

Storm King 181

Chapter 181: Stupid Dumb Idiot

The tiny white griffin had been badly hurt, as Leon could see trickles of blood staining its downy feathers and newborn fur. It was still struggling to move, but it was far too weak to do anything more than twitch. As Leon cautiously approached, he noticed that the griffin was so young that its eyes were still stuck closed.

[You're stopping for this beast?] Xaphan asked Leon in slight confusion.

Leon didn't answer, choosing to instead crouch down and examine the injured griffin.

[Be careful, you don't want to get fleas or something from touching this filthy creature,] Xaphan said derisively.

After taking a few minutes to gingerly check out the baby griffin, Leon guessed that most of its injuries were probably related to the older griffin pecking it a few times to prevent it from trying to follow it out of the crater. Leon thought that it needn't have bothered, as the tiny griffin was still blind and its wings were too small to fly yet.

Back in the Knight Academy, a few hours had been spent on griffins during the mandatory classes that focused on monsters within the Bull Kingdom. There had been a tremendous amount of information thrown at the trainees during those classes, so Leon couldn't quite remember them all, but he did recall enough to guess that the griffin was less than two weeks old, as that was usually how long it took for them to open their eyes.

And then, suddenly, Leon realized something.

[FFUUUCK!] he bellowed at Xaphan. He almost had to bite his tongue to prevent himself from screaming out loud.

[What?!] the demon responded, clearly startled. [What's wrong?! What's the problem?!]

[I'm a moron is the problem!] Leon shouted back. [I'm a stupid, dumb... *stupid* idiot!]

[Huh?]

Leon fumed in frustration. He was so angry at himself that he didn't even care that his fingers gently brushing through the down of the griffin's head had dispelled his invisibility.

[Ever since I was born and my father named me 'Leon', I have found myself associated with lions,] Leon explained to Xaphan as calmly as he could. [My father called me 'little lion', I awakened my blood by hunting and drinking the mana of a snow lion, and when I came to the Knight Academy, I was assigned to the Snow Lions unit.]

[Uh huh...] Xaphan said, still not quite following.

[This led to me deciding to take the lion as my own personal sigil,] Leon continued, glancing down as best as he could to glance at the silver lion in the center of his cuirass.

[Yeah, that's actually a little strange. Most of those with Inherited Bloodlines would take their ancestor as their sigil...] Xaphan added.

[They would,] Leon agreed. [Now, let me ask you something, demon, what is a griffin?]

[Why would you assume I know the answer to that question?] Xaphan asked. [This kind of shit isn't my forte. If you were to ask about fire beasts on the other hand...]

[It's a beast with the body of a lion and the head and wings of an eagle!] Leon shouted.

[Oooh,] Xaphan said, finally understanding the connection. [Ok, so an animal you associate yourself with and a bird that's kind of similar to your ancestor are combined into one beast. What's your point?]

[That's what my sigil should have been!] Leon said, glancing down at the silver lion on his cuirass. [As soon as I get back to the Bull's Horns, I'm finding a smith and I'm changing this from a lion to a griffin!]

Xaphan was quiet for a few moments. [... This is what you're worked up about?] he asked in disbelief.

[I'm upset because I'm *dumb*! I should've made this connection before and not wasted my damned time!]

[Hmm. So, what are you going to do about this tiny thing?] Xaphan asked, turning Leon's attention back to the baby griffin so the mage would stop yelling.

[Don't know. It looks to be an albino, and it's probably a runt if the mother griffin was so willing to abandon it.]

[I'd say it's best to just move on. The thing is close to death, anyway.]

Leon frowned. The way the tiny creature twitched made him think the griffin wasn't quite done with life, that it wanted to live.

[You would advise me to abandon this little griffin, but it's so young it hasn't even *seen* the world yet!] Leon said, a hint of anger appearing in his voice.

[What would you do to help it, then?] Xaphan asked.

[... I don't know,] Leon admitted. [My healing spells should work for it, but since it isn't human, I won't make any guarantees. Beyond that, it's still a griffin; I don't think it would have any trouble surviving after a few months.]

[If it can even survive those months...] Xaphan cynically added. Leon couldn't disagree with the demon, but he also didn't want to just leave.

[I wonder...] Leon murmured as he began to fish around in his satchel for an emergency healing spell.

[What are you wondering?] Xaphan asked curiously.

[It's just a thought, but since this thing hasn't even opened its eyes yet, if I'm the first thing it sees, maybe it will imprint on me—think I'm its parent...]

[You want to raise this thing?]

[If it's possible...] Leon responded. He finally extricated the healing spell from the satchel and gently pressed it against the griffin. There was a quick flash of golden light, and the wounds on the griffin slowly began to seal. It didn't improve the creature's appearance much, though, as the healing spell didn't clean up the blood that had already been shed.

Leon waited there for a few minutes, watching the griffin slowly stop twitching and squeaking.

[I have a question,] Xaphan began, [how are you going to get this beast to imprint on you?]

[If I recall correctly, a griffin's eyes shouldn't open for at least two or three weeks after birth, as their eyes aren't quite fully formed yet. The healing spell might accelerate this, so the griffin might be able to see in just a few minutes...]

[But only if you recall correctly,] Xaphan said.

[Yes, thank you for fixating on that part,] Leon said sarcastically. He continued to wait there for fifteen minutes, and his eyes began to be drawn from the griffin back to the Cradle. He'd certainly waited long enough to turn invisible again, but he was also hoping that he was right about the griffin.

And then, the griffin began to raise its head and squeak. Leon hurried over and crouched down so that his face would take up the griffin's entire field of view if its eyes opened. The creature's eyelids cracked open, giving Leon a brief glimpse of bright red albino eyes before they snapped shut again.

'*Shit...*' Leon thought to himself.

[Looks like it didn't work,] Xaphan said, striking a tone that almost gave Leon the impression that the demon was gloating.

So, instead of responding, Leon simply sighed and turned back to look up at the Cradle. He channeled his magic back into his ring, and he took a few steps back to the path he was following.

However, something made him stop and turn around. It was just a tiny little thought, one small regret that he wasted a healing spell on a wild animal, but when his gaze fell back upon the griffin, he froze. The glittering green emerald in his ring stopped shining when, in shock, he stopped channeling his magic.

He saw two bright red eyes staring back at him. The griffin had lifted its head again and made another attempt to open its eyes, and it and Leon made eye contact.

[You were saying, demon?] Leon asked, gloating with a much less ambiguous tone than Xaphan had used.

[Talk when the imprinting works, boy.]

Leon hurried back over to the griffin and took the creature's head in his hands. It was ugly, with fluffy down that was tattered and covered in blood, and a beak that was barely a nub in the center of its face. But its red eyes sparkled with life, and neither the griffin nor Leon broke eye contact for more than a minute.

[Is that all you're going to do?] Xaphan asked.

[It's really all I *can* do,] Leon answered.

[Where'd you learn this, by the way?] the demon continued.

[Read about it,] Leon replied. [The first thing most newborn animals see is their mother, so hopefully, this griffin can be tamed now that I'm the first thing it's seeing.]

However, as if the griffin could hear Leon's reply and felt spiteful, it immediately broke eye contact, struggled to its feet, and started running away. Leon wasn't committed enough to it to chase after it, though, so he just stood and watched as the griffin disappeared into the dark pillar-maze.

"Damnit," he whispered.

[Mmm, if only it were so easy to tame a wild beast,] Xaphan chided.

[Laugh it up demon. It was worth a try, at least.]

[I'm not going to blame you for it, but don't lose sight of the more immediate concern...]

[I'm not, trust me. But, as I said, worth a try,] Leon replied as he turned his gaze back to the Cradle. [Although I'm surprised that you would be so quick to spur me onwards, demon, I thought you weren't looking forward to being in there...]

[I've had to look at your clan's mind-bogglingly terrible architecture for far too long, and the prospect of seeing more of it isn't appealing. That being said, what might be hidden away in that ruin certainly piques my interest. So, be quick, and find whatever is in there!]

Leon smiled and didn't waste any more time. He immediately reactivated his invisibility ring and started hurrying in the direction of the Cradle. He was actually quite close to it and exited the maze of pillars about five minutes later. However, the sight in front of him froze him in his tracks: five stone giants, standing guard over the approach to the Cradle.

The mass of trap rocks that the Cradle had been built upon could only be effectively approached from the direction of Rakos' hall; all the other sides were too steep for Leon to scale before he ran out of magic power and his invisibility gave out. His only option was to take the stairway that had been cut into the rocks that the giants now stood guard over.

Fortunately, they didn't seem to be able to sense Leon's presence, as they had made no reaction to his appearing from the maze. Slowly, and as quietly as he could, Leon inched forward, suddenly becoming quite conscious of how much magic was still in his blood. He guessed that he could hold his invisibility for about twenty more minutes, but he still had to keep in mind the return journey. He figured that it would take about ten minutes to get back through the maze again, so he'd have to get past the giants and into the Cradle in the remaining ten minutes. If he did, then he would have about an hour or so to explore the ruin before he would have to leave in order to return in the time hack Aquillius had given him.

Leon took one valuable minute and continued to inch closer while keeping his eyes on the giants and looking for a way to get past them that didn't involve walking underneath their legs. His options were hardly plentiful, but he eventually came to the conclusion that the Giants truly couldn't perceive him, so

he started to speed up. Just in case, though, he made sure to restrain his aura as much as he was able to.

He was heartened to see that, despite coming almost close enough to touch the giants, they still hadn't reacted to his presence. Unfortunately, the stairway was so narrow that all five standing shoulder to shoulder was all that was needed to block the way; he wasn't going to get through without walking between some legs.

Before he did so, Leon stopped and took one last look at the stone giants. They had merely stood there, as still as statues, guarding the Cradle. They were so still, in fact, that Leon might've guessed that they *were* statues had they not been emitting powerful magical auras.

Leon, feeling his magic drain with every passing second, slipped past one of the giants as carefully as he could. He then began to climb up the enormous stairway, grateful that the wind and the ambient noise of the crater kept him from needing to be too quiet. Several seconds later, he reached the top of the stairway and was left with only one last problem for the immediate future: how to get into the Cradle, as it was the wing of the building that was facing the stairs that had collapsed.

He wasn't deterred, though, and he eagerly began his exploration.

Chapter 182: The Cradle

Leon stared at the Cradle ruins, conscious of every second that passed. He had about five minutes to get into the Cradle before he decided to call his exploration off while he still had enough magic power in his blood to return to Rakos' hall unseen. His eyes wandered over as much of the ruin as he could see, searching for a way to get inside.

After another minute, he decided to get closer and ran up to climb onto the ruins of the collapsed hall. Over the top of every hall was an enormous statue of what, to Leon's eyes at least, appeared to be a Thunderbird. The statue over the ruined hall was still mostly intact, with only a single leg and a wing missing, but it still gave a good view, so Leon climbed onto the statue's head and looked around.

[Looks like the doors to the other wings are still intact,] Xaphan observed.

[Yes...] Leon replied, [but I would prefer an entrance that has a less likely chance of being locked.]

[You don't know if those entrances *are* locked, though,] Xaphan responded, urging Leon to check them.

Seeing no other way in his quick scan of the building, Leon took off running to the hall on his left, which was slightly closer than the one on his right. Upon arrival, he wasted no time slapping the red runic circle on the trapezoidal plate, causing it to vanish and reveal a more conventional door as well as dissipate his own invisibility.

The door was huge, almost three stories tall. However, when Leon impatiently threw himself against it to minimize his exposure, it opened with startling ease. In fact, Leon was expecting much more resistance, so he tripped and fell when the door opened.

Leon scrambled to his feet to the sound of Xaphan's laughter and hurried to close the door behind him; the last thing he needed was for a Stone Giant to see the open door and missing plate. Just before the door closed, the plate reappeared with another runic circle in the center. Leon sighed in relief and

allowed himself to relax. But he couldn't afford to wait too long, so he turned and took his first good look around.

The hall he found himself in wasn't dark, which came as a bit of a surprise. The ceiling was adorned with an enchantment to look like the sky and was awash with the deep blues and blacks of late evening, illuminating the hall with the light of millions of stars. There was no moon, though, which tipped Leon off to the fact that the enchantment was a projection of light rather than somehow making the distant ceiling transparent.

The rest of the hall was just as lavishly decorated with additional, if somewhat less functional, light enchantments. The floor had been constructed of pale blue marble tiles, and enchanted to have a mirror sheen to them, though only about a third of the tiles were still reflective with the remaining being dull and dirty.

There were dozens of large columns supporting four hallways stacked over the ground floor on each side, forming galleries that protruded and opened into the hall. Leon could see even from his own low point of view that the walls on each floor of the gallery were angled, forming part of the now-familiar trapezoidal shape that was so common in the Thunderbird Clan's old facilities that he'd been in. Much like he'd seen in the prison, murals made of light were projected off of these slanted walls, but whatever was powering them didn't seem to have much power left, as the projected murals were flickering too much for Leon to clearly see their details.

At the opposite end of the hall was another set of doors, though they were only about half the size of the doors Leon had just walked through—still huge, but not absurdly so. Leon guessed from having seen the exterior of the building, that these doors led into the central domed part of the structure that connected the four wings.

[So, demon, where do you think we should start?] Leon asked.

[I would check out the central dome, but that's just me,] Xaphan answered. Leon agreed, and so he ignored the doors in the galleries and made for the other end of the hall.

The doors swung open as easily as the others did, but with the previous embarrassing experience, Leon pushed much more gently and kept his balance. Walking through the doorway, Leon found himself standing in a spacious rotunda with the domed ceiling above. At its highest, the ceiling was probably ten to twelve stories high, and what he could see was made entirely of some kind of concrete similar to what the wall between the Bull's Horns was made of.

Another light enchantment covered the inside of the dome, but instead of just projecting a night sky, it also showed brilliantly spiraling and multicolored nebulae and bright celestial bodies too distant for Leon to see clearly. In the center of the dome, the enchantment faded out, leaving only a massive glittering pale-white diamond set into the center of the dome, backlighting three nearby constellations. Two of these constellations were of humanoid figures, each with a sword and a crown, while the last was of a bird, which Leon guessed to be the Thunderbird.

The rotunda was in much better shape compared to the hall Leon had just left, as the black marble tiles were clean and tastefully reflective, and the light projections on the walls were steady and stable. However, Leon still couldn't see the projected murals clearly, as around the rotunda's edges were trees,

bushes, and flowers, contained in long trenches filled with dirt and kept alive through what he guessed was nature magic.

Leon drank in the marvelous sight, admiring everything that he could. However, his eyes were eventually drawn to the center of the rotunda, where he could see a gleaming shallow pool filled with crystal-clear water, and in the center of the pool was a raised marble platform. Upon this platform were eight grey metallic rods, perfectly cylindrical and without a single blemish to mar their polished shine. This platform was directly underneath the diamond 'moon', which in the simulated night seemed to cast a spotlight on the platform.

[There is an enormous amount of magic flowing through those rods,] Leon observed.

[I can sense it too,] Xaphan responded.

Leon approached the platform, walking across the pool using several small marble steps that formed pathways for anyone coming from the halls to reach the platform without getting their feet wet.

Upon arriving on the central platform, Leon cautiously examined the rods from a few feet away—the extreme amount of magic he could sense flowing through them made him wary of getting too close too hastily. The appearance of the rods wasn't particularly noteworthy, save for the bright red ruby set into the top of each one. What was more eye-catching was the platform itself, as its marble tiles were so reflective that they created the illusion of glass separating two nearly identical worlds. Below the surface, within that optical illusion of a reflected world, Leon could see thousands of glowing runes spiraling and flowing into each other in the air surrounding the platform, and especially concentrated around the rods.

Looking up, Leon couldn't see the runes that the tiles seemed to reflect; the air around the platforms and rods were devoid of any hovering runes.

The platform had nothing else except the rods; no consoles of control runes, no tables with instructions or notes, nothing explaining what the place was supposed to be, so with a degree of confusion, Leon turned to Xaphan. [Given their name for this place and the way they guard it, I was assuming that this place was where the Giants were built by the powerful mage that created them...]

The demon in his soul realm was quick to defend himself, saying, [It was only a guess on my part, obviously I can't know for certain what this place was built for or where the Giants come from.]

Leon frowned, then murmured, [Maybe the answer is somewhere else in this place...]

Leaving the platform for the time being, Leon started exploring the rest of the building. Since he made it inside before he ran out of magic power, he could stay for about an hour before he had to turn back—enough time that he didn't feel rushed, but also not enough for him to justify staring at something he couldn't comprehend.

The other two intact wings of the building were much like the one he'd entered from, being large five-story-tall halls with dozens of rooms on both sides accessed from galleries. However, the enchantments in these parts of the Cradle were much more decayed than the ones in the hall Leon had entered from, as none of the floor tiles were reflective, the walls projected no murals made of light, and even the fake

skies had started to dissolve in places, revealing the bare concrete of the ceiling, which he could see was cracked and in poor shape due to lack of maintenance.

There weren't any rooms on the ground floor of the halls, with the few doorways instead leading to stairways that provided access to the galleries above. There were plenty of rooms branching off from the galleries, though, which Leon eagerly started to explore until he realized that all of these were devoid of anything of interest. A few had a few pieces of stone furniture—a granite desk with extraordinarily elaborate geometric engravings, several chairs, a couple tables—but nothing caught his eye.

[Looks like this place has been completely mothballed,] Xaphan observed. Leon couldn't completely disagree, as it seemed like whoever had built the Cradle abandoned it in an orderly enough manner as to take everything of value. However, there was something that bothered him about that idea.

[If they were going to mothball this building, then why didn't they take whatever was powering the enchantments?] Leon wondered. [There was a huge diamond in the center of the dome, why didn't they take that?]

[I can't say,] Xaphan admitted.

[There're still rooms to check, maybe we'll get lucky and find some answers,] Leon said.

The rest of the rooms in the last hall he had to check were just as empty as the others, but Leon did find something of interest on the highest floor of the last gallery he had to search: a inscription upon the only door on the top floor of one of the galleries.

[Look at *this*,] Leon muttered as soon as he saw it. [This room has been labeled...]

[Well, check it out, it might have something nice inside if it were important enough to have a label,] Xaphan urged.

Leon did so, but the rooms behind were just as empty as he'd come to expect—though it was clear they would make for a palatial residence if they were fully furnished—so he returned to the inscription. It was the only writing he'd found in the entire building, and he didn't find anything else left to investigate except for the rods and their accompanying enchantment back in the dome.

[Can you read it?] Xaphan asked impatiently.

[It's an old script,] Leon said, a little annoyed that Xaphan was being so lazy as to make him do the work, [but it's still based on the runes as far as I can tell—and not the ancient runes, thankfully.]

[But can you read it?] Xaphan repeated.

[Give me a damned moment!] Leon responded. He stared at the letters on the door, trying to discern their meaning. As most written languages in Aeterna were based on the runes, it didn't take too much work for two different peoples to read each other's language, but Leon found this a little more complicated.

After about thirty seconds, he said, [It's a heavily stylized script, but I think I can understand it... Let's see, 'P', 'R', 'I', I think that's an 'N'... Ah! Prince!]

[These rooms were a residence for a Prince...] Xaphan said, his voice subtly growing lower from restrained anger. [Does it say which Prince?]

[Ummmmm, 'Nestor',] Leon answered. ['Nestor', I think I might know that name, it sounds familiar...]

[That bronze golem back in your family's archives name dropped him as its creator,] Xaphan said.

[Right!] Leon exclaimed. [So then... I guess this Prince Nestor must have been the one to create the Stone Giants!]

[If I was correct in my guess as to their origin, which to be fair, we haven't found any hard evidence of yet,] Xaphan said.

[Maybe I'll find some, I'm not leaving the Crater for a few days anyway,] Leon said. It was time to leave the Cradle, but he intended to return the next night to study those enchanted rods—especially since it seemed the Giants were created by the Thunderbird Clan.

Leon made for the exit. He'd been in the Cradle for a little over an hour, which had been enough time for him to recharge plenty of mana for his return journey. He slipped through the door, vanished from sight, and hoped that no one saw him.

He raced back to the stairs, slowing only he came close to the guardian giants. He didn't think they'd moved an inch since he'd snuck past them earlier, but he was still cautious of moving past them just in case they could hear his footsteps.

His caution was rewarded when he managed to return to the maze of tall trap rocks without incident, and he made his way through it as quickly as he could, dispelling his invisibility when he started drawing close to the exit closest to Rakos' hall.

The return journey was swift and uneventful, but that almost changed when, just as he was leaving the maze, Leon saw a small white blur in the corner of his eye. When he turned to get a better look, whatever he'd seen had disappeared, but he could still make a guess as to what it was. He reached into his satchel and pulled out some travel rations of dry meat. It was enough to be a hearty meal for a small animal, and he left the food just inside the maze, where nothing else would see it.

Leon then turned and left with a proud smile on his face, returning to the diplomats' guest rooms minutes before Aquillius' time hack was up.

Chapter 183: Anzu

There was little for Leon to do the next day in the Crater. The other diplomats socialized as best as they could with the Giants, which wasn't that much since Aquillius was the only one among them who could understand the Stone Giants' language, while Rakos and Lapis were the only Giants who could do likewise. As a result, much of that socializing came about with the diplomats hanging around the hall watching the Giants go about their business.

Leon was left feeling profoundly bored, as there was effectively no way for him to help with the mission. Aquillius would spend his days quietly talking with Rakos, while the rest of the party was just there.

The entire diplomatic party had assembled in Rakos' throne room early the morning after Leon explored the Cradle. They were off to the side in a place that was honorable enough, but also kept them out of

the way. The rest of the throne room was packed with five or six dozen Stone Giants, most of whom weren't from Rakos' tribe. Rather, they were representatives of the Crater Tribe's subordinate tribes, who had come at Rakos' request as a favor to Aquillius.

The Giants were discussing something that Leon was unable to follow, and he couldn't help but start to zone out. Noticing his obvious boredom, Lucilius leaned over and whispered into Leon's ear, "Try to pay attention."

His voice in Leon's ear nearly made the younger man jump out of his skin, but he turned and nodded to Lucilius to indicate that he'd try.

The older mage quietly chuckled, then said, "This is perhaps the most boring part of the job when you're only brought along to flesh out a more important person's posse. But this isn't always a job where you face off with a master of the art of speech in epic battles of wit. You have to take the good with the bad, I'm afraid."

Leon nodded his understanding. As he watched Rakos slowly introduce each newly arriving Stone Giant to Aquillius, he asked Lucilius, "If I may ask, where did Sir Aquillius learn the Giant language?"

"Ah, that. There are some people in the Eastern Territories that trade with the Giants—smugglers, mostly, who give the Giants gifts so they can move through the Border Mountains without trouble. A group of these smugglers was caught in a raid on a warehouse filled with contraband, and one of them was given the choice of ten years in prison or two years as Sir Aquillius' translator. He chose the latter."

"And he taught Sir Aquillius how to understand the Giants in those two years?" Leon asked.

"No, Sir Aquillius taught himself! That translator served his time and left us a little over a year ago, and Sir Aquillius hasn't needed a replacement since!"

"That's impressive," Leon said honestly.

"Indeed. The rest of us barely have more than a rudimentary understanding of the Giants' body language, let alone their speech," Lucilius said.

Leon smiled a little as he watched Aquillius converse with Rakos as naturally as he did with any of the rest of the party. Aquillius was respectful before Rakos, but not submissive, striking a friendly tone but not afraid to let the occasional hint of steel enter his voice.

'I suspect that's what he meant when he wanted me to watch and learn. It's not about the words he's using, but about his attitude,' Leon thought. Not a lot of nobles could perform delicate diplomatic work, as they'd usually be too arrogant, but Aquillius seemed to be an exception to that trend. He could be friends with another political leader and be respectful in their home without also tarnishing the dignity of the Bull Kingdom he represented.

Now that he was taking a closer look at Aquillius, Leon started paying more attention, trying to memorize the diplomat's bearing and demeanor. He doubted he'd be able to do what Aquillius could do anytime soon, but he was ready to learn.

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Introductions for the arriving Giants took the entire morning and most of the afternoon. The diplomatic party had been on their feet the entire time, but no one was more tired than Aquillius. Still, despite his fatigue, Aquillius was energized and almost shook with excitement. His three years of diplomacy and carefully building up trust with the Crater Tribe was finally paying off, now that Rakos had brought his subordinate tribes to meet with him.

After returning to the guest rooms, he checked and re-checked the terms of the non-aggression pact with the Crater Tribe—not that such a simple agreement needed such scrutiny, but he wanted to make sure everything was ready for proposal. His mind also raced with questions about what kind of trade the Giants could open up to the Bull Kingdom, and he couldn't wait for the next day for the negotiations to begin.

Aquillius' excitement, however, meant that there wasn't much else for the rest of the party to do. After a couple hours of being holed up in the guest rooms, he eventually decided to allow everyone to explore the outside for a little while. There were now Giants in the crater that were still officially hostile, but he trusted Rakos to keep them under control, so he wasn't worried about any trouble. Still, no one was allowed to leave Rakos' hall until they agreed not to roam too far away.

Leon took full advantage of this, being the first of the party to leave the underground hall with Alix close behind. As he stepped out into the light of late afternoon, he turned to his squire and said, "If you don't want to follow me, then please don't consider yourself obligated to."

"I'm fine with it," Alix replied, giving him a radiant smile.

Leon surreptitiously glanced at the Cradle in the distance and briefly considered forcing Alix not to follow him so he could explore the ruins a little more, but he decided that that could easily backfire on him; he allowed Alix to accompany him outside.

"Soooo, what did you do last night when you were out here?" Alix asked. Leon clenched his jaw for a moment, afraid that she might have some idea of where he went. However, his rational mind knew that it was almost impossible and that she was probably only asking out of curiosity.

"I went for a walk. Mostly explored the maze in the center of the crater," he answered.

"Is that it? You were out for hours just walking around the crater?" Alix inquired doubtfully.

"Yes... Why do you sound so incredulous?"

"It's a *little* weird," Alix responded.

"How so? We were underground for a while, and I needed the fresh air. Plus, we were—and are going to be—around all these other people for a hot minute, so I was savoring the solitude."

"Hmmm," Alix hummed, understanding Leon's explanation to an extent, but still not quite believing him.

Leon could hear the doubt still in her voice, so he decided to let her in on at least one secret, as he had a feeling that the secret would refuse to stay hidden once they got far enough away from the Stone Giants. "There is one other thing..." he began, proceeding to tell her about the abandoned newborn griffin.

When he was finished with the story, concluding with the glimpse he got of the griffin when he exited the maze, Alix almost looked like she had stars in her eyes.

“That little griffin sounds *adorable!*” she cooed. Then, something suddenly occurred to her, and she asked, “Is that why you packed extra food before coming outside?”

Leon smiled and nodded. “He’s still out here, and on the off chance that we run into him while we’re out seeing the sights, I’d like to leave him a little food. I can’t imagine there’s much in the maze that’s edible, though I also doubt that there’s anything out there that could kill even a newborn griffin...”

“Then let’s hurry up!” Alix said with a determined expression as she hurried toward the mass of hexagonal pillars in the center of the crater.

Leon blinked a few times in confusion, then silently chuckled to himself. *‘Should’ve led with the griffin. Something to keep in mind for the future, I guess...’* he thought.

They didn’t have to go far into the maze before they caught sight of a small white bundle familiar to Leon—in fact, they found the albino griffin only a few steps away from the entrance to the maze where Leon had left it the night before. Alix’s eyes went wide and she rushed forward to examine the tiny creature. However, once she drew close, the griffin woke up, took one look at her, scrambled to its feet, and retreated a ways.

Alix frowned and came to a stop, completely discouraged.

“Can’t blame it for being cautious, can we?” Leon asked as he caught up to his squire.

“I guess not...” Alix muttered.

Leon glanced over at the griffin, which was staring straight back at him, his golden eyes meeting the griffins’ bright red. He didn’t take another step forward, choosing instead to sit down on a short nearby pillar.

“Might as well have a seat,” he said to Alix. “It doesn’t look like the griffin is going anywhere, so I think we can afford to wait for him to come to us.”

Alix frowned again, and begrudgingly took a seat next to Leon. But, she was still repeatedly glancing back at the griffin.

The two sat there in silence for several minutes, while the griffin continued to stare at them without moving. It seemed to Leon that it might have approached him if Alix weren’t there, but he couldn’t see a way for him to be sure without rudely demanding her to leave.

“So, what should we call this little thing?” he asked Alix, finally breaking the minutes-long silence.

“Anzu,” she replied immediately.

Leon was a little taken aback at the speed of her reply, so it took him a moment to respond. “... That was fast,” he murmured.

“I brought the Myths of Ninurta with me to read,” she explained.

“Ahh,” Leon said in understanding; he’d read that book before, so he needed no further explanation.

Xaphan, however, wasn't so familiar with Aeternan literature, so he piped up, asking, [What is she referring to?]

[A myth from the Eastern Territories,] Leon replied. [Before the First Bull King united these lands and instituted Ancestor worship, the people living near the Border Mountains worshipped a sky god named Ninurta. He was the bringer of rain, lightning, and sunlight. One of his myths involves him getting into a dispute with a lightning griffin, who steals a scroll detailing Ninurta's magical arts. The sky god fought with the griffin to retrieve his scroll, causing an enormous storm to break out over the entire mountain range. In the end, the griffin returned the scroll, and Ninurta recognized it as his brother and equal. The two were the best of friends from that moment onward.]

[... And I'm assuming that the griffin in that story was called 'Anzu'?] Xaphan asked.

[He was indeed,] Leon affirmed.

[Hmm, an appropriate name for a beast of the Thunderbird Clan...] the demon mused, returning to his normal silence.

"Anzu's a good name," Leon said out loud.

"Especially given how you ascended to the fourth-tier," Alix added with a smile, pointedly not mentioning his family's famous lightning arts.

Leon slowly nodded. Alix was giving an expectant look; she was clearly angling for an explanation but didn't want to outright ask for one, so instead, she brought it up to make her curiosity known. Leon, however, wasn't going to indulge her.

After a few seconds of silence, he said, "Do me a favor, Alix, and don't mention what happened to me during the storm to anyone..."

"Why not? I mean, I didn't intend to, but why?"

"It's a House Raime thing," he said. "It's best not to talk about too much..."

"I see..." Alix said quietly. She had known Leon's identity since Emilie had let it slip during the dinner they'd had together, but she hadn't been quite willing to bring it up again ever since their subsequent conversation, and Leon wasn't willing to offer much information, leaving her burning curiosity unsatisfied.

As they were talking, the griffin took a hesitant step forward, drawing their attention toward it.

"We can talk about this later," Leon said to Alix. "For now, let's focus on what's in front of us..." He quickly pulled out a few strips of dried meat and tossed them on the ground a few feet in front of him. The griffin's eyes followed the food as soon as it appeared, and it took another couple of tentative steps toward them. There had been about thirty or forty feet between the griffin, Leon, and Alix, but it took almost five minutes for the beast's hunger to overcome its caution and finally cross that distance.

"There's a good Anzu," Alix said softly as the griffin started to peck with its stubby pale-white beak at the meat on the ground.

As Alix happily watched Anzu eat, Leon's eyes were drawn to the Cradle, visible over even the tallest pillars in the maze.

'Now, I just have to figure out to get in there without Alix knowing...' he thought to himself. He briefly considered telling her what he was doing, but in the end, decided against it. Given how the Giants seemed to venerate the Cradle, he thought it best not to involve anyone else in his explorations. Besides, he didn't have a spare invisibility ring to give his squire.

Chapter 184: The Map

By the time Anzu had finished off the food Leon had laid out for him, his caution was long gone. He immediately bounded forward and rubbed up against Leon's leg. Leon chuckled and pulled out a few more strips of dried meat and Anzu began eating them out of his hand.

Alix watched this with a gleeful smile, and she extended a hand down to try and pet Anzu. However, the griffin clearly wasn't nearly so comfortable with her, as he darted out of the way of her hand and squeezed himself between one of Leon's legs and the rock he was sitting on. Alix frowned and retracted her hand, but Leon subtly took out one more piece of dried meat and gave it to her; Anzu wasn't able to see it as he was still hiding behind Leon's leg.

He did, however, see Alix lowering her hand down with the piece of meat. It took another few minutes, but Alix managed to coax him out from behind Leon's leg and take the food. But, he immediately returned to press himself against Leon's legs once he was done, to Alix's slight dismay.

"I don't think he likes me..." she said dejectedly.

"He spent the entire night alone after his mother abandoned it. I can't fault him for being slow to approach someone new," Leon said quietly. "As a matter of fact, I doubt he would approach me so readily if I hadn't been there when he opened his eyes or if I hadn't left it food last night."

Leon slowly lowered his hand down and laid it upon Anzu's head. The griffin froze, but he still allowed Leon to touch him.

"I would be a little more worried and disappointed if he was still reluctant to let you pet him after a few weeks," Leon reassured Alix.

"I hope so," Alix said hopefully as she stared at Anzu. "What kind of creature would abandon a cutie like that?!"

"A wild beast would. Anzu probably had two or three other siblings born at the same time, and his mother decided that her time would be better spent on keeping them alive than watching out for an albino. It's actually a fairly common thing for animals to do, in my experience."

"It's still monstrous," Alix spat bitterly.

"That's the way of the world," Leon said quietly. The conversation reminded him of Artorias and what he'd been told of Serana. It was easy for him to empathize with Anzu's lack of parents, even if the reasons for his own being absent weren't exactly the same.

There was a short period of silence while Leon smiled down at Anzu and softly rubbed the griffin's head. A few minutes later, Anzu laid down over Leon's feet and looked like he was getting ready to sleep.

“What are you going to do with him?” Alix asked. “Are you going to try and take him back to the Horns?”

“If I can, then I certainly will,” Leon answered. “Although, I’m sure there’s plenty of regulations that will make that difficult, let alone whether or not Anzu will actually cooperate and come with us.”

“Well, you should absolutely try!” Alix insisted. “I say we’re not leaving this little guy alone! We’re bringing him back with us!”

Leon chuckled a little at her definitive tone, and he glanced at her with a cocked eyebrow.

Instantly realizing what she had just done, Alix stiffened and nervously added, “... Sir!”

“Relax,” Leon said. “I’ll bring it up with Sir Aquillius when I get back.”

The two spent about an hour with Anzu, who fell asleep draped over Leon’s feet. Leon decided to get in a little training so as not to waste the time, and he had Alix meditate as well. When that hour was up, Leon stood up, waking Anzu and disturbing Alix’s meditation.

“What’s up?” Alix asked.

Leon thought for a moment, as he still didn’t quite know what to say that would let him get back to the Cradle without Alix. After a few seconds, he said, “... I’m craving some solitude...”

Alix gave him a strange and slightly offended look.

“I don’t mean anything against you, Alix, but I just don’t get a lot of opportunities for seclusion, so I’m sorry for being rude, but I’m taking this chance to head into the maze for a few hours.”

“How long will you be in there?” Alix inquired as politely as she could, but she still couldn’t help but frown.

“A few hours probably,” Leon answered. “I’ll be back by nightfall at the very latest.”

Alix grumbled under her breath a bit, but she didn’t stop Leon from walking into the maze. Leon still felt her eyes boring holes into his back, though, and he felt every bit the asshole he knew he was being by leaving her behind. Anzu, meanwhile, had gotten to his feet and scampered off after Leon, leaving Alix to sigh and resume meditating all by herself.

As soon as he was out of sight of Alix, Leon started running through the maze with Anzu hot on his heels. Leon had to slow himself down a little so as to not lose the baby griffin, but he didn’t lose too much time. Soon enough, the pair arrived at the edge of the maze, with nothing between them and the Cradle except five intimidating Giants.

[How do you plan on getting past those things?] Xaphan asked curiously. [I doubt they’ll let you or your new pet pass without trying to turn you both into bloody smears on the ground.]

[I have an idea...] Leon said. He then crouched down without elaborating, much to Xaphan’s annoyance.

“Now, let’s see if this will work...” Leon muttered as he gently picked up Anzu. The griffin didn’t seem too thrilled at being held, but he didn’t struggle against Leon, either. Leon then began channeling his magic into his invisibility ring, and to his relief, both he and Anzu disappeared.

[Ahh, so you're going to carry him inside rather than leave him outside... Not a bad idea, that didn't even occur to me,] Xaphan said.

[I'm a little paranoid about leaving him out alone again, so I'd like to stay as close as possible,] Leon explained. [But, if I were to pick him up after turning invisible, I'd probably instantly become visible again. However, since my sword and armor don't seem to interfere with the ring when I have them equipped, I figured Anzu would turn invisible with me so long as I was holding him. I'm glad to be proven right.]

[... I can tell you weren't too confident in your plan,] Xaphan said teasingly. [You're taking pride in it, but if you *really* felt like it would work, you would've told me.]

[And why would I do that, demon?]

[To gloat.]

Leon scowled, but fortunately, his face was too transparent for Xaphan to notice.

So, while holding Anzu to his chest, Leon silently slipped past the Giant guards again, and he hurried back into the Cradle.

This time, the inside of the building looked a little different. As it was daytime, the projection on the ceiling changed to match, showing a perfect blue sky and a handful of fluffy white clouds. And, just like the moon the night before, there was no sun in the projected sky.

Leon didn't linger in the great hall, choosing to instead hurry back to the central dome. He let Anzu down by the door, and the griffin cub eagerly followed him as fast as his baby lion legs could carry him.

Everything within the main chamber was exactly as Leon had left it the night before, save for the ceiling which had changed to a daytime scene just like the previous hall. Leon immediately made for the central pool with Anzu sticking to his heels. However, as soon as he began to cross the pool, Anzu halted at the water's edge. Looking back, Leon saw the griffin constantly looking between him and the water, as if he were unsure what he should do.

'I think this one's instincts are more feline than avian...' Leon thought, Anzu's behavior reminding him of a few wild cats he'd seen that were reluctant to get too close to water. He shrugged and continued on, while Anzu decided that he didn't want to cross the water, so he sat down at the edge and stared at Leon.

Once on the platform, Leon looked down to examine the runes beneath the reflective surface. Many of the individual glyphs spun and rotated around, making it difficult to concentrate on any one single aspect of the enchantment, so Leon sighed and took a seat, resigning himself to a long period of study.

More than two hours passed before he moved again. Sitting still and concentrating for so long made him a little stiff and tired, so he rose to his feet and started walking back across the pool.

[Did you make any progress?] Xaphan asked him.

[No. Did you?]

[Nope, these enchantments are completely new to me.]

[Yeah... Yeah... I don't think we're going to figure this out in the few days we're going to be staying in the crater...] Leon said desolately.

[I'm sure there will be opportunities to come back, especially with the peace agreement that Aquillius guy is working on. I'm sure even *you* will have time enough to figure this out eventually,] Xaphan responded with a teasing tone.

Ignoring the obvious jab, Leon stated, [We don't even know what these rods do, or the purpose of this place, since it doesn't look like to me like a place where Stone Giants might have been built.]

[Don't forget that there's still a collapsed hall, and besides, the Giants may have been brought from elsewhere as laborers, they don't necessarily have to have been born here.]

[And yet, they still call this place 'the Cradle'.]

[A lot of people call a lot of things by weird names, doesn't mean those things are what they're called.]

Leon sighed; he couldn't really argue that point. The Cradle was obviously built by the Thunderbird Clan, judging by the familiar architecture and the numerous statues of Thunderbirds around, and Leon just wanted to know what this place had been built for.

Once he crossed the pool, Leon started to walk around the chamber with Anzu close behind. The chamber was quite spacious, being completely devoid of any furniture or decorations, except for the small gardens along the edges of the room and the murals of projected light behind them. Leon paced around the chamber thinking and ruminating on the enchantment, while he stared at the murals out of a lack of other places to look.

And then, he suddenly stopped and stared at one particular section of the mural, with his eyes widening and his jaw opening in shock.

[Is that... what I think it is?] Leon asked Xaphan as his eyes scanned the entire section of the mural that had caught his eyes.

[What is it?] Xaphan asked as he, too, started to pay attention to the mural.

The part that had drawn Leon's eye was actually three small sections in sequence. The first section showed a humanoid figure sitting cross-legged between two grey rods tipped with red diamond shapes—clearly rubies. The second section showed a cross-shaped building being struck by lightning. The third section showed a nearly identical copy of the first section, only with lightning arcing out of the rods and into the sitting figure.

[Are these murals... instructions?] Leon asked. [I thought they were just decorations, but this bit looks like the central platform, that building is clearly *this* building, and I think that last bit is what the rods are supposed to do!]

[Huh...] was the only thing that Xaphan could utter in his own annoyance at missing something so obvious.

Leon quickly scanned the entire mural along the walls of the dome. Most of it was hidden behind the trees, and when he squeezed himself between the trees and the walls, he judged that those sections *were* only as decorative as he'd first assumed. But, there were five sections where the trees left

a big gap, and these parts of the mural Leon realized weren't simply decorative. The one that had drawn his eye seemed to show what the purpose of the central rotunda was, while the other four, Leon guessed, showed what had gone on in the four great halls.

[So, what do you make of it?] Xaphan asked.

[I think that this was a place for young mages to train,] Leon answered. [It looks like they'd sit in the center of the platform during a storm, and somehow train their lightning magic.]

[That... actually makes a lot of sense,] Xaphan said. [I've heard that that's how many lightning demons train, by directing lightning into their residences. Places rich in ambient lightning magic are rare, after all, so it's understandable in my eyes that places like this would be constructed—assuming you're not misinterpreting anything, of course.]

[Of course,] Leon answered with a large amount of sarcasm. [It's just a shame there's no storm out right now, otherwise we could put it to a test.]

Leon frowned, disappointed in his own interpretation of the mural, and moved on to the next mural. This depicted a handful of figures bowing and maybe worshipping one large figure in the center. This was also just outside the hall where Leon had found the door inscribed with 'Prince Nestor', so he guessed that that hall was simply the residence for the Prince and his retainers.

The next mural was cut into two sections, with one showing half a dozen figures hunched over a table or a desk, and the other with those same figures stacked horizontally on top of one another.

'Offices and common residences?' Leon guessed. He had no way to know for sure, so he decided to go with his guess and move on to the next mural.

The fourth mural—next to the destroyed hall—showed two figures with their arms raised aloft, commanding a dozen much larger figures. Leon could see the smaller ones that seemed to be in charge weren't any different to the figures in the other murals, but the larger figures were a monochrome grey—Stone Giants.

[I suppose that's proof the Giants come from the Thunderbird Clan...] Leon muttered.

[Fuckin' called it,] Xaphan gloated.

Leon moved on to the final mural. All it appeared to be was a map, but it was easily the mural that affected Leon the most. It showed the entire plane of Aeterna, from the most distant coasts in the south all the way to the mountains in the deepest parts of the Frozen Mountain Range. What interested Leon the most, however, were about three dozen golden lights that were spread out around the entire plane.

It took a few seconds for Leon to understand what he was looking at, given that Aeterna under the Thunderbird Clan was a completely different political entity than what existed now, and the mural's stylization and lack of political borders had thrown him off a little. Once he got his bearings, though, his eyes wandered the map, scanning over every golden light. It wasn't until he got to the north where the Bull Kingdom now stood that he fully understood what the lights meant, though.

First, he saw a golden light approximately where the Cradle was located. There was another light in the same location as Teira, as well as one more about where Leon knew the prison to be located. Finally,

there was one more light in the least likely place Leon expected: the northeastern corner of the Forest of Black and White.

Chapter 185: An Unexpected Storm

Leon stared at the light in the Northeastern corner of the Northern Vale he'd grown up in.

"What is that doing *there*?" he muttered incredulously.

[What is it?] Xaphan asked.

[I grew up here,] Leon replied, pointing to the relatively tiny Forest of Black and White on the map.

[Oh? Then what's that light represent? It looks like the Cradle, your archives, and *that place* are marked, so it should be a location of some importance to the Thunderbird Clan.]

[I have no idea what's there,] Leon said truthfully. [Not in all the years my father and I lived there did we go so far to the east.]

[Why not? I'd figure that anyone who spends so much time in so small a place would know everything there is to know about it...] Xaphan responded disbelievingly.

[Well, my father certainly went farther east than I did, but he always told me that there were far more dangerous creatures in the eastern-most reaches of the vale, and to stay away from there.]

[Dangerous for you, or for him?] Xaphan asked.

Leon thought for a moment, then said, [... Hard to say for sure. Too dangerous for me, who was barely a first-tier mage back then? For sure. But for him, a powerful seventh-tier mage... I honestly don't know.]

[Don't wait too long to see for yourself,] the demon said with some impatience.

[I know...] Leon muttered. [It's just another damned thing I'm going to have to keep in mind. How many things am I going to have to revisit when I'm stronger?! This had better be the last one!]

[You say that as if you have any power to change things,] Xaphan said teasingly. [How about you simply copy down that map, and we can visit every light on it as we find the time. I must admit, exploring more Thunderbird Clan ruins is an enticing prospect, even if I can't stand their architecture.]

[I know,] Leon said, resigning himself to adding this to his laundry list of things he had to do when he became strong enough to do so.

He pulled out some paper from his satchel and hurriedly copied the map as best as he could. It took about half an hour for him to be satisfied with the quality and accuracy of his map sketch, and he double and triple-checked to make sure he wasn't missing anything important.

[I wonder if Heaven's Eye has any information on any ruins at these sites?] Leon wondered.

[Ask your girlfriend, I'm sure she'll have some useful information.]

[I don't doubt that; Heaven's Eye is too powerful not to have at least *some* knowledge of these sites. Besides, I'm sure that many of these ruins have already been explored and pillaged, so that should narrow down at least a handful of these lights.]

[Makes sense,] Xaphan agreed.

[In the meantime...] Leon said, pausing for a moment as he turned his attention back to the platform in the center of the rotunda, [... I suppose we ought to get back to figuring out how this thing works.]

[Did you already forget what you figured out only a moment ago? I can't say I'm surprised, but if you're truly so absent-minded, I suppose I can deign to remind you,] Xaphan said with sarcasm almost dripping from his words.

[I know I said this place seemed to be a training ground, but that mural was hardly very specific about *how* to use those damned rods!] Leon retorted. He walked back over to the mural, and all it showed was a figure sitting cross-legged in the center of the platform, something which he'd already done. [This middle mural seems to indicate that a storm is needed, so it's possible I won't be able to make use of this thing at all...]

[Just the kind of defeatist attitude I expect from a human,] Xaphan teased.

[And what is *your* interpretation of this? If you have some nuggets of wisdom to drop on me, then please don't be shy!] Leon shouted back.

[Look, waiting for storms to come around is hardly efficient, is it?] Xaphan asked. Leon couldn't disagree, as in the past year or so since he experienced the first thunderstorm that left him dazed, he'd only seen about half a dozen more, including when he had ascended to the fourth-tier. In fact, he hadn't even seen any storms since then.

[I guess...] Leon agreed.

[Then I would hazard a guess and say that there's something around here that's been storing magic power in order for whoever might make use of this facility to train as they pleased—or, if not that, then with slightly more reliability than only during storms. Since many of the enchantments in this place still function, then there's definitely still magic power left in the building.]

Leon's eyes widened in realization, and he turned his gaze up toward the diamond in the center of the dome, shining a bright gold like a fake sun. With a smile, he hurried back to the platform, leaving Anzu at the edge of the pool. However, once he got there, he didn't have much of an idea of what to do next, so he sat down and crossed his legs in the center of the platform, just like the figure in the mural had done.

And nothing happened.

[You... didn't *really* expect something to happen just with that?] Xaphan asked derisively after several minutes. [You've already done that, and nothing happened! Looking at a mural won't change that!]

[I know,] Leon said quietly. [I'm just thinking. And examining the enchantment again.]

Half an hour of silence passed while Leon continued to study the spiraling enchantment. He managed to at least isolate and identify more than ten thousand runes making up around twenty glyphs, but with all of them rotating and circling independently, it was difficult for him to be certain of the exact number. Making matters more complicated, every five minutes, one of the glyphs would dissolve, and the runes would either form a new glyph or join existing ones.

'So there's constant maintenance going on, with glyphs being created and destroyed within the enchantment as needed...' Leon thought to himself. He was absolutely fascinated with the construction of the enchantment, and the more progress he made, the more he wanted to study it.

[Hmmm,] Leon said so Xaphan could hear, [there's far more than just lightning runes within. I count at least five hundred lightning runes, but there are also more than one hundred air runes, and at least thirty water runes...]

[If the enchantment controls and channels the magic of a storm, then wouldn't there have to be more than just lightning runes?] Xaphan asked.

[I guess...] Leon responded. Xaphan wasn't too much help with this particular enchantment, given that there wasn't a single fire rune to be seen within, but he'd hoped that the demon would be able to at least provide some assistance with the overall structure of the enchantment and its glyphs.

[Maybe you're getting too caught up in the enchantment itself. Perhaps you could try examining the rods?] Xaphan suggested.

[Huh. Good idea, why didn't I think of that?] Leon wondered aloud.

[Because you're only a young dumb human, as you admitted last night after realizing you missed the perfect symbol for your armor,] Xaphan smugly replied.

Leon clenched his jaw and forced himself not to respond, then approached one of the metal rods for a closer examination.

He found that, although they looked simple from far away, they had extremely faint etchings creating a design that made it look like the rods were made of thousands of different-sized needles. The etchings on the top face of the rod created a similar segmented pattern, with a ruby the size of Leon's palm glittering in the center.

Leon analyzed the rod as best he could, but he wasn't able to get far. The etchings seemed decorative, the ruby was dazzling but magically inert, and he couldn't sense even the slightest trace of magic within the rod itself. Disappointed, Leon moved on to the next rod, and the next, until he had examined all eight. None of them were meaningfully different from the first.

[Well, I'll admit that I'm stumped. We don't have the time to properly analyze the enchantment, and the rods are a dead end...] Leon said with obvious dejection.

[Are they?] Xaphan asked mischievously.

[Aren't they?] Leon countered.

[You didn't touch them, so can you really say that you examined them properly?]

[What good will touching them do?]

[Probably none—especially not with your pathetic lack of magic senses—but it never hurts to try.]

Leon was silent for a long moment, squinting at the closest rod. [Did you sense something, demon?]

Xaphan didn't respond, but Leon took his silence as confirmation that he did. He sighed, but it came out more like a low growl, and he approached the rod he was staring at. With a great deal of hesitation, he slowly extended his hand and brushed the tips of his fingers against the body of the rod.

And he didn't sense anything.

Leon frowned and started to brush his fingers more deliberately against the rod, feeling every shallow etching in the otherwise smooth metal. And yet, he still felt nothing.

[What did you sense, demon?] Leon demanded.

[Try examining the gem a little closer...] Xaphan said with his air of mystery that Leon was finding increasingly irritating.

With his frown deepening, Leon gently reached out for the ruby. As soon as his fingertips made contact with the ruby, he felt a sharp shock journey through his entire arm, and he let out a cry of pain as his arm fell to his side completely numb.

"AAARGH! Fucking Ancestors damn it!" he bellowed. Anzu, waiting patiently by the edge of the pool, shot to his paws and stared at Leon. The griffin made a low whining noise and started to shift his focus between Leon and the water in the pool again. He wanted to join Leon on the platform, but he still couldn't get past his antipathy toward the water.

Xaphan's reaction, however, was to laugh uproariously. In between great guffaws, he managed to gasp out a few words, [HAHAHA... you'll need... more magic... in your... arm... to stop that!]

With his fury mounting, Leon clenched his teeth to prevent himself from screaming in frustration at Xaphan's lack of answers, and he flexed his shocked arm, quickly regaining feeling in it. His left arm, meanwhile, instinctively went down to grip the handle of his sword. Leon was too angry to make the connection, but his arm immediately started to feel better as soon as his hand touched the weapon.

With his right arm rapidly recovering, Leon channeled a fair portion of his magic into it and reached out for the ruby again.

[I swear, demon, if this damned thing shocks me again you and I are going to have words!] he snarled.

[Well excuse me while I shake in my boots!] Xaphan said sarcastically.

[You're a dick...] Leon muttered just as his fingers made contact with the ruby again.

This time, Leon prepared for the shock, and when it came, his magic was there to fight it. His power easily dissipated the foreign lightning magic, and Leon didn't feel more than a few brief seconds of discomfort.

But, once the shock was over, and Leon's fingers lingered on the ruby, something strange began to happen: the ruby began to glow and change colors. In fact, Leon immediately started to doubt whether it was actually a ruby, as its bright red shifted to a shining orange, then to brilliant gold, and finally settling on a gleaming silver-blue.

[What... is this?] he asked.

[Some kind of diamond specifically used to channel and store magic power,] Xaphan answered. [I'm going to guess that once you activate all of the gems on the rods, the platform should activate. Should.]

Biting his tongue, as he didn't want to say something that could later be used to embarrass him, Leon began to activate the other seven rods. Each one would give him the same shock the first had, but as he had prepared his magic beforehand, none did anything more than sting a little.

Unknown to Leon was that these shocks were also having a great effect on his soul realm. Xaphan watched as bluish-white lightning arced around the tiny island every time Leon touched one of the diamonds. This lightning possessed a terrifying aura, one that even Xaphan was apprehensive of, despite the front he showed to his partner.

'If anyone except one of the Thunderbird Clan touched one of these rods, they'd probably be turned to ash...' the demon thought, wincing slightly with every blast of thunder that accompanied these lightning bolts.

As soon as Leon finished with the last diamond, he returned to the center of the platform.

[What now?] he asked as he looked around at the glimmering silver diamonds. [I've changed the color of the gems, but that seems to be it...]

[This place hasn't been used for millennia, give it some time,] Xaphan said.

—

Alix was quietly meditating in the maze, pouting and more than a little offended that Leon had abandoned her to gallivant around the maze. However, she felt the crater's shallow breeze start to pick up, and she suddenly smelled rain in the air. Her eyes snapped open, and she saw deep black storm clouds materialize over the entire crater. She leaped to her feet, as it was obvious to anyone with the power of sight that this wasn't natural.

The wind continued to pick up, and more and more clouds began to coalesce over the crater. Alix didn't know what to do, whether she should wait for Leon or to hurry back to Rakos' hall. In the end, her loyalty to her knight and her desire to live up to her own knightly ideals kept her feet planted.

However, the now-dark sky began to light up with bolts of lightning and the crater resounded with booming thunder. The ground shook, and Alix thought for a moment that this lightning was so powerful that it was shaking the ground, but several seconds later she saw the real reason: every Stone Giant in the crater had abandoned their halls and began sprinting toward the Cradle, where the clouds were thickest.

"Miss Alix!" came a shout from just outside the maze. Alix spun around and saw Aquillius coming to a halt just behind her. "What's going on?!" he demanded.

"These clouds just appeared!" she shouted.

"Where's Sir Leon?"

"He went to do some solitary training somewhere in these pillars!" she answered.

"Shit..." the diplomat whispered.

The two waited there for several minutes as the rest of the diplomatic party and their Legion escorts hurried over. Even those who had gone to explore the Crater arrived in short order.

“Well, let’s go see what the fuss is a-“ Aquillius began, but he was interrupted when a blinding bolt of golden lightning fell upon the top of the Cradle’s dome and filled the Crater with a deafening clap of thunder.

Before Aquillius could repeat himself, another bolt fell onto the Cradle, followed by a third and fourth, and in seconds, dozens of lightning bolts were striking the top of the Cradle’s dome.

Chapter 186: Lightning

The giants gathered around the platform of basalt pillars that held up the Cradle. Rakos stood in front, with Lapis and the chiefs of the subordinate tribes right behind it. When Aquillius and the other members of the party arrived, the giants were standing stock-still and silent as they seemed to stare at the Cradle.

Golden lightning continued to strike the top of the dome at least once a second, and the hundred or so humans were forced to be just as silent as the giants, as the thunder was so deafening that any attempt to speak would be pointless. Again and again, brilliant golden lightning bolts fell upon the dome. As everyone was transfixed, rain slowly began to pour.

‘What is this?’ Aquillius wondered, not caring at all about the rain soaking his clothes and flattening his hair. *‘No way this is natural, the storm appeared too quickly for that. And where is Sir Leon?! Not a damned chance he hasn’t noticed this phenomenon, so where is... No...’*

Aquillius had a sudden idea, or rather, a suspicion, and his eyes turned from searching the crowd back to the Cradle.

‘If he’s in that damned building, and he’s putting three years of my hard work at risk ... I’m going to skin him alive! He’s going to push so many papers the paper cuts will bleed him dry! I will drown him in the lowest reaches of bureaucracy!’

—

Leon had no idea any of this was going on outside, as the dome was effectively soundproofed and kept even the loudest blasts of thunder from reaching his ears. However, with every lightning strike, the diamond in the ceiling grew brighter and its aura grew greater, and he couldn’t help but watch it with increasing trepidation.

“I’m surprised that thing hasn’t exploded, yet...” Leon muttered out loud.

[That diamond is, without a doubt, the keystone for this entire training room, so of course it can handle the function it was designed for,] Xaphan said with a hint of scorn.

Leon frowned and was about to respond, when a blinding bolt of golden lightning erupted from the diamond in the ceiling, split into eight separate bolts only three or four feet above Leon’s head, and struck the gems in the eight rods. The bluish-white gems then glowed even brighter, and Leon could feel a huge amount of magic building up within them.

[I would recommend getting ready to train, this place isn't going to wait around for you,] Xaphan warned.

[... Right...] Leon nervously responded. He then sat down in the center of the platform, but he continued to stare alternatively at the rods and the ceiling diamond.

After a few more minutes of waiting around, another bolt of lightning was discharged from the ceiling diamond into the rods. This bolt was more than twice as large as the first, and the rotunda shook from the ear-splitting roar of thunder. It was so loud, in fact, that Leon momentarily blacked out, and when he regained his sight and hearing he found that he'd collapsed on the platform, and had to push himself back into sitting position.

To prevent something like that from happening again, he channeled a significant amount of his magic power into his ears, which was fortuitously just in time for a third lightning bolt to fall from the ceiling and into the rods. Again, this bolt was stronger than the previous two, but Leon was ready and so he remained conscious.

'How long is this going to take?!' he thought as he stared at the rods. *'This training can't only consist of sitting here and enduring the light and sound of lightning, can it?!'*

As if to answer his question, a fourth bolt of lightning exploded out of the ceiling diamond, finally providing enough power for the rods to perform their function. Leon could feel that the charge built up within had reached its tipping point, and he prepared himself as best he could without knowing exactly what would happen. He also began to nervously grasp the sword at his hip for comfort, which seemed to do the trick as his heart rate slowed and his muscles relaxed.

And then, arcing out of all the rods simultaneously, came eight small lightning bolts that struck Leon in various parts of his body. In that moment, Leon's entire existence became pain, and all the muscles in his body seized up so tightly that he couldn't even scream. It was with barely a whimper that he again collapsed on the platform and was so stiff that he resembled a toppled statue.

[Keep channeling your magic!] Xaphan shouted. Leon could barely hear the demon, but he did as instructed, and he circulated his magic power within his body as much as he could. Over the course of fifteen seconds, he slowly regained control of his body, starting with his left arm which was still gripping his sword.

[What kind of training is this?!] Leon said angrily through gritted teeth.

[It's not uncommon,] Xaphan said, [my own personal training chamber back in the Void concentrated a large amount of magical fire and immersed me within it. Just try to absorb the lightning magic as best you can, and it'll help you with changing your own element-less magic power into more lightning magic.]

With a resigned sigh, Leon pushed himself back into a sitting posture and waited for the next blast of lightning. He called forth as much magic power from his soul realm as he could and closed his eyes so as to try and keep himself as relaxed as possible. This was only moderately effective, as his body shook with anticipation.

It took more than two minutes, and three more bolts from the ceiling diamond, for the next round of lightning from the rods. Leon was ready for it—or at least, as ready as he could be—and he managed to

stay in his sitting position this time. However, the lightning magic rampaged throughout his body, causing an indescribable amount of pain. He tried to channel his magic to fight against it, but his own magic was ripped out of his blood and melted away in the face of this tremendous power.

[Don't fight against it! *Absorb* it!] Xaphan shouted. As he was in Leon's soul realm, he could tell that the latter wasn't absorbing any of the foreign magic power.

[How... do I... do that?!] Leon shouted. He was in so much pain that even those five words spoken in his head took titanic effort.

[Just as you would your own power: draw it into your chest and channel it into your soul realm!]

Leon clenched his jaw again and began to try and assert control over the lightning rampaging through his body. It took an enormous amount of willpower, as he couldn't just gather all the power together with his hands, but he was just barely able to direct the lightning into his chest. He could feel his chest expand with all of the power gathering there, and much of it leaked out back into the rest of his body. With great effort, he grasped as much of the lightning magic as he could by wrapping it with his own power and started forcing it into his soul realm.

And then, Leon felt his heart stop. So much lightning was coursing through it so it could be absorbed, that it simply stopped beating. However, the pain of this happening paled in comparison to what he was already experiencing, and he just kept going.

It took thirty seconds of mind-bending agony, but Leon managed to absorb all of the lightning magic. When his body was free of the foreign magic, Leon felt the pressure in his chest dissipate and his heart began to beat again, and he took several deep breaths to steady himself.

[I have to be honest, demon, I never would've thought of absorbing this magic,] Leon said, trying to distract himself from the residual pain left over from the lightning bolts, and from the pain he knew he was still in for.

[This is a place for training, it wouldn't make much sense if the magic couldn't be absorbed,] Xaphan said.

[Yeah, I get that,] Leon replied, [but my father always taught me to avoid absorbing foreign magic if I could get away with it.]

[You've taken plenty of foreign magic into your body before, such as when you drank my potion, and even when you breathe in the air around you that's filled with foreign magic. This isn't that much different, fundamentally. You should only avoid magic absorption when that magic is still under the control of another mage. To take someone else's power into your soul realm is indescribably dangerous, as they can then use that power to cause you horrific damage.]

The rods sparked, and more lightning struck Leon, cutting off the conversation.

Leon could feel every bolt rushing through his body, ravaging everything it touched. He could feel his body locking up, but he held on to his consciousness as tightly as he could and did everything within his power to direct that lightning magic into his soul realm.

Within Leon's soul realm, Xaphan braced himself for another wave of lightning. The throne Leon's pseudo-magic body was slumped over began to spark and glow, and immense bolts of golden lightning rushed out. These bolts arced out into the Mists of Chaos surrounding Leon's small island, vanishing deep within. Still, Xaphan could feel the aura within Leon's soul realm growing more violent and tempestuous, more akin to that of a lightning mage.

'He'd better not slack off on training fire,' the demon grumbled silently. *'Too much more of this, and the magic I can siphon off will be much harder for me to train with, and this little kid actually will surpass me!'*

Every time Leon was struck with lightning from the rods, he endured it. He eventually became so numb to the pain it caused that he stopped feeling it. Everything else faded from his mind, and the only thing he could think about was the lightning in his body.

However, the bolts that the rods launched at him weren't static, they increased in potency with every round. Leon had to circulate his magic faster and faster to keep enough control of his body to channel all of this lightning into his soul realm. He didn't even realize it, but he was instinctively compressing his own magic in order to make it move through his body faster.

By the thirtieth round of lightning, Leon countered one of the bolts rampaging through his body with magic of his own. His intent was to corral the lightning and move it toward his chest, as he'd been doing, but suddenly, his own highly compressed magic seemed to explode with speed and power. This magic glowed and sparked within him, and slammed into the lightning bolt, instantly canceling it out and dissipating both magics.

Leon's eyes, closed in his meditative trance, snapped open. For a long moment, he contemplated what he had just done, but the rest of the lightning bolts jerked him back to reality, and he went back to channeling them into his soul realm. As he did, he consciously compressed his magic and allowed it to arc throughout his body, mimicking the very lightning he was trying to control. With thirty rounds of examples, Leon found it almost comically easy to do.

As his magic raced throughout his body, it underwent a radical transformation, taking on the power and characteristics of lightning. Leon realized then that his body was completely relaxed, and he didn't feel any pain—in fact, he felt quite comfortable.

His magic did everything he wanted it to do. He compressed it until it violently exploded outward, arcing through his body exactly where he wanted it to go. He sent some power into his right arm, and he could see tiny sparks of lightning arc around his fingers. With the amount of magic he'd already absorbed fueling his growth, Leon felt like he could conjure a thousand lightning spears described in his family's books of magic, and if he weren't in the middle of the training platform, he'd put that feeling to the test.

[I daresay that you've ascended to the fifth-tier, boy,] Xaphan stated. The demon was rather conflicted at this turn of events, as on one hand, Leon was better able to protect both of them. On the other, the young man was rapidly catching up to him, and he wasn't too comfortable with that.

Instead of responding to the jealous demon, Leon patiently waited for the next round of lightning. He sat there reveling in his power, building the 'muscle memory' he'd need to reliably call upon it in battle.

However, such a good thing couldn't go on forever; Leon was only able to absorb three more rounds of lightning before the dome above him cracked from the strain of the storm outside. The building looked quite formidable, but it had endured for eighty-thousand years without meaningful maintenance and was far more fragile than it appeared. The amount of lightning striking the dome and the transfer of that magical power was eventually too much for the Cradle to bear, leading to the crack that interrupted Leon's training.

This crack prevented more magic power from flowing into the diamond, which in turn meant no more power flowing into the rods. The gems in the rods and the diamond in the ceiling rapidly dimmed, while a few more cracks appeared in the dome above.

"Oh shit..." Leon muttered as the projected sky sputtered and blinked out of existence, showing him exactly how bad the damage was.

Small cracks and weaknesses in the concrete dome that had already been there, but hidden by the fake sky, turned into large cracks that snaked and spider-webbed all throughout the dome.

[That thing's going to come down, get out of here!] Xaphan shouted.

Leon didn't need any more encouragement, so he shot to his feet and sprinted off the platform. He didn't even bother looking to make sure he was landing on one of the marble platforms, and he consequently landed in the pool. He couldn't care less about the water that soaked his boots, because as soon as he leaped off the platform, the diamond in the ceiling came loose and fell. The platform fractured under the impact of the massive rock, and several of the rods were bent outward and discharged the last vestiges of their stored lightning magic, launching bolts of lightning at the walls.

"Of course it's fucking broken!" Leon yelled in frustration.

[Whine about that later, for now, get out of here!] Xaphan responded.

The destruction of the dome didn't stop with the fall of the diamond. It was an incredibly old structure, with only the enchantments in the building holding the structure together. With the diamond gone, the dome continued to crack, and tiny chunks of concrete were already starting to rain down into the rotunda.

With narrowed eyes and a determined look, Leon turned away from the platform and ran for the exit, but he didn't get far before he came to halt—he couldn't see Anzu, the griffin wasn't waiting for him at the edge of the pool. He frantically scanned the room as a big chunk of concrete several times larger than his body detached itself from the ceiling and fell into the pool with a titanic crash.

"Anzu!" Leon shouted. He didn't really expect the griffin to come running, as Anzu had only received the name earlier that day, but there wasn't much else he could do. Fortunately, when he heard Leon's slightly panicked cry, Anzu poked his tiny eagle's head out of the bush he'd been hiding in near the outer edge of the rotunda. The griffin had been absolutely terrified of the massive amounts of lightning and thunder that had filled the rotunda, and when Leon didn't move for a long while, he'd gone and hidden in fear.

Leon saw the little griffin appear from the bush, and he immediately sprinted over and scooped the beast into his arms, much to Anzu's consternation. The griffin thrashed and fought to get out of Leon's

arms, and two more chunks of the dome collapsing during those few seconds didn't help, making him that much more scared.

But, Leon ignored the griffin's terrified struggles to get out of his arms, and he ran as fast as he could to the nearest great hall, leaving the dome to finish its collapse.

Chapter 187: Judgement of the Giants

Leon raced out of the collapsing dome with a terrified Anzu in his arms. For a brief moment, he thought that he would be safe enough in the great hall he'd run into to take things a little slower and sneak back outside, but one look at the ceiling told him how wrong he was; just like in the dome, the projected sky in the hall had dissolved, showing hundreds of widening cracks that threatened to bring the concrete ceiling crashing down on his head.

Without missing a step, Leon sprinted through the great hall to the sound of the rest of the dome giving out behind him. He was so focused on getting out of the building that he barely even registered the hall starting to collapse behind him, or the clamor of rain and wind that now made its way inside. The only things he paid any attention to were the thrashing Anzu he was holding to his chest, the doors in front of him and the ring on his right hand.

"Settle down, damn it!" he shouted in frustration at Anzu, and the griffin must have picked up on something in his voice as the tiny beast settled down, though his eyes were still wide with fear.

The collapse of the dome had jostled the door somewhat, and he could see through the crack that the plate was gone. This small piece of good fortune, however, went unappreciated in his desire to get outside, and the emerald in Leon's ring pulsed with power—opening the plate would've broken his invisibility, so with the plate gone, he didn't hesitate to activate his invisibility ring. Leon had to wait for a brief few seconds at the door of the hall for the light around him to bend and for his body to fade from sight.

'Faster... Faster!' he thought with increasing panic as he looked back and saw the hall crumble. The ceiling was disintegrating, and the largest pieces of concrete were destabilizing the walls and columns supporting the galleries on both sides, which also started to collapse. As soon as the ring fully activated and his body faded from view, Leon burst out of the doors, leaving the devastated Cradle behind.

—

Aquillius and the rest of his team watched in awe as the lightning struck the top of the dome again and again. The rain that soaked their clothes and the wind in their ears were minor annoyances, but they weren't going to leave as long the giants were still there and whatever was happening with the Cradle continued. And then, about an hour after the unnatural storm first began, there was a tremendous cracking sound, and the storm immediately began to clear up.

"What the hell...?" Juliana said in confusion.

The sheets of rain thinned out to a gentle downpour, while the wind slowly died down from the howling gale into a brisk breeze.

"That thing's going to fall apart..." Lucilius observed, noticing the cracks visible in the dome even from where they were standing once the clouds had thinned enough to let a decent amount of light through.

Sure enough, only a few seconds later, the dome began to sag and crumple, and the plates on the doors disappeared. Aquillius started to alternatively stare at the dome and at the giants, but the latter watched the collapse of their sacred Cradle in complete silence. In fact, most of them weren't moving at all. He expected them to show some kind of anger, but he'd also never seen a stone giant angry, so for all he knew, they were seething with rage and he just couldn't identify it.

'Best to keep our distance until I can get a better read on the mood... And until we can locate Sir Ursus...' he thought to himself. Again, he scanned the crowd for Leon, but he still couldn't see the younger knight.

The dome finally gave out, crumbling in pieces right before everyone's eyes. The force of the dome coming down then caused the three deceptively unstable great halls to begin their own rapid destruction, with the ceilings going first followed by the walls and columns tipping over and falling apart.

"Fucking hell..." muttered Antonius, the knight in charge of the company of soldiers acting as security for the diplomats. "It almost looks like that place was designed to fall apart all at once..."

"That can't be *entirely* true, or else that other ruined hall would've brought the whole thing down centuries ago..." Eleanor responded.

As they spoke, they saw the door of the closest hall burst open. Everyone focused their eyes on the door for a moment, but when they didn't see anything, they turned their eyes back to the building as a whole. Most of Aquillius' group assumed that the force of the Cradle's destruction had simply caused the door to open.

Rakos, however, did not make that assumption. The stone giant began to move, drawing Aquillius' attention, as none of the other giants had moved an inch since the storm began. Rakos took two steps forward, then drove its fist straight into the ground. The Cradle's platform shook with the impact and cracks spread out from the giant's rocky arm.

—

Leon practically flew out of the Cradle once the door was open, and he was concentrating so completely on getting out of the collapsing building that he didn't notice the hundreds of stone giants surrounding the Cradle until he'd put ten or fifteen feet between himself and the door. The sight was intimidating as hell, and Leon couldn't help but come to a near-instantaneous halt.

The young mage stared out at the sea of giants in front of him, frozen and thinking fast about what he should do. However, he also saw Aquillius, Alix, and the rest of the diplomatic party standing on a large outcropping of pillars near the edge of the maze. Leon began trying to make his way over as quietly as he could, without disturbing the giants.

Suddenly, Rakos surged forward and punched the ground, sending cracks in Leon's direction. Leon's eyes barely had time to widen in panic and surprise before the pillars beneath his feet began to crack and vibrate, sending their shockwaves into his legs. As soon as these vibrations touched his feet, Leon's invisibility was immediately dissipated, leaving him completely exposed before all the giants and Aquillius' party.

—

Aquillius could hardly see with anger and fury clouding his eyes. Rakos' magical attack had caused a cloud of black dust from the basalt pillars that made up the Cradle's platform to be flung into the air. The figure that was revealed, however, was still perfectly visible even in this dust cloud.

The diplomat could see Leon plain as day, as could everyone else.

The watching crowd was stupefied into silence as the shock of seeing Leon revealed on the platform, and there was almost an audible clunk from their jaws hitting the ground. It was Antonius who broke that silence with an eloquent, "... The fuck?"

"What is this?!" Lucilius furiously demanded of Alix. "Why is your knight over there?!"

"What was he doing in the Cradle?!" Eleanor added, glaring at Alix as if it were her the giants had caught instead of Leon.

"How was he invisible?" Juliana asked, striking a far more curious tone than angry like the other two.

"I-I... don't..." Alix stammered. She backed a few steps away from the enraged knights, desperately trying to think of something to say that would deflect their ire.

"You're his squire! You had to know what he was doing!" Lucilius said, advancing at Alix.

"We've put *years* of our lives into this!" Eleanor said, but as she was about to continue, Aquillius interrupted her.

"Enough! All of you, shut up!" He turned from watching the giants only to glare at his junior diplomats who had lost their composure in public, ensuring that his order was followed instantly; Lucilius and Eleanor froze instantly.

"The giants aren't doing anything..." Aquillius observed. "Sir Leon trespassed on their Cradle, and yet they're not doing anything..."

—

Rakos' attack had knocked Leon to the ground, and Anzu had scrambled out of his arms and stared at him from several feet away. Leon knew that his invisibility was gone and that everyone could see him, but it took several seconds for him to work up the nerve to push himself off his stomach and to his feet. But, once he did, he rose with as much dignity as he could.

Inside, however, he burned with shame and a little bit of anger at being caught. In the distance, he could see Aquillius calmly watching him, but the diplomat was clearly curious if the way he glared at Leon was anything to go by.

Alix's expression, however, was something completely different. Instead of anger, her face showed more hurt and betrayal, and it cut right through Leon. She was his squire, and someone he considered a friend, but he'd left her in the maze and he couldn't imagine that she'd get off lightly after this, despite her lack of involvement.

With his invisibility disrupted and hundreds of giants surrounding him, there wasn't anything Leon could do other than wait for whatever came next. Fortunately, that seemed like it was going to come sooner rather than later. Most of the giants remained standing stock-still, but Rakos began to lumber toward

him, as did Lapis and several of the visiting chiefs of other giant tribes. With a determination to own this, he confidently strode forward to meet them halfway.

As soon as they came into speaking distance, they halted and began rumbling in their speech that, to Leon, was completely incoherent.

'At least they don't seem to expect me to respond...' he thought to himself, as the stone giants only spoke amongst themselves. It was obvious that they were talking about him, however, as all of their 'heads' were still watching him. In fact, when Leon took a look around, he noticed that all of the giants in the crater seemed to be staring at him, which was only made creepier by their lack of visible eyes.

About five minutes after the giants met with Leon, Aquillius arrived with Lucilius and Juliana, leaving Eleanor and Antonius with the rest of the party. The three ignored the giants, brazenly walking right past them to corner Leon between them.

"What in the name of all the Ancestors *were you doing in there?*" Lucilius demanded, leaning in closer to Leon and keeping his voice under control so as not to make a scene in front of the giants.

Aquillius and Juliana stared at Leon, awaiting a reply. Leon thought for a long moment about what to say, and in the end, he only said one word: "Training."

"Trai- you were training?!" Lucilius asked, clearly taken aback.

"You ascended to the *fifth-tier...*" Aquillius observed, finally noticing Leon's much stronger aura. "Hmm, we can deal with you later, but for now we have to present a united front to the giants. However, know this, Sir Leon, you have placed all of our efforts in jeopardy. We have spent three years trying to put a stop to the giant raids that have killed *thousands*. We are going to have words later."

"Understood," Leon responded.

With that, the diplomats no longer penned Leon in, and the four knights stood side-by-side before the giants.

Leon noted that the talking giants seemed exceptionally animated; they had always moved relatively slowly, owing to their enormous mass. Now, however, they were moving much quicker and with greater energy, which he suspected was due to an argument about what to do with him.

[I think we're in trouble, demon,] Leon muttered in a voice far more nervous than he would ever care to admit. He was not looking forward to what the consequences for this would be.

[We'll deal with it as it comes,] Xaphan replied. [Don't stress too much over it now—in fact, it would be better if you were to conserve that energy, rather than wasting it on worrying about the future. Prepare for something violent, as I doubt this will be solved in any other way.]

[You've a fair point...]

Leon quieted down and trying to not listen to the deep rumblings of the speaking giants. Instead, he concentrated on figuring out just what changes to his magic power ascending to the fifth-tier would bring. He knew what would happen from a theoretical standpoint, obviously, but he needed to feel it in order to understand it in more than just an academic way.

The other knights, however, weren't quite so willing to ignore the dozen or so fifth and sixth-tier walking mountains in front of them.

"Can you understand what they're talking about, Sir?" Lucilius asked Aquillius.

Aquillius looked troubled, and he did his best to listen in. "It's hard to follow, they're using a dialect I can't quite understand," he said. "It actually sounds a lot like their formal speech, and yet different. Maybe it's more formal than usual...?"

"I don't suppose we can just ask?" Juliana suggested.

"That's always an option," Aquillius replied. After another minute or so of listening to the giants talk amongst themselves, Aquillius stepped forward and addressed Rakos.

"Chief Rakos, I would like to apo—"

Before Aquillius could finish his apology for Leon entering the Cradle, Rakos thundered something at Aquillius, and the diplomat instantly stopped talking in shock. He stood stunned for several seconds, then returned to the other three, taking a few furtive glances at Leon as he did so.

"... Sir?" Lucilius hesitantly asked, seeking an explanation for what had just happened.

"They're arguing about *who* Leon is, not what he did and what they're response should be... I think..." Aquillius interpreted. "For now, let's just wait and see what happens—Rakos certainly did *not* appreciate me interrupting..."

"Have you ever seen something like this before, Sir?" Juliana asked.

"No. I was under the impression that Rakos' word was law for the subordinate tribes, but now they seem to be debating..." Aquillius answered.

Leon couldn't help overhearing their conversation, despite his attempts to remain calm. He subconsciously began to grip his sword, taking to heart Xaphan's warning about violence being the only way to get himself out of this mess.

The group waited for about five or ten minutes in silence. All four knights were growing increasingly nervous, despite their attempts to stay calm, as the giants were only growing more vigorous in their dialogue, with a couple even waving their arms at them as they spoke, as if to emphasize a point they were making.

Finally, Rakos quieted the contentious dispute with another thunderous roar to assert its authority and stepped forward to address Aquillius. The diplomat also took a few steps forward so the two could comfortably speak without shouting.

"I see..." Aquillius replied after Rakos was finished speaking its piece. "I don't suppose there's another way to—"

Rakos interjected with more sounds of stones harshly grinding together, and Aquillius nodded while glancing at all of the rest of the soldiers and diplomats that he'd brought with him.

"Then that's what we'll do if there's no other way..."

The two parted, with Rakos returning to the other giants, and Aquillius walking back to Leon, Juliana, and Lucilius.

“What’s the plan, Sir?” Juliana inquired.

“Sir Leon will battle a giant,” Aquillius replied with an ugly look on his face.

“... To what end? Is this an execution?” Juliana asked.

“I’m not sure. However, Rakos insisted, and said that we would not... *be welcome* in this crater if this was refused.”

Juliana, Lucilius, and even Leon could read into what Aquillius had just said: if the duel was rejected, then their entire party would have to fight the giants. The company of soldiers they brought with wouldn’t help against the full might of the near-thousand stone giants in the crater.

“I guess we have little choice then,” Lucilius said. “Sir Leon, you have gotten us all into quite the predicament.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry about that. Assuming we get out of this, I’ll take full responsibility,” Leon said. There was no talking his way out of this, even if he had the skill or desire to try. Instead, he had a look on his face that Aquillius found exceptionally curious; Leon almost seemed to smile in anticipation, and any worry he had seemed to vanish into that smile.

After Rakos returned to the rest of the giants, Lapis stepped forward. Leon steeled himself for battle against the giant, then started walking forward to meet it. The giants were not going to wait for this battle, as whatever question would be answered with Leon’s performance seemed like it was exceptionally important. Given what the Cradle seemed to be for the giants, Leon could understand.

Lapis stopped about twenty feet away from Leon, and the latter did likewise. Slowly, he drew his sword and waited for whatever would signal the start of the duel.

Chapter 188: Lapis

The entire crater was silent. The stone giants were like crude statues, watching Lapis and Leon face off. Eleanor, Antonius, Alix, and the rest of the party still by the edge of the maze watched just as transfixed; they had no idea what was going on, and suddenly a stone giant and Leon were squaring off with one another!

‘I guess this is the punishment, then?’ Eleanor wondered. *‘Sir Leon trespassed on their sacred ground, and so they now wish to make a show of his execution...’*

The lady knight watched in fascination, worried only for the future of their diplomatic mission and not for the young man who had put it in jeopardy.

Alix, meanwhile, stared in horror. She was certainly furious with Leon for leaving her behind, but she didn’t want to see him crushed beneath the feet of a stone giant more than three times his height. Her immediate instinct was to run to Leon’s side and defend him, fulfilling her duty as his squire. However, she never lost sight of the ring of giants surrounding the Cradle platform, and she doubted she’d get close enough to fight—assuming her first-tier power was capable of rendering any assistance.

Everyone had to stand and watch, silent and unmoving, as the duel between Leon and Lapis began.

—

Leon slowly drew his sword and waited for the signal for the duel to begin. Lapis seemed to do likewise, with the giant stepping forward and taking an aggressive stance. The giant chiefs stood behind Lapis, while Aquillius, Juliana, Lucilius, and Anzu—the baby griffin was frozen in fear of the giants—stood behind Leon, all waiting for the first blow.

The stone giant towered over Leon, being over twenty feet of solid rock. Leon speculated that its body was made of some kind of dark granite, and it seemed to be highly polished because Lapis began to sparkle as the storm clouds above finally dissipated. In the resulting late afternoon sunlight, Leon could also see thin streaks of dark blue around the giant's joints, which he assumed was what prompted Aquillius to give it the name 'Lapis' in the first place—its name in its own language was completely unpronounceable with a human mouth, unfortunately.

The two combatants stared at each other—or at least, Leon stared at Lapis' head—for what seemed like an eternity. Then, Rakos raised its arms into the air and clapped, creating a sound as sharp and loud as the thunder of the just-passed storm.

Leon guessed this was the signal to begin, and so lunged forward a few steps while calling upon his magic power; Lapis, however, remained standing still, and Leon came to a halt in confusion.

"Sir Leon, the fight has started! Keep going!" Aquillius called out from behind him.

Leon wanted to turn and give the senior diplomat a questioning look, but he wasn't about to take his eyes off of Lapis. So, instead, he decided to give Aquillius the benefit of the doubt, and he surged forward again, with his sword raised and his aura soaring.

And yet, Lapis continued to not move, even when Leon closed the distance between them and brought his sword down with all of his strength on Lapis' leg. For a moment, Leon was terrified that this was some kind of trap, and his suspicion intensified when his sword bounced right off the giant's leg without leaving so much as a scratch. Leon hurriedly pulled back, expecting the giant to follow up with something, but still, Lapis refused to move.

Leon glared at his opponent, then lunged forward again, striking the other leg this time. Unfortunately, his attack had the same effect as the previous did, which is to say none at all.

'I see what you're doing,' Leon thought bitterly. *'You're looking down on me, thinking that with that body made of stone, I can't harm you!'*

Looking at the seemingly nonchalant giant, Leon had to admit that he didn't see much of a way to actually harm the thing. Most soldiers that fight stone giants in the Eastern Territories do so with huge crushing weapons, such as mauls and hammers. His sword was painfully unsuited to the task of causing the stone giant damage, so rather than continue to wail ineffectually on the giants' stony exterior, Leon sheathed his blade and decided to take a different approach.

Calling forth his magic power, Leon expelled it from his body to sense his surroundings, just as he had practiced in the past. This time, however, was quite different in that it actually seemed to work; Leon channeled magic into his spine where he could feel it resonate with the magic outside of his body. It

was a confusing feeling, but he could vaguely perceive his surroundings. Using this technique, he felt relatively comfortable taking the risk of scanning the ground with his eyes while keeping his rudimentary magic sense fixated on the giant.

Glancing around, Leon found a few fist-sized stones, and he picked one up.

[You... What in the name of all the Gods and Devils are you doing?] Xaphan asked exasperatedly.

[I don't want to damage my sword on that giant's skin, so I need to use something else,] Leon answered. He then channeled a great amount of magic into his arm and hurled the rock at Lapis.

The giant stood there completely unfazed as Leon's stone almost exploded from the force of the impact. Lapis was completely unharmed.

[This is embarrassing,] Xaphan complained. If Leon looked behind him at the knights watching him, then he'd have noticed that Aquillius seemed to be thinking along the same lines as Xaphan, as he was struggling not to face-palm when Leon threw the stone. [Now, I know what I'm about to say is going to be some kind of revelation, but try to wrap your tiny mind around this concept,] Xaphan continued, layering as much sarcasm into his voice as he could. [How about you use *magic*?!]

[I am using magic,] Leon retorted.

[You know what I mean!] Xaphan shouted back.

[I'm not sure I want to,] Leon explained. [I used quite a bit of magic power when I was invisible, and though all that lightning feels like it charged me up, I still want to be economical with this.]

[The only reason you're getting a chance to be 'economical' is that that giant isn't moving!] Xaphan countered. [That thing is about equivalent to a sixth-tier mage! If you don't open up with something a little more substantial, then when it moves, you're going to die!]

[Mmm,] Leon hummed, deliberately not giving a definite answer.

He glared at the motionless Lapis. *'You're not going to give me the courtesy of effort, so why should I?'* he bitterly thought.

But then, with far more speed than Leon expected given how big it was, Lapis lunged toward him and raised its fist in preparation for a punch. Leon's eyes widened in slight surprise, but his magic sense had given him about half a second of extra time to react, so he was already diving out of the way when Lapis' fist impacted the ground right where he had been standing several moments before. Lapis' fist fractured dozens of pillars beneath the giant's strength and weight, creating a small pit in the Cradle platform big enough for a full-grown man to curl up inside if he so chose.

Leon knew that he couldn't be hit by one of those punches. Even with his newly-ascended fifth-tier strength and his magically strengthened muscles and bones, he doubted whether he would be able to survive a blow like that. Lapis rushed toward him again, the giant's punches ruining not only the pillars beneath the two combatants but also the sense of levity Leon had when the giant was standing still.

Understanding that it was past time to get serious, Leon immediately began to call upon his newfound power. He had an opportunity to test his strength, but only if Lapis didn't kill him first.

Leon dodged another of Lapis' blows by throwing himself to the side. The giant's massive size made turning on a dime impossible, so Leon kept himself relatively close to it, just outside of its reach. Lapis swiped out for him, but the giant grasped nothing but air. With his magic power flooding his body and his attention firmly fixed on the giant, Leon was able to easily dodge, duck, and dive out of the way of all of Lapis' attacks.

In fact, he found it a little easier than he expected, but with Lapis keeping the pressure on, Leon couldn't spare the time to think too much about it. Instead, he devoted everything he could into compressing his magic power and allowing it to flow into his right arm, just as he'd learned to when he was being struck by lightning in the Cradle. He felt the magic power change into lightning, and his fingers began to spark and crackle with power. As the power flowed through his arm and into his hand, Leon held it there as tightly as he could. He did not, however, leave the lightning magic without a place to go, as this ball of magic power began to elongate and slip out past his thumb and little finger.

In less than two seconds, Leon's upper body was illuminated by a silver-blue lightning spear held in his right hand. It was incredibly bright, so much so that Leon struggled to keep his eyes open. The spear vibrated in his hand, but he wasn't worried about accuracy; Lapis was far too close for him to miss.

Leon hurled this spear as hard as he could at Lapis, shouting with exertion as it left his hand. The spear crossed the short distance between the two faster than even Aquillius' sixth-tier eyes could track, and exploded on the giant's rocky skin, showering both combatants in sparks and causing small arcs of lightning to appear all over the giant's body. The force behind the attack sent the giant skidding back across the platform several feet, while Leon struggled to maintain his own balance from the reaction force of throwing the spear.

The lightning cleared up after a few seconds, and a scorched and blackened Lapis paused in its attacks while Leon stood and stared at the giant. The latter was circulating his magic through his body, getting ready to continue the fight, but something had started to bother him: Lapis was the equivalent of a sixth-tier mage, but it wasn't using any magic at all.

Suddenly, Lapis broke its silence, shouting something in its grinding voice back at Rakos. Aquillius tried to listen in, but Lapis spoke in the same ancient dialect that the chiefs had used when they were debating what to do about Leon which the diplomat couldn't understand. Rakos responded by lumbering forward, with the flecks of gold and rubies in its skin glittering in the sunlight.

Rakos spoke, this time directing its voice at Aquillius, who hurried forward to interpret.

"He says the... 'the fighting is over, there is to be no harm done to you'." The diplomat said to Leon. The younger mage relaxed somewhat, allowing his magic power to be slowly pulled back into his soul realm. He didn't take his eyes off either Rakos or Lapis, though.

Again, Rakos spoke, and Aquillius responded with, "I understand, give me a few minutes and I'll be right there..."

In one last surprise, as the giant chief and the diplomat parted ways to organize a new meeting, the rest of the hundreds of assembled giants roared. The humans watching were startled and put on alert, with many of the soldiers that were there to guard the diplomats reaching for their weapons.

Antonius, however, halted their hostile behavior by simply raising his hand and wordlessly telling them to halt.

The giants continued to roar. This cacophony of crashing, grinding, and crushing rock sounds echoed throughout the entire crater and was loud enough to even shake the Cradle platform.

“Are they... singing?” Juliana asked as she and Lucilius approached Leon and Aquillius.

“That they are,” Aquillius confirmed.

“They’ve got a hell of a bass section, have to admit...” Lucilius said with a hint of a smile and an expression of complete relief at the giants’ apparent lack of hostility.

“We’re returning to Rakos’ hall,” Aquillius said in a tone that brooked no argument. “I’m going to speak with Rakos afterward, and then we’re going to have a long talk, Sir Leon.”

Aquillius sent a chilling glare Leon’s way, and the younger mage could only nod in acknowledgment. The diplomat then led the four of them—followed by Anzu, who only started moving again when Leon turned and waved to him—back to the rest of the party. The giants finished singing after several minutes, and they, too, dispersed, with none of them getting in the way of the diplomatic party.

As Aquillius’ group fell back in with the rest of the party and began making their way back to Rakos’ hall, Alix moved to walk alongside Leon.

Remembering the betrayed look she gave him when he was first revealed, Leon quietly said, “I’m sorry...”

“Sir,” she curtly replied, shooting him a look that could almost kill before turning back to watch where they were going.

Leon took a deep breath and tried to steel himself for what he was about to face. If he were to be honest with himself, though, he was far more apprehensive about the talk he would need to have with Alix than with Aquillius.

Chapter 189: Power of the Gods

The first thing Aquillius did upon returning to Rakos’ hall was to point at a chair and say to Leon, “Sit.” Leon complied, with an apprehensive Anzu hiding behind his legs. Aquillius then turned around and left the guest room to meet with Rakos, with Juliana, Antonius, and half a dozen soldiers in tow.

The others gave Leon a wide berth, giving him nothing but the occasional curious or slightly hostile look. Even Alix and the other diplomats avoided him, with Alix choosing to quietly read—or at least, quietly stare at an open book—and the two diplomats whispering to each other in a private alcove. Leon didn’t mind this treatment, as it allowed him the time to take stock of the changes in his body.

Perhaps the most obvious was that he could now change his magic power into lightning, meaning he was a fifth-tier mage. This was the only distinction between the fourth and fifth-tier, so after a few breathing exercises and some silent meditation, he realized that his mana reserves weren’t that much greater than they were before he ascended tiers.

One thing that he wanted to check, but was more than a little hesitant to, was Xaphan's fire. The demon had told him months ago that he would be able to use his fire with impunity once he was fifth-tier, but to test it around so many other people was something he wasn't willing to do. There were quite a few people who knew he could use some kind of fire, of course, but he still only wanted to rely on demonfire when there was no other choice.

Plus, he figured it would be a little rude to suddenly call forth fire or lightning right in the middle of Rakos' guest rooms with about a hundred other people around.

While he was getting a rough idea of his new capabilities, Leon asked Xaphan, [How are you doing, demon?]

[Hmm? What do you mean?] Xaphan asked in confusion.

[How are you on getting to the sixth-tier, or whatever you demons call it?]

Xaphan's face twisted in anger and embarrassment, and he said, [I'm doing just fine, boy.]

[I'm sure you are, but is 'just fine' all you want to be?] Leon replied, forcing a joking tone.

[I'm still fifth-tier equivalent, and I will be for a while unless you have some kind of idea for speeding things up...?]

[No, I guess I was just curious as to whether *you* were worried at all that I'm about to pass you up in power.]

The demon quietly sighed and said with a heavily controlled tone, [The only thing I'm worried about right now is what is going to happen to *you*. Even if the giants let you leave this crater alive, I can guarantee that your fellows are none too happy with you right now.]

[Ahh, you used your stellar powers of observation to notice that, did you?] Leon asked sarcastically—even a blind person would be able to see the rejection in the eyes of everyone around Leon. There were, however, a few curious looks given to Anzu, who was still huddled behind Leon's legs and glaring back at anyone who looked at him, and no one was willing to approach Leon and ask about the griffin.

Before Xaphan could respond to Leon's comment, the doors to the guest rooms burst open, revealing a serious and unsmiling Aquillius, who looked directly at Leon and said, "Come with me." He then turned around and left, not even waiting for Leon to comply.

Leon almost leaped to his feet, startling Anzu a little, and followed Aquillius out of the room. Anzu scurried after the two as fast as his little legs could carry him.

The walk to the throne room almost went by without any conversation, with Aquillius setting a quick pace and not looking at Leon even once. However, he knew that simply dragging Leon into the room without giving him some kind of heads-up about what was going on would be a bad idea, so he stopped just outside the throne room and finally faced the young man following him.

"The giants demanded your presence, and they wouldn't hear anything I had to say without you," Aquillius explained in a carefully controlled tone.

Despite this, Xaphan still picked up on some concealed bitterness, saying, [I think this guy finds this entire event to be insulting...]

[I can understand,] Leon replied. [He's put so much time into this, and now he has a new guy putting it at risk and the giants he's built a rapport with won't even speak with him without said new guy. I'd be furious as well.]

"Sir," Leon said with as much respect as he could to acknowledge Aquillius' explanation.

"I'm going to try and smooth over any ruffled feathers in there, so you just stay quiet and don't make a sound unless directly spoken to, got it?"

"Got it, Sir," Leon tersely responded.

"Good."

Aquillius then pushed open the massive giant-sized door and led the two into the throne room. Rakos, Lapis, and the dozen other lesser chiefs were waiting for them, as was Juliana, Antonius, and the other guards Aquillius had taken. Everyone was standing—even Rakos, who was standing in front of its throne.

Rakos rumbled, and Aquillius responded with an odd look and asked, "What exactly do you want with my knight? I understand he encroached on your sacred gr—"

But, before Aquillius could continue, the rest of the giants in the room seemed to kick up a fuss, rumbling and grinding and preventing the diplomat from getting a word in edgewise. Rakos quickly reasserted control but waited a few seconds for Aquillius to understand that the giants wanted him to be quiet and not continue speaking out of turn.

Rakos spoke again, and this time Aquillius turned to Leon and said, "They want you to step forward and stand in front of them."

Leon nodded and slowly took a few steps forward, preparing himself for the battle that he felt was inevitable. He felt like he was on trial, with all the giants in the room seemingly staring at him, and the group behind him boring holes in his back with their eyes. Needless to say, this social pressure had put Leon on edge, and it was all he could do not to rest a hand on his sword for comfort.

He came to a halt about halfway between Aquillius and Rakos. The latter spoke to him, but there was no way he could understand. Leon realized that Rakos asked after that very thing, as Aquillius quickly replied with, "He does not, but I can interpret."

However, instead of continuing, Rakos turned and spoke to one of the other chiefs. This stone giant, thinner and shorter than most of the others, replied with a few only a few words, then stepped forward. Again, Leon had to repress his instinct to reach for his sword, as he wasn't too keen on the giant getting closer, but it also hadn't made any overtly threatening movements.

After another few rumblings from Rakos, Aquillius said, "That giant wants to give you something... I have no idea what, I couldn't understand what Rakos meant when he described it..."

Leon frowned, but he stood still as the giant lumbered closer. He heard the clinking of chainmail as the soldiers behind him shifted into more defensive stances, ready to act if the giant harmed Leon in any way; he may have gotten them into a mess, but Leon was still a knight of the Bull Kingdom and a

member of a diplomatic mission, and he'd be defended even if they had to make permanent enemies out of the Crater Tribe in doing so.

The giant approached Leon, but stopped a few feet away, far enough that it didn't seem hostile—not that that did anything to help Leon or the soldiers relax. Slowly, as if it understood everyone's apprehension, the giant extended one of its hands. Like all giants, it had six thick fingers, each equidistant from the others and opposing one of the others. In the center of its palm, however, it had something none of the other giants did: a pale-blue crystal, about the size of one of Leon's eyes that looked tiny in its massive hand.

The giant rumbled something, but its tone and cadence were slow, quiet, and somber compared to Rakos' more forceful and authoritative voice.

"It says, 'touch the crystal'," Aquillius interpreted.

Leon glanced back at the senior diplomat apprehensively. Aquillius seemed just as nervous and on edge about what was happening as he was, but the diplomat nodded to Leon to go ahead. So, Leon took a deep breath to steel himself for whatever was to come, and he reached out and touched the crystal.

Immediately, he felt a sharp pain right between his eyes, as if he was being stabbed in the forehead, and he fell to the ground just barely holding in his screams of pain. The soldiers behind him drew their swords, while Aquillius, Juliana, and Antonius waved their hands and pulled their own weapons out of their soul realm—a spear, a thin saber, and a war hammer, respectively.

However, the giants did nothing to respond to their actions; they simply stood there, frozen, quietly watching Leon. The giant with the pale-blue crystal even retreated to fall back in with its comrades.

After a few seconds, the pain in Leon's head went away, and he knelt on the floor gasping for air. He didn't panic, however, as he'd actually recognized that pain from several experiences he'd had before: whenever Xaphan had given him information, it had always come with a similar, but much more subdued pain.

And what the giants had given him became clear once Leon struggled back to his feet.

Before any of the knights behind him could inquire after Leon's status, Rakos boomed and thundered, speaking to Leon.

"CAN YOU UNDERSTAND ME, YOUNG HUMAN?"

Doing his best not to show any of his surprise, Leon responded, "I can."

Aquillius' eyes instantly swiveled away from the giants to stare in shock at Leon, but the giants ignored him and continued.

"WE WELCOME YOU TO OUR HALLS, AND APOLOGIZE IF OUR HOSPITALITY HAS BEEN LACKING."

Leon hesitated a bit before responding, as he didn't quite know what to make of this situation. "... Thank you," he said with a great deal of uncertainty.

“IT IS AN HONOR TO HAVE ONE THAT WIELDS THE POWER OF THE GODS AMONG US,” Rakos continued. **“IF IT IS AGREEABLE TO YOU, WE’D LIKE TO SPEAK FURTHER WITHOUT THE REST OF YOUR COMPANIONS.”**

Aquillius, already thoroughly confused as to what had just happened and what was being said, suddenly said, “I am not comfortable leaving one of my people alone here, we still haven’t agreed on that non-aggression pact yet...”

“THEN YOU MAY CONSIDER US AT PEACE. THERE WILL BE NO MORE RAIDS UPON THE LANDS OF THE GREAT BULL.”

The diplomat stared at Rakos, stunned. He’d spent three years of his life trying to get Rakos to say those words, and here they’d been said just to get him to leave the room!

“... I-I’m grateful for your agreement, Chief Rakos, but certainly, this would be better if we got it down in writing first, no?” Aquillius said, tripping over the first few words in his surprise but quickly finding his usual bearing.

“MY WORD IS ENOUGH, NO OTHER CHIEF WILL CROSS ME,” Rakos said. **“NOW, PLEASE EXCUSE US, WE WON’T KEEP THE YOUNG HUMAN FOR LONG.”**

The other giant chiefs made noises of agreement, confirming that they would not continue their raids, and Aquillius was too flustered to think of any other excuse to stay that wouldn’t insult the chiefs and put that agreement in jeopardy. After a few seconds of frantic thought, Aquillius was forced to lead the others out of the throne room. Just before a pair of giants closed the door behind them, the senior diplomat shot one last conflicted look back at Leon, his eyes conveying a mix of anger, elation, and a hint of jealousy.

Leon was left with Rakos, Lapis, and the other giant chiefs with no one there but Anzu, who was shivering in fear behind his feet. The tiny albino griffin was barely able to lift his head from the terror, but fortunately, the giants didn’t seem to pay him any mind.

“Sooo,” Leon awkwardly began, “what did you mean by ‘power of the gods’?”

“YOU POSSESS THE POWER AND STRENGTH OF OUR CREATORS, OUR GODS. WE HAVE BEEN WAITING CENTURIES FOR ONE WITH THAT POWER TO VISIT US HERE, AND NOW, HERE YOU ARE.”

[I see,] Xaphan whispered from Leon’s soul realm, [they worship the Thunderbird Clan, and they recognized the lightning you used on that giant. This could actually be extremely beneficial, I’m sure they’d do whatever you ask!]

[... Let’s not jump to extremes just yet,] Leon cautioned, [I’m still doubtful as to what their intentions are, and I don’t think they’ll come right out and say it to my face... Besides, their assistance would hardly be practical anywhere that isn’t the Border Mountains...]

“Why did you want to speak with me alone?” Leon asked.

“THAT OTHER ONE HAS BEEN PRESSURING US TO STOP OUR RAIDS. WE HAVE BEEN RELUCTANT TO ABANDON A SOURCE OF WEALTH, BUT NOW THAT WE KNOW YOU ARE ALLIED WITH THE BULL, THEN WE WILL DO SO AS WELL. TRIBUTE SHALL BE GATHERED FROM OTHER SOURCES.”

Again, the other chiefs rumbled to acknowledge Rakos' order, affirming their intention to no longer raid the Bull Kingdom.

"Ah..." Leon whispered. Rakos didn't explicitly answer his question, but the implication Leon got was that the giants were well-entrenched in their love for raids, even if the giants in the south weren't as frequent about it, and they didn't appreciate Aquillius' efforts to get them to stop.

"Well," Leon continued, "I'm hoping that we can all be friends. That would be great, wouldn't it? Peace for everyone? We can then open up trade, and defend each other from our enemies..."

"IT WOULD BE AN HONOR TO FIGHT ALONGSIDE A DESCENDANT OF THE GODS!" Rakos roared, and the other giants roared in approval. **"FROM NOW ON, YOU MAY CONSIDER US YOUR FRIENDS AND ALLIES, YOUR ENEMIES ARE OUR ENEMIES!"**

Leon smiled at the thought of hundreds of fifth and sixth-tier giants besieging Tiberias and his father in Aurelianorum, but he knew that most of his enemies would require a subtler, more personal touch. He didn't want the Bull King to think he was invading with an army of stone giants, after all.

"I appreciate the gesture, Chief Rakos. In that case, you may consider your enemies my enemies as well," Leon declared.

[Whoa, whoa, whoa!] Xaphan cried out. [Let's not get dragged into some petty squabbles between giants, now! Especially since you've dragged us into the local Kingdom's army as well!]

Leon immediately regretted his choice of words, but Rakos seemed to laugh and said, **"WE APPRECIATE THE SENTIMENT! IN RETURN, ALLOW US TO SEND SOME OF OUR WARRIORS BACK WITH YOU AS A SIGN OF OUR PACT!"**

With an awkward smile, Leon said, "... Thanks, but that might attract a *lot* of attention..."

"WE MUST PROTECT AND SERVE THE DESCENDANT OF THE GODS!" Rakos thundered. **"SHOULD YOU EVER REQUIRE IT, OUR TRIBES WILL FIGHT ALONGSIDE YOU!"**

The other giants again roared in agreement, and Leon was left feeling far too awkward to try to refuse. He resigned himself to the thought of a stone giant following him around wherever he went and hoped that his assumption of how this would play out was wrong. However, there were a few things that he could think of that would be much easier with stone giants backing him up, but he figured that bringing more than a handful into the Bull Kingdom wouldn't be a wise idea until he was more politically powerful.

Leon stood there and endured more flattering words from Rakos for about fifteen more minutes before he insisted, for Aquillius' sake, that the non-aggression pact be made official with some kind of document. The giants reaffirmed their commitment to peace, and Leon and Anzu finally managed to leave the throne room after Aquillius was called back in.

The other diplomats were staring at Leon with complex expressions as he left the throne room, but by this point, he was far too mentally exhausted to care. He only shuffled back to the guest room and collapsed into his bedroll.

Chapter 190: Returning to the Horns

Finally getting the non-aggression pact he'd worked so hard for turned out to be almost frustratingly easy for Aquillius after Leon left the throne room. In fact, he and Rakos formalized the treaty in less than five minutes, leaving the diplomats to return to their guest rooms and figure out what the plan was to do next.

In the end, with the task of negotiating peace with the southern giants complete, they decided to return to the Bull's Horns. Aquillius informed Rakos of this, and that he hoped he could return in several months with some proposals for trade agreements. The diplomat couldn't get Rakos to commit to anything more than hearing them out, but he figured that was good enough for the time being, and so made preparations to leave.

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Leon was woken the next morning by the sounds of the diplomatic party packing their things and getting ready to leave. He had been sleeping on his side, and when he started groggily pushing himself to his feet, he found that Anzu had curled up right next to him; the little griffin had pressed himself into the crook of Leon's stomach and remained cuddled there with Leon for the entire night.

Anzu had actually woken several minutes before Leon, and his bright red eyes were warily watching all the other diplomats and soldiers scurrying about. Leon silently chuckled at Anzu's nervous behavior, and he gently patted the griffin's tiny head as he rose to his feet. Leon packed much faster than anyone else, as he didn't have that much to begin with—what was out amounted to essentially just his bedroll, as he had been so tired that he'd slept in his armor.

Within several minutes, he was ready to go. He sat on his pack, waiting for everyone else to get ready, silently eating some of his rations and feeding a few pieces of jerky to Anzu. Eventually, Alix joined him, though she was quiet and unsociable, and Leon began trying to think of a way to explain himself to her.

"Let's get moving!" Aquillius finally called out, and the soldiers and diplomats departed Rakos' hall. Once they reached the passage that would take them out of the crater, however, they were stopped by a group of five stone giants, led by Lapis.

[PLEASE WAIT, BULL WARRIOR,] Lapis said.

"Is there something Rakos needed before we left...?" Aquillius asked with a hint of uncertainty in his voice.

[MY CHIEF INTENDS FOR ME TO JOURNEY WITH YOU TO THE BULL'S LANDS. IF WE ARE TO BE FRIENDS AND ALLIES, THEN WE NEED TO SPEAK RELIABLY.]

Aquillius subtly frowned, as even a single sixth-tier giant could wreak havoc in such a dense population center as Ariminium, the city that had been built around the Bull's Horns. Yet, it wasn't easy to say no, and since Aquillius was confident that Prince Trajan and the Legates at the Bull's Horns could easily subdue a giant if the need arose, he didn't say no.

Putting on his best diplomat's face, Aquillius said in a jovial tone, "We would be honored to host you as the representative of your people, though there are a few places in our path that I fear may prevent you from joining us..."

[THAT IS NO PROBLEM, I WILL FIND A WAY AROUND WHEN THE TIME COMES,] Lapis said, and the other giants made way for the group to pass.

Seeing this, Leon took his hand off the handle of his sword, where it had instinctively gone when he noticed the giants blocking the passage. He didn't want to think about what they might have done if Aquillius refused the giant, so he was glad that the diplomat didn't.

Besides, given the connection between himself and the giants, he wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible before something happened that revealed his identity. He certainly wasn't looking forward to returning, even though he was sure the giants would receive him with open arms; he genuinely hoped that Aquillius would decide to keep him away from stone giant affairs for a while.

It was a quiet march through the passage for Leon as he contemplated everything that had happened over the past day, from the discovery of the map to the conversation with Rakos. The other soldiers were far more open, talking and joking and laughing amongst each other, but the diplomats were as serious and stoic as Leon was. Leon knew that the reason for their silence was probably him, and how he had not only put their mission in danger but somehow accomplished said mission by being so selfish and reckless. And one of the biggest reasons he knew the diplomats were disturbed and didn't know how to handle the situation was that no one had even commented on his ascension to the fifth-tier, yet.

Though, if he were being honest, he wasn't that upset to not be speaking with them. Alix, on the other hand, was still treating him extremely coldly and spoke only when necessary. She did, however, spare a few smiles for Anzu, who was almost literally sticking to Leon's heels.

Of course, this silence between Leon and the diplomats couldn't continue, and after a few words with Aquillius, Eleanor fell back from the front of the group to walk with Leon at the back.

"So..." Eleanor said awkwardly once she reached Leon's side. "Does this little guy have a name?"

"Anzu," Leon curtly replied.

Sensing that he was being talked about, Anzu looked up and glared at Eleanor before moving to walk between Leon and Alix.

"Please don't mind him, Dame Eleanor, he's shy," Alix said, not bothering to make it clear if she was talking about Leon or the griffin.

"I understand," Eleanor said with an understanding smile. "He's young, he'll learn."

"So, what now?" Leon asked, keeping his face in its usual stoic expression.

"Well, once we return to the Southern Horn, you're going to have to take little Anzu to the Beastmaster and get him checked out. It's not uncommon for knights to return from missions with tamed beasts, and there are some tests that need to be run to ensure the beast isn't carrying parasites or diseases."

Leon nodded in acknowledgment as Eleanor told him where to find the Beastmaster.

"After you get that sorted out, you're to meet us at Headquarters, and we're going to make our way to the citadel as a group. Prince Trajan will want a briefing on what happened at the Crater and what we walked away with."

“Understood,” Leon said.

After working out the specifics of where to meet after visiting the Beastmaster, Eleanor leaned in toward Leon’s ear and whispered, “Look, between you and me, Aquillius is furious. He’s elated that the non-aggression pact was formalized, but he could very well kick you out of the Diplomatic Corps for being so reckless—that the giants seemed to appreciate you sneaking into the Cradle and doing whatever you did that destroyed it was pure luck. Even if you aren’t kicked out, you’ll be on thin ice from now on.”

“Thanks for the head’s up,” Leon said, giving her a nod of appreciation.

“No problem. If it were up to me, I’d probably confine you to your quarters for a few weeks, but it isn’t up to me, so don’t get too comfortable in your rooms.”

“We appreciate the sentiment,” Alix replied.

“Oh, and congratulations on ascending to the fifth-tier. That will make you high enough rank that, at the very least, you’re not going to be kicked out of the Legion or sent somewhere like that fort you came from, so no need to worry about that.”

“That’s good to hear,” Leon said. He didn’t follow up with anything, and the three wound up enduring a long awkward silence, during which Leon wondered why Eleanor was talking to him after what happened.

‘Probably just the fifth-tier thing...’ he thought cynically. His ascension gave him not only greater power but also greater status, and Eleanor was probably simply being polite due to that status. Or it was just the diplomat in her, Leon honestly couldn’t tell, and he became more and more unsure the more he thought about it.

“Sooo,” Eleanor said, desperately trying to break the silence, “lightning, huh? A rare element to use, not many books or teachers in the Kingdom who can explain it.”

“So I’ve been told,” Leon tersely responded, causing Alix to frown at him for being rude, but since she knew his identity, she also couldn’t fault him for not wanting to talk about it.

“Sometimes the more difficult elements to learn are the most rewarding,” Alix said, trying to help Leon deflect a little. “What element do you use, if I may ask, Dame Eleanor?”

“Oh, I use fire! Though I’m not that great in a fight...”

“Fire’s a useful element, even if you leave the Royal Legions you’d be set for life as a civilian mage,” Leon stated.

“A nice sentiment, but I doubt I’ll be leaving the Diplomatic Corps or the Legion any time soon. Speaking of diplomacy, what did the giants want with you? I thought they were going to try and kill you after the Cradle collapsed, but instead, they seem to revere your magic...” Eleanor said, staring in thought at Leon.

“I’m afraid you’d have to ask the giants...” Leon said as he nodded to the figure of Lapis far in front of them, “... because I have no answers for you in that regard.”

“Really?” Eleanor asked incredulously. “Then why did you enter the Cradle?”

“... Curiosity,” Leon said after a moment of hesitation.

“You trespassed on the giants’ sacred ground out of *curiosity*?” Eleanor practically shrieked. “You’d have to be *beyond* stupid to do something like that for such a reason! And I don’t think you’re that stupid, so why don’t you tell me the real truth?”

“I’ve told you the truth,” Leon replied.

Eleanor glared at him with eyes that could kill an entire field of grass, but Leon remained unmoved and refused to elaborate on his reasons.

“Fine, I will let you keep that secret, but in return, tell me how you became invisible! We all saw you appear out of thin air when Rakos attacked you, so don’t go trying to wriggle your way out of that!”

Leon sighed and began absentmindedly twisting the ring on his finger. The ring was an important tool for him, one that he would rather people don’t know about. That being said, Eleanor already knew that he had the capacity to turn invisible, and Leon suspected that if he didn’t tell her about the ring then she’d go back to pressing him for details about the Cradle.

With a great deal of reluctance, Leon slowly raised his right hand and displayed the emerald ring. “Some men came to kill me once, and one of them wore this. I killed the assassins and took the ring.”

“Someone tried to have you *killed*?!” Eleanor gasped. “Who?! When?! Why?!”

“Don’t know, about two or three months ago, and don’t know,” Leon answered. “However, as people have been so keen to point out to me ever since I was given my squireship and sent to the most distant frontier of the Kingdom, I have apparently made enemies in the year-and-change since I moved here.”

“Fortunately, no one’s come again since then,” Alix muttered before she could stop herself. “I-I mean, I would be in the way, and most likely would’ve been killed if someone had!”

Leon smiled and nodded, and didn’t push his squire over what she said. It cheered him up immensely, however, to know that she still would be saddened if he were to be killed and that it still seemed that she considered him a friend. He vowed to get her some decent equipment when they got back to the Horns as an apology, something better than what she would be issued if they were in a regular infantry unit. It wouldn’t be an immediate fix to her anger, he knew, but he hoped it would be a start. Besides, he knew that she would need decent weapons and armor eventually, regardless of how she felt about him at the time.

Hours later, after they had left the passage and were winding their way through the massive clusters of hexagonal pillars that made up the Border Mountains, they spied the highest reaches of the Northern Horn peaking over the tops of the mountains in the distance. Aquillius sped up and hurried on ahead of the rest of the group, as he had to inform the Legates and Tribunes in charge of security that Lapis wasn’t an enemy. This was a fairly lengthy process, though, so the group was forced to halt near the foot of the closest mountain, a fair distance away from the small village near the Northern Horn.

While waiting for Aquillius to return, Leon decided to train a little. One of the more useful powers a mage could learn was storing items in their soul realms, and the fifth-tier was generally accepted as the

lowest tier that such a power could be learned—though outliers were known to exist. Leon wasn't one of these outliers, and he was keen to acquire this ability, but he wasn't about to practice with anything he valued; fortunately, there were plenty of pebbles around, so he gathered a small handful and sat down to meditate.

Leon already knew the general theory behind storing something within his soul realm, but knowing the theory and putting it into practice were two often wildly different things. So, with the resigned sigh of a young man with far too many things that he needed to practice, Leon began trying to muddle his way through the theory. He was tempted to ask Xaphan for some advice, but he wanted to try it first before being forced to suffer through the demon's mocking words.