to every doubter that Jormun had to be stopped. Whether anyone thought he was still trying to unleash an ancient god or not hardly mattered, the powers he was invoking were scary enough already.

As Sigebert began to deploy the fleet according to Leon's report, the entire command staff moved with a sense of great urgency that Leon wouldn't have expected just a couple days ago after they'd found Prince Octavius' exsanguinated corpse.

The fleet moved quickly—or at least, as quickly as they could given the still-raging storm—and began to advance in three groups upon the archipelago.

A smile broke out onto Leon's face as he watched their movements. It was only a matter of time before the fleets clashed with the pirates, and he had to get his retinue ready for the fighting ahead.

—

In a dark stone chamber deep enough underground that the storm outside could hardly be felt, Jormun knelt before a circular pit so deep that even for his seventh-tier eyes, he could not see the bottom. It was utterly abyssal, with nothing but pitch-darkness to be seen within its depths.

The room itself was completely bare, with the pit the only notable thing within. There were no guardrails, only a walkway about five feet wide running around the entire circumference of the circular room, and then the pit.

Jormun himself was dressed in simple white clothes, though those clothes had been stained with countless drops of blood. His hands, too, were covered in the stuff, as was the empty metal container just next to him. The container wasn't that big, relatively speaking, but it had been more than sufficient to transport Octavius' blood.

If he were of a mind to do so, Jormun might've smiled at the thought of breaking that young Prince as he'd done, but his mind was focused on other tasks. The sound of slithering filled his ears, and hiss of the Serpent was closer now than it had ever been.

His power was close. His reward for fulfilling the pact so close at hand. The only thing left to do was to bring Leon to this place. Once that was done, everything he'd ever wanted would be his.

As he knelt before the pit, he heard a door opening in the distance, and then the unmistakable sounds of someone descending the stairs to this chamber.

He knew it was Friga. No one else would dare to disturb him at this time. And if she were coming down here, then it could only mean that the Bull had finally arrived.

A few seconds later, Friga reached the bottom of the stairs, her body clad in dark grey steel, her blade of golden fire at her hip. She wasn't playing around anymore, she was breaking out all the aces up her sleeve.

Jormun smiled in appreciation as he turned to regard the only other seventh-tier mage left in his fleet.

"They're here," Friga said as she locked eyes with Jormun. "Everyone has assembled. The allies will hold them off for a time, but they'll reach this place sooner rather than later. How much more is there to do?"

"Not much," Jormun said with a wide-eyed smile. "Just a few hours more, and then the Serpent will rise. We're so close, Friga. Can you feel it?"

As Jormun spoke, his voice filled with more passion, but he kept himself restrained.

Friga hesitated a moment and glanced back over her shoulder.

"I've come this far, I wouldn't have stuck around if I didn't feel this," she said. "No one would've. We've all seen what's going on outside. The plane is preparing to submerge the nations of the land. The world of the Serpent is close at hand."

"Yes," Jormun replied with quiet, breathy excitement. "We've lost much to get this far. But all our sacrifices are about to pay off. Let's go speak with the others."

Together, the two walked back up the stairs, each step in the dark, lightless stairway echoing in their ears as if to impress upon them the importance of this moment. With each step, the sound of the storm outside grew louder.

Jormun smiled again as he heard the thunder steadily getting louder, as if heralding the god that was about to rise. It made it only fitting that Leon would be the last key to this puzzle, the last piece he'd have to move into place before everything was right where it should be.

Jormun felt energized. The Serpent hadn't yet granted him the knowledge and power that he'd done all of this to obtain, but that wasn't to say it hadn't granted him any power at all. The original promise he'd made had been fulfilled: all of the seals had been unlocked or destroyed. After the sacrifice of Octavius, Jormun had been granted even greater command of the seas than he'd already possessed.

That fleet was sailing to its doom. They couldn't stop what was coming. Perhaps it would've been sufficient to stop him if they'd played their cards better at the fourth island, but they hadn't, and now, Jormun had won.

The two seventh-tier pirates reached the top of the stairs, and Jormun pushed open the huge door that they were confronted with. It easily swung open, revealing to them the inside of the boxy structure at the center of the great lake. The doors they stepped through were set into the back wall, right behind the huge room's grand stage. The rest of the massive chamber was bereft of furniture, but filled with hundreds of people.

They were an eclectic bunch, wearing armor and wielding weapons from all over the planes. Some of these accoutrements had been pillaged and stolen from various parts of the world that Jormun and his

people had raided. Others had been the possessions of Jormun's followers from before they'd joined him. His people came from everywhere, representing the men and women of every corner of the plane.

The warriors of Samar; the knights of the Halcyon Federation; Eskellion raiders; former Talfar cataphracts; Han crossbowmen; members of a defeated horde of nomads from the Kyron Steppes; even former soldiers of the great Indra Raj; and, of course, those of his crew that shared his homeland, the Serpentine Islanders, with their chainmail and their sword, axes, and bows. There were individuals from even further places, too, from the fractured Pegasi States; the enigmatic Forest Watchers; the heavily-tanned tribes of the Menomonee Valley; and even a few fellow pirates from the Selkies of the Sakura Archipelago, all drawn to this place by the word of Jormun, by the promise he'd made to them.

Once the Serpent rose and broke the world, it would rebuild it as it saw fit and then turn it over to them, making these reaving bastards and outcasts into Kings and Emperors.

All the eyes in the room turned in the direction of the two seventh-tier mages as they walked out to the front of the stage. The room was already as silent as it could be, with only the thunder from outside echoing within its walls.

"My friends..." Jormun began, speaking loudly enough that everyone within the chamber could hear him above the thunder. He spread his arms in a gesture that was both welcoming and triumphant, and continued, "We all know why we're here. Our reasons are many, but our goal the same! We've assembled within this holy place for one reason: to free the Great Horned Serpent!"

Jormun's declaration was punctuated by the rumble of distant thunder.

"By the end of this day, the Serpent will be unleashed upon the world! All the seals have been undone, all the locks opened, all the requirements met! Even now, as I speak, the door that imprisons the Great Serpent is swinging open!"

The room erupted in a great cry of triumph, but as it died down, the world seemed to respond with another blast of thunder, this time just a little bit closer.

"We have great cause to celebrate!" Jormun continued. "But we must not grow complacent! Celebration can come later, but right now, the Bull has come to our doorstep! They've come to stop us! They've come to deny us the spoils of our victory! And they will fail! How many have come before them? The mighty fleets of the Imperial Coalition could not stop us in the Argonaut Sea! The dread vessels of the Sky Devils only slowed us down! The Indra Raj even paid us to leave them be! And compared to us, the cities of the Halcyon Federation were like babes in their cradles!"

Another roar of triumph, and another blast of thunder. Each now seemed of equal volume.

"Compared to these fearsome foes, what is the Bull to *us*?! What might can their King call down upon us that we have not already met and repulsed?! We have the favor of our god, and soon, it will rise, and the seas will rise with it!"

Again, the roars of Jormun's followers, and again, a blast of thunder. This time, the thunder was definitely louder, the lightning that had precipitated it striking the highest point of the caldera's walls.

But Jormun continued on, only letting the sound of the cheers and the thunder infuse him with manic energy.

“My friends! Fear not these men and women of the Bull’s Legion! They will fall just as all others have before us! Remember to guard yourselves against complacency! Return to your ships! Prepare to defend this place with everything we have! This is the place where the chains of the Serpent first began to slip loose! This is the place where the last seal was broken! This is the place where the Serpent will return from! These interlopers must never be allowed to tread upon this holy place!”

The roars of Jormun’s followers turned fierce and violent, and many shouted that they would be the ones who would hold off the Bull, that they would single-handedly prove their worth to the Serpent. Jormun smiled again. These people were good pawns, and that they were so willing to throw themselves to their deaths in vain attempts to win the approval of the Serpent entertained him to no end. They hadn’t even started fighting the Bull, yet, and already they were competing to see who could promise the Serpent more blood.

Before his large coalition could turn upon itself, Jormun shouted, “Fear not, my friends! The Bull has blessed us with a great fleet to burn! There will be glory aplenty for each and every one of us! Now return to your ships! Prepare for the final battle! Prepare yourselves to be the first to witness the majesty of the Serpent as it rises! Prepare to celebrate its coming by bathing in the blood of the Bull!”

Jormun’s followers screamed the loudest they had yet, shaking the room with their volume. Many raised their weapons, roaring their devotion to the heavens that, even now, continued to pour endless amounts of water upon the archipelago.

Many of the pirates began to stream out of the chamber and make their way through the storm back to their ships. They moved with great confidence even as the strong winds threatened to blow many of them over, even as the rain threatened to drown them with every breath, even as lightning arced across the sky.

Soon enough, Jormun and Friga were left alone in the chamber. The crew of Jormun’s personal ship would have it ready soon enough, and the allies that Jormun had raised would hold the Bull off for a while; they had no need to hurry.

“That was... quite the spe—” Friga began, before a tremendous bolt of lightning fell from the sky and struck the top of the audience hall. The hall shook upon impact, sending a great cloud of dust falling to the floor as the loudest blast of thunder yet shook the entire island upon which the hall had been built.

As the completely unfazed Jormun looked up, he saw that the ceiling had been cracked, and a few drops of rain were already seeping inside and falling to the floor.

Jormun smiled for a final time. This was a sign. Leon and the Bull would fall upon them just as that bolt of lightning had upon the audience hall. Just like the hall, they would crack, but they would stand firmly upright when it was over.

“All right, Friga,” Jormun whispered. “The last battle. The last fight. Are you ready?”

Chapter 585: The Last of Jormun’s Pirates

With a dull thwack audible even above the howling winds and pouring rain, one last explosive shell was fired from a mangonel attached to the bow of a Legion war galley. It exploded upon the deck of one of the pirate’s long, thin ships, cracking the already-strained hull, and letting the ship’s own mass and

momentum pull it in half, spilling its contents of cargo and people out into the storm-ravaged straits of the broken eighth island.

Leon watched from above, riding upon the back of Anzu, untouchable even in this terrible storm, as this Legion battlegroup finished subduing a small group of four pirate ships that had been blocking their path deeper into the shattered island. Leon hadn't even felt the need to get involved, these pirates were clearly not of Jormun's caliber, and their ships were relatively weak, more in-line with the Islanders that had resisted the Bull Kingdom's advance rather than Jormun's direct subordinates. With Legion artillery raining down upon them almost as hard as the actual rain, they hadn't stood much of a chance.

Such scenes were repeating themselves all throughout the remnants of the eighth island, with multiple Legion battlegroups cutting their way deeper and deeper into the archipelago, aiming to secure each and every inhospitable rock they encountered and surround the massive crater in which Jormun's base seemed to be located.

There wasn't an easy way into the crater, unfortunately, as the walls completely enclosed the lake within, and the storm slowed everyone down and forced a more languid push through the straits.

As he flew above the island, Leon took some time to investigate what he could about the crater without coming in too close, ignoring the lightning strikes that, by his power, almost seemed to curve around him and Anzu. The crater walls had clearly been augmented by a powerful earth mage, for while about half of the crater's walls appeared natural, the remainder were far too smooth and uniform to be anything other than the creation of an earth mage.

This worried Leon a bit, as he'd yet to see an earth mage within Jormun's faction that was powerful enough to create such a structure.

He supposed it might've been an old construction, and that Jormun simply had other ways in and out of the crater's lake—he *had* displayed an ability to submerge his ship, before—but Leon resolved to keep an eye out for powerful earth mages, just in case.

As it was, it was clear that they'd need to clear out the pirates within the archipelago, fill the empty channel of water that surrounded the crater with Legion ships, and then send in the marines. There were a few other options available to them, such as trying to blast open one of the magically-created parts of the crater walls with Flame Lances, but Leon had a feeling that option wouldn't see many results.

This was going to end with a ground assault, he could feel that in his bones, and this weather wasn't going to make that an easy proposition.

With the destruction of the small pirate battlegroup beneath him, Leon turned his attention back to the task he'd taken upon himself: be the eyes-in-the-sky for the Legion ships advancing through the archipelago. With Anzu's wings and wind magic, he could move faster than any of the other ships, even in these hurricane winds, moving to and fro with great speed—more than enough to be constantly popping off flares to mark the locations of pirate ships that he could see, their light cutting through the dark gloom spread by the thick storm clouds and lasting for a surprisingly long time within the great sheets of rain.

There were quite a few pirates out there with more ships than he'd been able to initially count. Jormun's force had to have at least fifty ships of similar size to Legion war galleys, if not quite as heavily armed, hidden all over the ruined island, among other, smaller ships. These ships, however, were dropping like flies before the Legion onslaught. Without room to maneuver in the narrow waterways of the archipelago, the pirate ships weren't able to capitalize on the advantages of their lighter designs, and so were easy pickings for the Legion ships.

Leon and Anzu flew around, staying in contact with Maia on Sigebert's ship and marking the pirates for destruction, doing little more than that for several hours as the Legion advanced. He was greatly concerned that Jormun wasn't personally making a move, and he wanted to save his resources for that inevitable fight. Without his flight suit and his armor, taking Jormun on in direct combat was going to be a risky proposition. He'd need other tools at his disposal.

To that end, Leon began to contemplate breaking out a tool he hadn't used in years, and his left arm began to ache just thinking about it.

[Xaphan, how ready are you to loan me your power?] Leon asked.

[I'm always ready, boy,] the demon replied, his voice largely neutral, but Leon picked up on an undercurrent of anticipation within it.

[How about manifesting yourself outside of my soul realm?] Leon asked. [How would that work, exactly?]

[Ahh, preparing for things to go completely to shit?] Xaphan asked, his voice crackling with amusement.

[I have to be prepared for anything,] Leon answered, [and after what that guy I captured said... If Jormun's achieved his aims, then we have to assume that he's even more powerful now than he was when last we fought. I need to be ready to face more than a seventh-tier water mage, and Naiad isn't going to cut it, not with that fire mage woman still there with her proven ability to dissipate Naiad's magic.]

[You can do similar, can't you?] Xaphan asked.

Leon began to twist the three silver bracelets adorning his left wrist. [Maybe...] he said uncertainly. [I was only able to make two more copies, but even then, I have yet to test the original design. *Maybe* they'll work. *Maybe* they won't. *Maybe* the original was a faulty design that'll fail when it comes time to put it to the test, and *maybe* these copies will do the same. They're as prepared as they can be, I just need you to be, as well.]

[Is there anything stopping you from testing them on your fish girl? I'm sure she'd jump at the chance to help your dumb ass out with your enchanting.]

[The thought did occur...] Leon said, his tone dropping in both thought and reluctance. He could still remember the feelings of pain that Maia felt when her power was disrupted by that fire mage. He could vividly remember having to carry her back to the Legion camp that day, and the pain and uncertainty he felt in whether or not she was all right. [I'd rather not. I can risk testing them in the heat of the moment. I'm not going to use her as a straw dummy for my weapons.]

[A foolish notion before an enemy as powerful as this fuckstick is,] Xaphan muttered. [But I suppose it hardly matters at this point, not if you're planning on calling me out to clean up this filthy mess.]

[Mm. How is this going to work, then? I don't have to say a spell or strike a pose or anything like that, do I?]

[I certainly won't stop you if you feel it's necessary,] Xaphan said with an audible smile, [but no, you don't *have* to do so. This more like holding the door of your soul realm open so that I can come through. It could be dangerous under normal circumstances since you'd never want to leave your soul realm open like that in the presence of an enemy, but in this case, you'll have a Lord of Flame pushing his way out, so there's little to no risk of something successfully pushing *in*.

[Our contract will still be valid, and I should be able to return to your soul realm at my leisure, so long as you stay within I'd say about ten miles, but I'll also be physically present, it won't be some projection or anything of that nature. I'll be able to personally fry the dickhead pirate the way he was always meant to be!]

[Glad to hear you're so enthusiastic,] Leon drily quipped, but the conversation was forced to end there, for Leon saw far below, about halfway up a largely sheer cliff overlooking the largest route to the crater—one of the only routes that the dreadnoughts could take, and the one that Sigebert's flagship was slowly sailing through—a ledge carved into the cliff face. The ledge was protected from Legion sight and attack by a protuberance in the cliff, but as soon as the Legion ships sailed past that protuberance, any pirates on that ledge would be able to launch a surprise attack on them with near-impunity.

And there *were* pirates on that ledge, and they had with them a most fearsome weapon: a Flame Lance, obviously one that they had pillaged from the first Legion fleet that had been sent here. They'd be able to wreak havoc upon the fleet as it sailed past with that weapon up there, and it would be damned difficult for the fleet to deal with it on their own.

'All right, here we go...' Leon thought to himself as he urged Anzu to fly a little bit higher and in the ledge's direction as he used a modicum of his water magic to part the rain in their way. He wanted to save the lion's share of his power for Jormun, so instead of preparing his lightning magic, he instead reached into his soul realm and retrieved his bow along with a handful of arrows. He didn't think he'd need more than one, but one of those pirates was sixth-tier, and he wanted to be sure he got them all.

With some small measure of reluctance, Leon didn't launch a flare at the offending weapon, choosing to instead approach with a little more caution and stealth. The pirates manning the Flame Lance were staring down into the waterway more than a hundred feet below them, waiting for the first unfortunate Legion ship to pass the area the rocky protuberance obscured and into their range. They weren't paying too much attention to the skies, and even if they were, Leon and Anzu were largely obscured by the storm.

Anzu flew in close, and Leon let loose with an explosive arrow. With the gale-force winds blowing about them, however, the arrow missed the ledge and detonated about twenty feet below. The blast was powerful enough to blow a huge hole in the cliff face and send countless cracks spiderwebbing up into the ledge. The pirates began to shout in panic and alarm, but none could retaliate as their footing became suddenly unstable.

A marginally acceptable result, but not one that Leon was remotely sated with. He brought Anzu in for a closer pass, and then loosed another arrow, this time using one of his more powerful ones. He activated every enchantment his bow held, letting it draw as much of his power as it needed in the process. The arrow flew truer than the one before and hit the Flame Lance directly.

The ledge was immediately bathed in bright white flame. Rain within ten feet of the explosion's center was flash-vaporized, as was the flesh of several of the pirates. The sixth-tier mage survived, but he was the only one to do so, and he came through with a few nasty-looking burns and been knocked to the floor of the black stone ledge.

He roared as he drew his weapon and stumbled to his feet, the ledge now even more unstable than it had been. The Flame Lance was starting to slide away and fall into the water below, but the pirate didn't pay it any mind, instead choosing to stare up into the sky directly at Leon, his eyes squeezed shut from the rain and wind—but Leon knew he could see him, for he could sense the man's magic senses and towering killing intent lock upon him. The rain noticeably dropped in temperature around them, but Leon simply smiled and loosed another arrow.

The man roared once more and jumped with everything he had. The arrow exploded behind him, obliterating the ledge and sending the captured Flame Lance plummeting into the waterways below, but the pirate himself was untouched and sailed through the air toward Leon and Anzu.

Anzu hadn't been idly ignoring all of this, however, and it wasn't too hard for him to flex one of his wings and arc both himself and Leon clear of the pirate, letting him impotently shout as he passed harmlessly beneath them.

The pirate fell the hundred feet to the storm-ravaged water below. He managed to hurl one ice spike before he hit the waves, but his aim was terrible, and Leon didn't even bother acknowledging it.

With that, the ledge had been secured—or, more accurately, utterly destroyed—and Leon popped off a quick flare and sent a message to Maia relaying what had just happened. A moment later, he got word back from Sigebert acknowledging his report.

With that distraction taken care of, Leon took quick stock of the situation. The Legion was still pressing further into the islands, but it seemed that they were finally running into some problems. The pirates were growing in strength the closer the ships came to the crater, and the ambush that Leon had just prevented wasn't the only one that Jormun had set up. A few artillery positions had been set up all over the remnants of the island, hidden from detection mostly by clever placement of the weapons in caves or behind rock formations, and were starting to finally do some damage to the Legion fleet.

Leon even saw one large Legion war galley armed with a pair of fearsome-looking trebuchets on its deck be practically lifted by the water it was trying to sail through, and then bombarded with fire from at least three different pirate catapults. He urged Anzu to fly in its direction, reasoning that such a display of water magic could likely be Jormun's doing. No matter what, though, Leon was done with just being a scout—he needed to get involved so the Legion could keep up the momentum.

Flying over to the distressed war galley, Leon was disappointed to see that it wasn't Jormun himself finally making a play, but instead about half a dozen water mages working in tandem to block this

waterway. By lifting this war galley and hitting it with their catapults, they were blocking four more war galleys and a dozen smaller ships from sailing further into the shattered island.

Leon put a stop to all of that with a well-placed explosive arrow, but didn't need his bow's enchantments. He wasn't wasting any more magic power on the pirates if he could help it. A few more explosive arrows took out the catapults. The lead war galley, however, had been disabled, and many sailors had been killed. It hadn't sunk, so with it unable to sail, the waterway was still blocked, and a not insignificant portion of the fleet was unable to sail further—at least, for the time being. A few Legion water mages were already moving to get to work clearing the ship from their path and to help any stranded or injured sailors and marines.

Leon left them to it and moved on.

Things were going very well, so far. Apart from this one place, the pirates hadn't been able to stop the Legion's inexorable push through the broken island. On one hand, he was feeling good about that, but on the other, he felt not at all at ease with Jormun yet to make his move. Leon forced himself to focus on something productive instead of pointless speculation or frustration, though; on escorting the Legion into the wide channel that separated the crater from the rest of the broken, spiraling, web-like islands that the volcano's eruption had turned this place into.

It didn't take much longer before Legion ships were streaming out into this channel. Leon only had to intervene in one more engagement, and his continued use of flares to point out hidden pirates were invaluable to the Legion fleet; he saved many Legion lives that might've been taken by the pirates.

That wasn't to say there weren't any casualties, though. Several more war galleys were sunk, as well as about two dozen smaller craft, but for the most part, the Legion fleet began to enter the channel around the crater about as intact as they could reasonably expect to be.

On many of the larger broken islands that surrounded the channel, too, the Legion marines were landing and taking up positions to ensure their encirclement was total. Leon wasn't entirely sure what they were going to try to do, but he could see quite a few fifth-tier mages amongst their number, so he assumed they might be setting up some kind of artillery formations, using all of their powers in tandem to create effects greater than any single one of them could make. He'd already been on the receiving end of such formations during the civil war, when one such formation allowed the nobles to inflict serious casualties upon the stone giants that had followed him.

At that thought, Leon felt a quick pang of loss and guilt. There would've been no way that Lapis could've followed him all the way out here, but Leon still couldn't help but wish the stone giant were still around. He could use the support, and not just of the martial or magical variety.

As the Legion ships continued to stream into the channel, something of note finally seemed to happen. Nearly all of the pirates who had infested the outer islets had been cleared out, though a few smaller Legion detachments were hunting down the rest. That meant that the bulk of Legion forces could concentrate on setting up a blockade around the crater to support the coming assault that the marines would have to lead up and over the crater walls. This threat, it seemed, was just enough for Jormun to make his move.

One of the less-natural sections of crater wall suddenly began to rumble and vibrate, and then slide open like the double doors of a massive gate. They weren't swinging open, though, and instead showed much of the sea walls around them to be hollow as they retracted into them.

From this opening came sailing two dozen pirate ships of various sizes, led by the largest and most heavily-armed of their number: Jormun's ship. The two close-range Flame Lances set up on its bow were up and running, and it moved with great speed. Almost as soon as it sped out of the doors, it ran into a Legion war galley, and those Flame Lances opened up, bathing the Legion ship in flame intense enough to overwhelm its structural enchantments, setting the entire hulk aflame and slowly sinking as the Legion sailors and marines aboard screamed in agony as they were burned alive. The pounding rain of the storm did nothing to stop this fire, and the wind only helped it to spread faster.

The pirate ships behind Jormun's ship followed up, ramming into several Legion ships and boarding them so lightning-fast that they couldn't be anything else other than most powerful, experienced, and skilled members of Jormun's pirate coalition. For them, it was like the storm around them didn't even exist, for the choppy waters of the channel proved no obstacle for their boarding, and they didn't even seem to notice the rain or wind.

'This is it,' Leon thought to himself as he turned Anzu in that direction, popped off a few flares, and sent a message back to Sigebert about what was going on via Maia, *'these are Jormun's best people...'*

Indeed, as Leon scanned the inside of the crater with his magic senses, he noted that it seemed utterly deserted.

'He has nothing more to send out,' Leon thought. And he smiled, for he knew the end was close.

Chapter 586: An End to the Pirate's Fleet

As Sigebert's flagship sped up and his battlegroup spilled out into the channel surrounding the crater, Leon flew a little bit lower and pursued Jormun's ship. The wind howled in his ears and the rain was so thick it was practically a solid wall at the speeds that Anzu was flying, but neither Leon nor the albino griffin paid any attention to that at all. Instead, Leon's only concern was drawing close enough to Jormun's ship that he could shoot arrows at the thing without them being thrown off course by the gale winds.

The wind seemed to take some issues with that, for it began to pick up even more as Leon and Anzu flew lower, flattening Anzu's feathers and forcing Leon to don his helmet just to stay focused. That helped, dampening the sound of the wind and keeping most of the rain out of his face, but it wasn't perfect, and he still had to squint.

Fortunately, his magic senses weren't impacted at all by the storm—in fact, his power and magic senses seemed to be operating at heightened levels as the swirling air, water, and lightning magic within the storm was drawn into his body. He felt spectacular, more than powerful enough to drop down to the deck of Jormun's ship and thrash everyone he encountered.

But Leon maintained as detached a mindset as he possibly could. Jormun's ship was sailing past Legion ships, its Flame Lances setting each one ablaze with near impunity. Within the channel, there wasn't enough space for the Legion ships to turn to face their new foe, and their artillery emplacements were too cumbersome to turn quickly enough to catch the ship. The other pirate ships that had followed

Jormun out of the crater were less lucky, getting bogged down as they boarded other Legion ships, leaving them fairly easy pickings for still more Legion ships as they streamed out into the channel.

Leon took a few potshots at these other pirate ships as he passed, even setting one on fire despite the rain and the ship's own robust defensive enchantments. He didn't, however, let himself get distracted from his real target, and Anzu soon closed in on Jormun's ship.

'This is the end!' Leon roared in his mind as he swapped out his explosive arrows for his most powerful spell arrows, those attached to Thunderblast spells.

In the past few months, Leon had learned from and consulted with Nestor a great deal, and the dead man had certainly made good on his promise to teach Leon what he knew of enchantments and to help hone Leon's skills and understanding of the seven magical elements. The natural result of those lessons was that the Thunderblast spell arrows that Leon pulled from his soul realm were markedly more powerful than those he'd produced even just a few weeks ago. He only had a small handful of these newer variants, however, so he'd have to be careful with them, he couldn't waste them on risky shots or worthless targets.

With an almost manic smile, Leon and Anzu closed to about a hundred feet with Jormun's ship, and Leon gleefully let loose with one of his new Thunderblast spells. He was close enough that his bow's enchantments had the arrow cutting straight through the storm to hit the deck of the ship only a moment later. The arrow detonated, bathing the entire ship in golden lightning so bright that the channel was momentarily illuminated like it was daytime, and the thunder the spell brought was heard for miles.

And yet, the ship was intact. There hadn't been anyone on the deck, so Leon couldn't tell if his spell had actually killed anyone, but the ship was left still sailing, its Flame Lances still seemingly operational, but the deck had been badly burned, and he'd seen the ship buck as his arrow detonated.

With a scowl, Leon produced another of these spells and loosed, and again, it hit Jormun's ship like the fist of a wrathful god. This time, however, Leon had targeted the bow, hoping to at least disable those Flame Lances even if the spell was still too weak to do much damage to the ship.

The spell arrows detonated right where he wanted it to, bathing the Flame Lances in potent golden lightning. He was more than gratified to see the metallic weapons glowing with heat as the lightning dissipated, and their barrels starting to bend and sag. No more fire came from the weapons, though the ship still sailed without much noticeable hinderance, and more than two dozen Legion ships of varying size behind it had been destroyed or disabled by its fire.

The Flame Lances quickly cooled with all the rain and wind, but they didn't begin spewing fire again. He turned back to hit the ship again wherever it seemed weakest, but he only had three of these spells left. Given how distressingly little damage they seemed to be doing to the ship itself, he had to make sure he used them sparingly.

Before he could choose his next target, one appeared before him; the door that led below deck burst open, and the female fire mage came barreling out, her eyes wild and furious, her aura towering, her killing intent soaring. She was already exuding so much heat that her arms were lightly burning, and much of the rain that had been pooling on the deck started to noticeably steam and boil.

“LEON RAIME!” she bellowed as her eyes landed upon him. She didn’t say anything more, but instead began to conjure and throw fireballs at him.

Anzu was only of the fifth-tier, and Leon knew that if his griffin took even one hit from those fireballs, then he would be severely injured, if not killed outright. In response, he steered Anzu up higher, putting not only more distance between himself and the fire mage, but also much more water. Fireballs still came careening through the air between them, though, and Leon had to resort to calling upon his own fire magic and doing his best to either block or deflect those attacks.

The fire mage immediately put such pressure on Leon and Anzu that Leon had to have Anzu pull back almost entirely, retreating from only about a hundred feet from the ship to more than five hundred before the fire mage stopped attacking them.

But she remained standing on the deck of the ship, utterly immovable even as the storm crashed upon her. The ship kept moving, and even started to speed up—it still had a vicious ram on its prow, and it looked like it was going to use it.

Leon was a little confused, though. He’d yet to see Jormun, and he’d expected that if anyone were going to respond to him, it would’ve been the head pirate himself. He also would’ve thought that the ship would’ve tried falling back by now, to try and get itself out of harm’s way by returning to the crater. With a quick pulse of his magic senses, Leon could see that those pirate ships that had burst out of the crater with Jormun’s ship were being steadily destroyed, despite their initial gains.

All of this wasn’t coming without cost, though, and already by Leon’s estimation, Sigebert’s fleet was barely sixty percent of what it was when it left the Bull Kingdom.

But that sixty percent included both dreadnoughts, and Sigebert’s monstrous personal craft had already entered the channel and was sailing toward Jormun’s ship. All Leon needed to do was buy a little bit of time, and the Legion’s Flame Lances would tear that thing to pieces. After that happened, what did Jormun have left to resist them with? Leon could only think of his personal power, but with the storm ravaging this broken island, Leon was sure that there was something else going on, too.

Jormun had one more ace-in-the-hole, Leon knew it. That was why he wasn’t here, on his ship, leading the defense of the crater. He was preparing something elsewhere.

Below, Leon could hear the female fire mage screaming and roaring in challenge, and occasionally throwing fireballs at him, but they were far enough away that Anzu could easily dodge. So, Leon felt confident in shifting his attention momentarily away, to inspect the crater.

It was still empty and devoid of anything that stood out, but in his moment of distraction, the fire mage leaped off the deck of Jormun’s ship with great force, flying up into the air propelled by a massive explosion channeled through her legs. Her arms blazed with fire, and Leon only just barely brought his attention back to bear to avoid a huge gout of flame she launched at him. Anzu had already started to move, but Leon needed to throw himself down in the saddle to properly dodge. The fire sailed right over his head, and Leon considered himself duly chastised.

The female fire mage’s legs burned like jets, keeping her aloft. Leon couldn’t imagine the sheer amount of power she was using to keep herself in the air—he was a little jealous of it, though—but he supposed

that her shiny plate cuirass or maybe her armored boots held some secret to them that he couldn't immediately discern, giving her extra power for this move.

He took only the briefest of moments to admire it before he instinctively shot one of his more powerful Thunderblast spell arrows at her. She just barely dodged, not even letting her armor take the hit, and Leon cringed internally as his arrow sank into the waves down below them a moment later.

The fire mage then reached toward Leon, letting fire erupt from her fingers and sail up toward him in a great, wide geyser.

Anzu flapped his wings hard, propelling them onward and causing a cushion of air to hit the fire and delay it just long enough for them to get out of range.

Leon shouted and pulled on Anzu's harness, ordering the griffin to drop down to the fire mage's level, and he drew his family's blade. Immediately, he felt the power within him amplify even more than the storm had already made it, and he filled the blade with as much of that power as he could.

As he was preparing himself, however, the Thunderblast spell arrow that had sunk into the channel detonated, illuminating the water from below with thousands of arcs of golden lightning.

The channel was unfathomably deep, far too deep—in Leon's admittedly amateur opinion—for it to have been natural. However, more shockingly than the depth, was what Leon saw for the briefest of moments as the golden lightning flashed through the channel.

Writhing tentacles of darkness, hundreds of feet below the surface of the channel, far too many to count. They were intersecting and twisting together, forming a massive web of inky-black tendrils far below the surface.

Leon felt a burst of instinctive, primal fear well up from his chest, and for a second or two, he faltered in his charging of his blade.

That second was just enough for the fire mage to close in with him and Anzu and send one more gout of intense orange flame toward him and his griffin.

The griffin immediately furled his wings and let gravity pull them out of harm's way, and the fire mage's legs sputtered out as she fell back toward Jormun's ship, but Leon could only curse himself at having allowing himself to be distracted. What was beneath the water was deeply concerning, but the priority right now was the fire mage.

He and Anzu pursued her down, dodging several lances of fire she threw back as they did. When she hit the deck, Leon wasn't too far behind her, and as Anzu pulled up to avoid crashing into the deck, Leon swung his sword, sending a wave of lightning rushing toward the fire mage. Much like her fire, though, the huge sheets of rain interfered with Leon's rain a little bit, slowing it down and draining some of its power, enough that the fire mage was able to dodge out of the way.

Leon swore under his breath. He'd packed a lot of power into that swing, and it all went to waste. He could see that as the ship was drenched and heavily enchanted, his lightning was dissipated over its surface, doing little more than burning the surface of the wood—and reducing the effectiveness of his spell arrows, he realized, which was immediately followed by a round of self-recrimination.

He felt a little useless, but he didn't want to leap down to the deck and fight the fire mage properly. He felt like he'd perform better with stabler ground beneath his feet, but he ignored that feeling, for Sigebert's ship was now coming into range.

Instead, Leon had Anzu fly up about two hundred feet and use his magic to hover. There, he wasn't so close that the fire mage could take him or Anzu by a surprise attack, but they could still talk if they shouted above the rain and wind.

"GIVE UP!" Leon shouted to her. "IT'S OVER!"

"YOU'RE RIGHT, LEON RAIME!" she screamed back, a manic look in her eyes. "IT *IS* OVER! BUT NOT FOR ME! THE SERPENT IS WAKING UP, AND THE PRISON'S DOORS ARE SWINGING OPEN! IN ONLY A MATTER OF HOURS, THE SERPENT WILL RISE, AND YOUR WORLD WILL DROWN WITH ITS COMING! LOOK AROUND YOU! IT'S ALREADY STARTED!" The fire mage dramatically raised her arms and indicated the storm.

Leon used his magic senses and connection with Maia to check in with Sigebert's ship. By his estimation, he had enough time for one last exchange with her before the flagship could bring its Flame Lances to bear.

"YOU'VE DONE ADMIRABLY WELL!" Leon shouted, no trace of irony or sarcasm to be detected in his voice. "BUT IF YOU DON'T SURRENDER, YOU'LL DIE HERE! IF WHAT YOU SAY IS TRUE, THEN YOU'LL NEVER EXPERIENCE IT! YOU'LL BE DEAD! SAVE YOURSELF AND SURRENDER!"

"A TEMPTING OFFER, BUT NOT ONE I'LL CONSIDER!" she roared back, an almost crazed smile on her face. "NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS, I'LL NOT BETRAY MY CONVICTIONS JUST TO SAVE MYSELF! IF I DIE HERE, THEN SO BE IT! I WILL WATCH THIS WORLD DROWN FROM BENEATH THE WAVES!"

Sigebert's flagship finished turning around the crater wall enough to have a clear shot at Jormun's ship without any other Legion ship in the way, and its Flame Lances began to charge with magic power in an unmistakable declaration of intent. The fire mage had no chance anymore, not in this situation. The Legion was taking this archipelago, she couldn't stop them, and not even with her power could she hope to swim through the treacherous Endless Ocean to safety.

Leon pulled on Anzu's harness and the griffin rapidly rose into the air, a muted feeling of regret in his heart. She'd gravely hurt Maia, but Leon had fought her enough to have some measure of respect bloom in his heart, especially after her refusal to surrender. That, in particular, struck a bit of a chord within him.

Plus, she hadn't pulled out that turquoise with the white gemstone, nor had she drawn her sword of golden fire. If they were in her soul realm, then they'd be lost if she died.

The fire mage watched from the deck the two rise for a moment with a content smile on her face, and then Sigebert's ship opened fire. A pair of white-hot clumps of molten stone erupted from Sigebert's Flame Lances, and not even a second later, splashed across the bow of Jormun's ship.

Unlike with Leon's Thunderblast spells, this had an immediately noticeable and appreciable effect on Jormun's ship, tearing through the wood with ease and rending huge rifts in the hull. Both of the slagged Flame Lances on Jormun's ship exploded as their enchantments were damaged and their power sources

hit by the molten stone, causing even further damage. What truly brought a slight smile to Leon's face, however, were the cracks in the ship's lower decks and superstructure, and the lightning-pattern burns that were exposed—it seemed his spell arrows had done more damage than had been immediately visible.

A moment later, the Legion Flame Lances opened up again, further eviscerating the ship, and this time the top deck collapsed as the ship lost structural cohesion and began to sink.

The Legion ships fired a few more times, utterly savaging the pirate ship with every shot, and through it all, the fire mage just stood on the deck, her smile turning into one of resignation, her eyes locked on Leon as the ship sank beneath the waves. She didn't even squint as the rain hit her face.

Right before the ship slid beneath the waves, she was directly hit with a Flame Lance. Leon had seen the seventh-tier vampire Bran survive several shots from a Flame Lance, but it seemed his demonic patron or his darkness magic must've given him greater resilience to such blasts, for the fire mage was immediately torn in half at the waist, obliterating her armor and sending the tattered remnants of her body scattering into the sea.

Leon sighed as the pirate ship sank beneath the rough waves, spared just one more thought for the fire mage, and then turned Anzu back in Sigebert's direction. The pirates were all but defeated. Now, they just had to take the crater and kill Jormun, then hopefully stop whatever was going on. Those black tendrils of darkness writhing beneath the waves couldn't mean anything good, and with the storm, made Leon think that time was of the essence.

This thought intensified as Anzu flew in the direction of Sigebert's ship, and something about it made Leon turn his head in the crater's direction. His eyes felt almost attracted to something, and they quickly found the boxy stone structure in the center of the crater's lake. Standing atop the cracked roof of that structure was a figure, a person who was staring back at Leon and smiling in invitation.

Jormun.

Leon's mind was instantly filled with images of ripping Jormun's flesh from his bones with beak and talon, and almost without thinking, he pulled on Anzu's harness and redirected him toward the crater.

He could end this now. He *would* end this now.

—

Jormun watched emotionlessly as his ship, which had faithfully carried him for decades, vanish beneath the waves. Not even the death of the last of his followers, Friga, moved his heart.

He cared none for those who'd followed him. Not one. They were but means to an end, and that was all. They'd served their purpose, and now, everything he'd worked for was practically within his grasp. The power of the Serpent filled him, giving him a preview of what the sacrifice of so many had bought. Jormun was alone, with neither ally nor ship, but he'd never felt so powerful. He'd been able to assemble a vast fleet of pirates to sack one of the most important cities in the Halcyon Federation with little more than a few words; such was his reputation, but not even that kind of power could compare to what he felt right now.

Jormun's eyes found Leon as the boy flew around on his griffin, and he smiled. The boy's head whipped in his direction, his golden eyes practically glowing behind his visor, perfectly visible even through the rain and the darkness of the storm clouds. Jormun knew how strong the powers that backed the boy were, but now, he had powers comparable to back him. It didn't matter what Leon might display, Jormun was ready with great powers of his own.

Chapter 587: The Lion and the Serpent

With murder in his heart and killing intent pouring from his body, Leon directed Anzu closer to the boxy structure in the center of the massive crater lake. There, he could see Jormun watching with an expression of mild amusement. The pirate made no moves to counter Leon's obviously hostile advance, nor did he summon his power.

Leon's mind was filled with scenes of him tearing Jormun apart by fang, claw, talon, and beak. He could barely think enough to acknowledge that this didn't quite feel right; Jormun was *rightthere*, and Leon couldn't allow this opportunity to go to waste. Besides, with the wind howling in his ears and comforting sound of thunder both near and far, Leon felt invincible. The stormy sky was his domain, he could feel that in his very core; so high up and with such a tremendous storm around him, filling him with power, Jormun stood no chance at all.

As Anzu brought him closer, the griffin seemed to hesitate a bit, chirping back at Leon questioningly.

"Don't worry!" Leon shouted to his griffin so that his voice could be heard over the wind and rain. "I've got this!"

The griffin chirped again and redoubled his efforts to fly through the storm and bring Leon to his destination.

As they approached, Leon pulled on Anzu's harness and brought the griffin into a circling pattern, staying about two hundred feet from the already cracked roof of the boxy structure. Still, even when this close, Jormun didn't react, merely standing there and watching with a sly smile on his face.

Leon snarled, almost baring his teeth at the pirate, and conjured a bright silver-blue lightning bolt. It formed in an instant, pulsing with tremendous power, and Leon hurled it with as much strength as he could muster from Anzu's back.

The lightning bolt exploded at Jormun's feet only a moment later, bathing him in so much lightning that even to Leon's seventh-tier senses, he seemed to vanish into the light for a moment. More importantly, the roof beneath his feet, already broken from what looked like an earlier lightning strike, crumbled under the weight of Leon's power, sending the area immediately around Jormun collapsing into itself while cracks spread even further across the surface.

With a single lightning bolt, Leon had nearly brought the entire rooftop down. Jormun hadn't been killed, his aura was still emanating from within the structure, but Leon couldn't help but revel in this power. He directed Anzu to the remains of the roof, and once he was close, he nimbly leaped off the griffin's back so that Anzu wouldn't have to risk landing upon it.

Once his feet touched the stone, it began to crumble further, so Leon quickly shouted at Anzu to return to Sigebert's ship. Once he was finished with Jormun, he could wait a while to be picked up, but he

didn't want his griffin to be caught up in their battle—he was still only equivalent to the fifth-tier, after all.

Anzu screeched a protest, but Leon shouted again, and then jumped down into the structure before Anzu could protest again. With his magic senses, Leon was grateful to see him flying away in Sigebert's direction, and as he landed in the huge empty chamber where Jormun was waiting, Leon put all of that out of his mind and focused entirely on the battle at hand.

Jormun wasn't standing where he'd fallen and had instead moved to the slightly raised stage at the far end of the chamber opposite the structure's entrance.

"Quite bold of you, to come at me alone," Jormun smugly called out. "It'll be your last mistake, I should think."

Leon's lips parted in something that resembled a smile but felt more like a primal, almost animalistic threat. His eyes were locked on Jormun like those of a hunter stalking its prey, and his hands shook with desire to get ahold of him and start ripping. His body filled with magic power, and for the tiniest of moments before he began to call upon his lightning, a few small, nearly imperceptible licks of black flame appeared around his fingers.

But then, torrents of lightning erupted from Leon's body, and he charged at Jormun faster than the mortal eye would've been able to track. He slammed his sword down upon the pirate, the blade glowing with silver-blue lightning. However, Jormun simply raised a hand and conjured the massive bronze hammer that he'd used to escape from Leon back in the temple, the same one that Nestor had told him had been once wielded by a vassal of the Thunderbird Clan.

Leon's blade struck the haft of this weapon and was deflected, though the stored lightning magic within exploded out, bathing Jormun once more in Leon's silver-blue lightning.

A moment later, a powerful jet of water hit Leon in the stomach, not doing much damage but hurling him back dozens of feet. What followed was a storm of tiny beads of water, each no bigger than a raindrop but sharp, needle-thin, and fired with tremendous force.

It took Leon no more than a single glance to know that this attack was powerful, despite the size of each individual drop being seemingly insignificant—even one drop would probably pierce straight through his unarmored body. In response, he switched with incredible alacrity to fire magic, and swung his blade, sending out a great wave of fire to shield himself from the oncoming storm of droplets.

Jormun's water droplets hit the fiery wave and were largely vaporized, but a few still managed to pierce through, and Leon had to switch back to lightning and dodge as quickly as he could to have the speed he needed.

But Jormun wasn't done; barely a second had passed after his attack failed before he was raising his hand into the air and causing his aura to spike as he manipulated a terrifying amount of power. To Leon's magic senses, it was like suddenly staring at the sun, and he reeled for a fraction of a second as Jormun's magic power rushed outside.

And then, Leon felt the ground begin to shake, and he knew that he had to stop whatever Jormun was doing. He conjured a lightning bolt and hurled it at Jormun, but a shield of water materialized in front of

the pirate, causing the lightning bolt to spread out and dissipate across its surface instead of piercing through, though quite a bit of it was vaporized.

Before the bolt hit the water shield, however, Leon had already jumped, merely using his lightning bolt as a distraction. He put all of his strength into his legs and leaped with everything that he had. His seventh-tier strength had him sailing over the water shield, nearly scraping the ceiling of the massive chamber, and falling down almost directly onto Jormun, the power he was absorbing from the storm outside building up in his legs. As soon as he hit the shield, all of that power would...

Jormun waved his hand and conjured a dome of ice around himself. Leon hit the ice, and all of the power he'd built up in his legs shattered the ice with a tremendous blast of lightning and thunder.

Leon thought Jormun would've been in a more defensive stance, but instead, as the ice dome broke, the pirate was already in mid-swing of his massive hammer, and Leon barely had time to land on the ground before a massive spike burst from the floor. He managed to dodge just in time, and he was pushed far back from Jormun as more and more stone spikes erupted from the ground for him to dodge.

A moment later, the walls of the chamber shattered, and a decent-sized river's worth of water came pouring in from outside—the result of whatever Jormun had done before Leon's jump.

"Yes..." Jormun muttered loudly. "This power... it's not even a hint of what's to come, but already..."

The pirate turned and smiled at Leon.

"Count yourself lucky, young Raime. You're here to witness the birth of a new god!"

Leon's eyes narrowed. Those weren't exactly the words he was expecting to hear—more ranting and raving about the Serpent, or something more in line with that.

'*Whatever...*' Leon thought as his body filled with power once again, the storm outside nourishing him and giving him a nearly-limitless pool of magic to draw upon. Or so it felt to him, at least.

Leon raised his weapon, the blade of his family, the sword used by the Thunderbird herself, and let loose with his power. Jormun had strong defenses, and Leon needed a change in strategy, so instead of quick, powerful, surgical strikes, he decided to fill the chamber with lightning and see where that got him.

Silver-blue lightning poured out of his sword at least as quickly as Jormun's water poured into the room. These two powers clashed in the center of the chamber, shaking the entire structure down to its foundations, and causing the already-weakened ceiling to start to collapse even further. With stone falling from above, Leon's lightning and Jormun's water competed for dominance.

For a while, it seemed to Leon like he might come out on top. Jormun's water was heavy and limitless, but his lightning, powered by the storm, was just as limitless. It slammed into Jormun's water, filling it with energy, heating it up, and causing it to vaporize before it reached Leon. Jormun was forced to keep his water coming, or else Leon's unending stream of lightning would quickly reach him.

Leon couldn't help but smile as he turned himself into a conduit for the raging storm outside. The very storm that Jormun's rituals had summoned would be his undoing, as its power flowed through him and pushed the pirate back. He could almost *feel* his teeth sinking into Jormun's throat, breaking the skin, piercing his jugular...

And then, Jormun swung his hammer once more, and the ground under Leon's feet shattered into sand and erupted over his body. Leon's eyes went wide as the sand formed arms and hands and grabbed onto his body, restraining him, and pulling his sword arm down, causing his lightning to score across the floor instead of across Jormun's water.

That water, now without the restraint of Leon's lightning, crashed down upon him with terrible force, first slamming Leon into the ground, and then lifting him and hurling him against the wall of the chamber, just above the door.

And there, the water held him, even as more lightning erupted from Leon's body in an attempt to free himself. But no matter how much power he used, there was just too much water—Jormun's power reserves were without limit, and he had all the power of the lake outside, which the rain was more than happy to replenish.

Leon was able to break the water's hold on him, but not enough to completely free himself. He switched from lightning to fire once again and created a bubble around himself through which Jormun's water was unable to penetrate.

But that still left him clinging to the doorframe a couple dozen feet above the ground. With a single swing of his hammer, Jormun could dislodge him, and then his water would be on him again...

It was strange, Leon didn't think a seventh-tier mage should have quite this much power. There was just far too much water for Jormun to control, let alone have the spare strength to use that hammer. The pirate's aura was still that of a seventh-tier mage, though...

As if able to hear Leon's thoughts, Jormun helpfully offered the solution when he shouted, "Just give up, Leon! You can't win! I am backed by divinity! You cannot hope to compete with the two of us together!"

Leon grimaced, his anger growing in direct proportion with his sense of helplessness. His eyes turned in the direction of the silver bands upon his left arm, and he decided that it was now or never. If they worked, then great. If they didn't, then he'd have to resort to even more desperate means.

Leon clenched his left fist and channeled his magic power into the first of his three silver bands. The runes etched upon its surface flashed with blue light, and then a pulse of water magic filled the ruined chamber, immediately scattering all of the magic that Jormun was using to control the lake water. The water fell to the ground, as did Leon, and spilled back out through the massive holes in the walls that Jormun had made. As Leon's feet hit the stone floor, the band he'd used made the sound of a struck tuning fork, blackened like it had been burned, and then split in half, falling to the ground.

Jormun made a confused sound as all of his water was forcibly released from his magical grasp, only to then smile and say with more than a hint of admiration in his voice, "Well, well, well, look what you have there... I haven't seen weapons like that since ravaging the coasts of the Sky Devil's Hell. I'm impressed, Leon, I had no idea you had such powerful weapons at your disposal..."

"I'm full of surprises," Leon said as he pushed himself back to his feet and, before the room could completely empty of Jormun's water, let loose with a blast of lightning through his legs.

His lightning spread out in a flash of silver-blue light and deafening thunder, almost instantly covering the drenched room in Leon's power. Jormun couldn't avoid it, and his response time was just a little bit

too late. His body seized up and he screamed in pain. Leon kept it up, advancing slowly as his power devastated Jormun.

But then, the pirate managed to contort his body enough to slam his massive hammer into the ground, and he was lifted ten feet into the air by a stone platform, releasing him from the water that Leon was using to channel his lightning.

Leon halted and conjured a lightning bolt, hurling it as soon as he felt it finish forming. Unfortunately, Jormun invoked the power of his hammer once more, forming a stone shell around himself strong enough to remain intact as Leon's terrifically powerful lightning danced across its surface.

A moment later, the water in the room fell back under Jormun's control, and it sprang into action, rising up around Leon, who wasted no time in conjuring forth a shield of fire to ward the water off. He was just barely fast enough, and holding up his fiery shield almost forced him into a kneeling position as Jormun's water crashed down upon it. But as he held it up, he felt the ground beneath him shift once again, and he threw himself back just before a stone spike burst from the floor.

"Leon!" Jormun shouted as the stone shell fell away from him, his tone both impressed and victorious. "You've put up an admirable display! But I'm afraid that duty calls, and it's time to end this!"

Leon snarled and activated the second of his silver bracelets. The water that surrounded his flame shield collapsed as Jormun's magic was forcibly dissipated, and Leon recalled his flame shield in favor of filling his blade with lightning magic.

As the flame shield subsided and he laid his eyes upon what Jormun was doing, however, he paused. He'd kept an eye on the pirate with his magic senses, but seeing what was happening with his own physical eyes was another thing entirely—a tall, thin line of light had appeared behind the pirate, almost as if the stage he stood upon had a set of invisible curtains that were now just starting to separate. This line was about four times as tall as Jormun, but only about as thick as a flagpole.

As if to solidify that curtain comparison, the sides of the light suddenly expanded like two curtains being pulled open, revealing featureless white light.

And then a shadow appeared in the center of that light, a shadow that rapidly and alarmingly grew larger until it took a roughly human shape, though it was far larger than any human could possibly be.

[Leon!] Xaphan roared into his mind, [Summon me right now! That pirate is summoning something of his own!]

Leon's heart rate spiked, and though his mind was still filled with images of ripping and tearing into Jormun like a crazed beast, he still followed Xaphan's suggestion and immediately cut off the flow of power into his blade. Instead, he focused deep within himself, allowing the entrance of his soul realm to grow. He mentally reached into his chest using his magic body and searched around until he found the thread of power that connected him and Xaphan, the magical bond that had formed when they had first made their contract years ago. When he found it, he pulled hard, like he was using fishing twine to haul a boulder out of the sea.

His body practically exploded with dark red demonfire, and for a moment, he could see Jormun's triumphant smile falter.

An arm came out of that fire, enormous and wreathed in flame. The shoulder followed, and the fire grew as if stretching to accommodate the massive form that was squeezing himself through. Xaphan's head came next, his obsidian skin obscured by flame but undeniable in shape. The demon roared in exertion as he thrashed and crawled out of Leon's soul realm, the temperature in the ruined chamber spiking fast as the bright orange flames that perpetually covered his body filled the room with heat.

But the figure behind Jormun only grew faster as it raced to leave the light, and almost as soon as Xaphan was done pulling himself free of Leon's soul realm, it was stepping out into the ruined chamber where it was no longer obscured by bright white light.

It was tall—taller even than Xaphan, standing at perhaps seventeen or eighteen feet tall. It was broad shouldered, rather masculine in shape, though most of its physical features were obscured completely by a long white robe. Its head was, in turn, obscured by a loose white hood that had been clearly enchanted to hide its face, for nothing could be seen beneath that hood save for a pair of wrathful glowing white eyes.

Perhaps most startling of all, however, was the pair of wings that proudly sprouted from its back, its feathers as pristinely white as if it were an ethereal thing that had never been touched by the profanities of mortal life, while grasped in its right, white-gloved hand was a truly immense blade large enough that it could easily be wielded with both hands even by this massive being. The handle looked to be made of platinum and ivory, while the blade was entirely made of sharp, white light.

Leon could tell what this thing was just by looking at it, its staggering and ancient-feeling aura that emanated light magic like it was one of the most radiant stars in the sky only served to add further proof to his conclusion. The Thunderbird had told him of the servants of the Primal Gods before, though she'd also told him that they were no longer around, just like their creators.

Only a second after it emerged from the light to stand just behind Jormun, from deep within his soul realm, Leon heard Nestor whisper the confirmation of his conclusion.

In a voice dripping with awe and fear, Nestor whispered, [An angel...]

Chapter 588: The Angel and the Demon

The angel stepped forward, brushing past Jormun with about as much consideration as it held for everything else—which is to say, none at all. Its brilliant white eyes, shining within the black void beneath its hood like a pair of stars plucked from the night sky, were locked upon Xaphan.

The demon, in turn, had stepped forward as well, interposing himself between Leon and the angel.

“Concentrate upon your true enemy,” Xaphan growled, his crackling voice quiet and serious as he glared back at the angel. “I will deal with this old thing, alive far past its time.”

The angel didn't respond, but it did lift its blade of light a little higher and took a few more menacing steps toward the former Lord of Flame. Its killing intent was overpowering, greater even than the killing intent that Leon could feel from Jormun, or the distant auras he could perceive from the Legion as it cleaned up the last remnants of Jormun's pirates. Its aura was terrible to endure, and even with the violent storm outside filling Leon with power, he still felt tiny and insignificant with this thing closing in.

Before the angel could reach Xaphan, however, the demon lifted one of his massive hands and let loose with a torrent of flame. Dark red demonfire erupted from the orange fires that perpetually covered the demon's body, rushing out and enveloping the angel in its entirety. But a moment later, there was a flash of white light, and a barrier of light was projected from the angel's robes, pushing the fires away with seeming ease.

It then took a couple more rapid steps forward until it was in range of Xaphan and swung its massive blade of white light.

Xaphan raised his left hand, and from his orange fires, another hand made entirely of dark red fire sprang forth, brushing aside the blade with its fiery knuckles, and then detonated in a controlled blast, wrapping around the angel once more. Instead of just surrounding it, though, the fire then began to spin in a small cyclone, wearing down at the angel's barrier of light.

But the angel just swung its sword again, ignoring the fiery cyclone as if it were inconsequential. Xaphan had to raise his other hand and conjure another fist of fire to block the blade. The demon then roared in challenge, and charged. The fires on his body exploded with fury, his aura spiked in response, and he rose into the air. The fiery cyclone intensified, increasing the temperature in the ruined chamber so high that the rain and lake water that was filling it began to boil.

For Leon, all of this boiling water was hardly concerning. He was far more concerned when the angel's wings beat once, lifting it into the air as well, and it and Xaphan then floated up and out through the massive hole in the roof that Leon had created at the start of this fight, taking their bout out into the storm and away from Leon and Jormun.

They soon disappeared into the dark and the rain and the wind of the storm outside, but the effects of their fight could still be felt down below, as the earth shook with every blow they exchanged, and the rain and the howling wind seemed to pause in time with every strike.

But Leon and Jormun were left alone in the chamber, both rather stunned and struck temporarily dumb with what had just happened.

It was only when Leon glanced back at Jormun after staring at the hole in the ceiling, watching the indistinct flashes of white and dark red light as his demonic partner and Jormun's angel dueled, that he again saw himself in his mind's eye striking down Jormun and rending his flesh with his bare hands—though his fingers were long and sharp and covered in glittering black scales.

Leon took a menacing step forward, but caught himself. Coming here alone was a terrible mistake, that much he could recognize, and one he wasn't quite sure why he made. But regardless, the decision was over, and he couldn't back down now. He took another staggering step forward, the lingering effects of his and Jormun's brief exchanges having taken their toll already; he was tired and ready for this to be over, but he wasn't going to stop until it was.

However, he did pause when Jormun turned his attention back to him and whispered in awe, "I never would've thought that you were contracted with a demon, young Leon. Truly... this is... well, I don't know quite what to say. I'm impressed. Usually, you people in your isolated northern Kingdom are so averse to using powers gained from other planes..."

Leon stood there, staring back at the pirate, unsure quite how to respond or how to proceed. So, he decided to indulge his curiosity a bit. "What was that thing of yours? Something sent by your Serpent?"

"Indeed," Jormun proudly replied, his plain features breaking out into a smile. "The Serpent is a god, after all, and what better servant for a god is there than an angel?"

"It didn't seem particularly serpentine," Leon responded.

"Does it have to be?" Jormun asked with a shrug. "Far be it from me to dictate how a being such as that ought to present itself. So long as the Serpent gives me what I want, I don't care what other servants it has. I'm not that jealous..."

"And what is it that you want?" Leon inquired. "Truly?"

"Now there's a question *really* worth asking..." Jormun quietly said. "I don't think I'll answer it just yet. There's more for the two of us to do, and I don't want to ruin the surprise... I'd rather talk about your demon friend. You see, it's not the first time I've encountered a fire demon, and it's piqued my interest."

Leon cocked his head, taking note of that admittance. Xaphan wasn't the only fire demon he'd encountered, either—his seemingly back-from-the-dead rival, Amon, was active on this plane, and had even sent assassins after Leon a couple years ago. Leon wasn't sure if Amon was here physically on the plane, but he knew the demon to be an enemy that he and Xaphan would have to deal with sooner or later, and the idea of Jormun working with such a powerful demon didn't sit well with Leon.

"When and where?" Leon brusquely asked.

If the pirate was offended by his attitude, Leon couldn't tell; Jormun just smiled a little wider and promptly replied, "Oh, this must've been... two decades ago at this point? My, how time flies... Anyway, I was down in the south east, raiding the rich settlements of the Argonaut Sea, when I encountered a ship that seemed laden with spoils. Naturally, I attacked it, hoping to find sufficient plunder to advance my goals. Instead, I found a ship nearly devoid of goods, save for a rather curious stone that I later threw into the sea. You see, this stone captured my mind and gave me visions of a great ocean of fire, and a pair of eyes within it.

"I knew this to be a demon, and tried to bargain my way out of its domain, but all it did was rip from me any knowledge I had of the old places of power on this plane, and then release me. It was quite painful, and I knew it to be looking for something. All I cared about, though, was that it didn't seem to be looking for the same things I was. In the years that followed, I ignored several other ships that had similar markings to the one I'd found that stone on; that demon and I could leave each other alone. It wasn't getting in my way, so I wasn't going to get it in its."

"Seems a rather passive response from a demon," Leon remarked, not doubting Jormun's story any more than it deserved—the pirate was a proven liar, and Leon took everything he said with a huge grain of salt, but he didn't think the pirate was lying about this.

"It was," Jormun replied, his statement punctuated by a titanic explosion from far above that shook the entire chamber and briefly illuminated the interior with dull red light. "The second time I encountered that demon was less so."

Leon cocked his head again.

"I was approached several years later by a rather tall, thin, and pasty individual that I quickly identified as a vampire," Jormun explained. "I usually give such types a wide berth—you never know what kind of powers are backing them, after all—but this one sought me ought and contracted me to retrieve an object for them. This object was held being transported from the island of Empty Promise to the city of Argos by ships of the Sunlit Empire. I fulfilled that vampire's request, and in return, that creature gave me all the information I needed to finally finish my mission. If it weren't for the servants of that demon, I wouldn't be here now—at least, not so soon."

"What did that vampire tell you...?" Leon quietly asked as he took a step forward, his blade sparking and crackling with lightning.

"Who can say?" Jormun smilingly said.

With that, Jormun's grip on his massive bronze hammer tightened, and Leon dropped into a powerful offensive stance. The two stared at each other for what felt like an eternity, Jormun up on his broken stage, and Leon a little bit below, his blade brandished and his aura filled with killing intent.

Leon, his body blazing with silver-blue lightning, charged the pirate, who responded with a mighty swing of his hammer. The ground beneath Leon broke open, but he nimbly leaped up and hurled a bolt of lightning. A shield of water appeared in front of Jormun, protecting him from Leon's attack, and he countered by freezing the shield, shattering it, and sending it sailing back at Leon in a hail of icy shrapnel.

Leon conjured another shield of fire, halting Jormun's attack in its tracks. Then, he charged again, but was stopped by another of Jormun's hammer swings, which tore apart the already-ravaged floor and had Leon dodging by leaping through the air as spikes erupted from the ground. All the while, the sky above was lit up with white and dark red magic as Xaphan and the angel clashed, their powerful attacks sending shockwaves back down that were powerful enough to cause the lake to vibrate and the ground to shake. That, combined with the magics Leon and Jormun were throwing around, was enough to send the much-abused boxy structure crashing down.

Jormun and Leon quickly adapted, dodging hither and thither as great chunks of stone fell and the walls collapsed. The two were so fast on their feet that neither missed a beat in attacking the other even as they leaped and wove through the falling stone.

The pirate shouted in exhilaration, swinging his hammer and sending a great wave of spikes, both ice and rock, Leon's way.

With his legs glowing with lightning, Leon dodged, and hurled a bolt of lightning.

However, unlike the battle so far, instead of Jormun blocking or dodging, a great beam of light fell from the sky, creating a shield between Jormun and Leon across which Leon's lightning bolt harmlessly splashed.

A moment later, the angel descended from the clouds, the storm seemingly parting around it. Xaphan came crashing down a second later, landing upon the ground with much less grace than his winged foe. The angel lightly touched down in front of Jormun, while Xaphan stood in front of Leon.

From Leon's perspective, it definitely looked like Xaphan had gotten the worse of their short bout, with his shadow within his orange flames looking a little more defined, and the angel looking largely unhurt, but neither otherwise seemed particularly debilitated at all.

Xaphan then said something in a strange, lilting, almost song-like language that Leon couldn't understand—his tone, though, indicated that he was asking it a question. The demon waited a moment for the angel to respond, and when it didn't, he said something else, his tone taking on a stronger and more resolute quality.

The angel responded by lifting its sword, the blade of light pointing straight at Xaphan. The blade then dissolved into countless millions of tiny floating motes of light, which drifted away from the angel like a massive swarm of tiny fireflies. Xaphan waved his arm, conjuring a hundred bats made of dark red flame and sending them hurtling toward the angel from all directions, but a small portion of the motes of light froze in their drifting, and then shot through the air like falling stars and tore the bats to pieces.

But if Xaphan was disheartened at all, he didn't show it, and simply waved his arm again. This created a great wall of fire, and when he stomped on the ground a moment later, he sent it rolling toward the angel like a great wave. However, Leon noticed something else...

The angel's motes of light responded once again, launching themselves into the fiery wave and dissipating, but ripping the wave to pieces in the process. However, Leon knew the wave to be a distraction, and as the wave was forcibly ripped apart only about ten feet from the angel, the ground beneath the angel fractured and a geyser of dark red demonfire erupted at its feet, bathing it in Xaphan's horrific power.

This fire rose up from the ground—sent by Xaphan when he'd stomped on the ground—but instead of just washing over the angel, it instead took on the form of a hand and closed around its body like curling fingers.

The angel's pure white robes began to burn, and its sparkling white feathers began to blacken, but it just flexed its body and broke free of Xaphan's fire. Then, all of its remaining motes of light swarmed around it, severing Xaphan's power at the point where it left the ground.

Xaphan didn't remain idle, though, and he snapped his fingers, cracking the ground and sending another geyser of flame shooting at the angel.

This geyser was further away from the angel, and all it had to do was raise a shield of light to protect itself as it took again to the skies.

'Maybe it's more injured it looks?' Leon thought to himself, noting that even though it hardly seemed any different from how it had looked immediately after it had been summoned, and it had several chances to, it wasn't able to seize the initiative back from Xaphan.

[Keep it up, human,] Xaphan whispered into Leon's mind as he leaped into the air in pursuit of the angel, [this won't take too much longer. I expect to see that pirate dead at your feet when I knock this pigeon out of the air.]

"Working on it..." Leon whispered, trusting that the demon could still hear him despite his low volume.

The two inhuman combatants rose back up into the air, the small hole in the storm that the angel had created over the island in the center of the crater lake closing again as they soared back into the sky, bringing back the pouring rain and the gale winds.

“HAHA!” Jormun roared, his face lit up with glee as he watched the two vanish into the clouds. “WHAT MIGHT! WHAT POWER!” The pirate turned his gaze back to Leon, who was already conjuring a lightning bolt in his off-hand.

Leon hurled the bolt, but Jormun was ready with a wall of water. After blocking the bolt, that water wall came hurtling in Leon’s direction, backed with even more water that was rising from the lake.

Leon silently cursed as he used his last anti-magic bracelet, letting the wall and the water behind it fall apart as the silver band snapped in half and fell to the ground at his feet. He had to end this now. His blood boiled with the need to end the pirate, to bring a bloody end to this tiny creature that had challenged his position, his power, to rake his claws through Jormun’s flesh and eviscerate his internal organs, to fill his body with fire and lightning and burn him until not even ash remained.

This was his last chance to do that. With no more anti-magic bracelets, he no longer had an effective counter to all the water that Jormun could call upon. The storm around them filled Leon with power, but with such a deep lake at his beck and call, Jormun was completely in his element.

Leon threw aside all caution and charged Jormun as the water wall dissolved. His golden eyes were wild, his teeth bared behind his helmet, his body so flush with power that he seemed to shine brighter than even the lightning bolts that were striking the top of the crater walls. As the storm filled him with power and purpose, Leon even began to feel like *his* power was the cause of this storm, like it was *his* power that was causing it to rage and so violently twist the ocean.

As he charged, for just a moment, Leon saw a vision of himself high above the clouds, the Lord of the sky, the King of the Heavens, just as his Mana Glyph claimed he would one day be. But he wasn’t himself; his body was much larger, covered in feathers that sparkled with lightning. He looked almost identical to the Thunderbird in her avian form, just with a few harsher lines to mark him as a male of that ‘species’.

It was intoxicating. For just that moment, Leon felt what it must have been like to be the Thunderbird at the height of her power, when even the weather was at her beck and call. When she was equal to gods.

And then, as Jormun smiled and swung his hammer with speed that seemed to Leon to be far more than he’d previously shown himself capable of, the vision shattered. The massive head of the bronze hammer struck Leon’s unarmored stomach as he closed to within striking distance of the pirate. Leon felt his bones shatter and his internal organs immediately bruise. All the air was driven from his lungs, and he was hurled back like a ragdoll, pain filling his mind as all the power of the storm suddenly fled from his body.

Leon hit the ground, gasping for air as the pain drained his body of energy. He could do nothing except watch through the gloom as Jormun slowly walked toward him, the sly smile of a man who’d never once lost control of the situation adorning his face, the pouring rain parting around him as if he were maintaining an invisible shield.

Jormun loomed over Leon, paused just long enough to ensure that Leon could see his grinning face, and then raised his hammer. In that last moment, Leon saw that Jormun's eyes had started to glow a gentle white, and his aura had drastically changed, as if he'd suddenly tapped into an unknown reserve of power.

Leon had only just enough time to wonder if this was the end, and for a spike of white-hot fear to lance through his mind before Jormun brought the hammer down upon his helmeted head and everything went dark.

Chapter 589: The Final Sacrifice

Blood pounded in his head like a hammer against an anvil, and the darkness that enveloped his mind was the oppressive sort; Leon had no idea where he was or what he was doing. He could barely even remember what it was he'd been doing last. All he could see or feel was the darkness, and the blood madly pumping in his veins.

Despite this, he felt rather calm. Whatever had been going on before he'd come to this place had left him mentally and physically exhausted, and the darkness, however much it weighed upon his body and mind, was at least peaceful.

But such things could never last. At some indeterminate point, Leon took note of a strange red-orange light shining in that darkness, and of a few licks of black flame surrounding it, and suddenly he became aware of himself again.

He was laying down on his side, his hands tied behind his back, his head pounding with pain, his ears lightly ringing. He felt like he'd just been eaten alive and somehow passed intact through the digestive tract of whatever creature had done it. He could barely muster the energy to crack open his eyes, let alone make any noise or try to move.

His first instinct to try and solve this problem was to summon his power. With a little bit of lighting surging through his muscles, he was sure he would start to feel better.

But his power didn't respond to his call. His limbs remained leaden, and his mind remained clouded by pain and fatigue.

It was a slow build-up, but the longer he stayed that way, the more panicked Leon became. His breathing rate slowly began to build with that panic, as did his heart rate. Finally, after calling upon every ounce of physical energy he could muster, Leon began to struggle against his bindings and tried to sit up.

He found that it was only his hands that were bound, and that the rest of his body was free, but as he began to force himself to sit up with every ounce of grit he possessed, his heart sank and a lance of fury raced through his mind as a familiar voice called out, "Whoa there, Leon, don't go struggling too much! You'll slip and fall before we've had a chance to talk!"

The voice was Jormun's. The man's smooth tones alone had Leon nearly chomping at the bit to rise and fight, but it was an almost entirely mental reaction, for his body was still as devoid of energy as it had been before the pirate spoke.

Leon slowly forced his eyes open until he could properly see his surroundings. His attempts to project his magic senses went about as well as his attempts to summon the rest of his power, so he was now entirely reliant on his more mundane senses.

When he fully opened his eyes, he found that he was lying in a rather simple circular chamber made entirely of black volcanic stone. The only entrance and exit that was immediately apparent was a staircase that he was in no position to see the end of, while more concerningly, only a couple of feet behind him was a huge circular pit in the stone floor, so deep that the bottom was lost in darkness.

As Leon was trying not to panic even more at finding himself perched on such a dangerous ledge, he felt hands on his shoulders, helping him to rise and steady himself, and as he turned back to look forward, he found himself nearly nose-to-nose with a smiling Jormun.

There were many things that Leon wanted to say, and few of them were particularly pleasant. At the very least, though, he wasn't plagued with strange visions when his eyes landed upon Jormun anymore...

'What in the hells was with that, anyway?' Leon wondered as his mind cleared a little and he was able to reflect upon the battle he'd fought with the pirate. He had many questions, but chief among them was what in the hells had gotten into his head that made him think attacking the pirate as he'd done was a good idea. Sure, he'd been filled with power by the storm—which he could still vaguely hear raging outside, along with the occasional explosion, indicating that there was still some fighting going on—but those visions had been intoxicating.

What most concerned Leon was that his mental defenses had remained up since the fight had begun, and his body had been nearly always full of the lightning he'd inherited from the Thunderbird. As far as his understanding of such magics went, he should've been largely impervious to mental attacks, but when he looked back on the fight with Jormun, he couldn't come to any conclusion other than his judgment had been somehow impaired.

"I'm sure you have many questions," Jormun quietly stated as he rose to his feet after helping Leon to sit upright, "so, how about the two of us have a little chat? We don't have all day, especially not with that demon of yours still fighting the angel I summoned, but I couldn't just end things as they were after our fight. You've done too well these past few weeks, and I've... Well, I felt you deserved to know a few things. So, go ahead; if you have questions, ask away."

Leon scowled as he took a few deep breaths and forced himself to remain calm. The knowledge that Xaphan was still out there and resisting provided some comfort, but it proved impossible to completely calm down given the situation he found himself in.

"You've already answered one..." Leon quietly stated, "but I suppose I've got a few more."

"Shoot," Jormun encouraged as he leaned against the bare stone wall of this small chamber.

"How long was I out?" Leon growled.

"About twenty minutes," Jormun answered. "I didn't strike to kill, and your natural resilience as a seventh-tier mage helped you survive our fight, but you still required some healing, which I was happy to provide. Your helmet, however, wasn't so lucky..."

Leon's scowl grew slightly deeper, and he checked himself over as thoroughly as his bound state could. As far as he could tell, his injuries *had* been healed, though, so that much at least, Jormun seemed to be telling the truth about. The only question he had about that, though was...

"Why?"

"As I said," Jormun replied, "I couldn't leave things as they were. I know it may seem strange to hear, Leon, especially after these past few weeks, but I feel some amount of kinship with you. Or maybe that's too strong a word. I've grown fond of you, and I didn't want to send you off to the Serpent just yet. Not without breaking a few words, first."

"That just brings more questions..." Leon muttered.

"We don't have unlimited time, but we have about as much as we need, I think," Jormun replied.

"What comes next, then?" Leon asked. His power still wasn't responding, and as a result, he couldn't even check in with his soul realm. He tried to speak with Nestor, but all he heard back was silence. He guessed it was a result of enchantments within his bindings somehow disrupting his connection with his soul realm, which also meant that he couldn't feel his connection with Maia, either.

No Nestor, no Maia, no Xaphan. For the first time in a long time, Leon was truly alone.

"Once we're finished here, I'm going to jump down this pit," Jormun matter-of-factly stated. "You're going to come with me. You, with your blood, are the final key to me receiving all the power that has been denied me my entire life. That my Ancestors were denied for their entire lives. When I give us over to the Serpent, I honestly can't say what'll happen to you, but I shall be lifted high as a new god, with all the powers of my blood awakened..."

Leon glared at him, recalling that Jormun *had* claimed while they were in the temple that he had some Inherited Bloodline which his Ancestors had lost the ability to awaken, but Leon had taken that as just a way to screw with his head, to make Jormun seem more relatable and victim-like.

"Still on that story, are you?" Leon asked, his tone tired and resigned. "Gone through so many with me that you're having trouble keeping them straight? Or have you just gone through so many that you've gone full circle and are back at the beginning?"

"I get why you might doubt my words," Jormun responded, "but I actually haven't lied to you as much as you might think. Sure, I claimed to be someone I wasn't back in Kraterok, but even then, I essentially told you what I was doing, you just didn't believe me. I've been quite honest with you."

"Horse shit," Leon spat as he flexed his hands against his bindings. He could feel his physical strength slowly returning, at least, even if his magic still remained outside of his reach.

The bindings around his wrists seemed to be made of some kind of rope. If Leon had to guess, he would say that they were what was preventing him from using his magic, but they weren't rigid, and he felt like he had a good chance of working himself free if he kept at this long enough. He just had to keep Jormun talking, and he might have enough time to break free. He'd lost their fight; he could play the blame game to try and figure out why, but it wouldn't change the fact that he lost. As his eyes drifted back toward the pit not too far behind him, Leon knew that he couldn't afford to lose again.

“What happened to my sword?” he asked, ignoring the direction Jormun was trying to lead the conversation in.

For the first time, Leon saw Jormun make a strange expression, one of muted anger and frustration, but it was gone as quickly as it had appeared.

“Oh? That thing?” Jormun asked. “I had no need of it, so I threw it into the lake.”

Leon’s scowl grew deeper, until he was practically baring his teeth at the pirate in a manner that he found quite similar to what his instincts had pushed him into doing earlier.

Jormun went quiet for a moment, and his eyes unfocused as if concentrating on something else. When he refocused on Leon, he said, “The Serpent is growing impatient, and the Bull is finally encroaching on the crater. So, I think instead of waiting for you to ask the questions I want you to, I think I’ll just talk for a while. You amenable to that?”

Leon only glared at the pirate in response.

“Good,” Jormun said, ignoring Leon’s look entirely. “Where should I begin? The easy answer to that, I suppose, would be the beginning, but I’m not sure I want to go *that* far back... Ah, fuck it. This is the last time we’ll get to talk, and probably the last time I’ll ever interact with another human being as one, myself, so what’s the harm in getting a little long winded?”

Leon continued to glare at Jormun, but if the man was going to talk himself to death, then Leon wasn’t going to get in his way. He just continued to flex his wrists and work at his bindings. They didn’t feel like they were getting any looser, but he wasn’t going to give up.

Jormun was silent for a long moment, and only started to speak when the chamber lightly shook in time with a huge explosion that Leon heard from outside—he guessed that Xaphan and the angel weren’t even close to being done with their battle, yet.

“I was only a boy when the Bull came to these islands,” Jormun began. “My father was the Jarl of this island, before it was rendered just a collection of shattered rocks sticking out of the sea. He was respected. Powerful. When the Bull came, he was the one who rallied my people to fight back, despite being located the furthest away from the Bull Kingdom. He fought so hard that the Penitent Paladin destroyed three of our eight islands.”

Despite the subject he was talking about, Leon couldn’t detect even a shred of emotion within Jormun’s voice, which struck him as a bit odd. He knew he couldn’t speak about his father without getting at least a little emotional, but he supposed Jormun had more than half a century to get over it.

However, that lack of emotion soon gave way for rising passion as Jormun continued, his eyes growing wider with excitement as he narrated his life story.

“I saw my father cut down before my eyes before I was ten years old! And then, not long after, I saw my home and everyone I ever knew incinerated by the rapid eruption of this island! And don’t think I was spared, Leon, oh no! I was *not* spared that devastation! I was scorched from within and without as I breathed in the boiling ash that swept over my childhood home!

“But even though that was the end for everyone else, it was not the end for me. In my last moments, I refused to accept my death, and I screamed. This was only the impotent rage of a child, but just before I died, I heard the voice of the Serpent whispering to me. It told me of its power, and of the power that dwelled within me. If offered to save me, if only I could save it from its own predicament.

“Without hesitation, I agreed, and I was pulled beneath the waves as the ocean claimed this island for its own. I remember the water rushing into my lungs, my eyes closing, and the life leaving my body. But then, I awoke on the shores of Aeterna, on the sandy beaches of the Bay of the Drowned. All around me were the corpses of my people, having been swept away from these islands by the ocean currents and carried all the way to the mainland. As far as I could tell, they had been warded against rot and carrion, and as I searched through those endless piles for those I knew, I heard the Serpent again.

“It spoke of everything I could be, and the price that I’d have to pay to become what I *needed* to be.”

Leon continued trying to free himself, but he found himself getting a little distracted as he listened to Jormun’s story. He did his best to distance himself from the man’s words, but he couldn’t help but relate a little to what he went through. Jormun was, of course, a proven liar and manipulator, and Leon tried to keep that in mind, but he also couldn’t help but believe Jormun’s story. At this point, there wasn’t much point to lying... unless the pirate just liked lying and was only messing with Leon’s head.

When that thought occurred, Leon redoubled his efforts to free his hands, but the bindings weren’t loosening at all, and the panic he’d been suppressing was slowly growing more and more powerful and urgent.

Jormun, if he noticed this at all, ignored it in favor of continuing his story. “For the next thirty years, I slowly grew in power, guided by the voice of the Serpent. It taught me everything I needed to know, and showed me the path I would need to walk. I threw away everything that I didn’t need—love, friendship, desire for wealth, none of that mattered anymore. There was only me, my journey, and those who could aid me in my quest.

“It was only when I turned forty-six that I truly began, however. By that time, the knowledge I had gained from the Serpent had made me a rather notorious pirate, and I had attracted a fine crew. Most of these people I’d chosen to sail with me not because they were strong, but because they were naïve enough to believe me when I told them I could make them the Lords of this plane. They followed me because I spoke for the Serpent, and they believed that the Serpent would reward them for their service.

Jormun paused, ignoring Leon’s look of muted disgust. Leon wasn’t too fond of people, but even he was extremely put off by how Jormun was describing those people who had just died for him.

“I suppose it’s for the best that they didn’t live to see me rise,” Jormun whispered with a faint smile on his face. “Though, I *did* prime them to expect a Serpent to rise from this place. If I succeeded, they would’ve believed me to be that Serpent. It would’ve been quite entertaining to witness them ever realize the truth, I suppose, but this way is definitely cleaner. My crew is all dead, so there’s no need for me to worry about them.

“Anyway. I believe I told you of that vampire who spoke to me, yes?”

Leon slowly nodded, not really wanting to engage with Jormun, but wanting him to continue, anyway. Lie or not, he had to admit that he was fascinated with what Jormun was saying.

“When I completed the raid that they’d hired me for, that vampire and the rest of his disgusting ilk gave me a long list of those on this plane who bore some kind of power within their blood. These people were the key to my plans. For some reason, the seals that I needed to undo keeping the Serpent within its prison only respond to the blood of those descended from Ascended or Divine Beasts. With that list of people, I got to work. I hunted them all down and brought them to where the seals were located. I sacrificed them to the Serpent, using their blood to break the fetters that bound it. And when I sacrificed Octavius, the last of these fetters was broken.”

Leon couldn’t but ask, “I thought *you* were going to be the Serpent? Why speak of the Serpent you follow and then say that you, yourself, are going to be the Serpent? What, are you planning on usurping it?”

Jormun smiled and shook his head. “No, not at all. The Serpent below wishes to be free, and in return, it will help me to awaken the power in my own blood. What kind of creature do you think I’m directly descended from?”

Leon immediately answered, “A Great Horned Serpent.”

“Right in one,” Jormun quietly affirmed as a mad smile slowly spread across his face. “I don’t know if the thing below is really a serpent or not, and honestly, I don’t really care. It presents itself as such, so I call it the Serpent. It won’t stick around once its free; this place is far too weak for it to bother with. Instead, it will leave, and I shall rise as the Serpent that I told my people of. And once I’ve had my fill of everything I’ve denied myself, once my power has grown far beyond that of this plane, I will move on to others. Only once I’ve consumed all the power in this universe will I rest.”

For such a bold and utterly mad statement, Jormun spoke calmly and with a serenity that struck Leon as almost more unsettling than if he were dramatically pontificating to Leon what his grand plans were. If anything, it made Leon think that Jormun was at least marginally more capable of achieving that goal.

“You know, Leon,” Jormun said, “I never expected to run into someone from the Bull Kingdom that I could identify even a little bit with. But here we are. You, with your power, dying to awaken the dormant power within me. I expected so much less from the Bull Kingdom—some older, more experienced Paladin, maybe even Penitent himself coming to these Islands to finish what he did so many years ago. But instead, they sent me... *you*, and I’m so grateful for it.”

Jormun crouched down next to Leon, laid a hand on his shoulder, and looked him in the eye. The chamber shook with another massive explosion from outside, but Jormun didn’t even blink.

“I apologize for rambling. I hope you don’t think less of me for needing all of this; I have to admit that standing upon the precipice of my destiny has me feeling more than a little nervous, and having someone to talk to that I don’t have to lie to is surprisingly liberating... I think I’m ready, now. What do you say, Leon? Shall we get on with this? I think this plane has waited for its new god long enough...”

Leon’s eyes widened as Jormun began to push him backward. He abandoned all caution and put all of his strength into trying to free himself. Jormun only quietly chuckled as Leon failed to get his hands free of the anti-magic bindings.

“Those I looted from the Sunlit Empire,” the pirate said, pausing only long enough to speak those words. “I’m afraid they’re unbreakable unless you’ve achieved Apotheosis. You’ll die with your hands tied behind your back. Such is the way of things, I’m afraid.”

And then Jormun pushed Leon into the pit.

Leon felt the sudden and terrifying sense of weightlessness and he toppled backward. He was descended from the Thunderbird and the Great Black Dragon, two beings of the sky, so a sudden and uncontrollable fall was one of the most terrifying things he’d ever felt

Chapter 590: Serpent Ascendant

The pit was impossibly deep. Down and down it went, for miles and miles, so far that it seemed like that if they dropped any further, then Leon and Jormun would fall right out of the underside of the plane and into the Void.

For Jormun, this was one of the most exhilarating and terrifying moments of his life. The culmination of everything he’d worked for over the past fifty years... to finally achieve the power he’d so coveted, and to face a future without that obligation to the Serpent hanging over his head...

When he started that conversation with Leon, he hadn’t lied when he told the younger man that he wanted to talk to honor how well Leon had fought against him—Jormun had never anticipated having none of his followers remaining when he finally ascended to divinity—but it wasn’t the only reason he stopped to talk. When faced with the completion of his goals, he found that he’d needed some minutes to work up the nerve to take that last step, to finally plunge into that darkness and give himself over to the Serpent completely.

He wasn’t nearly as devoted to the Serpent as he’d made it seem whenever he spoke with his crew, or with Leon, or anyone else. He wasn’t blind to the risks involved. He was the one running around the world undoing the seals holding the Serpent in place, but the Serpent still held far more power in their relationship, and the pirate couldn’t help but fear that now, at the very end of his journey, the Serpent might renege on their contract, killing him now that he was no longer useful. That fear only grew the further he and Leon fell into that abyssal pit.

They fell for a long time, occasionally slamming and scraping against the stone walls. The sounds of battle faded away, as did the meager light at the top of the pit, until all that surrounded them was the dark.

At some point during the fall, he realized that Leon had vanished from beside him, and for that Jormun had felt some amount of jealousy—it seemed the Serpent wanted the boy, first—but eventually the dark claimed him, too. The last thing that went through his mind before he felt an eldritch power wrap itself around his mind and force him into unconsciousness was the fear that he might never wake again...

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Fire and tremors. The ground shattering beneath his feet. The sounds of battle, and the screaming of everyone he’d ever known being killed by Legion soldiers not far away. His own desperate, silent pleas for anyone to help him survive and live through this calamity.

Finally, at the end, the image of a great serpent, miles long, with a single curved horn protruding from its forehead, breaking through everything else, until it was all he could see. It fixed him in its merciless gaze, its emotions completely unreadable upon its reptilian face, but as the dream faded and Jormun slowly came back to consciousness, he was left with the impression of gratitude, amusement, and fatherly pride.

The first thing the pirate did upon awakening was to project his magic senses. He was no longer falling, but instead found himself lying face-up upon nearly perfectly-smooth black volcanic stone. He could see nothing else, for wherever he was had been completely shrouded in darkness. He could perceive the floor for about twenty feet, and then everything faded away into the abyss.

He had no idea how long it had been since he'd descended into the pit with Leon, nor how long he'd been unconscious. The younger man was nowhere to be seen, but given where he was, Jormun could only guess that he had been drawn by the Serpent into some pocket space. What happened to Leon, he couldn't even fathom a guess.

Without much warning, the quiet sound of slithering began to build up in the back of his mind, so slowly and quietly that he couldn't say when it started. A moment after he became aware of it, he heard the familiar hissing in his ear from the Serpent.

[You... doubted me, did you not...?]

Jormun sighed, but he was done lying—not to mention he didn't think he could fool the god that had saved him so long ago, whose presence within his mind had been a near constant for almost his entire life.

"I did," the pirate admitted with a smile, knowing that no matter what, what was done was done. "It wasn't intentional. Just fear."

The Serpent hissed incomprehensibly for a second or two, then whispered, [An understandable reaction for one in your position... But I fulfill my promises...]

Jormun's smile widened, and he began to sit up. "Then...?"

[Prepare yourself,] the Serpent hissed. [The blood of your line has laid dormant for a very long while, and to awaken it will be no small task... But you have spilled so much blood for me that I am replete with power, more than enough to fulfill my obligations. Fear not, young human, for I always make my promises in good faith, without thought to twist them for sadistic purposes...]

As the Serpent spoke, Jormun could feel himself calming down, even though the slight hint of suspicion and fear never left the back of his mind. However, as he sat up a little straight, the total darkness that surrounded him began to fall away like receding fog, and he found that he sat upon what seemed to be an endless plane of flat stone within a black void.

When the Serpent stopped speaking, power suddenly filled this space, not brightening it in a physical sense, but nearly blinding Jormun's magic senses with its brilliance. The ground cracked and broke apart, but it quickly became clear that this was purposeful and benevolent; Jormun saw the cracks and tears in the stone forming clearly-defined runic patterns, massive in scope to match the tremendous power that was carving them.

Jormun recognized few of the runes. He was never much of an enchanter, but given that most writing systems were based at least partially upon the modern runes, he could usually recognize at least some of the runes used by enchanters. These runes, however, were clearly much older and more ornate, and they hummed with power and caused his head to spin if he looked at them for too long.

These strange, otherworldly runes, once carved, were then connected to each other with great streams of white light that arced through the air and formed great flowing patterns for dozens of feet above Jormun; within those streams of light Jormun could see millions of more recognizable modern runes made of light hovering and flowing within.

These interconnected runic patterns were immense, almost mind-boggling so, and not just for their scale but for the speed with which they were created, too. And he stood right in the very center of this titanic scheme, the locus upon which all the power of this space turned.

One-by-one, the rune-filled streams of light began to fill the old runes with power, causing them to light up in sequence.

[Prepare yourself, human...] the Serpent whispered into his mind. [With this, your power is awakened, and our bond has been completed. This, I think, will be the last we ever speak to each other...]

The hissing and slithering in his mind faded, and for a moment, Jormun knew true solitude, something he hadn't experienced since he was but a young boy. It unnerved him more than he would ever admit how apparent it was now that it was gone how omnipresent the sound of slithering had been, but what unnerved him more was that he didn't feel any different. The runes glowed, and he could feel the power within the space whirling about him like a cyclone, but he always assumed that he would feel stronger when his power awakened.

He felt exactly the same; just as powerful, just as human...

His skin began to itch, and he absent-mindedly scratched first his forearm, then his thigh, and then his neck before he realized that something *was* different.

That itch quickly became a searing pain, as if his skin was melting off even though he could see that it wasn't.

'Just a side-effect of my Inherited Bloodline awakening...' he thought to himself as he fought to remain calm and not to start scratching until he ripped his skin. *'Nothing to be concerned about!'*

His will didn't last that long, and as his skin burned, he began to madly scratch in a vain attempt to bring himself some relief. However, after a few seconds more, his arms suddenly snapped to his sides as he fell to the ground. He could feel his body shaking as the power around him suddenly began to pour in, filling his every cell with light and darkness.

He still had some control over himself, though, and he used every ounce of willpower he possessed to summon the greatest treasures that he'd acquired over his years spent raiding the south. His bronze hammer, stolen from a vault in the great southern city of Argos. His onyx bracelet set with six black crystals, all now dull and lightless with his krakens dead. A book he'd pillaged from a Sky Devil ship as it ferried Titanstone along the coast of their remote island, the cover sealed with magics he had never been able to unravel, keeping the knowledge stored within its pages a perpetual mystery.

Whatever was going on within his body, Jormun did not want to lose these three greatest of his treasures. If his soul realm shattered under the colossal weight of the power that was changing him, everything within it would be lost, and while he cared not for the rest of his loot, these three items were irreplaceable.

But even as those items left his soul realm and fell to the ground before him, his eyes were glazing over and becoming unfocused as his conscious mind was inundated with pain and new sensations and instincts.

His body began to grow in size, his skin and clothing ripping and tearing as his body grew too big for both, while through the tears in his skin could be seen scales that glittered in the abyss like dark emeralds. His internal organs shifted and while most of them grew, some of them withered and shrank, dissolving into waste as new organs grew in their place. His bones cracked, twisted, fused, and grew into new shapes and configurations, and the only reason Jormun didn't roar in pain from this was because he was already roaring in pain from everything else.

His arms and legs twisted upon themselves as his body bent and painfully transformed. Soon enough, his skin was growing around them as the flesh and bone of those limbs were consumed by the rest of his body, leaving him looking like a long dark mass of scaly green flesh.

Jormun was unable to see this, however, as his eyes dissolved in their sockets and his mind was too shattered by pain to project his magic senses. From his forehead erupted a spike of ivory, glowing white in the darkness, and as it grew, it began to curve backward into a wicked horn. In his empty eye sockets, new reptilian eyes formed from the shapeless gel and blood that his human eyes had melted into. At the same time, his human teeth fell out, while several rows of sharp serpentine fangs speared their way out of his gums to replace them.

His body grew and transformed, while his mind shut down from the pain. He barely even felt it after a while as his body continued to grow and change shape into something more snake-like, while his newly-awakened blood filled his mind with alien instincts and genetic memory.

And his transformation hardly seemed like it would end anytime soon.

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The battle was over. The Legion had won, at least as far as anyone could tell. The pirates had been defeated; their fleet lay in ruins, and the broken remains of the eighth island had largely been secured. There was only one last push remaining, and the marines were already massing on the slopes of the caldera for that final push.

However, there was still an undercurrent of anxiety among the Legion. The storm had yet to abate, and if anything, seemed to only grow more intense, soon reaching hurricane conditions. This would've been bad enough on its own, but Leon Raime had gone missing. He'd been easily detectable by practically the entire fleet as he flew around on his pure white griffin, firing off flares and lightning bolts. His presence alone guiding the fleet through the channels had been a tremendous comfort to everyone, but that comfort had turned to dread with his mysterious disappearance, and the subsequent appearance of a demon and some unidentified winged humanoid whose power was essentially immeasurable by the fleet.

No one was more disturbed than Maia, Anzu, and the rest of Leon's retinue.

After being sent away by Leon, Anzu had circled around the caldera a few times, the worry he had for his human near-all-consuming. However, when the griffin saw Leon fall, he knew that he had to do something. He couldn't act directly, for the demon and the winged thing were still battling over the island, but he knew who might be able to help.

He'd flown back to Sigebert's flagship. There, he found Leon's mate, Maia, staring at the walls of the crater with a look of such worry in her eyes that the griffin just instinctively knew that his worry was hers as well. He ignored everyone else, even as they shouted in surprise as his sudden landing upon the deck, and ran to Maia. The river nymph didn't miss a beat, quickly jumping onto his back and glaring a challenge at anyone who protested.

Once she was secured into his harness, Anzu took off with great force, the wind and rain of the storm having barely any effect on him with the worry he had for his human pushing him onward.

On his back, Maia continued to stare at the crater, unable to see what was happening there even with her magic senses. It was like everything within had suddenly become warded against magic senses as soon as that pirate conjured the winged humanoid. Once Anzu climbed high enough, however, Maia was able to physically see down into the caldera, and took in the sight of the obliterated structure at the center of the island in the lake, as well as the conspicuous lack of Leon or Jormun.

Wordlessly, she urged Anzu onward, though the griffin needed no urging. With her power, his confidence had been greatly bolstered, and not even the demon and the angel continuing to battle high up in the clouds would deter him from getting closer. They were going to find Leon and bring him home, no matter what.

As Anzu sped forward, cutting through the wind and rain with prodigious speed, Maia tried again and again to connect with Leon through their soul realms. She'd been doing this ever since he went silent following the destruction of the pirate's primary ship.

However, she received no response. She didn't think he was dead, but she wasn't sure what she'd feel if he were. She couldn't sense him, and as a result, she felt like a piece of her was missing.

Unfortunately, she'd been unable to leave Sigebert's flagship before Anzu returned. The seas here felt wrong, and that feeling was only growing more intense as the storm raged on. Even with all of her power, she couldn't overcome the fear that these waters gave her, nor the idea that if she were to dive in and become one with the water here, she'd be lost forever.

But now, with Anzu's help, the two landed upon the island about an hour after Jormun's ship was annihilated.

Maia quickly slid off Anzu's back and surveyed the area. All around her, she could see the evidence of Leon and Jormun's battle, as well as that of the beings fighting above her. Most alarming of everything, from the rubble and the broken ground and the evidence of intense magics, was Leon's blade lying in the dirt, the ground all around it scorched black by lightning.

However, she wasn't given enough time to even run over to the blade before a truly massive explosion above had her springing back and channeling her magic power, ready to defend both herself and Anzu, who'd tucked in wings and tail and crouched low to the ground in fear.

A moment later, the angel came falling out of the storm clouds, its wings ragged and burnt black, its white robes nearly completely incinerated, leaving its body charred. Following after it was the fire demon, glowing like a meteor as it slammed into the angel once more, accelerating its fall.

The angel hit the island with all the weight of its massive frame, shaking the ground beneath Maia and Anzu's feet. The demon landed a second after it did, with cat-like grace. It spared the dead angel only one look before wordlessly turning in Maia's direction.

The rain around Maia began to coalesce into a gigantic water dragon. She could sense that this demon had roughly eighth-tier power, so they should about evenly matched. If it wanted to fight her, then she'd respond with all the power she had at her disposal.

But she didn't want to kill it just yet. It was here when Leon vanished, it must know what was going on. It even had a slight tinge to its aura that reminded her of Leon, though why it did she didn't dare guess.

The demon took a few steps toward her and strangely relaxed its aura. For just a moment, it gave Maia an oddly familiar feeling, as if she'd encountered this demon somewhere before...

Before she could figure out what this feeling was, however, or even say a single word to the fiery being, the ground began to shake in earnest, and as if to herald the rising of something terrible, lightning began to fall upon the walls of the crater like rain. The demon reassumed its fighting posture as it turned toward the rubble of the boxy structure, and taking her cue from it, Maia also turned toward the rubble. At the very least, it seemed like the demon wasn't particularly hostile to her, but a titanic aura was rising from those broken rocks, one that was laced with enough killing intent to make her dizzy.

Whatever was coming was no friend to her, and it was *powerful*.

Suddenly, the rubble practically exploded as something immense forced its way out with extreme force. Maia easily kept the flung chunks of stone from hitting her or Anzu, while the demon did likewise for himself. However, both were struck dumb by the enormity of the thing before them.

From a huge hole that the rubble had somehow covered had sprouted a long serpentine body, already easily more than two hundred feet long—and that was just what had already erupted from the ground, there was still far more body down there. Its smooth serpentine head was gigantic, bigger even than some Legion war galleys. Despite this, its head seemed oddly small compared to the rest of its enormous body.

Its scales were dark green, with black lines and bright yellow spots breaking up the monotony in even patterns. From its brow sprouted a massive horn that curved backward and that glowed with tremendous magical power—enough to put more than enough fear into Maia that her hands began to shake.

The sclera of its eyes were a duller yellow compared to its spots, while its pupils were the deepest midnight black. It roared in primal rage as it burst out into the storm, the wind whipping around it and

covering it in rain. Its mouth was filled with altogether far too many massive teeth, each more than twice the size of the average young adult, while its aura towered over that of Maia and the demon.

Maia sprang back to Anzu, recognizing that this thing was *not* friendly, not with the sheer quantity of killing intent pouring from its form. But before she could reach the griffin, the titanic snake's body came crashing down not too far away. The demon had to leap out of the way as the snake crushed the body of the angel beneath its enormity.

The snake then slowly turned its eyes in the direction of Maia and the demon, the twin orbs glittering with malice and hatred, its fangs bared, its long forked tongue rapidly darting out to taste the air.

Without hesitation, Maia sent her water dragon forward to buy some time—her watery construct was large by her standards, but was still utterly dwarfed by this serpent—while the demon conjured a great orange fireball in its hand and hurled it at the serpent.

With but a flash of its eyes