

## Storm King 491

### Chapter 491: The Pillar

The night following the Gorgon attack was harrowing and restless. Banshees shrieked close enough that Leon, Maia, and Valeria were constantly on edge, they occasionally felt the chill of ice wraiths as they passed nearby, and none of them could shake the oppressive feeling that the Gorgon was only waiting for the three of them to fall asleep before she struck.

Fortunately, neither Leon nor Maia strictly needed to sleep every day, and Valeria only needed a token amount, but not getting a full night's rest still left them all feeling extremely tired and irritable by the time morning finally arrived.

Despite these dangers, though, they made it through the night without being overtly bothered. They had hidden themselves not too far from where they fought off the Gorgon, in a denser patch of foliage to conceal themselves from view while Leon carved a few enchantments on nearby trees to hide their auras from ice wraiths. He and Artorias had used such enchantments many times before, but now that he was more experienced in the field, Leon realized that these enchantments were actually deceptively simple. They were light enchantments with a few amplification runes, enough to make the ice wraiths think their immediate area was bathed in sunlight, and thus making them avoid the area.

Leon never realized when he was younger, but it struck him just how correct Xaphan had been when he described the ice wraiths as being unintelligent and lacking in proper leadership. If Leon tried to use similar methods to hide from humans or other creatures of comparable intellect, it would probably have the opposite effect, serving only to shine a spotlight on them rather than hiding them from view.

None of them spoke at all during the night, other than a few quick words once they got settled in and concealed in the bushes and flowers, which amounted only to what they ought to do if attacked. Their options on that front were limited, being run or fight. Leon settled on run. Staying around to fight would only lead to their deaths as their battle drew more and more attention from other creatures in the forest.

They only felt comfortable moving again—let alone talking out loud—once the sun started to peek through the few holes in the canopy and slightly brighten the inside of the forest. By then, the near-constant shrieks of the banshees had abated, the chill of the ice wraiths had receded, and all three had regenerated quite a bit of their depleted magical reserves. Leon counted them lucky that even in these dark parts of the forest, the ice wraiths and their pet banshees were still much less active during the day than they were at night.

Still, as the three began to rise out of their 'camp', they were quiet and on edge.

Silently, Leon motioned for them to get moving again and set a route roughly northeast. None of them were yet willing to admit defeat even after the harrowing experiences of the previous day.

About the only thing that was said out loud was a warning from Leon to stay alert in case the Gorgon decided to attack them from below. They would have a second at the most to react if she did, so letting their guard down would only result in them being gravely injured or outright killed.

He and Maia kept their magic senses constantly projected and stayed on the lookout for ice wraiths, banshees, the Gorgon, and any other threat that the forest may present them with and moved much more slowly and cautiously than they did the previous day.

But that didn't stop Leon and Maia from being able to converse. Leon felt a little bad about leaving Valeria out of the loop, but he wanted to know everything that he could about their current situation.

[So,] he began, speaking into Maia's mind, [feeling a bit more willing to talk about what happened yesterday than you were last night?]

[I suppose,] Maia replied with a deliberately nonchalant shrug.

[Did you know that Gorgon? It seemed to me like you did...]

Maia was silent for a long moment, almost long enough for Leon to think that she wasn't going to answer.

[... I... don't know her personally,] she finally said. [I guessed that she was, in human terms, my aunt. My mother's youngest sister never found a mate for whatever reason. She left Saron before I was born; coming here, I suppose. I don't know that much about her.]

[But you're sure that was her?]

[She said as much when we spoke,] Maia admitted, her tone sharp and spiteful as she remembered their initial fight against the monster. [I think she spoke more to me than you might realize. She was constantly mocking me during that fight. Telling me... all sorts of things.]

[Like what?] Leon's tone was curious and concerned. He didn't mind if she and the Gorgon had shared river nymph secrets that he wasn't meant to know, but from the way Maia was acting, he doubted that was the case. More than that, he was worried about her. She wasn't letting on too much, but he could sense the pain and anger she was feeling clearly enough through their connection.

[Things I would rather not repeat,] Maia replied. Leon was disappointed to hear that, but based on the steel in Maia's tone, he didn't press for more answers.

After a moment of silence, he said, [She said she wanted to eat me. I can't deny that that freaked me out a little bit, but on a more... *intellectual* note, I thought they ate stone.]

[They do,] Maia replied, her face contorting in momentary anger and disgust at the Gorgon. [They don't lose the ability to eat meat, but eating stone is necessary for survival. The former is optional, the latter is not.]

[I see...] Leon murmured. He could sense that Maia did *not* want to talk about the Gorgon right now, so he reluctantly let the matter drop, for the time being. They would have to revisit the issue, but for now, he had no problems giving Maia her needed space to think. He reached over and squeezed her hand, conveying as much as he could with that one gesture. From the way she glanced at him and lightly smiled, he got the impression that the sentiment was received.

With a sigh, Leon turned his attention back to pathfinding and keeping an eye out for threats. And there were quite a few; he noticed a few ice wraiths slaughtering a pack of relatively high-tier wind wolves; he saw a tree that certainly held a tree sprite; he saw a large spotted cat, bigger even than the Snow Lion

he'd killed to awaken his power; perhaps most wondrously, he saw a creature that he'd never seen before, a quadrupedal thing about two and a half or three times the size of a full-grown bull. It had taut black hide stretched over intimidatingly large, rippling muscles; a ridge of dark brown fur running along its massive, curved spine; four beady eyes shining like obsidian in its long, angular skull; a pair of vicious ebony spear-like tusks jutting out of its toothy maw; and hammer-like hooves that were displaying that similarity as the creature busied itself mashing an ice wraith into snow like it was nothing, a pair of crushed banshee corpses not too far away from it.

*'Better to avoid that one, I think...'* Leon thought with a sense of terrible danger. It radiated an aura of the seventh-tier, but from the ease it seemed to have taken care of the wraith and its attendant banshees, Leon wanted absolutely nothing to do with it.

However, given that the other dangerous creatures that he was able to see were giving it a wide berth, too, Leon decided to try and find some kind of middle ground. He stayed away from the tusked-creature, but not so far that the other monsters might be willing to approach them if they were viewed as easy prey.

And so, moving with much greater caution than they had the day before, Leon's small party slowly made their way through the dark forest. They were all of them too anxious to properly appreciate the forest's natural beauty, their attention almost exclusively settled on keeping an eye out for more wraiths and the Gorgon, with their destination coming in second.

After a while of peace, though, Leon was unable to stop himself from relaxing and trying to see further ahead of them. There were still at least a dozen miles between them and the northeastern corner of the Vale where the Cradle map was leading him, and over that much land, he struggled a bit to focus on details that didn't have a magical aura. But he started to devote more of his attention to getting an idea of what lay ahead of them as they proceeded. He wanted to see if he could find this pillar they were seeking before they just ran across it.

So far, he hadn't had much luck—until, that is, around noon, when he realized that there was some kind of artificial structure closer to them than where he'd been focusing. The northeastern corner of the Vale bent inward a bit and seemed to be little more than rock and ice. However, there was a cylindrical pillar about three stories tall and maybe five feet in diameter about two miles away from them.

Leon almost stopped walking out of surprise. The pillar seemed to almost blend into the background, for it barely had any aura as far as he could initially tell. However, after a few seconds of staring directly at it with his magic senses, Leon finally saw what the problem was: the pillar *did* have an aura, but that aura blended so well with the background magic in the Vale that the pillar seemed practically invisible.

But see it Leon did, and he whispered to the other two, "I think I found the pillar we're looking for..."

He quickly gave Maia directions so that she could find it with her own magic senses, but Valeria hadn't the luxury of doing so with hers.

"Can you... see any evidence that it's been visited recently?" she hesitantly asked.

Leon took a closer look at the pillar's immediate surroundings. The forest had swallowed it completely, leaving the structure practically trapped in the branches of a pair of nearby trees. The bottom quarter of it was covered in moss and vines, and the base was completely hidden by the glowing multi-colored

foliage of the forest. As far as he could tell from so far away, the pillar hadn't seen a human visitor in a *long* time.

"I... It's too hard to tell from here..." Leon answered, not wanting to crush Valeria's hopes or to confirm her fears quite so soon, but already, his heart was starting to madly beat in his chest on this off-chance that they were going to run into Justin Isynos.

Keeping his magic senses projecting and staying on the lookout for Justin or anyone else, Leon led the three toward the pillar. About an hour of tense marching through the dense, dark forest later, they finally came within visual range of the pillar.

What little that Leon could see of it was made of stone, but most of it was hidden by leaves. More intriguing to him, though, was the fact that he could see millions of tiny runes carved into its surface that had escaped his magic senses. Whatever enchantment was carved upon it was terrifically complex.

Leon was about to lead the other two over toward the pillar to examine it closer and to rest a bit when Valeria suddenly groaned and almost keeled over.

"Hey!" Leon loudly said as he moved toward her instead. "You all right?!"

"Yeah... yeah..." Valeria replied, sounding breathless and beyond tired.

[It's this pillar...] Maia said into their minds and drawing Leon's attention as Valeria leaned against a nearby tree, sweat starting to form on her brow. When Leon's eyes fell upon his river nymph lover, he saw that while she wasn't in nearly so bad a condition as Valeria, she was still clearly tired and struggling a bit—her arms were hanging limply at her sides, her bronze skin seemed stretched over her bones as if she were somehow dehydrated, and her eyes were partially lidded.

Leon quickly understood what the problem was. The two had mentioned that they were feeling magically suppressed several times, but they had pressed on with him anyway. However, it seemed that their close proximity to the pillar had suddenly intensified that suppression to the point of making them almost physically sick.

"I'm going to get closer, I might be able to find a way to turn whatever enchantment is carved upon it off," Leon said. "Fall back a few hundred feet, but don't let your guard down."

Maia could only nod while Valeria seemed about ready to collapse. Both ladies turned around and started to move back into the forest. Leon then ran toward the pillar, hoping that he could find the problem and fix it before it got worse and before anything that might be watching them decided to take advantage of his party's separation.

Apart from the trees immediately next to the pillar that were covering it in leaves, the forest seemed to thin out a bit around the pillar, letting in plenty of natural light and creating quite the picturesque scene. Leon couldn't help but appreciate it a bit as he approached the base of the pillar.

However, as his eyes swept over the area, he froze as something else came into view, then instinctively dropped to a crouch to hide in a patch of tall grass.

He saw a small tent tucked behind one of the trees and so well-hidden amongst the bushes and other flora that it had been practically impossible to see until Leon had come this close.

[Head's up,] Leon said to Maia, [don't say anything to Valeria, yet, I don't want her running this close to the pillar, but I've found a tent here. I'm going to investigate.]

[Be careful,] Maia replied, her tone deadly serious. [I'll be there if you need me.]

[Thanks,] Leon replied as the emerald on his invisibility ring flashed green as his magic coursed through it, and the light around his body bent and distorted. Once he was fully invisible, he drew his sword and began to sneak closer to the tent.

His guard was raised as high as it could be, and he withdrew his magic senses so as to not give his position away. However, as he did so, he realized that both he and Maia had already saturated the area in their magic senses for hours, so if whoever this tent belonged to was still there, they'd already know that they had company.

And yet, as Leon carefully snuck closer using every trick he knew to approach safely and quietly, nothing about the tent changed. He heard no movement around it, he couldn't see anything inside moving about other than the occasional flap of fabric with the wind, and he sensed no strange magical auras in the area that might've given away the presence of someone else.

Still, Leon didn't let any of that goad him into relaxing. He kept moving forward with the expectation that at any moment, Justin Isynos and a hundred of his allies could jump out from behind the pillar and ambush him, even though he knew such a thing was impossible in every practical sense.

The closer he came, the more the set-up seemed both suspicious and completely harmless. The tent wasn't that large, maybe barely large enough for two people to use comfortably. It didn't seem enchanted, or at least, there wasn't any magic flowing through it, so Leon had a hard time believing that someone as strong as Justin Isynos would be using it. And, the closer he came, the more obvious it was that there wasn't anyone around.

And then it hit him about fifty feet or so away from the tent. The stench of decay, of long rotting flesh in a damp, verdant place.

Leon's nose wrinkled in displeasure, but after another thirty feet or so, he finally saw why the tent seemed to have no enchantments: the other side had been torn asunder as if some hungry beast had ripped it apart. The level of damage sustained would've completely destroyed any enchantment that the tent may have had.

The hole in the tent also gave Leon a nauseating look at what was inside. He saw what was left of a human corpse, its limbs scattered around the inside, the flesh of its face having been torn away, leaving nothing but a bare, blood-stained skull sitting amid pulpy, fly-infested flesh.

From what little remained, Leon guessed that this was the corpse of a male, his body had been here for at least a month, perhaps as many as three or four, and that whatever had killed it had not eaten him. There was just too much meat left behind for him to have been made a meal.

*'Could this be Justin?'* Leon wondered.

## **Chapter 492: The Next Steps**

[I found a corpse,] Leon reported to Maia. [Looks like it's been here for a while.]

Maia didn't respond with words, but he felt her acknowledgment.

He approached the tent a little bit closer despite the rank stench coming from the rotten man. As far as Leon could tell, he'd been there, dead, for at least a month, probably more, which again threw off his estimates for Justin's timetable. Assuming, of course, that this man was affiliated with Justin, which Leon felt was a safe assumption to make.

The more Leon examined the corpse, though, the less he thought it was Justin himself, in contrast to his initial assumption. There wasn't enough lingering magic on the corpse to get an idea of how strong the man was, but judging from his physical proportions alone, he wasn't Justin.

He couldn't help but be disappointed. If Justin had died in the Northern Vales—in Leon's old home, no less—then Leon could simply chalk it up to arrogance and the universe administering justice on his behalf. The question of what exactly to do with Justin was still one that weighed on Leon's mind, for even though Leon had committed to making peace with him for Valeria's sake, he couldn't just let the man who ordered his father's death to walk away from that scot-free.

As he gazed down at this half-rotted corpse, Leon remembered that Valeria had told him that one of Justin's surviving seventh-tier subordinates was a man with a shorter and stockier build, and that certainly fit what he was looking at.

*'Alexandros, if I recall correctly,'* he thought.

What Leon found a little more confusing, though, was the sheer lack of evidence for a struggle that he could see that would've led to the death of a seventh-tier mage. The tent had certainly been violently sundered, but apart from that and the violence done to the man's body, the surroundings were serene and seemed intact. Even if Leon were to go with his outside estimate and take the man as having been dead since shortly after Trajan's death, there still should've been *some* sign of the kind of battle that would've killed him—broken ground, toppled trees, burns and stone rubble, that sort of thing.

Yet, there was nothing. The ground around the pillar was perfectly serene and intact, as far as Leon could tell. The trees were fine, the flora seemed undisturbed, and the man was lying in the tent as if he'd fallen asleep there, in rather disturbing contrast to the vicious wounds that covered his corpse.

Leon was tempted to just light the body aflame since the miasmic odor was so terrible, but he decided to just step away for a little while to clear his head and nose.

Turning his attention to the pillar after determining that there were no hidden threats ready to attack him, Leon finally got a good up-close look at the pillar with his own eyes. It had clearly stood there for ages, perhaps long enough to have been built by the Thunderbird Clan before its fall, but it hardly seemed at all weathered. The moss and vines that grew upon it and the trees that had enveloped it in their branches clearly spoke to that age, but the runes inscribed upon it and edges of its boxy base seemed to Leon to be far too sharp and defined to have suffered in the elements as he would've expected it to.

Additionally, the pillar was perfectly intact, without fault or crack that Leon could see, which he greatly appreciated as he approached to examine the tiny runes carved upon its monolithic surface more closely.

Even in just the few swift minutes he took to look the pillar over, he had to admire the sheer complexity of the enchantment inscribed upon the massive pillar. The entire thing was covered in only a single enchantment, as far as he could tell, indicating that the aura that the pillar seemed to be emitting that was suppressing Valeria and Maia's power was its sole function. However, that complexity made it nearly impossible for Leon to figure out where to even begin to analyze it, let alone finding any controls that he could use to turn the damn thing off.

With a sigh, Leon turned back to the tent. He felt like he could spend the next few years studying the pillar, but he hadn't that kind of time.

Holding his breath, Leon began to rummage through the things that he could find in the tent. There wasn't much, mostly just some tattered bedding that was starting to rot, but Leon noted that there was a second bedroll in the tent beside the corpse.

*'This guy wasn't alone...'* Leon thought. After another few minutes of poking around and examining the tent's surroundings for clues, he found little else of note, nothing to point him in a direction of where the second person may have gone or what their current status was. *'Maybe that other person was Justin... Well, 'probably' might be better to say. But we're still months behind him if this corpse is any indication...'*

With little else to learn, Leon began to trudge back to Maia and Valeria, feeling dejected and just a little bit embarrassed that he hadn't been able to find anything more or a way to turn off the pillar. The thought occurred to him to try and destroy the thing, but he figured that even with his current power, he wouldn't be able to do much to a structure that had survived in such a state for thousands of years.

When he arrived, he found them looking a little better than they had seemed when approaching the pillar.

"Find anything?" Valeria asked, still looking a little pale but otherwise recovered. At the very least, she was leaning against a tree but didn't seem like she was about to collapse if she weren't.

Leon nodded but decided to start off with something else. "I couldn't find a way to shut off that pillar, though, so we might have to live with it. Has it steadily grown worse or was it more sudden once we got close?"

"A bit of both," Valeria said as she glanced at Maia, who nodded in agreement. "It's gotten slowly worse the further east we've gone, but it wasn't much and gradual enough that it was hard to notice in the moment. Where we are right now, I'd say I could still fight if I had to. That spike in intensity once we got within visual range of the pillar was unusual."

Leon nodded again and leaned against another nearby tree. "I... found something else," he hesitantly began, his eyes finding Valeria's. He then quickly informed her and Maia of everything he found.

Valeria let him talk, but as soon as he was done, she hurriedly asked, "You didn't find anything else that might've identified him?"

"I did not," Leon replied. "The rest of the tent was empty apart from the spare bedroll, and his clothes were too tattered to have any identifying marks. I couldn't say who that man was, but I can say with reasonable certainty that he wasn't Justin."

Valeria still looked more than a little worried, but she seemed to accept Leon's judgment. However, from the way her eyes glanced back in the pillar's direction, Leon got the feeling that she was a hair's breadth away from investigating the tent herself despite the pillar's aura.

[What should we do now?] Maia asked them both. [Correct me if I'm mistaken, but without anything else to go on, this is where our trail ends. There's nothing else to see.]

"Maybe..." Leon murmured as he projected his magic senses back over the region again. "There certainly wasn't any sign as to Justin's whereabouts, or even any concrete evidence that he was here. But... I can't help but wonder if this is it."

"I know what you mean," Valeria agreed, to Leon's momentary surprise. "Can either of you see anything else in this place that might be worth checking out? Something further east, maybe?"

"Not that I can tell."

[Same here.]

Valeria raised a hand to her chin in thought. "My father, after he learned of my interest in enchantments, once told me about some of the defensive wards that people in the Nexus use. This pillar seems like one of those that he told me about..."

"Right, my father built something similar—though much less powerful—when we lived here after consulting some of my family's old books," Leon added, thinking of the obelisk that had been in the middle of his home's compound.

"I never learned the specifics, and it was something he mentioned in passing," Valeria continued, "but this pillar strikes me as not something that anyone would just put up for no reason. What reason demanded that it be constructed? Why would someone not want people who aren't connected to the Thunderbird to enter this Vale?"

"I remember telling you about that map I found in the stone giants' territory," Leon said, to which Valeria nodded in recollection. "All we've found so far of structures that old is the troll's bridge and that pillar. Nothing so far that would warrant inclusion on that map... assuming it points to places where my Clan built... *things*."

[From what you've told me of these ancient people, they wouldn't set something like this up just to protect this forest from interlopers,] Maia added.

"I'd agree with that," Valeria said. "The preservation of nature has never been a big priority of those in power in the Nexus, from what I've been told. Nature magic makes preservation kind of unnecessary."

"Then there's something else here," Leon said. "Something hidden. And if he told you about these things, Valeria, then I have no doubt that your father would realize this, as well."

"Then he may have gone off to search for this place?" Valeria asked, her tone hopeful.

"I would think he did. The question for us, then, is where to go."



As Leon spoke, he remembered that he actually had a physical map of the points that the Cradle pointed to, and with only the slightest bit of hesitation from Valeria's presence, he retrieved it from his soul realm to show the other two.

"It looks to me like this is pointing to roughly this area of the forest, basically the north-eastern quadrant," Leon said, pointing to the relevant part of the map as Maia and Valeria took everything in. "The scale is too zoomed out to get a more accurate picture, though."

Leon felt Maia project her magic senses again, searching the northeast more thoroughly and with more focus. However, from her expression, he doubted she managed to find anything. On a whim, Leon projected his magic senses, too, but between them and the massive veritable ice wall at the base of the Frozen Mountains in the northeast, there was nothing else of note that he could see with such a cursory check.

And then, Leon felt something familiar, something that made him freeze just as he was about to propose they move past the pillar and explore the northeast a little more thoroughly. He wasn't sure if what he noticed was accurate, though, so he turned more of his focus to using his magic senses and used them to inspect the icy northeast in almost excruciating detail.

And he felt it again, the faintest wisp of demonic power.

"Shit..." he muttered.

Valeria responded with the question on her and Maia's mind. "What is it?"

"All that snow and ice covering the mountains out there... I don't think it's natural. I can feel some traces of demonic power coming from it... Maybe the ice wraiths made it?"

[Ice wraiths alone couldn't create so much,] Maia said as she inspected the area.

"Depends on how long they've been here and how determined they are," Leon replied. "However, I think you may be right. Regardless, there's demonic power coming from those mounta—"

As Leon was speaking, his magic senses were washing over the mountains and beyond the Vale and coming close to the limits of how far he could push them when they were suddenly scattered and dissipated.

"What is it?" Valeria asked, her tone taking a turn for the anxious. She'd noticed Leon's change in expression as he stopped talking.

"... There's definitely something out there," Leon said, his voice dripping with both excitement and terror. "Something worth defending. Something worth putting up wards that scatter magic senses."

[How far?] Maia asked. [Oh, never mind, just found it. I didn't manage to see anything else, though. Just what looked like more mountains.]

"But no one sets up those kinds of wards on a whim," Leon said.

"If you're right, does that mean that there will be more ice wraiths around?" Valeria asked. "From what you're saying, it sounds like ice wraith central, or will be once the sun falls."

“That’s... a valid point,” Leon conceded, checking his excitement. “There’s nothing else up here, though.”

“I’m not saying we shouldn’t go and have ourselves a look,” Valeria said challengingly. “All I’m saying is that we should probably make sure we don’t let our caution slip.”

“I think we can do that,” Leon said as he glanced at Maia.

[I’m willing to go,] Maia said as she nodded to Leon. [I’d prefer if we could make this quick, though. The sooner we leave, the happier I’ll be.]

“Right,” Leon said, understanding that they were all in agreement.

They now had a new destination, and none of them were keen on sticking around so close to the pillar any more. So, Leon led them on, toward the mountains in the northeast, toward the field and practical wall of ice that covered them, toward the great barrier that was blocking his magic senses.

And with every step, his heart raced faster and faster. He felt like he was so close to something amazing and something terrible at the same time.

#### **Chapter 493: A Monstrous Offer**

Far stretched the ice of the northeastern mountains, forming an impassable wall separating Leon’s small party from what lay beyond, from what was scattering his magic senses. It wasn’t like a sheer cliff, but the amount of ice—several great hills and ridges of it that curled upward and outward into an enormous icy curtain that came close to rivaling the size of the smaller mountains beyond—was more than enough to form an effective barrier over which Leon didn’t think he and his party would be able to move.

At least, not without flying. With Anzu back in Vale Town, he with his flight suit was the only one of them who could fly. Without greater access to the air, not even Maia was confident that she could get over the ice.

Part of that was because of the much more noticeable demonic aura it emitted once they got closer. Maia wouldn’t be able to control that ice with it inundated with demonic magic.

Looking out at this problem from a hill close to the ice stood Leon, Maia, and Valeria. It was damn cold even with a quarter-mile between them and the ice, and the Forest of Black and White had ended about a quarter-mile behind them, with nothing but broken, steadily ascending ground and the occasional patch of grass or stubby tree between them and the forest.

From their vantage point, they could look out over essentially the entire Vale, and look out ahead at their new obstacle. Fortunately, there didn’t seem to be as many dangers out in the foothills of the Frozen Mountains as there seemed to be down in the forest, so they didn’t have to contend with ice wraiths and banshees while investigating the demonic ice.

[Do you have any ideas, Xaphan?] Leon asked his demonic partner. He’d been staring out at the fields and great curtains of ice that stood between Leon and *something* that had probably been built by his Clan.

[All of that ice was definitely made by a powerful demon,] Xaphan observed. [Probably several. Note how all of it seems to stem from five 'sources', as if the demons stood at those locations and let loose with their power, sealing up these mountains with ice.]

Leon nodded to himself, agreeing with Xaphan now that the fire demon pointed out the pattern.

[If I had to guess, I would say that the superior demons that commanded the 'ice wraiths', as you call them, probably sealed up the mountains, then vanished. Perhaps they returned to the Void, perhaps they ventured into the mountains. No matter what happened, they don't seem to be around anymore, though their ice remains.]

[Does that mean they might still live?] Leon asked. He remembered the battle he had with the vampire that ended with him down an arm. Once the vampire was dead and the connection between his demonic patron and the fires that he'd started was severed, the fires immediately vanished. That this demonic ice was still present led him to think that the demons that put all of it there were still around somewhere.

[Maybe,] Xaphan replied. [I doubt either of us will ever be able to say for certain. However, it would appear that for whatever reason the demons set up this barrier, it was probably to prevent something else from coming south through these mountains into the forest, so they built it to last. It wouldn't need them to continually supply it with power if it were properly built and enchanted.]

[Would you happen to know any way to get past it?] Leon asked.

He could almost feel the immediate indignation rising out of his soul realm as Xaphan practically spat, [Yes. Use my fire.]

[I'm not strong enough to use it continuously, though, and even then... that would be a *lot* of ice to get through even if we just made a thin path for us to move through.]

[You're not going to be melting a path through all of that,] Xaphan said matter-of-factly. [Have you ever tried to melt demonic ice? You're not getting through that in a timely manner.]

[I hope you're not suggesting that we *climb* over all of that,] Leon replied.

[You can try that,] Xaphan said, his tone taking on a few shades of delighted expectation. [I would love to see you try and resist the cold of demonic ice. Even with the aid of fire magic, I wouldn't bet on you making it halfway.]

[So that leaves cutting our way through these ice hills or flying.]

As if she could hear Leon and Xaphan's conversation, Valeria murmured aloud, "Do you think there's a way around? Surely all of this ice isn't a ring around whatever is beyond these mountains..."

"I wouldn't recommend going deeper into the mountains," Leon said. "For the most part, the kinds of things that live in the extreme environment of the Frozen Mountains are much more dangerous than the fauna that live down here in the Vale. The last thing we'd want is to disturb a flight of wyverns or griffons while we're just trying to find a way through the passes, assuming we even *could* find a way through."

“Right...” Valeria said with a grimace. “Not going to lie, though, I’d almost take fighting a wyvern over another group of ice wraiths...”

Maia, hearing their conversation as she bathed the Vale in her magic senses, replied, [All of this ice looks like it’s covering a passage through the mountains. Notice how the peaks are fewer in front of us compared to our east and west.]

Leon looked up, using his physical eyes rather than his magic senses, and saw that she was correct.

“I wonder how far in all of this goes,” Valeria said, continuing to think out loud.

Xaphan responded, though she couldn’t hear, [Probably farther than she realizes. Listen, boy, you’re not going to climb over that. If you want to risk flying in a place that, by your own word, is infested with wyverns and griffons, then do me a favor and let me out of your soul realm before you try. I’d rather not be in here when you get torn to bloody pieces by flying lizards.]

[Yeah, I’ll do just that,] Leon sarcastically responded. He hadn’t been planning on flying in, anyway.

However, before his and Xaphan’s conversation could continue, he sensed the appearance of a massive magical aura not far behind them, an aura so dense with magic that he was completely unable to see through it.

He spun around, his sword appearing in his hand with a flash of light. Beside him, Valeria and Maia had similar reactions, with Valeria summoning her glaive and Maia a water dragon.

What they saw had all of their hearts sinking: the Gorgon rising out of the earth like a goddess of the underworld arriving to ferry their souls to the hells. She wasn’t too far away, perhaps thirty or forty feet down the hill they were on, with her lips turned up in a confident smile as she made no attempt to conceal herself, and she barely reacted at all to their blatant hostility.

She seemed the same as the day before, with her entire serpentine lower half emerging unharmed from the crack in the earth that she appeared from, while her nude upper half was almost flagrantly uninjured. Leon and Maia had gotten in some good hits against her in their last violent exchange, but there was absolutely no sign of any injury anywhere on her body.

“Spread out, prepare to try and flank her,” Leon ordered as he took a couple of steps forward to face the Gorgon head-on. Maia and Valeria, meanwhile, began to move out to the sides. Leon’s heart raced in his chest as his adrenaline spiked. He called upon all of his magic power that he’d regenerated in the past day in preparation for a brutal fight, a fight that they wouldn’t be able to run from with their backs against a mountainous curtain of demonic ice. But before any of them were ready, the Gorgon made her move.

Oddly enough, however, her move wasn’t hostile. She spread her arms out almost as if she were inviting their attack, but a moment later, her voice rang out in their minds, showing that that wasn’t at all what she was doing.

[Peace...] she calmly whispered. [Please, peace...]

Leon froze in confusion and surprise, and his reaction was mirrored in Valeria and Maia, who slowed in their movement and subtly glanced at him.

[I mean you three no harm,] the Gorgon said. [I would break words if you would have them...]

From within Leon's soul realm, Xaphan quietly said, [My power is ready. You seemed to have gotten your ass handed to you the last time you fought this creature, so don't hesitate to call upon it. It might just save your life.]

[Thanks,] Leon replied.

To the Gorgon, he spoke out loud, though he had little idea what he ought to say.

"Uh... What do you mean by 'peace'?"

[I mean I don't want to fight,] the Gorgon replied, her arms rising even further as if to show that she wasn't armed, though, to a being like her, that hardly mattered.

Leon glanced at Maia. [What do you think?] he asked her.

[Not a clue,] his river nymph lover replied, glancing back at him with a look of muted astonishment. [Maybe... maybe we should hear her out?]

Leon cocked an eyebrow, but he at least didn't want to fight if he could avoid it. Still, he kept his guard up and his magic senses projected to watch the Gorgon like a hawk.

Before he could say anything more—not that he had much to say in the face of this surprise—the Gorgon said, [I understand your caution, but please hear me out before making any rash moves! I have some things to say and not as much time to wait around as I would like.]

*'What's that supposed to mean?'* Leon wondered. The Gorgon hardly seemed pressed for time, with her easy smile and almost relaxed demeanor.

Leon glanced at Valeria and Maia. Both had gotten a fair bit of distance and were now waiting for him to decide what to do.

And he had to admit, he was curious as to what game the Gorgon was playing.

"How about you stay over there!" Leon shouted back. "So long as we all stay at a respectable distance, there shouldn't be any problem with exchanging a few words!" Even as he said this, he focused his magic senses completely on the Gorgon, taking in her every movement, every fluctuation in her aura that he could perceive. If he caught so much as a whiff of killing intent—of which he couldn't detect any right now, giving him some measure of confidence that talking wasn't the worst decision ever—then he wanted to be ready to respond in kind.

[That works for me, it's not like I'll be the one raising my voice to be heard,] the Gorgon responded, her smile taking on an ever so slightly mocking quality before settling back into something more friendly and unthreatening. [First of all, I would like to thank you. I wasn't in the proper state of mind when we met, but the power you used against me eventually brought me back to my senses.]

Leon gave her a strange, searching look, but said nothing. He wanted her to say her piece before making his own reply.

[Unfortunately,] the Gorgon continued, [even with the lightning that I captured from you, my condition forces my current lucidity to be only temporary. If I wish to retain my tempered state of mind, I'm going to require some assistance. That's where you'll come in.]

Leon couldn't help but exclaim, "What?!" His eyes sought out Maia, but his river nymph lover was staring at the Gorgon, unmoving and revealing nothing by her stony expression.

The Gorgon's smile took a bitter turn and her eyes turned toward the ground as if she were ashamed of what she was admitting. After a silent second or two, she looked up again, but this time her eyes were locked on Maia. However, her voice still rang clearly in Leon and Valeria's minds, too.

[Gorgonism is a strange thing. It twists our bodies into these new shapes if we fail to find a mate. Our power slows until it turns to stone, and stone becomes the only thing that can sustain us. I'll spare you the details but suffice it to say that this is not a painless existence. Constant physical pain aside, the worst pain is in the mind. Everything that makes you 'you' becomes warped and broken, like looking at your reflection in a turbulent lake.

[This happened to me long ago. I traveled all over the plane, seeking out a way to end our dependence on finding mates, to cure Gorgonism once and for all, but I failed... obviously. Now I exist as a monster on the edge of the world, with nothing but a small school of lesser nymphs to attend to me, surrounded by wraiths and banshees and all else in this Vale.

[But yesterday, you used your lightning upon me, and I captured it with a lightning rod that I found many years ago and many miles to the south. Using that power that I captured last night, I remembered myself. Clarity came with the pain of your lightning; it showed me everything that I've become while reminding me of who and what I used to be. I can't tell you how happy that made me once I realized what had happened! My joy was, in fact, matched only by my dismay when I felt the fog returning, when I felt my condition flaring back up and turning me back into a base and primal thing, a monster that seeks only to fulfill her most primitive desires.

[I don't want that. What I want is your help to keep me being me, to prevent me from sliding back into that fog, to help me return to what I once was.]

Here, the Gorgon paused, awaiting a response. Leon, though, was struck kind of speechless. Nothing that the Gorgon had just said resonated with what little he knew about Gorgons, though to be fair, he truly knew *little* about them. That being said, he did have a theory or two as to why the Gorgon was now 'lucid,' if that term could be considered accurate.

"Be specific with your desires, and with what you're offering in exchange!" Leon called out. He was tempted to agree if only to satisfy his intellectual curiosity, but he wasn't about to render his assistance to this monster that had nearly killed all three of them less than a day ago without something in exchange.

Remembering his initial encounter with Maia made him *doubly* cautious of agreeing to anything that might aid this Gorgon.

It seemed that that was the question the Gorgon was waiting for, though, for her smile widened into something akin to pride.

[I've watched for a while, now, trying to figure out just what you were doing here. And I think I figured it out. You want to get past that ice, don't you?]

She waited again for Leon to confirm or deny, neither of which he did. After an awkward moment, she shrugged and continued on the assumption that her guess was correct.

[I happen to have a way past all of this. All you need to do is to promise to help me in return for helping you. It won't be an onerous task that I require of you, either, requiring basically no effort on your part. You just need to bleed a little for me, no more, no less. Now, what do you say?]

#### **Chapter 494: Reaching an Accord**

The Gorgon stared at Leon and Maia in expectation, while practically ignoring Valeria. She waited for their response to her offer, to help her in exchange for being given a way to bypass all of the demonic ice between them and whatever lay to the northeast of the Forest of Black and White.

Leon wanted to say no. He didn't want to indebt himself to yet *another* river nymph, even if this one was twisted and less focused on breeding than Maia had been when they'd met. Besides, there was only one place left for Justin to be in this Vale, if he was still here at all, and that was past all of this ice. And that meant that there was probably a way past it that Leon hadn't managed to find or think of, yet.

Or maybe Justin could fly. The simplest solution was probably the likeliest.

Still, Leon could fly, too, and if push came to shove, he could always do what Xaphan had half-seriously suggested and escort Maia and Valeria out of the Vale, then proceed to try and fly over the ice, all while hoping that he wasn't seen by any powerful winged thing that was looking for a human-shaped meal.

[Is this truly such a difficult decision to make?] the Gorgon asked, seemingly running low on patience. [If I were you, I'd want to get up there and see what was what regardless of what I had to do to get there. It's only a little bit of blood...]

"You saying you know what's up there?" Leon replied. The Gorgon gave him a predatory smile as soon as he said that, and he immediately wished he hadn't.

[Are *you* saying that you *don't* know what's up there?] she shot back. [I'd hardly have guessed. I would've figured that it was your primary reason for coming back here after you'd left, to reclaim what your Ancestors left for you there. If you knew what was up there, I'd think you'd hardly need any time to deliberate.]

Leon grimaced more and more as the Gorgon made it clear that she not only remembered him from his childhood here in the Vale, but she also knew what kind of power he carried in his blood back then. Which then struck him as a little strange, since he figured she would've made a move against him and Artorias if she knew that much, but then again, he had little idea what her motivations were.

After a long, silent moment, Leon ignored her statement and testily asked, "For what purpose do you need my blood? We're going to need to know that—and what's beyond these mountains—if we're to make a decision about whether or not to help you. We need to know that what we'll find is worth the risk."

[As I said before, I want your assistance in curing my Gorgonism.]

“Not specific enough, we’re going to need the details,” Leon said as he glanced at Valeria and Maia, trying once more to gauge how they were feeling about all of this. Valeria seemed a little more relaxed, though she was keeping her glaive up and at the ready, while Maia still stared at her twisted kin with stony determination and a robust aura. If the Gorgon made even the smallest of moves against them, he knew that Maia would attack in an instant without hesitation.

[I think it was your power specifically that woke me up,] the Gorgon said to him, confirming at least some of what was already going through his head. [The rest of the injuries helped, of course, but I think it was all that lightning that you used that made my current lucidity possible in the first place. I’m going to need a little bit of your blood, which, when combined with the magic-repressing qualities of this place, as well as a few other ingredients I’ve gathered over the years, might be enough for me to brew a potion to aid me in regaining my former body for good and without the usual restrictions inherent to river nymphs.]

[The power it contains could banish the mental aspects of Gorgonism permanently, if enhanced properly. That is what I want, and what I’m now *asking* you for, rather than trying to *take* it...]

Leon almost refused outright. It was on the tip of his tongue, all it would take would be a single, ‘no’. Her implied threat only made him even angrier, even if he knew that she was fully capable of following through.

But then he glanced at Maia and saw her staring back him, her lake blue eyes locking him in place.

[I don’t think she’s intending anything that would harm you,] the river nymph said. [Giving her your blood would be safe.]

Leon grimaced, suddenly unsure of his decision.

[Why do you say that?] he asked.

[I... believe her,] Maia simply replied. [She’s not lying, I would stake my life upon it. And if she *can* cure Gorgonism... it would mean much to my—*our*—people.]

Leon’s grimace turned into a full-on scowl. [Do you think she’d consent to an oath upon her true name?]

The true names of river nymphs he’d learned were much like human Mana Glyphs. They could be used to directly influence someone else’s soul realm, and oaths sworn upon them would wreak terrible and potentially irreversible damage upon the oathbreaker. As a result, they were rarely used, for such a risk was not one that most people were comfortable with.

But Leon wanted assurances that his blood wasn’t going to be mismanaged.

[You’d have to ask her, it depends on how desperate or motivated she is.]

Leon slowly nodded.

Directing his attention back to the Gorgon, he asked out loud, “I’m not entirely opposed to giving you some of my blood, but I have some conditions that I hope you can agree to.”

[Is being led to the place beyond the ice not enough?] the Gorgon asked with a knowing smile.



"I can't say, I don't know what's out there." Leon glanced north, the fields and great curtain of ice blocking his vision of what was nestled in the Frozen Mountains, his expression briefly turning to one of yearning and desire. He *wanted* to see what was being protected up there.

The Gorgon's smile faltered a little, and she asked, [What conditions are you speaking of?]

"A pledge that my blood will be used for this potion of yours, and *only* that potion, as well as the recipe for the potion you intend to brew," Leon stated. He caught Valeria looking at him out of the corner of his eye, reminding him of the entire reason why they'd come to the Vale in the first place, so he added, "And while I'm not going to demand it, I would *appreciate* your assistance in a matter of some personal significance."

[I can agree to the first,] the Gorgon said exasperatedly, [but your 'request' will have to be more specific. I will not be making any blank promises.]

Leon smiled. "I understand. The main reason why we're here is because we're trying to track some missing people that came to this Vale not too long ago. Do you remember any humans who may have come here recently that possessed eighth-tier strength?"

The Gorgon's smile turned somewhat predatory and her eyes for the first time flickered in Valeria's direction. [About four months ago, a group of six humans arrived, led by a human mage of the eighth-tier. He was well-built, handsome, and had hair the same color as hers.]

Leon didn't see or hear Valeria react, and for that he silently praised her self-control. He didn't know if he could maintain his stoicism if they were talking about his father, and that she didn't even blink impressed the hells out of him.

Pressing for details, Leon asked, "Can you tell us anything else about what he may have been doing? About where he might be right now?"

[I'm afraid not,] the Gorgon responded. [His power was enough that I wasn't going to approach them too closely. I did watch them from afar, though, and saw them exploring your old home and the western reaches of the Vale. After a few days, another group arrived, doubling their number, and they set off for the west. They seemed to run into some trouble, though, for the next time I saw them, four of their number were gone, and one of their strongest was fleeing to the west—a blond woman at the seventh-tier, I believe. She made it out of the Vale, but I watched those who remained be slowly picked off by the wilder locals over the next few days.]

"Did the silver-haired man fall in battle?" Leon asked.

[Not that I saw,] the Gorgon replied. [I last saw him and his last surviving companion travel back to your old home and leave something behind, a piece of paper, I think. Then, they ventured back out to the east. I lost track of them not too long after. I believe this was about... oh, three months ago?]

"I see..." Leon whispered. "And you have no idea at all of where these two went?"

[I do not,] the Gorgon replied. [They were not after me, so I left them alone.]

*'Wish you extended the same courtesy to us,'* Leon thought with a light frown.

"So," he continued out loud, "would you be willing to swear to me that—"

[No,] the Gorgon immediately replied. [My true name is mine alone. If you do not trust me so much that you would ask me to make such an oath, then... we're going to have problems. I'd understand, but we'd have problems, nonetheless. An accord between the two of us of a more mundane variety will have to do.]

Fighting the urge to click his tongue, Leon said, "I suppose that's how it's going to be, then. We'll have to trust each other's word. How much blood do you need?"

[Not much, perhaps enough to fill this container.] The Gorgon conjured a stone bowl small enough to fit in her palm. It was shallow, relatively speaking, but since Leon was going to be the one filling it, it looked worryingly deep.

"We... we can get that filled *after* you show us the way past the ice. Once it's filled, I would like you to explain the recipe for the potion you intend to make."

The Gorgon took a deep breath, appearing as if she were steeling herself for something, or fighting to keep something else down. Her slitted reptilian eyes found Leon and held his gaze, and he began to feel a slight change in her aura. It was subtle, nothing too big, nothing to be concerned about, but still enough that he was able to notice.

[I might need a blast of your lightning before we begin,] she said.

Leon neither asked for confirmation nor hesitated. He conjured a bolt of silver-blue lightning in his hand and hurled it with all the force he could bring to bear, though he tempered his attack enough to aim at the ground in front of the Gorgon. She was still caught up in the lightning explosion, but it was hardly as damaging as it could've been if the bolt had hit her.

Once their ears stopped ringing from the thunder and the arcs of lightning cleared up, the Gorgon simply smiled, seemingly unfazed, and said, [I think we could've found another way, but that worked well enough, I suppose. Now, then, follow me.]

She then slithered off into the forest without another look at any of them, as if she didn't even care if they were following her or not.

"All riiiiight," Leon said, letting out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding as the Gorgon put some distance between herself and them. "Everyone good? Is this everything we want? I'd say this is the last chance we might have to change anything or to propose a different plan before we cross a point of no return..."

Maia just looked at him and said, [I want to see this through. I want to know what she has learned about Gorgonism.]

Valeria seemed likewise willing to follow through with what Leon had asked for. "Thank you for asking about my father," she said, finally letting herself relax as the Gorgon continued to slither away. "She didn't give us the best news, but it was something. Now, I need to know if he's somewhere past all of this ice. He doesn't seem to be anywhere else, so..."

She trailed off, not wanting to finish her sentence, but Leon knew what she was getting at. They'd already found Rhea and who Leon assumed to be Justin's last remaining seventh-tier mage dead, which meant that Justin's chances of continued survival were not great. The chances of him being past this ice

were also not great, but he could completely understand why Valeria was clinging to this hope right now.

Personally, though, he felt some small satisfaction in knowing that Justin's entire party had perished up here. It had felt like they were trespassing on holy ground for him, but knowing the losses they'd suffered went a long way to assuaging the offense he felt. Now, he was mostly motivated by seeing whatever it was in the northeast more than wanting to actually find Justin. If anything, he felt like it would just be in everyone's best interest if they were to find the man dead somewhere.

"Well, if we're all on the same page, then we should go catch up before she leaves us behind," Leon said, directing them after the Gorgon. All three set off after her, moving at a steady clip northeast toward the barrier of demonic ice.

### **Chapter 495: Colossus I**

Leon, Valeria, and Maia quickly caught up to the Gorgon. The serpentine woman wasn't moving too quickly, so it was easy enough to fall into place not too far behind her as she led them toward the ice-covered foothills at the edge of the Vale.

Valeria and Maia were quiet, and Leon wasn't in any particularly talkative mood, but he still had a few questions that he wanted to be answered by the Gorgon, so he moved ahead a little bit to fall in beside her.

"So," he hesitantly began, not entirely sure if she would be receptive to more conversation, "how long have you been here?"

The Gorgon shot him a strange look out of the corner of her eye, one that had Leon about to apologize for broaching a sensitive topic, but a moment later, she said to him in a heavy and weary tone, [Too long.]

Leon nodded, taking the hint to drop that line of questioning. "Not a problem. I was just kind of curious because you clearly remember me from when I lived here..."

[I do,] the Gorgon said, her tone lightening up a little bit. [You and your father were hard to miss. I actually approached him not too long after the two of you arrived. I think you were only one or two years old at the time.]

"Really?" Leon could guess that things had ended between them on a somewhat amicable note, otherwise his and Artorias' time in the Vale would've been much more complicated than it otherwise would've been. However, he never heard his father talk about this before, and Artorias had always kept them at quite the fearful distance of the Gorgon. "I never knew that the two of you knew each other."

[I wouldn't go that far,] the Gorgon said, smiling at Leon in a way that clashed heavily with his view of her from the day before. It was decidedly *un-monstrous*. If it weren't for the snake tail and the serpentine eyes, Leon could even see the Gorgon as being civilized, with all the bearing and custom that was absent from Maia when he first met her. [The two of us met only once, when I approached after he started building your little cabins. He almost responded with hostility when he sensed me, but all he did was interpose himself between me and you. We exchanged a few words, and once he made it clear that he didn't want to interfere with my business, we parted ways.]

“Nothing more than that? Just parted ways?” Leon had a hard time believing that, the Gorgon had acted quite hostile and determined to cause harm once he and his party ran into her the day before.

[Nothing more than that,] the Gorgon confirmed with a smile. [All we did was agree not to interfere with each other, and we stuck to that agreement for the entirety of your time living here.]

*‘Surprisingly civil...’* Leon thought.

“Never once did you think of breaking it?” he asked.

[As far as I was concerned, so long as you stayed outside of my territory, you weren’t my problem,] the Gorgon replied. [Of course, you were hardly much of a threat, so in the state I was in, I wasn’t of a mind to hunt you down out of spite.]

“It does seem a little strange that you weren’t more hostile, though.”

[You left me alone, that was enough,] the Gorgon repeated in simpler terms. [Had I been more aware of myself, less of a Gorgon, then we might’ve had more contact. I mean, I refrained from mating with anyone in my life, as should be obvious, but your father... now *there* was a human who could’ve made me break that streak.]

Leon smiled awkwardly, not knowing how he should follow that up. Fortunately, he didn’t have to, for only a few moments later, the Gorgon came to a halt not too far from the first sheets of demonic ice.

[This is where we need to be,] she said to all three of them.

Leon cocked an eyebrow as he surveyed their surroundings. Nothing but rocky hills were around them, they’d left the forest behind almost half a mile ago. Before them lay the ice-covered hills that extended up into the mountains, which the ice quickly blocked.

“Damn...” Leon said as he finally beheld the true scale of the frozen barrier. The great sheets of ice extended north, spreading out and flaring upward, forming the gigantic wall that was preventing them from investigating whatever lay beyond.

[We’re going to go under it,] the Gorgon stated.

“Under it?” Valeria repeated with a confused tone. “There aren’t any safeguards preventing that?”

[None that I’m aware of,] the Gorgon said. [My current theory is that all of this ice was designed to keep something in rather than others out. Look at the pattern of the ice, see how it all emanates from five separate points?]

Leon nodded along. Xaphan had said something similar, with the assumption that the ice had been created by the ice demons that had probably led the weaker ice wraiths.

[Maybe I’m wrong, though,] the Gorgon continued, [maybe it’s all just strange never-melting ice. In all the time I’ve lived here, I’ve never seen anything come out of the plain on the other side of this thing.]

“You’ve been to the other side?” Leon asked.

[Yes,] the Gorgon confirmed. [It was one of the first things I did once I arrived. I wanted to see what was beyond.]

Leon waited a moment for the Gorgon to elaborate, and she rather frustratingly didn't. Before he could ask, though, her aura suddenly spiked as she reached a hand out in front of her. Only a moment later, the stone and dirt immediately in front of her began to flex and sink. In mere seconds, a gentle ramp down into a dark tunnel that bored through the hills had been formed.

[Just this way,] the Gorgon said with a dissonant amount of cheer as she slithered down into the tunnel.

Leon took a deep breath. Going underground with a creature proficient in earth magic was *dangerous*, and he began to hesitate. Beside him, Valeria was clearly feeling just as anxious, as she kept looking between Leon and the ramp as if debating with herself whether or not she should speak up.

But Maia didn't hesitate for a second. She walked right past the other two and started heading down the ramp. Leon almost made to stop her, but her confidence and poise were striking enough that he ended up just scowling and following after her. Valeria just swore under her breath and then did likewise.

The tunnel was about what Leon would expect: simple, dark, and cold. The walls were smooth, the ceiling was arched, and the only light source was the entrance, which was slowly getting smaller and smaller as they pressed on deeper into the earth. That wasn't much of a problem for anyone, though, since all of them were strong enough to have near-perfect vision even in the dark.

Ahead of them, the Gorgon slithered on, pushing the stone back more and more to lengthen the tunnel. On and on she led them on, not once looking back over her shoulder, until the entrance was little more than a pinprick of light far behind them. It made for an oppressive atmosphere, and no one spoke for a long time.

They didn't continue on like this for long, though, or at least, not as long as Leon would've thought. By his reckoning, they traveled through that tunnel for about three miles before it started to tilt upward. Another half mile and the tunnel ahead of them suddenly burst with bright light as the Gorgon broke through to the other side.

[We've arrived,] the Gorgon smugly stated as she shot them all a proud look over her shoulder. But instead of making way for them, she slithered into the doorway and turned around, blocking the exit. [Now it's time for you to fulfill your end of the bargain,] she hissed, her serpentine eyes locking onto Leon.

He glared right back, but at this point, he had no intention of not fulfilling his end of the deal. He'd been waiting for the Gorgon to make any kind of hostile move, but they'd gotten through the entire tunnel without a single incident.

But he wasn't going to just give up his blood without seeing what it was paying for. He sent a quick pulse of magic senses at the exit of the tunnel, hoping to see what was past the Gorgon. However, it soon became clear that the Gorgon had chosen her exit point quite well, for barely a few feet past her, Leon's magic senses were scattered, giving him only a brief look at the grassy exterior of the tunnel.

With a sigh and a desire to just get this over with, Leon walked over to the Gorgon, lightly brushing against Maia as he passed her.

[It's all right,] his river nymph lover whispered into his ear. [I've been talking to her, it'll be fine.]

Leon gave her a bitter smile, but he was reassured, nonetheless, if a little curious as to what they were talking about.

As he approached the Gorgon, he asked, "How are we going to do this?"

[What's with that face?] the Gorgon teasingly asked. [Do you think I'm going to bleed you dry? I may be a monster to you humans, but I'm far from a vampire...]

"Be that as it may, I'd still prefer to get this over with as soon as possible. I don't enjoy pain, you know."

The Gorgon shrugged and reached into her soul realm, producing the stone bowl that she had shown Leon before.

[Give me your arm,] she demanded, extending her hand to Leon.

Leon took one last deep breath, then complied. Barely a second later, the Gorgon did something Leon had never seen before and turned one of her nails into obsidian, slicing into Leon's arm with one clean stroke. Leon grimaced from the sudden white-hot pain, but he held his arm steady as the Gorgon slid the bowl beneath his wrist to catch the blood that was starting to drip.

It was a steady flow, filling the bowl with a reasonable amount of blood in about a minute, which Leon considered fortunate since his natural healing factor as a seventh-tier mage had already started to seal up the wound, and he didn't want a second slice.

[That should be enough to experiment with,] the Gorgon said with a smile. In a flash of light, the bowl filled with Leon's blood vanished into her soul realm, while Leon at the same time pulled out a weak healing spell and pressed it to his wrist.

A moment later, the Gorgon moved out of the way, finally giving Leon his first real look at what lay beyond.

And his jaw almost hit the floor of the tunnel. For him, it was like looking out into a paradise.

What lay beyond was a grassy field perhaps half a mile wide. It was warm, the sun was shining, the sky only had a few fluffy white clouds, and the entire field was surrounded by steep mountains. It was essentially a tiny hidden Vale.

But all of that was only the cherry on top for Leon. It was gorgeous, but not enough for him to stare in wonder. Rather, it was the corpses and the enormous colossus that had seized his tongue.

Scattered throughout the field were five enormous corpses, each one only resembling the others in general body shape: bipedal, humanoid, and startlingly thin, but packing many human features, like a nose and mouth. Their skin was white-blue ice, sparkling in the light of the sun as the ambient chill they gave off caused a ring of frost twenty or thirty feet thick to form around where they had fallen, causing the grass that still somehow grew there to sparkle as if they were made of glass. If the corpses had been upright, Leon guessed they would've been about twice his height.

[Xaphan, I think I found where those greater demons went,] Leon whispered to his demonic partner. He felt Xaphan's attention rise up out of his soul realm, but by then, Leon's focus had already moved on to the field's bigger feature.

Across the breadth of the field lay a mountain with a perfectly smooth face, as if it had been cut in half and had one of those halves taken away. Carved partially into the face of the mountain and partially projecting off of it was an avian colossus, its wings spread in a threatening manner, its talons tucked back in and resting on the top of a small hill at the foot of the mountain, its watchful eyes gleaming in the daylight. It took a moment for Leon to realize, but as he stared at this gigantic depiction of the Thunderbird—he couldn't imagine this titanic thing being a depiction of anything else—he realized that the eyes in the colossus' head were singular precious stones of a white or cloudy color, though he couldn't say which kind. He knew for a fact, though, that both of those glittering stones were probably three or four times as large as he was, if his estimation of the scale of the colossus wasn't distorted by distance.

So captivating was the colossus that Leon barely registered the others following him out of the tunnel and the Gorgon tossing a scroll on the tunnel floor and disappearing back into it.

He was only pulled back to reality when he heard Valeria mutter, “I *really* hope she doesn't seal this thing behind us. I don't want to have to try and dig our way back out...”

Glancing back at her, Leon grabbed the scroll—assuming it to be the recipe to counter Gorgonism he'd asked for—and released his magic senses, hoping that he was now past whatever enchantment was preventing him from seeing this place before. His hope was correct, for a moment later, all of this tiny Vale was for him to see. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to see anything of note other than the five corpses and the colossus at the other—

And then he saw a small doorway about large enough to let all three of them through shoulder-to-shoulder, almost hidden in the shadow of the Thunderbird colossus. It was made of familiar dull grey metal, trapezoidal in shape, and with a small runic circle glowing in the center of it.

“Can either of you... see anything?” Valeria asked, sounding a little uncertain and hesitant as Leon and Maia gawked at the Vale around them. For the briefest of moments, Leon wondered just why she wasn't as amazed at what they were seeing as he and Maia clearly were, but then he remembered that they were ostensibly here looking for her missing father, not to satisfy his curiosity and need to find whatever his Clan had left behind.

[I can see a lot,] Maia snarkily replied, drawing a look of ire from Valeria.

Knowing what Valeria was talking about, though, Leon quickly took one more look around with his magic senses as he put the Gorgon's scroll in his soul realm, to be examined later. He bathed the field in magic, searching every pebble and blade of grass for signs that someone had recently come through. It didn't seem like there was anything to see, nothing jumped out at him as out of place.

Until, just before he said as much to Valeria, he saw something that gave him pause. Around one of the demonic corpses, in the ring of frost that covered the grass, he saw several footprints, faint but unmistakable to his senses.

“There was definitely someone here recently,” Leon said as he stared off at the corpse.

Valeria's head whipped around to him, but before she could ask for clarification and before Leon could freely give it, Xaphan suddenly started shouting into Leon's mind.

[Boy! That statue is preparing to attack!]

## **Chapter 496: Colossus II**

[Boy! That statue is preparing to attack!] Xaphan shouted into Leon's mind, drawing Leon's attention away from Valeria and back to the colossus on the other side of the field, half a mile away.

Leon could sense a rising magical pressure, and his eyes grew wide as its power and density quickly surpassed his ability to see through. Whatever the statue was preparing was far more powerful than any attack Leon could possibly muster with only his own power.

"SCATTER!" he roared, cutting Valeria off right before she asked about his previous statement, that someone had been there recently.

Neither Valeria nor Maia hesitated. Maia noticed what was happening almost as soon as Leon shouted, and she peeled off to the right, trusting that Leon knew what he was talking about and that scattering was the right thing to do. Likewise, Valeria threw herself to the left, putting quite a bit of her fifth-tier strength into her legs and gaining forty feet between her and Leon with a single movement.

Neither of them moved a moment too soon, for as the words were leaving Leon's mouth, the great jewels in the eyes of the Thunderbird colossus flashed with golden light and a bright gold lightning bolt erupted out of the blue, nearly cloudless sky and fell upon where the three had stood only a moment before.

Leon sensed the magic condensing into the bolt even before it was visible and reacted with every ounce of speed he possibly could, instinctively understanding that even the distance the two ladies had gotten wouldn't be enough to escape its effect given the amount of power he could sense packed into that bolt. Drawing the Adamant blade of his family and the Thunderbird Clan, he held it aloft like a victorious hero and reached out with his element-less power, creating something like an invisible net in the air with which he hoped to catch or block the bolt.

In the space of a flash and with an earth-shattering boom, the lightning bolt hit Leon's power with astounding force, far more than Leon could possibly muster with his seventh-tier powers. He was immediately hammered down to one knee and started sinking into the loose, grassy dirt as he pushed back with all of his might, his raised sword wavering as the lightning bolt above him slowed enough that Maia and Valeria could see it reaching down at Leon and extending back up into the clear blue sky like a singular tree root.

Leon clenched his jaw and bared his teeth in exertion, the sheer power of the lightning bolt forcing him further and further into the dirt, his net of power straining and barely holding together. He did his best to keep it intact and to try and seize control of the bolt, but the thing was too powerful.

Suddenly, Leon heard the Thunderbird's voice echo through his mind with all the speed her lightning magic gave her.

[You can do this, Leon. This lightning is but power absent conscious control, no one of my blood could possibly fail to stop this thing.]



Leon braced himself against the ground as much as he could as he turned his head up to stare at the brilliantly shining lightning bolt above him, so bright that it washed out the colors of everything around for hundreds of feet.

[Take it,] the Thunderbird both encouraged and demanded, [seize it and make it yours! This thing is nothing compared to you!]

Leon became vaguely aware that he had begun to scream at some point, and that the power being transferred from the bolt to him even with the distance between them was great enough to start tearing apart the skin of the hand holding up his blade. Blood streamed down his arm, glowing bright red with magic power.

But the lightning bolt slowed even further. To Leon's magic-enhanced senses, it had practically come to a halt, though the pressure forcing him down into the ground had not lessened at all.

[That's it...] the Thunderbird purred. [To become the King of the Heavens, to become my truest successor, you must become the master of lightning, he who commands the wind and the rain, who summons lightning and thunder, who brings the tide and orders it to recede... This lightning is nothing to the brilliance of the powers at your command, so MAKE IT SUBMIT!!!]

With a roar, Leon pushed himself back into a standing position and constricted the 'net' of power above him, enveloping the lightning bolt as much as he could. It extended up into the sky for miles, though, so the entire body of the bolt was effectively out of reach. But the tip was enough; Leon's power wrapped it and pressed in and seeped into the spectacularly radiant magical energy.

Slowly, as the lightning bolt crept ever onward, inch-by-inch, Leon's power invaded it, slowing it down and bringing it under his control.

Leon almost felt great about it, but he soon realized as the lightning inexorably advanced that he wouldn't make it in time. The bolt was just too big, too powerful, his power—especially after the past couple of days—wasn't going to be enough to subjugate it completely. But as a few stray arcs of lightning erupted between his raised blade and the tip of the lightning bolt above him, transferring magic power from him into the bolt and back again, he had an idea.

The Adamant metal of his blade seemed capable of holding near-limitless amounts of lightning magic. He'd used it in his attacks many times over the past few years, and no matter how much of his power he poured into it, it always seemed greedy for more.

And here was an opportunity to give it more.

Leon braced himself as much as he could. Then, he squeezed the lightning bolt with his power, letting it burst out of a small hole in his net. The lightning bolt arced downward, the suddenly relieved pressure causing it to move faster than even Leon could track.

The bolt had originally been aimed at the ground between all three of them when they had stood together, but with Leon's blade raised high, the bolt bent only a few feet from Leon and slammed into the Adamant.

Again, Leon was pushed back, the force of the lightning so great that it almost tore the weapon from his hands. But the weapon stayed locked between his fingers, his grip on it so tight that if he had the brain power to spare, he would've suspected it wasn't natural.

For what seemed an eternity to Leon, but for Maia and Valeria was barely the blink of the eye, lightning surged into Leon's blade, and the blade absorbed all of it. Every spark, every errant arc, all of it was captured by the weapon.

The sword was a greedy thing, eagerly devouring all the ownerless lightning that touched it, but inevitably, the connection—both physical and otherwise—that it shared with Leon caused some of that lightning to travel between it and him. The powerful bolt conjured by the eyes of the Thunderbird colossus was intense, and even diminished, its power was more than Leon could easily handle.

It rushed into Leon's hands, bursting capillaries and causing his muscles to seize. Traveling up his hands, his wrists locked up and his nerves felt like someone had dunked them into molten iron. Into his upper arms the lightning continued, ripping and rending flesh as it went.

Throughout all of this, Leon concentrated on nothing but holding the lightning, on seizing control of it and controlling it like he would his own magic. And as the lightning raced up his arms, he felt it working; the lightning slowed, weakened, and eventually stopped just before it surged past his shoulders.

It was now under his control. The bolt had struck, and it submitted to him, becoming docile and obedient after his efforts, indistinguishable from his own magic power.

And then the pain hit, Leon finally breaking his concentration long enough to let it in. He fell to his knees, his blade still raised above him, glowing, snapping, and crackling with the stored lightning. He couldn't let it drop or all of that lightning would explode out on whatever the blade touched, for the blade couldn't just make all of that magic power disappear, it had to *go* somewhere.

So Leon gave it somewhere to go. He clenched his jaw and opened himself up to more power from the blade. He pulled what he had into his soul realm, storing it as his own power, and let the rest take its place. He blocked the pain as much as he could, but it was all he could do to just kneel there and absorb the power, to dominate it and pull it into his soul realm where it would truly become his.

For Leon, it seemed like hours had passed, his magic lighting up his senses and making everything seem like it was traveling in slow motion. In reality, though, by the time Valeria and Maia turned back around to see what was happening after scattering, Leon was already kneeling and absorbing the lightning bolt, screaming in pain.

But neither could approach, for the might of the lightning in his blade was still too strong. Valeria tried to launch an ice spike at it, hoping to break Leon's grip on the weapon and save him from whatever was happening, but the heat of the lightning simply vaporized the ice before it came within twenty feet of Leon. Maia, too, tried to aid her lover, but the water dragon she conjured met the same fate as Valeria's ice spike.

There was nothing either of them could do.

It took about ten agonizingly long seconds for Leon's sword to stop glowing, all of the magic power finally absorbed into his body. By then, though, the sleeves of his shirt had been shredded, revealing

broken, burned, and bloody skin, most of it charred black. Leon's golden eyes had practically turned orange from how bloodshot they'd become, and he had a wild look about him, as if he were an animal cornered by a predator.

"Leon!" Valeria shouted, her eyes wide and terrified.

[Are you all right?!] Maia added as she rushed back toward Leon.

But it wasn't either of them that cut through the haze of pain and the rush of all of his absorbed power, it was the passionate, proud, arrogant, imperious voice of the Thunderbird that managed to bring Leon back from the brink of blissful unconsciousness.

[It has challenged you...] she said into his ear, her pleased tone bordering on inappropriate at the display Leon had just made, [... **NOW ANSWER IT IN KIND!**]

Before either Maia or Valeria could get too close, Leon suddenly roared and staggered to his feet, his right hand releasing his sword and coming back to his ear where he opened his fingers and summoned the brightest, most powerful bolt of silver-blue lightning he'd ever held and hurled it with a strength worthy of his name and heritage.

That bolt crossed the space between him and the colossus faster than anyone could track and exploded across the colossus' beak like a meteor. The stone cracked and split as lightning danced across the colossus' face, only for all of that silver-blue lightning to stop in place as if someone had frozen time, then suddenly vanish as the gemstone eyes of the colossus flashed with silver light.

Leon stood there, his arms limp, his eyes wide, his arms burned and bloody and limp, his legs shaking so badly that it was a wonder he stood at all. In his ears rang the raucous laughter of the Thunderbird, unapologetically gleeful.

[YEEES!] she boomed, her voice like thunder in Leon's soul realm as she reveled in what he had just done. [LET IT KNOW WHO HAS COME TO RECLAIM IT! LET IT KNOW THAT ITS MASTER HAS RETURNED!!!]

Maia wasted no more time, appearing at Leon's side and pulled him into her, letting him lean on her body for support. Valeria likewise ran over, and though she kept a more respectable distance, she also produced several healing spells which she hurriedly applied over Leon's wounds.

Leon managed to stay conscious, all that had just happened over the past half-minute or so overwhelming him and leaving him dazed and speechless. Fortunately, no more lightning bolts followed the first—it seemed that whatever had happened when Leon answered with his power, it ended with the colossus standing down.

[You know,] the Thunderbird said as Leon slowly came back down and started registering his surroundings again, [that thing isn't a bad depiction of me, as far as such things go. I've seen better, of course, but this one isn't awful. Something for lesser peoples to be proud of, I suppose. Still, it tickles me a bit to see it now...]

Leon's glazed-over eyes refocused back on the now-damaged colossus, its face shattered, with small chunks of stone tumbling to the ground. But the great eyes set within its face were untouched, still glowing with silver light, still appearing as immovable as the mountains around them.

It struck Leon as an arrogant thing, lording over the tiny Vale like a god, and Leon couldn't help but admit that it *was* a startlingly accurate depiction of his Ancestor, at least in that regard.

Taking a deep breath, Leon conjured a few more healing spells and layered them over the ones Valeria had already given him.

"Thank you," he said to her gratefully as he separated from Maia. Turning back to his river nymph lover, he gave her a loving smile and a nod, their connection ensuring that he needed no words for her to understand.

Her lips turned upward in a smile to match his, and she asked, [What now? It doesn't seem like another bolt is coming...]

"No, I think we're good on that front," Leon said as he took a deep breath to steady himself. He glanced around at the rest of the Vale again, specifically at the demonic corpses, and figured that there was little reason to investigate them. It seemed clear enough to him that they'd all been killed by the colossus, and if they were here now, they'd likely been here for a *long* time.

What struck him as strange, on the other hand, was the fact that there were no other corpses around. If Justin *had* come through here and fell to the colossus, as those footprints he could see in the ice surrounding one of the corpses suggested, then he would've left a corpse behind. The bolt Leon had absorbed had been strong enough to kill an eighth-tier mage by his, admittedly hypothetical, reckoning, but not enough to destroy them entirely.

"Justin must've made it to the door..." he murmured to himself, half thinking out loud and half to the other two. "So let's go check it out."

"You mean... get closer to that thing?" Valeria asked with some trepidation. However, her tone was even and calm, and Leon didn't doubt for a second that her nerve would falter at approaching such a terrifyingly powerful weapon.

"There's a door between its talons," Leon said, pointing to the top of the shallow hill that the colossus sat upon, at the base of the mountain just behind it. "This Vale is meaningless, what matters is what's beyond, or *beneath*. So that's where we're going."

[It's worth pointing out that there might be more powerful security measures inside,] Maia replied.

"Maybe, maybe not," Leon said. "I wouldn't be surprised if there are, but generally speaking, defensive measures are there to ensure a place's survival, so the power of an interior defense would have to be limited to keep collateral damage low. Besides, the colossus seems to have recognized me, so I'm hoping that any internal security measures will as well."

"That's *real* encouraging," Valeria sarcastically stated, but her expression was stony and determined.

"Let's go and see what's here..." Leon said, setting off toward the hill, his wounds having been closed up by his natural healing factor and the spells on his arms so that they were barely more than a dull ache.

Maia and Valeria unhesitatingly followed, neither of them willing to back down now.

—

Far below the Vale, beneath seemingly endless trapezoidal halls, past empty bed chambers, through workshops and assembly rooms and storage rooms packed with enchanting materials and raw metals, past dozens of bronze statues each as large as a stone giant, was a vast domed chamber.

The floor of this chamber had been polished to a mirror shine, while millions of glowing runes made of light of various colors hovered on the domed ceiling, constantly shifting and rearranging themselves in various patterns. The chamber itself was dark, with all of these runes sparkling like stars in the night sky.

There were no adornments in this place, no pieces of furniture, no carpets, no decorations of any kind. However, directly beneath the center of the dome where a massive diamond that glowed like the moon had been installed, was another dome, this one made entirely of bright opaque white light.

From within that light came a voice, aged and tired, that growled like it was a thought spoken aloud, "... Ahh, finally... one of the Clan has arrived..."

A pulse of magic swept out through this deepest of chambers and washed itself through the entire complex. In response, the bronze statues began to move, their eyes and joints lighting up as their wisps, long dormant, began to rouse themselves from slumber.

And they readied themselves to fulfill their duties, to fight to the death in defense of this place.

#### **Chapter 497: Prince of the Thunderbird Clan**

As Leon led Maia and Valeria toward the door between the talons of the great Thunderbird colossus, he turned his attention to the Thunderbird herself. He doubted she would given how distant she usually was, but he hoped she would provide some insight regarding this place.

[Hmm?] the Thunderbird responded when he asked for just that. [I have no idea what this place could be. When it was built, my Clan was so big and spread across so much of the universe that it was honestly impossible to know what each and every one of them was doing. I barely even checked in on the Storm King himself most of the time.]

[Did the exploits of your descendants not interest you at all?] Leon wondered as he and the other two reached the slope of the hill and began to ascend, only a few hundred feet now remaining between them and the door. She'd told him several times by now that they didn't, but with what he was seeing, he wanted to hear it again.

With the colossus looming over him, its jeweled eyes glowing white with power, the Thunderbird responded, [No, as you well know. My time was up when I... not long after the Primal Gods and Devils fell. There's little left for me in the physical world.]

Leon heard sorrow, anger, and bitterness in her voice, though she tried to hide it. Before he could ask anything more of her, though, he felt her attention recede, apparently leaving him to his own devices now that he had conquered the colossus' power. He was a little irritated, but such a powerful being in such a unique position was hardly one that needed to adhere to common social niceties, though he would've preferred a little more of her time.

But just as he was about to turn his full attention back to the hill, Xaphan spoke up. [That was a good job you did, human. You absorbed quite a bit of magic power.]

[I'm quite proud of that,] Leon said, his face breaking out into a smile.

[And it's something to be proud of—for someone of your power, at least. You absorbed enough power to expand your soul realm, even.]

[Really?] Leon almost stopped in place, his eyes going wide. [Did... is that good? I mean, it sounds good, but is that dangerous?]

[Your soul realm will grow naturally, but if you want to achieve Apotheosis, you'll have to *make* it grow a little faster than that. You can't overdo it, otherwise you'll end up like that Cow King. You'll be fine, it wasn't too much. Think of it like exercise.]

[How much was it, though?]

[I'd say about five miles. You even managed to hold on to quite a bit of that power. Good boy, Leon, goood boyyy.]

Leon nodded appreciatively, ignoring the demon's provocations. Five miles was still a hefty increase given that he needed his soul realm to hit one hundred miles in order to ascend to the eighth-tier.

[Thanks, Xaphan,] Leon said as he, Valeria, and Maia arrived at the top of the hill.

"What in the hells *is* this place?" Valeria asked, sounding more like she was wondering out loud.

Answering despite the question seeming rhetorical, Leon said, "Someplace important enough to place on that map. Someplace that needed to be secure and remote. Someplace that was attacked by demons sometime in the last eighty thousand years."

[It hardly looks like it was attacked,] Maia said as she glanced first up at the colossus, then back into the Vale.

"That, I think, would depend solely on how long ago it was attacked," Leon said. "Though, I would agree that it doesn't look like any significant damage was inflicted however long all that was."

The field was flat and peaceful, filled with nothing but grass and the demon corpses. The colossus was intact—or, had been before Leon semi-defaced it with his lightning bolt—indicating that the demons, for all their power, had been unable to harm it.

"Not going to lie, that seems... unlikely," Valeria said. "If those were the demons that created that ice wall, then I can't imagine that they couldn't have damaged this place. I mean, that colossus' attack was stopped by a seventh-tier mage! No offense..."

"None taken," Leon said with a good-natured smile. "That *was* a powerful attack, but I suppose I agree that it shouldn't have been enough to kill those demons."

Valeria nodded. "Maybe we'll find some answers inside."

Leon nodded back and turned his attention to the door. It was strangely small given the size of the hill, the Vale, and the colossus towering over it, but was at least wide enough for Leon and the ladies to enter side-by-side comfortably if they so wished. Still, compared to the Cradle and Xaphan's prison, the door seemed positively minuscule.

Flashing red on the door was a familiar runic circle, one that Leon carefully, hesitantly approached. Turning back to the other two, he said, "This statue is still functioning. We need to assume that other defenses in this place are, as well. So prepare yourselves for anything."

Valeria nodded, while Maia gave him a dangerous smile. He could feel her anger and indignation after being useless during the attack from the statue, and she seemed practically electrified at the thought of getting some visceral payback.

Leon pressed his hand to the circle and the door swiftly slid open. Unsure what he was expecting in the first place, the bright hall beyond was certainly not it. He, Valeria, and Maia walked in, their guards up, ready to defend themselves, though it was difficult in light of the splendor that greeted them.

The hall was just like the prison as far as Leon could tell, and much wider and more open than the door would suggest. Its glossy gray metal walls were sloped, thinner at the top and wider at the bottom, with bright white fire burning in the lower corners to provide soft, indirect light. But the hallway gave a momentary impression of being rectangular, for dropping straight down from the higher corners were barely translucent monochromatic projections of light, showing heavily stylized exotic landscapes, heroic figures in moments of triumph, scenes of battle, and so much more that Leon's eyes started to glaze over from detail overload.

The floor was rich gray carpet, while the ceiling about thirty feet up had a similar enchantment to that of the Cradle's ceiling, showing bright blue sky interspersed only with a handful of fluffy white clouds, giving the impression that the ceiling was open to the sky outside rather than the mountain that it was.

Completing that outdoor look, the hall was trisected by two rows of columns that appeared to be living trees whose leafy canopies extended up past where the ceiling appeared to be. There were hundreds of trees in the hall, each one with different colored leaves, adding a bright burst of color to the otherwise relatively colorless hall. Adding to the trisection were two rows of grass connecting the trees, which also furthered the impression that they were still outside.

Leon's heart began racing the more of the place he saw, each and every sign of magic just another testament to the power his Clan once wielded. It stood as a challenge to him, demanding that he reach for greater heights and surpass such feats of magic.

But even these most basic of enchantments that adorned the walls and ceiling were beyond him, too arcane for him to reproduce. He hadn't the faintest idea of how to even approximate such things, and they were only the enchantments that decorated the entrance hall!

All-in-all, this place was remarkably intact, and beautiful to boot. Leon wanted nothing more than to start sprinting further inside, flinging open every door and exploring every nook and cranny. All of this *couldn't* have been built for nothing, he was convinced that *something* had to have been left behind if the place was still in such a state.

And that one thought brought Leon back to reality. There was no way this place could've remained so intact on its own, especially in light of the Cradle, the prison, and the archives below Argent Palace.

Leon took a deep breath to steady himself and slowly crept forward, his magic power rushing through his veins, keeping him ready and alert for anything that looked like it might jump out at them. Beside him, he could sense Valeria and Maia in similar states of heightened alertness.

But nothing jumped out at them, no wards were activated, no traps were sprung. The place seemed as deserted and defenseless to Leon as the Cradle had been. However, the functioning statue outside and the fact that there were no signs of decay or deterioration to anything they could see indicated otherwise.

Saying exactly what was on Leon's mind, Valeria said, "This place looks like it's been seeing regular maintenance..."

Leon gritted his teeth and had them all halt as he stared ahead. The hall was long, almost absurdly so, but he could only see a handful of breaks in the projected murals that would indicate a door.

"Yeah..." he whispered. "Yeah... I agree, I think there may be someone or *something* living here..."

As Leon paused to contemplate the merits of trying to, as politely as he could, figure out a way to greet any potential inhabitants of this place, a voice rang out, a voice unmistakably masculine, one that sounded as ancient as the statue outside, and as tired as the dead.

"Your... guess... wouldn't be wrong..."

Leon couldn't help it, hearing the voice come from seemingly nowhere set him off, causing him to drop into a combat stance and summon his sword from his soul realm. As soon as the blade was revealed, he thought he heard a slight gasp from the voice, but he wasn't sure. He felt Maia and Valeria tense up as well, and only becoming more so once the door on the other end of the long hall swung open and figures began to march out of it.

"Please..." the voice continued, sounding soothing and grandfatherly and without any sign that he'd gasped before, leading Leon to think that he'd imagined the whole thing, "we are... of the same... blood... Violence... is unneeded..."

That failed to get Leon to stow his blade, but he did loosen up a fraction. He noted the 'same blood' comment, but that only served to make him distrust whoever was speaking, for the Thunderbird had on multiple occasions told him in no uncertain terms that he was the last of her blood that still lived. He quickly cast his gaze inward, hoping to see if she was still hanging around in his soul realm after the 'battle' with the colossus, but he was disappointed to see that she was nowhere to be seen.

Leon grimaced and put the blood issue aside, at least for the time being. "We're not here for violence! All we're here for is to find someone who may have come here not too long ago..."

The voice didn't immediately answer, but the figures further down the hall were getting steadily closer, and as they did, Leon could see that they were *huge*, easily twice as tall as he was, perhaps as much as a stone giant. What was more, they appeared quite familiar, being almost identical in form to the golems that took care of his family's archives.

"I... do not... want... violence... either," the voice said, clearly straining to be heard despite remaining calm. "Please... my... servants... will... answer... questions..."

The voice said no more, but Leon and the other two didn't hold it against them given how much effort it sounded like it was taking for them to speak. Instead, they turned their attention fully to the figures approaching them.



These bronze beings numbered a dozen, by Leon's count.

"What should we do?" Valeria asked, glancing back over her shoulder at the still-open door.

Leon grimaced. "Whoever is here is connected to me, I think. I'm... not going to go anywhere..."

[This is dangerous,] Maia protested as she stared at the oncoming bronze figures. Indeed, when Leon took a closer look at their auras, he found them to be tremendously powerful, seventh-tier all.

"I... I'm going to risk it," Leon said, unwilling as he was to let go of this chance to see a part of his legacy. Besides, while the figures were advancing, he didn't detect a single trace of killing intent or any other sign of their hostility, and the voice had been welcoming enough. But Valeria and Maia were obviously uncomfortable—he was, too, of course, but... "You two can wait outside if you want. I won't ask you to come with."

Maia just glared at him while Valeria gave him a disbelieving look.

"Hey, don't get mad at me, this is your moment to turn around and go back," Leon said with a forced smile. "If things turn sideways, as they so often do, then we all chose this. We all chose to continue on."

"Hardly a choice here, either turn around and save myself or continue and find my father," Valeria murmured as she shot a dark look Leon's way, who at least had the good graces to grimace.

"Right, sorry," Leon replied. "Not trying to dodge responsibility, just... I don't want anyone to jump into this pit after me if they don't want to."

[I certainly don't want to, but I go where you go,] Maia stated. [If anyone tried to bring you harm, they will die at my hand!]

Leon smiled in gratitude, but the oncoming bronze figures finally arrived before he could respond. They marched in two rows, with seven in front and five behind. The one in the center of the group was the largest and most ornate, with its bronze form covered in glowing runes and engravings in a style that matched many of the decorative projections on the walls.

More eye-catching than that, though, was the fact that there was no way Leon could ever mistake these things for anything other than golems now that they were up close. Their bronze armor had large gaps at the joints through which bright golden lightning flowed like a river, animating their bodies and giving them some semblance of life.

The golems stopped about five paces or so away from Leon and his party. The leading golem, the eye slits in its helmet-head glowing brilliant gold, took another couple of steps forward, ignoring the semi-brandished weapons and obvious magical readiness of Leon, Valeria, and Maia, and addressed Leon in an inhumanly deep, resonant voice, as if its words were echoing around inside of its metallic form, "Welcome, Young Lord, to the Northern Research Center of Jason Keraunos, Storm King and Lord of the Thunderbird Clan. By His Highness, Nestor, Prince of the Thunderbird Clan, Lord of Storm-Shaping, and Chief Researcher of this installation, I have been ordered to escort you and your companions further inside."

"Wait, what?!" he quietly but intensely asked in disbelief. "Prince Nestor?! The son of Jason Keraunos? He ordered you to welcome me?"

The golem twitched as if holding itself back from something before responding to Leon. Its voice came out as if it were clenching its nonexistent teeth in anger, "... Yes. Now, please stow your weapons and accompany me to better accommodations."

The golem then stood to the side, swept out its hand, and lightly bowed, clearly showing that it wanted Leon and his party to start walking down the hall. The golems behind it likewise stood to the side, like servants at a palace waiting to see if there was anything their guests needed upon their arrival.

But Leon wasn't thinking about any of that. He'd come across Prince Nestor's name several times—the golem beneath Argent Palace had dropped his name, and he'd found it inscribed on a door in the Cradle. More astoundingly, though, was that the Thunderbird had specifically told Leon that Nestor had survived the death of Jason Keraunos, but later died without children.

Doubt, anger, excitement, and confusion all warred within Leon, fighting to become the dominant emotion he was feeling. If the Thunderbird had lied to him *again*, then his fury would know no bounds. Likewise, though, if someone were here impersonating a member of his Clan in order to seize control of this place, Leon would be downright murderous.

But if Nestor were somehow still alive...

Leon needed no more invitation. He took off down the hall, Valeria and Maia only hesitating for a few moments before following.

#### **Chapter 498: Depths of the Mountain**

"Where exactly are we going?" Leon asked as the golems escorted him and his party further into the 'research installation', as the lead golem had called it.

Behind him, Valeria and Maia were on high alert, their auras indicating that magic was still flowing through their bodies, keeping them ready just in case things took a violent turn. The lead golem was walking alongside Leon and the rest were behind them, so Leon could hardly blame them for their caution.

"Up ahead is a place of rest for travelers," the golem helpfully responded, showing no sign that Leon could perceive that it intended anything untoward—though this was much harder to do with something made of bronze rather than flesh. "This facility was not designed to accommodate guests, so extensive quarters were not constructed. However, for Young Lord's small party, we can provide a place to rest until His Highness arranges to meet."

"Right," Leon said. "And that man who spoke to us when we arrived, that was Prince Nestor?"

"Yes," the golem confirmed.

Leon just smiled, a look in his eye that was both curious and dangerous. Speaking to Maia, he said, [This Prince Nestor they're talking about... I was told in no uncertain terms that he was dead.]

[Who told you that?] Maia responded, her eyes narrowing and her aura growing a touch more turbulent.

[The Thunderbird,] Leon replied. [She's lied to me before, but... be prepared for anything. There's no turning back now. This place used to belong to my family, and if someone is squatting here pretending

to be Nestor, then I won't rest until that person is dead at my feet. Even if we must fight our way out and return later when we're stronger.]

[I understand,] Maia replied, turning her attention back to the golems, who had continued to accompany them without making any threatening moves.

"These other golems," Leon continued, deciding that if the lead golem was going to answer his questions, he might as well ask some about their immediate situation, "are they designed for combat?"

"They are not," the lead golem replied, though Leon didn't take it at face value. Even if they weren't designed to kill people, they were still roughly twelve feet tall and possessed of great magical power. If he and his party had to fight their way out, it would not be easy, and he'd probably even have to call upon Xaphan.

"What functions are they designed to fulfill, then?" Leon asked.

"Facility management and maintenance," the lead golem explained. "His Highness designed each and every one of them to keep this facility in perfect condition to await the Clan's return."

"Return? Where did everyone go?" Leon asked as he looked around. The hall was quite long, but here and there were a few other doors that defied his attempts to see past with his magic senses. "As a matter of fact, how many people worked here before they left?"

The golem, instead of answering Leon's question, said, "I'm afraid I cannot say. King Jason restricted all information coming out of this place, and until the proper proof of your rank arrives or His Highness clears you to learn such information, lines of inquiry such as those relating to human staff or the operations conducted here cannot be answered."

Leon nodded, disappointed and surprised that the golem was so discerning. It even seemed *alive*, but as far as he knew, such magical constructs gave up any pretenses they had toward immortality for that sentence. In the case of the stone giants, they had managed to evolve into sentient beings, but in doing so they had apparently imposed lifespans upon themselves. The wisps animating their physical bodies were simply not powerful enough to sustain an endless existence and a sentient mind.

*'At least, not without ongoing maintenance,'* Leon thought as a slight frown crossed his face. Nestor's name had come up multiple times in relation to golems, both down in the archives and the Cradle. If these golems were more advanced versions, then *maybe* the rules were different.

Or maybe this place was equipped to build golems and this one was constructed relatively recently, it could've been either one.

By now, they had reached the end of the hall, and the lead golem waved a hand and opened the door. Beyond was a plush lounge, filled with comfortable furniture that didn't look even vaguely like what Leon would've assumed they should've given about eighty-thousand years had passed since the fall of his Clan. The sofas, tables, and chairs all looked pristine, without the slightest hint of decay. Additionally, the room was lined with empty alcoves, each one with stone plinths where statues otherwise would've been placed. Leon guessed that since this was the room where the golems had emerged from, then maybe those plinths were where they were stored when not in use.

“Young Lord’s party may rest here,” the lead golem stated. “I shall stay with you until His Highness calls upon you.”

Leon nodded, indicating to Valeria and Maia that they should head into the room. They complied, with the rest of the golems following them inside and confirming Leon’s guess when they stood upon their plinths and freezing in various poses that showed off their bronze forms. The lead golem, on the other hand, simply stood next to the door, silently watching them as they got comfortable.

Leon wanted few things more than to head over and continue his questioning of the lead golem, but one of those things was to speak with Xaphan and the Thunderbird. The Thunderbird operated on her own time, though, and apparently not even Leon plumbing the depths of one of her Clan’s old facilities was enough to get her to pay attention. Xaphan, on the other hand, was always there.

[What do you think about this, demon?] Leon asked.

[I’m thinking a lot about this, human,] Xaphan testily replied. [Nestor was the one who oversaw the project that saw me first summoned to this plane, though we never met face-to-face.]

[Really?] Leon replied, his tone unbelieving. [Why has this never come up when we spoke about him before?]

[It’s not an easy thing to talk about,] Xaphan shot back. [It’s relevant now, so I’m talking about it.]

Leon clenched his jaw in frustration. *‘Getting real sick and fucking tired of people withholding information from me,’* he thought, though he could understand why they were doing so, so he did his best to rein in his irritation.

[Fine. What do you think about what’s going on right now?]

[Sounds almost too good to be true,] Xaphan said. [Looks that way, too. I’m skeptical, but this place *has* been remarkably well-maintained, especially considering the pit I was left to rot in. I can’t sense anything beyond these walls, though, so maybe the rundown areas are just hidden from view?]

Before Leon could respond, the same ancient, tired voice was heard from all around again, as if the speaker were right in front of Leon, though he couldn’t be seen.

“My kinsman... come and... meet with me...”

“Uuh, sure, just point the way,” Leon cautiously replied, though the voice gave no response. Instead, the lead golem stepped forward again.

“This way, Young Lord. His Highness resides deep below the surface level, it may take a few minutes to reach his chamber, but you have been given access to the facility.”

The golem stood to the side of the door, its posture steeped in a perfect bow that would impress even the most highly trained of palatial stewards. It opened the door for Leon, then stood back in a clear invitation.

Leon almost agreed right away, the encounter with the colossus outside having given him a great deal of confidence in dealing with anything that this place could throw at him, and having Xaphan in his corner

only raising that confidence further. But he managed to refrain from immediately walking out just enough to ask a question or two.

“What about my companions?” Leon asked in concern as he glanced at Maia and Valeria.

“They shall have to remain here for the time being,” the golem responded. “Worry not, Young Lord, they shall be safe and well taken care of here. Should they have need of anything, they have only to ask one of the other golems for it and we will do our best to see them accommodated.

Leon nodded and looking back to the other two. Valeria hardly looked like she wanted to be left behind, and Maia looked one step shy of demanding she be brought along, too, but he simply shook his head and said, “Be careful. If anything happens, think first of yourselves.”

Valeria silently nodded, her apprehension written all over her face. Maia, meanwhile, said into his mind, [If you don’t come back, I will level this mountain until I find you.]

Leon smiled at her as he and the golem walked out of the room, dearly hoping it wouldn’t come to that.

As the door closed behind him and the golem, Leon paused to take a deep breath and to let the golem take the lead, then decided to try and pick the conversation back up that he’d started as they walked in.

“Does being given access to the facility mean I can ask questions about this place?” he asked the golem.

The golem didn’t immediately respond, taking a brief moment to pause and think in a way that only led credence to Leon’s theory that it was properly sentient.

“I suppose it does,” the lead golem eventually answered, though there was enough hesitation in its voice that Leon decided not to push this privilege too far.

So, he asked, “How long exactly has it been since you last had visitors?”

The golem, seemingly without further hesitation, answered, “By my estimates, it’s been seventy-eight thousand, nine hundred and twenty years since we last had guests from the Clan. The last of our research team departed three years after that, leaving Prince Nestor to operate this facility alone ever since.”

Leon nodded, filing that information away. He remembered Xaphan telling him that he’d been alone in his prison for longer than that, though not by much, so clearly some of the Thunderbird Clan survived whatever happened to Jason Keraunos, enough at least to visit this place.

“Prince Nestor’s been alone this whole time?” Leon asked. “And he’s never left?”

“Correct,” the golem responded as it directed Leon to take the first right off the entrance hall that they came across.

“Is he... all right? Have there been any notable incidents regarding him in all this time?”

The golem paused again, clearly thinking over its response. In those long few seconds, Leon had taken that right and found that it led into a small octagonal magic lift just large enough to hold maybe ten normal-sized people, which bore him and the golem down deeper into the mountain.

"The Prince's situation... has not allowed him to leave the primary research chamber since shortly before the death of the Storm King," the golem eventually replied, though its tone seemed conflicted as if it were reluctant to say these things. "When His Majesty's call came to assemble the best we had, Prince Nestor was unable to join his father and siblings."

"What situation is he in, exactly?" Leon was surprised, for if his father were still around and in trouble, he'd not allow *any* situation to prevent him from coming to Artorias' aid, yet apparently Nestor's was bad enough that he wasn't able to stand with his family during their dying moments. At least, what Leon assumed was their dying moments, the only information he had on that front was from the Thunderbird, and she hadn't been able to give him any specifics at all about how Jason Keraunos and his family died. All she'd been able to tell him was that Nestor was still alive at that point, but died soon after.

"I... cannot say," the golem replied. "Young Lord shall see soon enough."

Leon nodded, his unease deepening as the lift carried them even further into the mountain, not showing any signs of stopping any time soon.

"Sooo," Leon said as the silence grew awkward, "I apologize for not asking earlier, but you got a name?"

"No," the golem replied. "Names are reserved for those above me in station."

Leon frowned. "Is that a rule imposed by 'Nestor'?"

"It is a rule of the Clan." The golem didn't make any signs that it was upset about that fact, but Leon still couldn't help but feel some revulsion at the fact that it had been denied a name.

*'Even dogs have names,'* he thought to himself.

Deciding that he needed to move on from that topic before it infuriated him, Leon asked, "My original purpose in coming here was to search for someone who may have shown up here recently. Do you know anything about that?"

"We did receive a visitor not too long ago," the golem replied.

"Can I get some specifics? How long ago exactly, and what did he look like? How strong was he? Was it even a 'he' to begin with?"

"Our visitor was a man of roughly one hundred and twenty years of age, possessed of eighth-tier power, six-feet-two-inches of height, and silver hair."

Leon clenched his jaw, recognizing the description as exactly matching that of Justin Isynos. His killing intent began to rise uncontrollably as he thought about the possibility that Justin was still here, and that he was now away from Valeria. If he were to encounter Justin without her around, he could potentially kill him and tell her anything he wanted. "Did he give you his name? What happened to him?"

"Prince Nestor had him taken alive and held here."

"I would like to visit him, if possible."

"Bringing you to the Prince takes priority right now."

Leon smiled, though there was no mirth or warmth in the expression. “How much longer, then? I would like to take care of my business as soon as possible.”

“We’re almost there.”

Leon nodded and took a deep breath. He figured that this was probably for the best. Dealing with Justin would likely be far more emotionally taxing than dealing with *whatever* was here. But that certainty was tested as soon as it appeared in Leon’s mind as the magic lift began to slow, the journey having been long enough to take them *deep* into the mountain. He was about to meet with someone who potentially lived during the heyday of his Clan, someone who *potentially* was related to him, someone who could share the burden of rebuilding the Clan.

The doors of the lift slid open, revealing a hall that was far less visually appealing than the entrance hall. Gone were the brilliant light murals, replaced with dry, boring slanted walls of gray metal. There were no trees or ceiling enchantments, only magical light fixtures that illuminated this short hallway deep beneath the mountain.

Leon took a purposeful stride out of the lift and began walking for the one relatively small door at the end of the short hall, the golem at his side, but his heart began racing faster with every step he took. Having Justin to fixate on had made it easier to ignore, but the closer he came to the trapezoidal doors, the more real it became that he was on the threshold of *something* that could change his situation forever.

In his mind, there were only two options: either Nestor was on the other side of these doors, or there was an imposter here that he would have to deal with. Then again, whoever this person was in reality, he’d still invited him down and placed no magical defenses in Leon’s way.

‘Nestor’s’ voice echoed in Leon’s ears again, “Come... in...”

And the doors slid open without a sound, allowing uncomfortably bright light to stream through the open doorway. Leon, even with his seventh-tier eyes, had to squint in discomfort as he took just a few more steps and walked through the door.

As soon as he was passed, though, the door slid shut, sealing him into the room and separating him from the golem.

“What is this?” he shouted, his magic immediately flooding his body with power and energy.

“Something... to ensure... we’re not... disturbed...” the voice rasped. “What we have... to speak of... is not for outside ears...”

Leon scowled, but that expression softened as his eyes adjusted to his surroundings. The room was massive, domed, and largely lacking any adornment—though the latter might have been because the functional design was breathtaking as it was without further decorative embellishments. The immense ceiling hundreds of feet above him was covered in glowing runes that constantly shifted into new patterns, forming new enchantments as the need for them came and went, just like the control room of the prison where Leon found Xaphan.

[This fucking place...] the demon muttered from within Leon’s soul realm, and he couldn’t help but agree, though in a different manner. The floor had been polished so well that it almost looked like Leon

was floating in a gigantic black void, with nothing but the runes to light his way, like the stars at night in the countryside. Completing this vision of the night sky was a gigantic jewel in the center of the dome, glowing brilliant white like the full moon, while directly below it on the floor was a sphere of golden light. The sphere was the source of the light that initially made it difficult for Leon to see, but strangely, this sphere didn't shed any light upon the floor that Leon could see. It was as if the floor just devoured that light and *only* that light, leaving the reflection of the ceiling undisturbed.

"Come... closer... child..." the voice croaked. It sounded weak and on the cusp of death, all traces of the original jovial elder apparently lost in its exhaustion.

Leon summoned his blade, not trusting this at all, but figuring that since he'd already walked into this lion's den, he might as well go all the way. Besides, he doubted he'd be able to get the door behind him open, so onward was the only choice he could reasonably make.

He started walking toward the sphere, keeping his blade at the ready and his magic flooding his bloodstream just in case it was needed.

As he cautiously approached the sphere, he began to ask, "Are we going to be talking through thi—"

Before he could finish, an opening in the sphere formed just large enough for Leon to enter.

Not jumping into it immediately, Leon quickly stole a glance inside and tried to flood his magic senses through it. His magic senses were scattered immediately, but he at least got a look inside.

In the center of the sphere, sitting on a huge ornate silver table, was a massive chunk of white, unworked stone about four or five times as large as the golem outside, shining with soft white light. It was a magnificent thing, seeming almost holy as oceans of endless light magic streamed out of it in a blatantly magical way.

It was so radiant that Leon almost missed the other thing in the room: a bed, immaculate despite the age it almost certainly was, made of ivory and trimmed with emeralds and turtle shell. The mattress was thick and the sheets seemed luxurious, but when his golden eyes fell upon it, Leon's attention was captured entirely by the bed's occupant, a man with features as aged as his voice implied, his face wrinkled by time and paled by millennia underground. His body was withered and skeletal, even moreso than the Bull King's had been—he even seemed to be a skeleton for a moment, he had so little flesh on his bones.

But his dark brown eyes glittered with life and intelligence, even as his almost inhumanly pale skin spoke only of a man with a foot already in the grave. His light brown hair—he had a surprising lack of white hair given how ancient the rest of him seemed—was long and unkempt, to the point that even in its current tangled state, the man's hair would've reached down to his knees.

Most notably, however, was the fact that his shaky and weak-feeling aura was completely opaque to Leon, indicating that the man had at least surpassed him in magical might even if his body lay desiccated in the bed.

He smiled as his eyes landed upon Leon peeking in through the hole in the sphere. "Come in," he said, his voice straining to be heard even though it was deathly quiet in the massive chamber. "It is not safe to keep this sphere open for long, please join me for a moment, my kinsman..."



*'Shit, shit, shit, shit,'* Leon repeated in his head as he stared at the sphere. He doubted that he'd be able to open this thing if he needed to on his own...

... but he hadn't come this far just to turn back, so he swore in his mind once more before he dashed into the sphere of light, only for it to seal shut behind him with a hiss of magic power.

#### **Chapter 499: Nestor**

Leon whipped around, his blade in hand as the hole that allowed him into the sphere of light sealed itself behind him.

"What is this?" he almost shouted as he turned back to face the man in the bed, who despite looking like the living dead barely batted an eye at Leon's brandished weapon. However, Leon saw his eyes flitting between him and the sword often, so he hoped that it meant that the man could still be harmed with it. Given where he was and the fact that he couldn't see through the man's shaky aura, though, he wasn't going to take anything for granted.

Instead of answering directly, the man said, "I'm glad you came down here so readily..." Now that Leon was here in front of him, he sounded much less strained than before, though his voice was still barely more than a tired whisper. "I don't know what I would've done if you had refused to meet with me down here..."

"Who are you?" Leon demanded to know.

"I am exactly who my golem outside claimed me to be," the man replied, the pale, waxy skin on his face stretching into a grotesque smile. "I am Nestor, the son of Jason Keraunos, Prince of the Thunderbird Clan and the Kingdom of the Storm."

"Not a fucking chance!" Leon shouted, not sensing anything about the man that would lead him to believe that this 'Nestor' was kin. "I have it on damned good authority that Nestor died thousands of years ago, childless. You can be nothing more than an imposter!"

The man chuckled, though it seemed to take quite a bit of energy to do so. This pathetic display left Leon feeling a little foolish for continuing to hold his weapon at the ready, but he didn't let his guard drop for even a moment.

It took 'Nestor' a few seconds to summon the strength to speak again, "I... assume that... our Honored Ancestor... told you of my death?"

Leon scowled, and that was answer enough for the emaciated, bedridden man.

"Yes, yes, it could be no one else, she must've thought I died after everyone else assigned here left... Well, my young kinsman... the thing about the Thunderbird is that... she can't see you if you have... no soul realm..."

Leon's eyes almost bugged out of their sockets. "You... have no soul realm?!"

"I... do not," the man admitted. "In the course of my experiments..." He gestured not far behind him to the glowing white stone, "... I became infected with some kind of ancient curse... by the way... do not touch that thing, its power is... beyond anything you can muster to defend yourself..."

Leon took an involuntary step back. He could sense intense light magic coming from the stone, but even though light magic was mostly associated with its healing properties, he knew from experience that light magic could be incredibly dangerous, and light magic was absolutely *pouring* out of this monolithic chunk of white-ish, uncut stone.

Continuing, 'Nestor' explained, "I was... confined here before my father... set off to kill the Grave Warden of this plane..." Leon blinked in confusion, lost for a moment until he recalled the Thunderbird's story of Jason Keraunos' death and of the man who killed him, the 'Planar Lord' of Aeterna. "My body survived the curse, but my soul realm was consumed, cutting me off not... only from most of my power... but also from our Ancestor. As far... as she would be concerned... I am dead... for she cannot see me... and my power... is gone."

Finally, Leon's sword dropped a few inches. The man was weak and practically on the verge of death, and nothing he could sense would lead him to think otherwise.

"What proof do you have of any of this?" Leon asked. "You could be anyone as far as I know, how can I possibly be sure you are who you say you are?"

"You cannot," 'Nestor' croaked. "I am but an old man... barely able to absorb enough magic... to keep myself alive... by staying here... there's nothing I can do now... that would prove my identity to you... not in the way you want me to..."

"Not even a *little* bit of our inherited power?" Leon knew that to create elemental magic required some hefty reserves of power, enough that the lack of a sizeable soul realm made it nearly impossible. But a few sparks he didn't think would be beyond this man's ability to conjure.

'Nestor' squinted at him in mild frustration but raised his shaking hand and lightly snapped his fingers. A flash of silver-blue light appeared between them, the tiniest arc of the Thunderbird's lightning connecting his thumb and index finger for just long enough for Leon to see.

"Is that... sufficient?" he asked as he slumped back in his bed in an almost exaggerated manner as if he were subtly chastising Leon for his mistrust.

"I suppose it is," Leon said, lowering his blade but not dropping his guard entirely. A little flash of light was one thing, he knew that illusions weren't that difficult to create for many people. But when that tiny arc of lightning appeared, he could feel something in him tremble in resonance. As far as his senses could tell, that was no illusion. "So... now what, then?"

"You could... tell me of the Clan," 'Nestor' requested. "I've no inkling... of what has happened... in all the long years I've been here..."

Leon nodded as he took a few steps forward, but his eyes drifted toward the glowing stone not too far away.

"I can give you the general run-down, but in turn, how about you tell me what was going on in this place?"

'Nestor' smiled and nodded, seeming no more than a sickly grandfather hoping to dote on his grandchild a little bit.

Understanding that as a silent plea for him to start first, and knowing that conjuring that tiny bolt probably took quite a bit out of a man so injured, Leon decided to just jump right in.

"I guess the best place to begin would be at the beginning—or at least, the beginning as I see it, I suppose it must feel more like an ending to you... As far as I know, Jason Keraunos died roughly eighty thousand years ago..."

It took Leon quite a while to finish narrating his family's history for 'Nestor', and even then, he left out quite a few of the more personal details he could've included, especially that of House Raime's recent troubles and of Justin Isynos. If the lead golem was correct in saying that Justin was imprisoned in this place, then he didn't want this man who he still had a few doubts about to know just how much power that might give him over Leon and Valeria.

But for his distant ancestors, he gave as much detail as he could, for the most part, but he couldn't relay that much even if it took a little while to say. He'd heard about Jason Keraunos' death from the Thunderbird, and she hadn't been paying too much attention, so he didn't barely even knew what Jason had been trying to do when he led the best and brightest in the Clan to their deaths.

The one notable detail he left out was the name of his ancestor who started House Raime, who he knew to be Nestor's younger brother, hoping to catch the old man in a lie. In this, however, he was met with failure.

"Ahh... so Demetrios survived...?" 'Nestor' said with a wistful smile on his face, and Leon's heart just about stopped. That 'Nestor' knew Demetrios' name—the man who would later change his name to 'Raime' and found Leon's House—was more proof than anything before it that he was who he claimed to be.

Leon felt his resolve to distrust this man start to falter as the possibility that he'd just met, for the very first time with the sole exception of his father, someone who was a part of his family, someone who could share at least a tiny part of the burden of being the last one of their line in existence. His eyes started to burn with unshed tears, but Leon simply cleared his throat and steadied himself. Letting his guard drop too quickly would only lead to disaster in his mind.

Fortunately, it seemed that 'Nestor' didn't notice this deliberate attempt to stay untrusting on Leon's part, or if he did, he chose not to comment on it.

"But..." the old man continued, "to be... the last one... I had no idea... our Clan had fallen so far..."

"By your own admission, no one has come here for thousands of years," Leon replied, trying to maintain as much skepticism as he could.

"That's... not so long... a time as someone as... young as you... might think..."

Leon shrugged. "I think I'd consider a single day stuck in a place like this to be interminably long, let alone eighty-thousand years."

'Nestor' smiled in amusement. "It gets... easier..."

Leon tilted his head in acknowledgment. "I suppose you *did* have a few ice demons try and storm the place, that must've livened things up a bit."

"It did... though not by much..." 'Nestor' replied. "They did not... get far..."

"I noticed, they're corpses yet remain outside."

"A good... warning... to any who might follow..."

"By the way, uh, not really *immediately* important or anything, but..." Leon's eyes turned from 'Nestor' to the giant shining rock not too far away. "... What in the hells is that?"

'Nestor's' smile widened in the way one's does when asked about their favorite topic by someone they're trying to bond with, and he explained with as much energy and enthusiasm as he could, "That... is a fragment of the local moon..."

"The *moon*?!" Leon stared at it, and while it did seem kind of moon-like, such an origin was something he never would've been able to guess.

"Yes..." 'Nestor' replied. "I noticed... upon our arrival on this plane... something was strange up there... so I convinced my father... to let me take a chunk of moon stone... And lo, behold! This thing... radiated with such magic... that it simply... cannot be natural!" As he spoke, the old man struggled to rise as he strove to gesture at the moon rock more emphatically. "And the most... incredible thing... is that this is just a rock I... carved from the surface! No different... than any other!"

Leo stared at the old man, then back to the moon rock. "How... did you even manage to get a hold of this thing? And what... is it doing? What power is this?"

"Do you... know about... Universe Fragments?"

Leon nodded as his eyes widened.

"It was my hypothesis... that there is one in the core... of the moon. One of unparalleled... powers over light magic... But I was never... able to prove this... to my father before he fell."

Leon nodded, now starting to understand why the moon rock was emitting so much power. His blade, according to the Thunderbird, once held a Universe Fragment called the 'Iron Needle'. The blade was powerful, and while Leon was unsure how much of that was due to the weapon's former accessory or because it was made of Adamant, a material forged from the Thunderbird's own blood, it seemed reasonable to him to think that the powers of Universe Fragments could 'rub off' on objects they were in close contact with for extended periods.

"You brought it here to study?" Leon asked.

"I did... This place was remote, far from... the Grave Warden... it was the best possible... place to conduct such research... to see what could be learned... from something that had been touched... by a Universe Fragment!"

"And have you learned anything?"

"I have learned much... but nothing that could help me... when the curse manifested..." 'Nestor' replied.

Leon nodded again as he took a hesitant step back. "You said it was dangerous to keep the opening in this dome open, does that mean that rock is dangerous?"

"Light magic can be... dangerous if not handled... properly. I am... confined... to this bed because of my own... *negligence* when pursuing my... investigations... But you... should be fine... unless you're planning... on spending a few centuries here..."

Leon sensed some lingering frustration in his statement and thought it wise to change the subject as soon as he could, even though he *really* wanted to know more.

"You've mentioned this 'Grave Warden' before, who is he? The Thunderbird told me a few things about him, but she didn't get too specific."

'Nestor' settled back into his bed, his expression taking a turn for the serious. "The Grave Warden is the man... who controls this plane... he murdered my father... most of my brothers... and my sister!"

For a moment, there was such a look of rage and murderous intent in 'Nestor's' eyes that Leon took another step back, suddenly kind of grateful that the old man didn't have a soul realm which would've let him project a more vigorous aura. Leon did *not* want to taste the kind of killing intent that 'Nestor' could create.

"His power exceeded... that of my father's... somehow... And those that he slaughtered... that day... If I had the ability... to seek vengeance... then I would..." 'Nestor' sagged back into his pillows in exhaustion, that brief outburst seeming to take all of the energy he possessed.

Leon just stood there, staring, unsure how to proceed.

After a short period, though, the old man seemed to calm himself and fixed Leon in his piercing gaze.

"I've answered... some of your questions... Perhaps now... you can answer some more... of mine...?"

Leon grinned with a slight hint of bitterness, then nodded.

"First... May I know... your name?"

Leon immediately flushed with embarrassment, suddenly realizing that he never properly introduced himself.

"Ah! Uh, sorry about that, I should've led with that, shouldn't I?"

'Nestor' chuckled and nodded, but leaned forward just enough to show interest.

"My name is Leon," Leon said.

"Ahh, Leon. A good name. A strong name." 'Nestor' nodded in appreciation, then gave Leon a mildly suggestive look. "And those women... who arrived with you? Friends of yours? Maybe more?"

Leon felt a sudden welling of protectiveness and territorialism flare up within him, but he battered it right back down for the sake of civility. Still, he didn't like the look 'Nestor' was giving him after asking that question.

"They're with me," Leon said with a dangerous smile. "In more ways than one."

'Nestor' chuckled again, though it seemed to Leon like he was laughing at his expense. "Ahh, don't... worry too much, Leon... those lovely ladies... are in no danger... from a man... who can barely string... a sentence together..."

Leon's bitter smile remained, though he supposed what 'Nestor' said was true. And what was more, he was becoming more and more convinced that this man was who he said he was.

[Have you been listening in, Xaphan?] Leon asked his demonic partner, having no one else to ask with the Thunderbird flying about somewhere else.

He felt Xaphan's attention rise up, and the Lord of Flame responded, [I've been keeping an ear open.]

[What do you think so far?]

He almost *felt* Xaphan frown in ambivalence. [He *seems* to be telling the truth, though it's hard to say from so far away.]

[Is that it? Didn't you claim that this guy is the reason why you were trapped in that prison?]

[I did, and *thank you so much* for reminding me of that, boy. Nestor and I never met, as I've told you before. Beyond that, it's difficult to maintain hatred for something you've never seen before. This man before you is a husk, someone barely worthy of acknowledgment, let alone such passion as rage and hatred demands.]

Leon had to stop himself from shrugging for no reason in front of the old man, but he generally agreed with Xaphan. His own experience with hatred had made it clear that it couldn't be sustained for long, not without having constant contact with the person responsible for it. His thoughts briefly turning to Justin and Valeria as he pondered this.

"There is... something I would ask... of you... young Leon..." 'Nestor' said as he reached a hand out toward Leon. "I would like... to take your hand..."

Leon raised an eyebrow and made no attempt to step forward. "May I ask what for? I'm not overfond of... *touching* people, let alone someone I just met..."

"It's nothing... bad... I assure you," 'Nestor' replied. "There are things... that you must know... of our Clan... Things that our Honored Ancestor... likely hasn't... told you..."

Leon gave him even more of a skeptical look.

"She's lied to you... before... hasn't she? She's a fickle beast... one that holds her cards... close to her chest... She does not give information... easily... But I will give you... everything that you need... Everything you need... to restore our Clan to... supremacy..."

Leon hesitated, but after a moment he began to walk forward. He didn't take the old man's hand immediately upon arriving, but he stared down deep into his dark brown eyes just out of reach, searching for any sign that the man was deceiving him. But in the old man's eyes, he saw nothing but genuine concern, along with a hefty dash of residual anger from earlier in the conversation.

So, with extreme trepidation, Leon reached out for 'Nestor's' hand.

He expected many things to happen once their fingers touched. He expected some kind of flood of information akin to what Xaphan had done several times before to give him the knowledge he needed for certain things. He kind of expected maybe some kind of power transfer to happen, where the old man might give him some kind of power boost to reach the eighth-tier more quickly.

What he did *not* expect, given how sturdy and undeniably physical, if weak, 'Nestor' seemed, was for his hand to fall right through the old man's as if it weren't there, which, of course, is exactly what happened.

Leon's eyes widened in alarm as the smiling form of 'Nestor' lying in his immaculately preserved bed vanished, revealing a rotten and desiccated bedframe, and the completely fleshless skeleton lying lifeless upon it. A few scraps of cloth remained from the bed's trimmings, but other than that, there was nothing but a pile of rotten wood and bone in front of him, practically glowing in the light of the moon stone.

Before Leon had a chance to shout, leap backward, or do anything at all to protect himself or express his surprise and alarm, there was a scarlet flash of light from a ruby hidden in the skeleton's ribcage, and a massive torrent of lightning erupted from the skeletal remains.

Leon was enveloped in this sudden eruption, his magic melting away before it, completely unable to protect him from the sheer amount of power contained within the ruby.

And as quickly as it had appeared, the lightning ceased, leaving the ruby cracked, broken, and lusterless within the skeleton's ribcage, and Leon stood before it, his eyes hollow and dead, an arm extended in a vain attempt to shield himself.

A moment later, Leon fell backward, his body limp, the connection between his mind within his magic body and his physical form disrupted, the last thing he registered before his eyes shut being the new presence he could sense in his soul realm.

## **Chapter 500: Captured Power**

Valeria couldn't sit still. Leon had been gone for over an hour, there had been no word from him, and the golem that had escorted him hadn't returned. The other golems remained on their plinths in the alcoves, and there didn't seem to be any sign that anything was wrong, but still, she couldn't help but think the worst.

As worrying, if not more so than that, though, was the thought of finally finding her father. She clung to her last hope that he was here somewhere, and not lying dead out in the forest they had just fought their way through. She had been thinking about what she might say to him if she ever saw him again to the point of overthinking, but nothing seemed quite good enough. She wanted to know why he left, why he abandoned her, and if this task that he was so dedicated to completing really *was* the best and only way of freeing her mother.

If it came down to it, Valeria knew in her heart that she couldn't betray Leon, not after all the trust he'd shown in her to this point. But she also knew that even after he'd abandoned her to run off to this place, she didn't hate her father, either.

However, for all the feelings of love she had for her father, she could no longer turn a blind eye to what they had been tasked with, with what Justin had been telling her was necessary for her entire life. Kamran was forcing them to murder innocents or remain forever in exile—the latter she felt was more likely to be his *real* intention. But that order to kill a child was something that she had found easy to ignore when it was more impersonal—to the point that she was kind of scared how easy it was. Now that she had a face and a personal relationship with the person they were targeting, it was impossible for her to turn a blind eye to what they had been ordered to do.

All of these thoughts bounced around her head while Leon was gone; anxiety of his status; the status of her father; what might happen if they were to meet and she wasn't there; anxiety about her and Naiad's current situation—left alone and possibly forgotten in an isolated corner of this remote... *whatever* this place was.

She soon found herself unable to stay still; her legs began to bounce so powerfully while she was seated that she had to rise and begin pacing, her brow furrowed and a hand under her chin as she listened intently for any sign from outside that anything at all was happening. That Naiad's reaction was so comparatively tame baffled her, given that Naiad was Leon's lover.

The river nymph had splayed herself out over a nearby sofa, practically draping herself over the cushions like a cat over a sunny spot. She, to Valeria's eyes, seemed barely able to keep her eyes open, and even appeared perfectly at ease with their current situation.

Valeria found her eyes drifting more and more in Naiad's direction as the minutes grudgingly moved on and her anxieties compounded upon themselves.

*'How can she remain so calm?'* Valeria wondered with increasing vitriol. It started as simple curiosity since Valeria seemed more concerned about Leon than Leon's own lover did, but that eventually morphed into mild annoyance, then irritation, and finally to anger.

Eventually, the stress got to her and she couldn't help but loudly ask the river nymph with barely-contained fury, "Is all of this boring for you? You hardly look like you care that Leon's been gone for more than an hour!"

Naiad cracked her eyes open for a moment, directing a withering glare in Valeria's direction, but she did not respond immediately. After about five long seconds of Valeria furiously returning Naiad's glare, the silver-haired woman began to turn around to continue pacing when she heard the river nymph's voice whisper into her mind.

[Do not presume to know my mind, human. I am far more concerned about my mate than you will ever be.]

Valeria spun back around to face Naiad, her face rapidly reddening with anger and indignation, her body reacting almost violently now that she had managed to find an outlet for her stress.

"You should not presume to know *my* mind!" she practically shouted.

Naiad gave her a look of distaste, then slowly rose to her feet, letting her aura radiate from her body as she did. Even that casual display was a power play, for she was so powerful compared to Valeria that even the magic that leaked from her body was stronger than anything Valeria could muster.



[He is my mate,] Naiad growled. [You have admitted that it was the task given to your family to kill him. If it were up to me, you would be nothing more than red mist and shattered bone.]

Valeria clenched her teeth so hard that her jaw muscles almost tore through her cheeks, but even for all her anger right now, she knew that she was no match for Naiad. So, she said nothing in response. Besides, she knew that she'd instigated this and that Naiad was correct in saying that her family was here to kill Leon. If they hadn't that task, then they would still be in the Nexus.

Still, she hated hearing it 'out loud', especially from someone that she didn't consider involved in the affair, and it took every ounce of self-control she possessed to not immediately assault Naiad right then and there. Instead, she took a deep breath, forcing herself to calm down and not escalate the situation.

She glanced back at the door, but nothing had changed during this short exchange as far as she could tell. Leon was still gone, and she and Naiad were, for all intents and purposes, trapped here without him.

Suddenly, Naiad's aura spiked in intensity, nearly causing Valeria to fall to her knees in nausea as waves of power and killing intent washed over her. For just a moment, Valeria thought that the outburst was for her, and her heart just about stopped in primal terror as she thought she was about to die. However, when she turned back to Naiad, intending to face her death with as much dignity as she could muster, she saw the river nymph had her back to her and had conjured an orb of water in front of both of them.

Realizing that something else was going on, Valeria summoned her weapons and armor and began circulating her magic power to fight off the instinctive reaction she had to Naiad's power. Before she had regained strength in her legs, however, the golem nearest to them leaped off its plinth, only being held back by Naiad's water orb, which sank deep into every nook and cranny it could find in the automaton. A moment later, the water flash froze, tearing the golem apart, a flash of light momentarily blinding Valeria as the enchantments woven into its frame tried to save it, only to fail.

[On your feet,] Naiad commanded to her, and Valeria saw the other golems stepping out of their alcoves, as well, the weapons they now carried and the auras they now gave clearly indicating hostile intent. [Leon has been indisposed, I know not how. Get ready to fight.]

—

With a titanic flash of lightning and clap of thunder that somehow left his ears ringing, Leon found himself hurled first to the ground, and then down several stone stairs. He'd been standing next to a skeleton on a rotten bed, not stairs, so his spatial awareness was thrown completely off. It took him a long moment to regain his bearings and realize that whatever had just happened had hit him so hard that he'd somehow been thrown back into his soul realm, his magic body having been ejected from its throne.

"ON YOUR FEET, BOY!" Xaphan shouted, his voice sounding panicked for the first time in a long time. "DEFEND YOURSELF!"

Leon, his mind feeling a little slow and muddled, looked up at the demon. The former Lord of Flame had come charging out of his pavilion, the fires that covered his body burning like a star, his eyes blazing like golden coals.

Xaphan didn't get too close to Leon for fear of burning the young man, but he got close enough for Leon to feel both the heat and the panic that the demon felt right now.

With a groan and a titanic effort, Leon pushed himself back to his feet and began looking around at his soul realm. Everything seemed in place, at least until he heard the voice.

"Xaphan... is that you?"

The voice was familiar—he'd just spent some time speaking with someone who had a suspiciously similar voice. However, this one sounded more energetic, more confrontational. *Younger*.

Appearing with a flash of golden lightning, a man of roughly middle-age appeared in front of Leon and Xaphan, his only marginally-lined face looking positively youthful compared to the aged man he had appeared as only a moment ago when he and Leon were speaking.

"How wonderful it is to see you," 'Nestor' said, ignoring Leon completely in favor of staring at Xaphan like a dog eying a scrap about to drop from the table. "So long you resisted our attempts to recruit you, yet you made a contract with one of our Clan in the end, anyway. How delightful!"

"Identify yourself," Xaphan demanded, extending his thin, burning arm out toward 'Nestor' and conjuring a handful of fire bats that sat in his palm, waiting for Xaphan's order to strike.

Yet, 'Nestor' seemed not at all perturbed by this sight of blatant aggression, and for that, Leon could hardly blame him. He'd just invaded Leon's soul realm somehow, and that meant he likely had more tricks up his sleeve than Leon knew.

"What..." Leon murmured as he stared at 'Nestor', his face one of shock and fury, his magic power starting to churn and roil within his soul realm, causing the very air to start becoming wavy and distorted like a heat mirage. "... In the hells... Just HAPPENED?!"

As he finished his question, a blast of silver-blue lightning erupted from the Mists of Chaos above him, striking the ground right behind him as if to punctuate his demand for answers.

'Nestor', however, just stood there, in front of Leon and Xaphan, his 'body' seemingly full of vitality—or at least, full of muscle—and his mouth turned up in a mocking smile. His aura, however, was comparatively weak, completely at odds with how Leon thought another man might act when faced by two magical beings that completely outclassed him in power.

With an attitude like he was explaining arithmetic to undeserving children, 'Nestor' said, "I am exactly who I claim to be. I have no reason to lie, nor do I have any intention of doing so. I am Nestor, the son of Jason Keraunos, and I have done this to ensure our Clan's rise to power."

"What the right fuck are you talking about?!" Leon roared as he took a couple threatening steps toward Nestor, only stopping when Xaphan held out his hand.

"Hold there, Leon," Xaphan said, keeping his gaze locked on Nestor. "Rushing into this will only get you killed. Take a moment and prepare yourself. This man has not come here for words or to share *anything* with you."

"This little demonic pet is right," Nestor said, taking a step forward, "I have broken into this place for one reason and one reason only: I will be taking your body, young Leon. It will be of much better use in

my hands, I assure you, and through me, our Clan will regain every scrap of power lost in the millennia since my father's death!"

Leon could hardly believe his ears. Nestor was standing there as if he already owned the place, yet Leon could barely sense any magical aura from him at all, let alone one that surpassed him in power, and that wasn't even touching on Xaphan's power.

Yet, when Leon began to channel his power, causing the skies to darken and lightning to streak flash among the gathering storm clouds, he took a quick sideways glance at Xaphan and saw that the demon was treating this *very* seriously. Xaphan was standing in a fairly defensive pose, and the fires on his body were burning with terrible power, the bats in his hand turning the dark red of demonfire.

Still, he was in his soul realm, a place of utmost power for him, a place where he was theoretically untouchable. Here, he did not fear Nestor.

"My body is *mine*," Leon said as a dark look drifted across his face. "I don't care who you claim to be, you will not be taking a damn thing."

"That," Nestor replied, his expression sliding into one of tired resignation, "is no longer for you to decide. I've already seen enough of you to judge that you are not enough, and the stories you told me only a few moments ago sealed the deal. You are unequal to the task ahead of you. You carry our ancestral blade and wield our sacred power, but compared to me, you are nothing, you are a spoiled boy who has had everything he has given to him. You can't even defend your own soul realm against a man who doesn't have a physical body anymore!

"Now, as the last surviving son of Jason Keraunos, and the senior-most member of the Thunderbird Clan, I will take the responsibility for rebuilding us. You are no longer needed, though I will allow you to live on, in another form."

Leon's face twisted into an ugly snarl. He had no interest in hearing about what this form that Nestor spoke of would take, for he had no intention of just stepping aside. Nestor would *not* have his body, he would *not* have his soul realm.

Without another word, Leon, using barely more than a single thought, let one of the silver-blue lightning bolts dancing about the sky come crashing down upon Nestor. The man's magic body practically exploded in sparks and arcs of lightning, his form vanishing within the light. But only a moment later, the light vanished with the lightning, revealing Nestor still standing there, smiling as if nothing had just happened.

Beside Leon, Xaphan made his move, too. The half-dozen bats sitting in his hand took flight, and then one-by-one, dive-bombed Nestor, consuming him in dark red demonfire as they exploded across his form.

There was no time for celebration. Leon saw a flash of light within that conflagration right before the first bat exploded and knew that Nestor had almost literally laughed that attack off. Sure enough, a moment later, there was another flash of light from a floating rune that had appeared beside him, and the flames parted around him like waves on a rock; Nestor was unharmed.

[Leon,] Xaphan whispered into his mind despite standing right next to him, [this man is a master of the runic arts. His power is not solely dependent on elemental magic.]

Leon spared Xaphan a quick look and a nod, but he wasn't deterred. Nestor was here in his soul realm, there was nowhere for Leon to run to.

Again, Leon called forth lightning from the Mists of Chaos, only this time, he put more than just some momentary anger in it. He put into his attacks his rage at being misled and lied to, at being so casually dismissed and discarded by this man; he put his desire to see Elise, Maia, and others into his strikes; he put his sorrow at having not, in fact, found kin he could share his responsibility with, only a thief who didn't even blink at attempting to steal his body.

Lightning fell upon Nestor like rain, bolt after bolt, so many that even Xaphan had to take a step or two back and cover his ears to protect them from the thunder. So many bolts that Nestor seemed to become lightning, his form little more than a vague outline with a hazy ball of silver-blue light.

Leon called upon every spark of power that he had. Everything he absorbed from the Thunderbird colossus, everything his soul realm had managed to collect during the hours since he'd last depleted his soul realm, and when he absorbed the stray magic that didn't strike Nestor but remained in his soul realm, Leon recycled it and hurled it at Nestor again, all of it packed and compressed into lightning and sent down upon Nestor like the wrath of an angry god.

At the same time, Leon called upon the Mists of Chaos. He could see within the lightning that Nestor wasn't even shuddering with every bolt that fell upon him, so he began to form a ring of stone around the impact area using the mist taken from beyond the limits of his soul realm, further concentrating all of the force that he could bring to bear down upon his ancient kinsman.

It took minutes, which stretched on and on and on, to the point that Leon lost track of the time. He poured everything he had into stopping Nestor, into defending himself and keeping this man from taking his body. It was so much that even his ears began to ring with the constant thunder.

When he finally ran out of power, Leon fell to his knees, the storm clouds above the vale of his soul realm clearing as he no longer had the power to sustain them, his eyes wide with disbelief as he stared down into the deep crater that his power had dug in the center of his Mind Palace at Nestor, still standing, still smiling, his eyes narrow with amusement, a rune about the size of his head hovering right next to him and shining like the sun with magic power.

Leon only then comprehended the magnitude of his mistake. That rune was not modern, it was ancient beyond imagination. Unlike modern runes, which were essentially alphabetical, forming enchantments the same way that he would write a sentence, Leon knew that ancient runes were more pictorial, representing individual ideas, concepts, or things. There were thousands of ancient runes, far too many for any average mage to ever memorize, each one doing on its own what it would take a mighty enchantment in the modern runic script to accomplish.

But this one, Leon knew. He'd seen it before in books that he'd taken from his family's archives, though he'd never truly comprehended its power.

It vaguely resembled a box with its lid open, little more than a squiggle made of light in substance. 'Collection' was what it was, or some variant thereof. Leon could see now that it was collecting his magic power— or rather, it was *capturing* it.

He'd just thrown every scrap of power at his command at Nestor, and Nestor had caught it all, leaving Leon with just about no moves left to play, having not just wasted all of his power, but given all of it to the enemy in front of him.

Grinning, Nestor, yet unscathed, began to slowly advance up the crater straight at Leon, the rune at his side following him with every step.