Storm King 501

Chapter 501: Control

Nestor climbed out of the crater and stood in front of Leon, a smile of victory all over his face. Leon was still on his knees, his soul realm devoid of any meaningful amounts of magic to call upon to defend himself. He glared up at Nestor, and if looks could kill, Nestor would've been ash on the wind.

Unfortunately, Nestor was unharmed, the rune in the air next to him glowing with all the magic he'd stolen from Leon.

The old mage extended a hand in Leon's direction, but not to help the younger man up. Instead, his index finger drew a quick rune in the air, causing the rune he already had to flicker for a moment as he expended some of its power. A second rune appeared in the air just where he'd drawn it, glowing with white light. This rune then flashed, and Leon felt his body lock up as his face was slammed into the ground.

And there he stayed, completely immobilized.

"I hate to do this, kinsman," Nestor said, his smug tone indicating the exact opposite, "but I can't have you resisting any further, especially with you making a complete mockery of the strength you inherited. Just stay right there for a little while, maybe in a few centuries if you're lucky, and I'll give your body back."

Nestor's gaze then turned toward the onyx throne in the center of Leon's humble Mind Palace.

"By our Ancestor, boy, this place is dreary. I'm going to have to make some changes around here if we're going to get anywhere…"

Before Nestor could take a single step toward the throne, however, a massive flaming fist the size of his face practically appeared in front of him and crashed into his nose, hurling him right back into the crater he'd just crawled out of.

"Leon," Xaphan murmured, his blazing body now replacing Nestor's at Leon's side, "I cannot help you with your restraints, but fret not! I shall annihilate this arrogant shithead and find some way to free you!"

"*Really*?" came the response, though it wasn't from Leon, who found his jaw just as locked as the rest of his body, but from Nestor, who picked himself off the ground of the crater and now stood glaring at Xaphan, seeming none the worse for wear. "The slave raises hand against his master? Very well, then, demon, I shall strike you down to where you belong before I take this boy's body."

Xaphan didn't hesitate, however, to leap down into the crater before Nestor could make a move. Another flaming fist crashed into the ghostly mage, hurling him into the crater wall with tremendous force, enough to send cracks spiderwebbing throughout that side of the compound.

Unfortunately, Nestor seemed about as affected by that blow as he was by the first.

"You'll have to do better than that, demon," he said as he rose to feet, taking the time to flash Xaphan a cheeky grin.

But again, Xaphan moved, seeking to exploit Nestor's lack of caution. He had seen Leon's power fail to take Nestor, so he resorted to more manual methods. With a vicious uppercut, Xaphan's fiery fist had Nestor doubled over in pain, and over the next few seconds, punch and kick and punch rained down upon Nestor, preventing him from doing much more than try to block.

And Nestor did his level best to block many of Xaphan's blows, but he was slow and clearly out of his element. Xaphan had the initiative, and Nestor had few tools at his disposal for getting it back. After a while, he leaped away, gaining as much distance between himself and Xaphan as he could as he drew another rune in the air. His finger was a blur, moving almost as fast as the demon.

The rune hovering by his head flickered again as he summoned some of its power just as Xaphan appeared in front of him again, his burning fist barreling into Nestor's stomach, lifting the dead man off the ground.

Nestor did not come back down; he spun around in the air, using Xaphan's momentum combined with the rune he'd called upon to summon a small cyclone around his legs that lifted him even higher, out of the demon's immediate reach.

"You claim to be the master, but you're no better than a street thief, and one who can't even fight, at that," Xaphan growled, his fires increasing in intensity as he wrathfully stared up at Nestor. Without waiting for a response, he waved his fiery hand at the hovering interloper, and a pillar of flame erupted from the crater beneath Nestor. This pillar rocketed upward, its top shaped into a hand with fingers outstretched, large enough to block Nestor's view of the fire demon.

Nestor, however, didn't even move as the pillar reached upward for him, and even in the moment right before it hit smiled derisively and wrote another ancient rune in the air.

The pillar extended up, but as the flames licked at his feet, starting to play around the cyclone that held him aloft, and the fingers clenched around him, they all stopped like they had hit an invisible barrier, leaving Nestor unharmed. They were then drawn into the shining rune that still hovered right next to Nestor's head, their magic power captured and added to what Nestor had already stolen from Leon. A second later, Xaphan cut the pillar off from his power, recognizing that it wasn't doing anything, and it dissipated into nothing.

But he'd moved, knowing from Leon's display that his demonic power likely wasn't going to do anything. Nestor tried to continue to mockingly smile at Xaphan as he lazily held out his hand and began to draw another rune in the air, but his smile froze when he registered that the demon had vanished.

Barely a moment later, Nestor felt Xaphan's fist slam into the back of his neck, sending him hurtling back to the ground. Nestor slammed into the earth and did not rise, his 'body' battered and bruised and burned from Xaphan's strikes.

"I think we may have made a mistake in summoning you, Xaphan," Nestor said, his tone filled with pain and disdain, though still surprisingly vigorous given how efficiently Xaphan had beaten him. "The whole point was to summon powerful Lords, but clearly that doesn't include you if this is all you're capable of!"

With that, Nestor finally pushed himself back as the demon loomed above him, his flaming fist raised again. Before the massive fire demon's fist could fall, however, Nestor revealed what had kept him

down—it hadn't been Xaphan's attack, but rather the rune he'd drawn in the ground as Xaphan had fallen down after him.

The collection rune next to Nestor's head flickered again as its power was called upon, and the rune Nestor had just drawn flashed with brilliant blue light, causing all of the burning orange fires on Xaphan's body to sputter and fizzle out, driving the demon to his knees.

Xaphan furiously tried to stand, but his body wouldn't move. He knelt there, his obsidian skin exposed, his eyes burning bright yellow… then dimming to orange, and then to a dull, almost lifeless red.

"That's it…" Nestor cooed as if he were trying to get a young child to sleep while he wiped blood from his face. "It's over now… no need to resist…"

Xaphan tried to scream and roar and thrash, but his body wouldn't move. Slowly, and against every thought and will that Xaphan possessed, his body relaxed until his eyes closed and he fell into the dirt, unable to stay conscious any longer.

Nestor stood above the obsidian-skinned demon for several more seconds, reveling in his victory. After a moment, he turned and made his way in Leon's direction, who yet remained conscious despite his similar magical restraints.

However, Nestor barely spared him a glance. Leon couldn't move or speak, there was little need for him to waste his time there. Instead, all Nestor had eyes for was the onyx throne just beyond the fallen Raime. Once he sat upon it, his magic body would connect with Leon's physical body, and he would take it over completely. For all intents and purposes, Leon's body would become his to control and do with as he pleased.

"'Why study the ancient runes?' they said," Nestor mocked as he started walking toward the throne, "'They're useless, everything they can do, modern runes can do better!'"

Finally, as he reached the marble platform upon which the throne stood, Nestor stopped and glanced over his shoulder at Leon. Despite being held there by Nestor's rune, the young man's magic body was subtly shaking as he tried to fight the total paralysis he'd been hit with.

"Before I go through with this, know that I mean you no ill will, regardless of what I said before. The summit of the mountain is only as lofty as what lies beneath it, and a Clan is only as strong as its members. If you were born back in my day, you could've been quite a powerful mage, perhaps even enough to have stood beside a Storm King on one of his conquests. But to actually *be* the Storm King? You lack the power, and thus, the right to claim that mantle. That's just the way of it. You have no one to blame other than yourself. If you had been stronger, this never would've happened. This never would've been *necessary*."

Nestor smiled as he turned back around to face the throne. It was a humble thing, barely more than what he might consider a dining chair.

'Or maybe even less than that…' he thought with a grimace. He stole a quick look at the rest of Leon's soul realm and saw nothing that pleased him. Dirt, grass, and unworked rock, these were not the things that made for a good palace. He'd have to make quite a few changes as he got settled into Leon's body, if for no other reason than his own comfort.

'Going to have to move quickly…' Nestor thought, glancing once more over his shoulder at Leon. It might've just been his imagination, but he thought that Leon's body was starting to shake a little more violently. For all that Nestor was about to take it and make it his, Leon's body still responded best to the younger man, and until Nestor got around to making changes to Leon's soul realm, Leon would still command most of the magic that built up within his soul realm.

But Nestor wasn't worried; he practically skipped over to the throne, supremely confident as he was in his victory. Almost eighty thousand years he had languished at the bottom of his laboratory, abandoned by everyone save for the golems that he'd built. He felt a brief tinge of regret as he proceeded to unleash his golems on Leon's two companions, but he wanted no loose ends who might strike at him before he was ready.

Now that he had a body again, he figured it would be the easiest thing in the world to return his Clan to glory once more, with him at its head, prepped to return to the Nexus and reimpose the old dominions of his forebears.

With an almost theatrical flourish, Nestor sat down upon Leon's throne, and a moment later, in the physical realm, Leon's eyes opened.

"Ooh, what a wonderful feeling," Nestor said through Leon's lips, not caring at all that he was speaking to none but himself. He picked 'himself' up off of the ground where Leon had fallen and glanced down at the desiccated bed where his old corpse now lay, fleshless and barely recognizable. Within his old ribs sat the shattered, lusterless ruby where his magic body had for so long resided.

All it took Nestor was a single thought and an outstretched hand for a tiny silver-blue bolt of lightning to erupt from Leon's finger and the ruby shattered into dust. Within Leon's soul realm, the rune that stored his magic power and hovered next to Nestor shimmered, dimming by a tiny fraction.

With that out of the way, Nestor turned his attention to the sword of House Raime, the blade that had once been wielded by the Thunderbird herself, and which had fallen to the ground after Leon was knocked unconscious. Leon had never quite dropped his guard, for which Nestor was grateful, for it meant Leon hadn't drawn the blade back into his soul realm and Nestor hadn't had to face the power of the weapon when seizing Leon's body.

Now, he bent down to pick the blade up, but just as his fingers brushed against the hilt, the weapon exploded with a tremendous blast of golden lightning that flung Nestor and Leon's body across the room to crash against the golden sphere of light that prevented the power of the moon stone from escaping.

Nestor was stunned, so much so that he could only sit that on the ground where he had fallen, Leon's eyes wide and mouth agape.

"What?!" he complained in confusion. "What is wrong with you?! There is none other who can wield you! I am it! You *must* submit to me!"

Nestor pushed back to Leon's feet and strode over to the blade, seemingly fine despite the blast that he'd just suffered. Again he bent down to grasp the blade, but he froze as the hilt began to spark with golden lightning in clear warning.

"You…" he angrily murmured, barely able to keep his anger and displeasure hidden. It was only a sword, after all, it could not hear him or even truly comprehend the gravity of what it was doing. "Fine," he said as he straightened up and created a door in the golden sphere with a snap of his fingers, "you may wait here until I return to claim you."

Nestor then turned around and stalked out of the room, pausing only to glance over his shoulder at the moon stone, still glowing in the center of the sphere of light. Not even a second after he left, though, the sphere's door quietly closed, keeping the moon stone separate from the rest of the facility.

The lead golem was still waiting outside of the door when Nestor walked out.

"Master!" the golem cried as Nestor appeared, despite wearing Leon's body.

Nestor didn't even respond verbally, instead simply waving his hand at the golem to get it to shut the hells up and follow him. He had much to do if he wanted this facility to get back up and running and to lay the groundwork for his return to the world. He needed to build more golems, he needed to solidify his hold over Leon's body, and he needed to regain his lost power.

And, if he was of the mind, he also wanted to see if he could get Xaphan properly enslaved. The last thing he wanted was for that damn demon to be running around without any checks on his power, making Nestor's life a living hell.

'Hmm, yes, some good punishments must be included in this new enslavement enchantment,' he thought to himself. *'Such disobedience can* never *be tolerated!'*

Chapter 502: Beginnings of Trust

Valeria sucked down as much air as she could, her body feeling weak and drained of magic power. She hadn't managed to recover her magical reserves from the ice wraith attack, and the fight with the golems had just wiped out what little she'd managed to build back up, and that deficiency left her nearly breathless.

But her body being devoid of magic power was hardly her biggest concern; she bled from a dozen different wounds, her glaive was bent and broken, and her armor had been damaged to the point of uselessness.

Still, she was alive, Naiad was alive beside her, and the golems that had attacked them were shattered at their feet. It had been hard fighting—fighting which Valeria was somewhat ashamed and embarrassed to admit had been mostly handled by her river nymph companion—but they'd won, though Naiad herself had also been quite heavily wounded.

Naiad was covered in her own blood, her wounds severe but already clotted. Like Valeria, she was breathing hard as her eyes frantically searched the absolutely ruined and partially flooded guest room for any more enemies, but it seemed that the obliterated golems at their feet in the ankle-deep water was the extent of the forces that had been sent against them.

At least, for now.

"Fuck…" Valeria exclaimed as she fell to her knees and used what little magic power her body was generating to retrieve a few healing potions from her soul realm. The potions weren't as powerful or immediately effective as Leon's healing spells, but they required no magic power from her end to work.

She downed the first healing potion like it was water and she was dying of dehydration. As the red blood-like liquid hit her stomach, she felt the warm power within it already beginning its work.

Then, she held out a second potion for Naiad. The river nymph's clothes were in tatters, making it clear enough even without all the blood for Valeria to see just how bad off Naiad was.

However, Naiad just glared down at the potion and refrained from taking it.

"It's not poison," Valeria said, her tone exasperated yet too exhausted to be insistent.

Naiad didn't respond and instead just summoned a small orb of water to begin washing the blood off her body. Valeria couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at this—she could sense that Naiad's aura, while completely opaque to her, was still shaky and weak, or at least not strong enough to justify such a use of magic power.

But Valeria just shrugged and turned her attention back to the room as she downed the healing potion herself. She knew that Naiad was going to use her power as she saw fit, no matter how much Valeria might protest or argue that they needed to work together. She wished that Naiad would be a little more cooperative since they were in the same situation, but she doubted anything she'd say would get through to the river nymph given the looks she'd gotten from Naiad over the past few days.

Deciding to just focus on the problem at hand, Valeria asked, "Can you tell what's going on with Leon?"

Naiad had told her that she could sense Leon was in danger, so she was hoping the river nymph had a little more information she might be able to share.

[I cannot,] Naiad responded, though her tone sounded like she was doing so reluctantly.

"But you know that he's been indisposed?" she pressed, glaring at the river nymph.

[Yes,] Naiad responded, clearly not willing to give any further information given how she returned Valeria's glare.

Valeria took a deep breath to steady herself. Naiad clearly didn't like her, to say the last, but given the nature of the relationship they both had with Leon, Valeria couldn't blame her too much. She decided to focus on the situation in front of them rather than start a fight that she couldn't hope to win.

Turning to face the door, she said, "I'm going to try and get this door open. We can go from there."

Naiad barely acknowledged her statement, but positioned herself to cover Valeria if any threat within the guest room were to present itself while she was working.

Valeria, meanwhile, hobbled over to the door, her injuries painful but slowly healing. She took a long, hard look at the door, seeing no visible signs of how it could be opened. There was neither handle, hinge, nor seam, and no visible runic circle to control it with.

"This might take a moment," she said to Naiad as she called upon all of her enchanting knowledge. She was still quite amateur in the art, but she enjoyed studying it and had some skill in the art—enough, she hoped, to at least get the door open.

She ran her hands over the door, searching for any hints of magic that she might be able to manipulate. Finding nothing, she moved on to the frame. There, she found a little more success, as her fingers brushed against a nearly invisible panel set into the frame about half the size of her hand. She grinned and conjured a small knife from her soul realm and set to work prying the panel open. It took a little bit of effort, enough that she thought it might've been more time-efficient to have Naiad use her water magic, but Valeria got the panel open to reveal the door's emergency controls.

The enchantment placed upon the door was quite simple, for which she was grateful. All it took were a few motes of magic power from her to get the door to slide back open.

"And that's that," she quietly said. Turning back to Naiad, she said, "Door's open. I don't suppose you have any idea where to go from here?"

Naiad turned and Valeria saw a brief flicker of surprise pass over her bronze face. She almost thought she was mistaken until Naiad gave her a brief nod of acknowledgment in opening the door.

[Down,] Naiad responded, her tone a little more neutral than it was only a few moments ago. [Last time I sensed Leon, he was below us. Far below us.]

"I suppose that's a start," Valeria said as she edged out into the long entrance hall with Naiad right behind her, both ladies on the lookout for any additional golems or other obstacles in their way.

Fortunately, everything seemed peaceful; nothing jumped out at them, and no magical weapons targeted them once they left the guest room.

"I guess… we ought to start picking rooms…?" Valeria said, unsure as she was of where to go now.

Naiad nodded, and the two started walking down the still-beautiful hall, neither one letting down their guard. When they came to the first intersection, they had the choice of checking either the right or left doors. With nothing else to go on, Valeria randomly decided to go with the left, and Naiad had no reason not to follow.

This door had no visible way to access it, so Valeria began searching for a control plate. As she did, she said to Naiad, "You doing okay? Not to be condescending or anything, but your wounds don't seem to be healing all that quickly…"

It was true, even though Valeria was weaker, with the healing potion in her system, her wounds were actually healing up faster than Naiads. Valeria figured that this was just a sign that Naiad was running dangerously low on magic power, but she didn't want to come right out and say it.

Naiad audibly clicked her tongue, and said, [I'm doing… fine. I just want to find Leon.]

Valeria paused in her search. She was concerned that the door's control plate was inside the room and thus inaccessible, but her concern at the moment for Naiad was greater. Without the river nymph's power, she'd never manage to escape, let alone find Leon or her father.

"You say that, but it's not helping you to heal any faster…"

Naiad glared at Valeria as if the latter had just implied she was weak, but her glare soon softened into cautious surprise as Valeria conjured a healing potion from her soul realm.

"This is the only one I have left. You should take this, it would be a waste to use all your power on healing yourself when we don't know what's ahead."

Naiad's lake-blue eyes flickered between Valeria's utterly serious face and the small bottle of blood-red liquid. After what seemed to be enough thought to almost break Naiad's mind and Valeria's patience, Naiad reluctantly accepted the potion and drank it.

"That wasn't so hard, was it?" Valeria asked as she watched Naiad's healing visibly speed up.

[Don't press your luck, human,] Naiad responded, her expression quickly returning to an angry glare.

"Given our luck so far, I don't think it can be pressed any more than it already has been," Valeria replied. "Look, Leon's gone, we don't know where he is. It's just you and me right now, and neither of us are in good fighting condition. Even if we were, I, quite frankly, don't think I'd be able to do much in a fight—these golems are beyond me. But I *can* do something about the enchantments in our way. If we're going to find Leon and work our way through all of this, then we're going to have to work together."

Valeria spoke with complete earnestness, her conviction plain for Naiad to see. And for a moment, Naiad appeared to consider her words. But then that moment passed, and Naiad just looked meaningfully at the door behind Valeria, silently getting her demand across.

Valeria could only sigh and return to examining the door. Fortunately, there was another control panel on their side of the door—giving Valeria the impression that this wasn't primarily a fortified stronghold, even if some of the place's defenses were quite extraordinary. The room revealed when the door slid open, however, was completely empty. And it was a large room, but with nothing in it—bare sloped walls, no furniture, just shiny grey metal everywhere—it felt both stifling and cavernous at the same time.

"What a waste of time…" Valeria murmured in dejection.

Naiad, meanwhile, glared around at the room as if it were keeping a secret from her and she was hoping to intimidate it into revealing what it was hiding. Her efforts were in vain, however, for the room remained empty no matter how hard she stared.

The two took a reasonable amount of time to inspect the room—even if it was empty, it was still quite large and obviously built for *something*—but an empty room was an empty room and after several minutes they were heading back for the door.

Valeria reached the door first, just ahead of Naiad. In her disappointment and frustration, she'd let her guard down and she entered the doorway with little care. When her eyes turned up and saw the golem staring back at her, its bronze hand extending to do who knows what to her, she froze in surprise and panic.

And then she was violently grabbed by Naiad from behind and hurled back into the room like a ragdoll, with barely enough awareness to notice the water dragon that the river nymph summoned and slammed into the doorway.

It all happened in a moment of intense surprise and violence, and when Valeria hit the ground, it was over. She sprang back to her feet, what little magic power she'd managed to regenerate since the last fight circulating throughout her body, and ran forward to assist Naiad in any way she could.

But it didn't seem like Naiad needed the help. Valeria couldn't tell how many enemies they were facing, but the water dragon was quite easily keeping them from pushing through the door's fatal funnel.

[Stay back!] Naiad commanded, causing Valeria to stop in place not too far away. [I'll deal with this, you just stay alive!]

Valeria bitterly smiled, but she wasn't going to argue with Naiad on this point.

It took only a few minutes, but the water dragon made short work of three golems that had appeared in the hallway, at least as far as Valeria could tell once she and Naiad edged out of the empty room—Naiad hadn't left much behind, so it was a bit hard to tell.

"Where did they come from?" Valeria wondered aloud.

Naiad just pointed to the door on the other side of the hall, which was conspicuously still open. There were no other golems around, so Valeria quickly ran over to investigate, finding that the open door led to a magic lift.

"Found our way down," she said to Naiad. "You up for any more violence if it's needed?"

Naiad smiled and raised her hand, spinning a few drops of water around her fingers.

'If she can waste power like that, it shouldn't be an issue…' Valeria thought as she impulsively ducked into the lift. She half-expected the door to slam shut behind her and was *very* happy when it didn't. Naiad slipped in behind her not a second later and they both examined the small panel of runic circles next to the door.

"So… where do you think we should go?" Valeria asked.

[The last time I sensed Leon, he was far below us,] the river nymph responded.

"I don't suppose you can get any more specific?"

Naiad shook her head in the negative.

Valeria shrugged. "Let's start with the bottom, then, and work our way back up. Not like we can tell how far down any of these floors are…" She pressed one of her fingers to the bottom-most runic circle, and the door slid shut. A moment later, the lift began to plummet deeper into the facility.

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Nestor, still wearing Leon's body, scowled as one of the runes on the console he was sitting in front of began to blink. Activating it, he saw that Leon's two women had entered the lift and were now descending.

"I see they're going to be a bigger problem than I'd originally thought… I suppose I might have to start taking them more seriously before they do any more harm to this place…"

He considered his options. He had other, grander concerns regarding getting production at this lab restarted, and he didn't want to waste time dealing with Leon's companions, but if they were going to wreck his golems, he'd have to stop them sooner rather than later.

"… I suppose I can always use a few extra batteries. That new one isn't going to last forever…" Nestor said with a dark look as he rose to his feet and sauntered over to the door. As much use as he could get out of them, he did *not* appreciate this kind of distraction.

Chapter 503: Humiliation

Leon was furious beyond words. His anger burned within him like a star had ignited in his chest. His body had been hijacked by an ancient member of his Clan, his magic body had been completely immobilized, and Xaphan was down for the count. In this state, Leon couldn't even sense Maia, let alone communicate with her. By any measure, Leon had been thoroughly defeated, and without a way to move again, there was no way for him to overcome this turn of events.

But that didn't stop him from struggling. His body was slowly building back up its stores of magic power, filling his soul realm—for that much was still his, at least for the time being—with fuel for him to burn.

Leon flexed and pulled, pushed and relaxed, struggling and raging against the invisible chains that locked him in place. Aside from a bit of twitching, his magic body remained motionless, face-down in the dirt of his Mind Palace.

He wanted to scream, he wanted to leap up and tear Nestor from his throne and rip the older man limb from limb, and to retake his body. He had no idea what Nestor might be doing right now out in the physical world, but Leon had a sinking feeling that if he didn't get moving again soon, then he might never recover what had been stolen.

His vocal cords stretched in a silent scream of fury, his jaw unable to move to let it out, and his struggles intensified. He dug deep within himself for every ounce of strength and willpower he possessed and pressed against this cage. His muscles strained, his body quivered, his bones almost bent to the point of breaking. All the pitiful motes of magic power in his soul realm flowed into his magic body, strengthening it further and keeping him intact as he tore at his shackles.

And still, his body remained there in the dirt.

Eventually, the effort became too much. His strength failed him. He couldn't move.

Leon relaxed with a silent cry of frustration, anger, bitterness, and resentment. His rage and complete impotence had him on the verge of tears, for he had no other means with which to vent. He was quite thoroughly locked in place. He couldn't even turn his head enough to glare at Nestor sitting on his throne, though for that he wasn't sure if it were torture or small mercy.

He'd lost. That much was without question, now.

He lay there for long, agonizing minutes, stewing in that fact. He found himself rapidly alternating between bouts of energetic, righteous anger, and a more subdued melancholy, but not once was he able to surmount the obstacle that was the rune that Nestor had imprisoned him with.

As he lay there, inevitably, his thoughts turned to other things. Specifically, he found himself ruminating on everything that had happened since he'd returned to his home Vale. Just embarrassment after loss after embarrassment. His power had proven insufficient to effectively counter the wraiths, leaving him, Valeria, and Maia to an extent, drained of magic power after a single fight. The fight with the Gorgon had been even worse, they'd been nearly unable to land an injuring blow to her until after they'd been forced to run.

Now this. Now, his face was in the dirt, his power had failed him for the third time in two days. He'd lost before, he'd been forced to run away before, but this kind of string of losses was another thing entirely.

He wondered if maybe he'd grown a bit too arrogant, too sure of his power, too reliant upon it. Ever since he'd ascended to the seventh-tier, and even many times before then, his solution when faced with an obstacle he couldn't surmount had been to simply try and overpower it. But that hadn't been working since coming north, and all he'd gotten from his efforts had been humiliation and defeat.

Leon forced himself to relax. He wasn't sure how long he'd been face-first on the ground, but it was more than enough time to hammer home that he wasn't going to be able to force his way out of this. He'd tried brute force, and it hadn't worked. It was time for a new approach.

He closed his eyes and began to think. Nestor was a master of golem-crafting, that much was obvious enough just from Leon's previous encounters with what he'd left behind. More than that, though, he was also an expert in the use of runes, which Leon could've guessed from the golem-craft alone, but what Nestor had displayed blew away any expectations Leon thought he would've had if he'd ever expected to meet the man in the first place.

It was an admirable thing, in Leon's eyes, to be so proficient in the use of runes, and the gulf of ability between him and Nestor was so large that he had no problem at all admitting that Nestor completely blew him out of the water in this regard. As if to undersell the magnitude of their difference in ability, Leon had no earthly idea how to free himself, and the more he thought, the less hope he had for an answer. No enchantments he knew would help, even if he were able to draw them somehow. He wasn't knowledgeable in the ancient runes, his studies having never progressed beyond a few cursory glances at some of the books Artorias had brought to the Vale years ago.

Leon sighed again as he lay there, his rage cooling to a light simmer. There had been a vague hope in the back of his mind as he'd gotten worked up that the Great Black Dragon's power might awaken within him again and give him the boost he needed to escape, but it seemed that he'd hoped in vain. It seemed all he could do now was to wait for the Thunderbird to eventually reappear, whenever the whim struck her.

But that in itself was risky, for he remembered the Thunderbird even telling him outright that the only reason she'd taken such an active role in his life was that he was the last of his bloodline. Now, there was another, and Nestor had proven himself stronger. Leon feared what the Thunderbird might do, who she might side with, if she were to arrive while he was still immobilized and helpless. But he couldn't do anything about it.

His mind began to wander again, his will to resist slowly being sapped by his complete powerlessness to do anything of value. He found himself wondering how Elise's negotiations with Torfinn were going, and how well Anzu was doing in his absence. He thought about the Bull Kingdom and everyone he knew

back there, and if everything had been settled or not. He truly hoped that Octavius had been laid upon the headsman's block by now, and he hoped that all of his acquaintances were doing well.

He thought about Marcus and Alcander and wondered how they were doing in the new order. They'd fought at his side for long enough that he was more concerned than he'd ever thought he'd be for them. He also thought about Gaius.

'Whenever I get control of my body, I'm going to have to challenge him to keeps again!' Leon thought with far more energy than he was able to muster in his body, almost as if he were trying to psyche himself up to do something again. *'Our record can't stand on a single draw!'*

But that wasn't enough. Whatever he thought about to try and motivate himself had to compete with the fact that he lacked magic power and couldn't even move.

After a little while, he started thinking about ancient runes again. There was little else for him to do, and while he was tempted to continue wallowing in his failures, he wasn't about to completely give up yet.

He called upon every scrap of knowledge about the ancient runes he could remember. Their shapes, which ranged from almost as simple and abstract as modern runes to those of such complexity that he could spend hours working on one and still not finish. Of the more complex runes he'd briefly studied, he remembered very little, but the simpler runes—simpler both in form and in meaning—he could remember with a reasonable amount of clarity.

The one that stuck out the most was the rune for 'prison', for that was how Xaphan's prison had been identified on the map he used to come south years ago. It wasn't the same rune that now held him down, though it had some heavy similarities in appearance, indicating that the two were related in more than just abstract meaning.

Leon knew that the more specific runes were usually more complex versions of simpler runes that covered the same meaning. The ancient runes representing 'open' and 'open lock' were probably similar, from what little information he remembered, but the latter would be more complex than the former.

But as he thought about it, the memories starting flooding back. Artorias by the fire, teaching Leon what little he knew about enchantments, encouraging the young boy's interest in the craft.

Leon focused on his memories of the lessons regarding ancient enchantments, but even with his magic-enhanced brain, it had been years since then, and time had darkened and clouded those memories.

For a brief moment, all of Leon's rage and hatred came roaring back, searing him from the inside and causing his heart—or whatever passed for it in his magic body—to feel like it was about to burst from his chest with how hard it beat.

But Leon took a deep breath, quelling his rush as much as he possibly could, though not without a few cathartic thoughts about carving Nestor into a thousand tiny pieces.

He hated this feeling of powerlessness with a passion, but he had to admit that it had served at least to give him a little bit of perspective with regards to his power level. He was strong enough to be nearly untouchable in the Bull Kingdom, but up against someone like Nestor, even in such a state as Leon had found him in, his power was meaningless.

That Leon was not invincible, no matter how much power he had, was a lesson that he intended to take to heart, but it didn't help him in the slightest to escape his current—

And then, like a bolt of lightning out from the blue sky, it struck him: the shape of the 'open' rune. He wasn't sure how much it would help in a situation where he couldn't move, but he remembered it with reasonable clarity.

Leon focused on that rune as hard as he could. Unsure of what else he might be able to do, he thought about that rune as he began to strain again against his restraints. He didn't know what he was trying to accomplish, but he felt incredible about having remembered the rune.

A few minutes of hopeless struggling later, though, his rush of good feelings was essentially gone. He couldn't invoke the power of the rune just by thinking about it, it seemed.

He sighed again, his instincts pulling his lips back as the air escaped his mouth.

Leon's mind froze up for the briefest of moments in shock, only to then be replaced with ecstatic glee; his lips had moved!

He tried to move his lips again, but it was difficult, like they were incredibly numb and unresponsive. But they did move, sluggishly responding to the commands they were receiving from his brain.

Leon summoned his rapidly-bolstering willpower and began to think about the 'open' rune again. It was a vague and unspecific notion, that of openness, but that also benefitted him since it made the rune just as simple, looking like an abstracted key with one long vertical line and three short horizontal lines sticking out of its top end on one side.

Leon thought about his situation and willed himself to move again, to open his restraints and rise.

His results were mixed. He regained some feeling in his lips and found that he could slightly open his jaw, but the rest of him remained frozen and unresponsive. He couldn't move his arms, fingers, legs, none of his extremities.

After about ten or fifteen minutes of trying to move again, Leon had to stop. He'd regained some function of his mouth, but that wasn't enough.

"ZZZaahfffffgiiinn!" Leon tried to shout, hoping to wake his sleeping demonic partner. His tongue was like a brick in his mouth and his lips didn't move as he wanted them to, and on the whole, his voice alone was clearly not strong enough to break the hold of whatever Nestor had done to the demon.

Leon swallowed hard, beating back his rising rage. That wouldn't help him right now. As with the past couple of days, it wouldn't be raging, unthinking power that would help the most right now, but clear-thinking and determination.

The thought occurred to him that the 'open' rune would be more effective if it were actually physically drawn. He couldn't do whatever Nestor did to draw the rune in the air, and he didn't even have the use of his hands to draw it in the dirt.

But he did have other things that were moving…

Leon clenched his jaw, his pride flaring up and preventing him from doing what he knew had to be done to quickly free himself. Every moment he spent languishing here was another that Nestor had to do whatever he wanted with Leon's body. He didn't even want to think about the possibility of the older man encountering Maia or Valeria. On a logical level, he knew that Maia probably knew that something was up since their connection seemed to be disrupted on his end, but the thought of his lover running into someone else in his body was *distressing*, to put it mildly.

Just before he began, though, something else occurred to him. There was an endless amount of mist beyond his soul realm, and if he could get even a tiny fraction of what he could usually command, then he wouldn't need to further degrade himself.

Unfortunately, after about five minutes of trying, Leon realized that the Mists of Chaos weren't responding to him, and probably wouldn't so long as Nestor's restraints remained on him. Biting down on his frustration, Leon accepted what he had to do.

With as much willpower as he could summon, Leon retracted his lips and opened his jaw. He strained his neck muscles, commanding them with everything that he had to move, and miraculously, his head began to twitch. At the rate he was regaining control of himself, he figured he could undo the restraints in a few hours of struggle, but that wasn't fast enough. Worst-case scenario, Nestor finished whatever he was doing outside and came back into his soul realm before Leon finished freeing himself.

With an ugly grimace worthy of a monster of a thousand terrifying bedtime stories, Leon used what little control he had over his body to press his face further into the soft, loose dirt, using his tongue and nose to draw the required rune. It wasn't easy, to say the least, but fortunately, the ground had been loosened quite a bit during his bombardment of Nestor. Still, he screwed it up more than once, and each time had him silently screaming at himself for his failure.

But, finally, the rune was completed. A vaguely key-shaped ditch in the dirt, and new familiarity with the taste of dirt.

Leon breathed hard, the worst part of his job done, though it didn't make the taste of dirt on his tongue go away any faster.

Pushing everything out of his mind save for the thought of freeing himself, Leon reached out with his will and collected the wisps of magic that had been continuing to slowly accumulate in his soul realm and pushed all of it into the rune.

It was a truly pathetic amount of magic power for someone of the seventh-tier, but at this point, Leon hardly cared. All he needed was enough to free himself. He could lament his lack of power when he was free.

The rune in the dirt began to fill with light, glowing brighter as more of Leon's magic power was fed into it, the few sparks of hope that remained within him growing brighter with it. It wasn't nearly as efficient as a rune drawn on spell paper with specially-prepared ink, but it was working. He focused on the removal of his restraints, letting nothing else work its way into his head for long. He mentally commanded the rune to do what he wanted it to do as his paltry reserve of magic power filled it and gave it strength.

Suddenly, there was a bright flash of light that had even blinded Leon for a few seconds. He was mildly irritated and quite worried that something had gone wrong, but as his eyes recovered, he found that he'd moved his hand up to his face by instinct.

He blinked in surprise as he stared at his palm barely an inch in front of his face. Then, he tried moving his legs, and to his immense relief and gratification, they obeyed his command.

He smiled and pushed himself off the ground. It was time to even the score a little.

Chapter 504: Scope of the Ancient Runes

As Leon once again took to his feet, his magic body felt flush with energy as every fiber of his being demanded that he seek vengeance against the man who had so violated and humiliated him. It even looked like it would be easy, since Nestor remained upon Leon's throne, his eyes closed and seemingly none the wiser that Leon had freed himself.

A vicious smile graced Leon's lips as he took in the sight of his ancient kinsman completely unaware of what was about to happen. Then again, Leon, too, had little idea how he ought to proceed. He took a few menacing steps toward Nestor before catching himself.

He took a deep breath and took stock of himself. The possession wasn't total since Leon could still command the magic in his soul realm, but the Mists of Chaos didn't respond to his attempts to control them. Neither could he do anything to fix the damage he and Xaphan had done to his Mind Palace during the fight with Nestor. Compounding his issues was the fact that his soul realm was still quite bereft of magic power, leaving him with precious few options available to him to deal with Nestor.

On Nestor's end, Leon noted that he still possessed the glowing 'collection' rune filled with all of the power that Leon had thrown at Nestor and that Nestor still hadn't used. If Leon were to somehow wake the man up, Nestor would probably have little difficulty restraining Leon again, and if that happened, Leon doubted he'd get another chance to free himself. Nestor had arrogantly left him to his own devices, either trusting that Leon would remain restrained or having something much more important to take care of in the physical world.

No matter the case, it was both a blessing and a curse to Leon that Nestor still had that rune. On the one hand, it meant that Nestor had much more power than Leon had. On the other hand, it also implied that there was a cap to Nestor's power that Leon didn't necessarily have. If enough time passed, Leon's body would regenerate all of his lost power, sending it to his soul realm.

But Leon didn't feel like he had the time it would require for him to regenerate enough power to exceed what Nestor had. Worse than that, though, was that Leon doubted that power would help at all. He had no idea how to get past Nestor's 'collection' rune, so more power would do little save for giving Nestor more to work with.

No, Leon would need to fight smarter, not stronger. His strength had been failing him lately, anyway, and now was as good a time as any to start changing his habits.

Leon's eyes drifted in Xaphan's direction. The demon still lay unconscious upon the ground, the fires that usually burned on his body now barely more than a few glowing cracks in his obsidian skin. As much

as Leon hated to admit it, he'd need help to beat Nestor in a timely fashion. At the very least, he wanted Nestor incapacitated before the Thunderbird chose to come back.

Leon didn't know what he would do if she were to side with Nestor. He had to assert himself before she was given the choice. Given all that had happened between them, from his anger at her to her lies, he wasn't confident that she'd choose him over the clearly more capable Nestor.

He quickly shuffled over to the demon and started trying to wake him. He shouted and pushed and kicked, but Xaphan remained out. The rune that knocked the demon out, Leon figured, was probably still active, and unlike with the 'open' rune, he didn't know any ancient runes that might be used to counter this.

With a long sigh of frustration, Leon sat down to think, his burning gaze rarely wandering from Nestor. He wondered what the man was doing, whether Valeria and Maia were all right, and where the Thunderbird was.

As if on cue, the mists in the distance began to darken, heralding the Thunderbird's approach, and Leon had to fight the instinct to bury his face in his hands in shame and anxiety. His anger cooled in his chest like he was a child nervous that he was about to be scolded.

And there she was, flying out of the mists, her feathers radiant and her aura as oppressive and powerful as it always was.

Leon wasn't able to get much of an idea of what she thought about the situation as she flew over, for she didn't seem to be in a hurry and neither slowed down or reacted at all when she came into indisputable visual range of his Mind Palace. But she'd seen Nestor, there was no doubt in his mind about that. However, as she flew in, she shapeshifted into her human form and lightly landed in front of him, her yellow avian eyes locked onto him. Not once did he see her turn to look at Nestor.

After several long seconds, she asked in a carefully neutral tone, "What are you doing?"

Leon, desperate not to show weakness in front of his Ancestor, stood back up and replied with as much composure and nonchalance as he could, "Thinking."

The Thunderbird's eyes pierced into him with an almost physical force; her gaze threatened to tear away all of his defenses and leave his real mental state bare for her to see.

"And what is it that has so taken your mind that you are not ejecting this interloper?" Her tone was accusatory, and her eyes were even more so. She wasn't acting outright imperious, but her quiet and serious demeanor still demanded an answer.

"Trying to think of a way to eject this interloper," Leon coolly replied, his voice starting to quaver a bit, yet he still maintaining his natural stoicism. "He beat me once, I want to ensure that he doesn't do so again."

The Thunderbird finally glanced back over her shoulder at Nestor upon the throne, but her features were completely inscrutable; Leon had no idea what was on her mind.

"Are you nervous?" she finally asked, an almost imperceptible smile pulling at the corners of her lips. "Do you fear what I might think of you?"

Leon's expression didn't change much, but when he averted his gaze from his Ancestor, she had her answer.

"I will not abandon you, Leon," she declared. "I have spent too long raising you up to drop you now for a shiny new toy."

Leon wasn't convinced.

"He says he's Nestor, son of Jason Keraunos."

"So he is," the Thunderbird confirmed, putting that matter to rest, at least.

"You told me Nestor was dead."

"So I did, and so he is." The Thunderbird's expression finally softened a touch, and she explained, "I thought he was dead and gone. That over there is just his magic body. His physical body and soul realm are destroyed, leading me to the reasonable assumption that he was dead. If you lost your soul realm, I would assume the same about you, for I would not be able to see you anymore. For all intents and purposes, you would cease to exist to me, for all magical connections between us would be severed."

Leon slowly nodded. She'd made a reasonable enough mistake, and he wasn't of a mind right now to hold a grudge over it. So, with his anxiety at least temporarily assuaged, he pushed his emotions down as far as he could and refocused on the task at hand.

"For now, why don't we take care of this?" the Thunderbird said, a smile finally blooming across her tanned features.

"Wait a minute," Leon said as a terrifying thought suddenly occurred to him, "does he know you're here? Like, right now, not in a general 'you're always with us if we believe' kind of way."

The Thunderbird's smile took on an amused quality, and she gently shook her head. "No," she said. "So long as I don't do something that clues him in, he won't notice me."

Leon nodded again, his worries temporarily assuaged. Mentally, he accepted that the Thunderbird was on his side, that she was choosing him over Nestor, but emotionally, he wasn't going to really start believing her until he was back in control of his body.

Eager to make that a reality, Leon took a deep breath and asked, "What should we do now? I hope you have something in mind because I've got basically nothing."

"Tell me about him," the Thunderbird replied. Leon cocked an eyebrow at her, but he indulged anyway and told her everything that had happened since his triumph over the colossus outside.

Supposedly triumphed, at any rate; he hoped that he had, in fact, beaten it and that Nestor hadn't simply let them inside once he realized a Clan member had finally arrived.

He didn't give voice to these thoughts, and when he was finished, the Thunderbird was quiet for a moment before saying, "I understand, now. A master of ancient runes is, indeed, a difficult opponent to face without also possessing knowledge of such things. How much do you know about ancient runes?"

"They're basically pictograms as opposed to the alphabetical nature of modern runes," Leon answered. "Each one has a specific meaning to it, which imbues it with power. They're limited in scope, but tremendously powerful compared to modern runes within that scope."

"Not a bad description, as far as such things go," the Thunderbird replied. "The modern runes you use are much more versatile and easy to use, it's true, but ancient runes are not so limited as you might think. You managed to escape using an 'open' rune, did you not?"

Leon nodded.

"If ancient runes were so powerful, you would've specifically needed a rune to 'open restraints' or to 'counter this specific rune'. Each ancient rune has its meaning, but they can be applied in various ways. Just as an 'open' rune might be used to open restraints; it can also be used to open locked doors, to open up a hole in something, even to open minds to truth. The ancient runes are regarded as simpler and more restrictive than modern runes because their rules are based more on the thoughts and intent of the mage wielding them, with the runes growing easier to use the more specific they become."

By this point, Leon's brow had furrowed in thought. Everything she was saying was resonating with what he'd done to escape—he'd *willed* the 'open' rune to work in the way he'd wanted it to, rather than having it work through any specific intrinsic nature of the rune itself.

"Getting the ancient runes to work as you want them to is difficult," the Thunderbird continued, "even more so if you're using vague, simple runes. Your attempt to escape your restraints would've been much easier if you'd known the runes for 'open restraints' or 'release prisoner' or something of that more specific nature."

"Makes sense," Leon said. "Unfortunately, none of that really helps me now, does it? I haven't the knowledge to counter Nestor, and without being able to counter his runes, I'm basically helpless unless I can beat him to death. *Can* I beat him to death?"

"No, his magic body is far stronger than yours, and it looks like he has quite a bit of magic in that storage rune next to him," the Thunderbird replied with an amused look on her face. "Before the death of his physical body, he'd achieved Apotheosis."

Leon's eyes almost bulged out of their sockets. "He did what?"

"He'd achieved Apotheosis," the Thunderbird repeated. "By any metric you might choose to measure his power, he was powerful. And while he's lost almost all of that power—much like that worthless demon over there—his magic body yet contains a hint of that power, and even just a hint is more than enough to completely overpower you in a hand-to-hand scuffle."

Leon took a deep breath. "All right, so no engaging in close range."

"It's probably best not to violently engage at all, especially not on equal footing," the Thunderbird said.

Leon gave her some side-eye, his worry about her choosing Nestor over him rising again.

"Think about it," the Thunderbird continued, "the things I can teach you about the runic arts are limited. Same thing with the demon. But here, before you, is a master of the craft, someone who can teach you

everything you might want to know. I would recommend you subordinate him, rather than aiming to end him permanently. *Conquer*. Not destroy."

Leon scowled. He wanted to see Nestor dead about as much as he'd ever wanted anyone dead, including Justin Isynos… but the Thunderbird was making at least a degree of sense.

"I can't trust him," Leon stated. "He's stolen my body. He'll try to do so again."

"There are ways to prevent that," the Thunderbird replied.

"Magical oaths are sworn using blood or connecting to a mage's soul realm. Nestor has neither. I don't see how he can be prevented from trying again."

The Thunderbird smiled and glanced at Leon's vault not too far away.

"You have what you need here, already. I'll help to show you the way, but you'll need to do this yourself. Consider it a taste of what you'll need to face in the Nexus."

Leon glanced up at Nestor on his throne and seethed.

"Then let's do this quickly," he said with determination. "I don't know when he's going to come back in here, and I want to be ready when he does."

Chapter 505: Prince's Arrogance

When the lift doors opened, Naiad and Valeria came out with their guards raised. Valeria's glaive was brandished—not that she thought it would do much good against the golems they'd been fighting—and Naiad's power was at her fingertips.

But nothing jumped out to greet them. As far as it seemed, the short hall they stepped out into was devoid of life.

The place was also far less decorated than the entrance hall; much like the large empty room they'd explored, it seemed that this place wasn't one meant to show off the power and majesty of the Thunderbird Clan. It was narrow enough to not need the tree-like columns of the entrance hall, and as far as Valeria could see, there was only a single door apart from the lift, and it was all the way at the other end of the hall.

That being said, the hall was a far cry from being hideous or even depressingly neutral—the floors had been polished to a near-mirror shine, the sloped walls had regular alcoves, and the light was soft and pleasant.

[Keep an eye on those alcoves,] Naiad commanded Valeria as they spread out a bit in the hall.

Valeria whispered, "Got it," not feeling the slightest bit out of the place with Naiad giving the orders. In this case, she was perfectly happy following Naiad's lead if only to stay out of her way if they ran into trouble of a violent sort.

[Notice anything?] Naiad asked.

"Nothing," Valeria answered as they crept along the hall, Valeria's eyes probing every shadow and dark thing in the hall, searching for any sign of danger.

However, the alcoves were empty; no golems appeared from either direction, the lift stayed on their level with the door open, and she detected no changes in the room's natural aura that might have indicated the activation of a defensive ward.

Soon enough, they reached the other end of the hall, and Valeria got to work opening the door while Naiad watched her back. At this point, after having explored three lower floors already, it had become something of a habit for the two.

After clearing out the golems on the first floor, they'd gone down to the lowest floor the lift could take them to, but they'd found nothing of note down there, only huge storage rooms filled with metal boxes. Unfortunately, most of these boxes were filled with raw materials that weren't of much use to the ladies, like huge slabs of steel and bronze. The second floor from the bottom was somehow even less exciting, with nothing but what appeared to be large theaters and meeting rooms devoid of furniture.

The third floor from the bottom, meanwhile, appeared to be the place where the people who used to work in the place would spend their off-time. There were only about two dozen rooms however, perhaps, Valeria theorized, because of the golems around to do manual labor. Each room had an attached bathroom, though no furniture to speak of. At the end of that hall had been what she'd thought had once been a large common area, though with it again devoid of furniture, so she could only guess.

Despite all of this, she and Naiad had managed to keep their guards raised. Having been surprised once by an unexpectedly silent attack by golems, they weren't going to get careless again.

So, there on the fourth floor from the lowest floor the lift would take them, Valeria got to work opening the only door. By this point, she'd gotten so good at opening these doors that it slid into the wall in a matter of seconds, giving the two ladies access to what lay beyond.

And it was a beautiful sight. Whereas the rest of the facility seemed to have been evacuated, this room was the only one that still seemed inhabited. The walls had been enchanted to resemble hedges blooming with flowers of every shape and color; the center of the room was a small pool about the size of a large bath, flanked by four pillars that had been enchanted to resemble trees; the ceiling had similar enchantments, as well, showing a scene of bright blue sky with the perfect amount of fluffy white clouds lazily drifting through the firmament.

The rest of the décor was beyond luxurious, with a polished marble floor, a number of sofas, recliners, and tables made of ivory, green jade, and turtle shells. At the far end of the room was a large chair built like a throne made of ivory and emerald sitting upon a dais of green marble.

It was an almost unnerving shock to the two to be so far underground yet to walk out into what all of their senses were telling them was outside. It was shocking enough that their guard slipped for just a moment as they walked in, only for it to be immediately raised again when they noticed the four alcoves in the corners of the room which housed bronze golems.

"You needn't worry about them," said a bored-sounding voice from the hallway behind them.

Valeria and Naiad spun around ready to attack whoever had just snuck up on them, but both froze for a moment when they saw it was Leon walking through the door.

"Leon!" Valeria cried. "What's been going on?! The golems have been—"

Valeria was cut off as Naiad held out her arm in front of her.

[That isn't Leon,] the river nymph whispered into Valeria's mind. When Valeria glanced over at her companion, she felt ice enter her veins when she saw the look of utter hatred and rage on Naiad's face.

Not seeming to care about Naiad cutting Valeria off, not-Leon strutted right on in, walked past them, and stretched out over one of the recliners.

"Ahhh," he sighed as he got comfortable. "I've been so long without comfort, I'd almost forgotten what it felt like to sit in one of these…"

[Who are you!] Naiad demanded as she and Valeria spread out into the room a little, with Naiad blocking the door, the only apparent exit not-Leon might be able to use to run away. Valeria, meanwhile, divided her attention between not-Leon, the golems in the room, and monitoring the doorway for any more unexpected arrivals.

Not-Leon looked at them with a smile of amusement, his almost playfully in-control attitude standing in sharp contrast to Leon's significantly more reserved and stoic nature.

"I wondered how I should approach this," he said. "I thought that maybe trying to pass myself off as your companion might've been a good idea, made all the more tempting by how utterly gorgeous the two of you are, but in the end, I decided against it. I am not Leon Raime, the man you journeyed to this place with."

Valeria wrinkled her nose in disgust, and she noticed Naiad's making a similar expression. This person was *not* welcome making even relatively tame comments like those, especially not wearing Leon's face.

[Who are you?] Naiad repeated, echoing her question in Valeria's mind for the sake of clarity. [Why do you wear his face?!]

Naiad's aura began to rise, roil, and churn, reflecting her subtle shift in posture to a more offensive stance. It was clear to Valeria, at least, that if she didn't get an answer she liked, then violence was going to ensue. But she couldn't blame the river nymph, Valeria felt an instinctive revulsion at whoever this was aping Leon's form. In fact, if they had more information on wherever Leon was, Valeria knew that Naiad would've already attacked, and she probably would've joined the river nymph.

"I am here to talk," not-Leon said in a conciliatory tone. "I've been watching you two traipse all over my lab poking your noses into every little crack and corner, destroying my labor force, and just generally being kind of a nuisance. I want you two to stop."

"You're in charge here?" Valeria demanded to know, her hand clasping her glaive a little bit tighter.

"I am," not-Leon replied. "You may call me Nestor, if you must call me anything. Now that you know my name, perhaps you two can relax and join me for a few words? Whatever you want, I'm sure we can come to some kind of arrangement—"

Naiad abruptly ended his sentence when she conjured a thin line of water in the air and, using it almost like a sword, she sliced Nestor's sofa in half. Nestor himself was fine, leaping to his feet just before the water hit—and not being in Naiad's line of fire, anyway.

[WHERE IS LEON?!] Naiad furiously roared into his mind.

"Now, now, there's no need for that…" Nestor said, his smile slipping a little as Naiad stared daggers at him. He glanced at Valeria in what she guessed to be a silent plea for intervention, but if that was, indeed, what he wanted, then he was left wanting. Valeria sensed barely any magic coming from him; he didn't seem to be much of a threat, his attitude notwithstanding, so she was with Naiad one hundred percent of the way. "All right, I tried," he said exasperatedly as he started making some strange, arcane hand movements. "Don't complain that you didn't have your chance!"

Naiad needed nothing more. She conjured a small serpentine water dragon only about a foot thick and sent it careening in Nestor's direction. It smashed through the horrifically expensive furniture without the slightest care on its course to clamp its jaws down on Nestor's body, but Nestor nimbly leaped out of the way.

When he landed, he grinned at Naiad as the water dragon lost all bodily cohesion and collapsed into shapeless water, Naiad's magic scattering beyond any hope of control as it hit a shining rune hovering in the air.

Valeria wasn't idly watching this take place, she'd conjured half a dozen ice spikes—about all she could manage with her relatively depleted magic reserves—and had them hover around her. As soon as Nestor's feet touched the ground, she launched one of these spikes at him, which he only dodged by the skin of his teeth.

"Oomph!" he cried in surprise, the exclamation sounding terribly strange in Leon's voice. "And here I was thinking you were only kept around for your looks!" he shouted at Valeria, winking at her in a way that sent a shiver of disgust down her spine. She, without hesitation, launched another ice spike his way despite knowing that it would be pointless with his guard up and his eyes trained on her.

However, as he twisted his body out of the way, another of Naiad's water dragons came roaring in from the side. It slammed into him with astonishing force, hurling him across the room before it followed its predecessor and collapsed into formless water.

Nestor landed on his feet, looking a little shaky but otherwise unhurt.

"Oof," he quietly complained. "Not used to this…"

He didn't get a chance to get used to it, though, as one of Valeria's ice spikes almost impaled his shoulder, blocked only by a hastily thrown up rune that created a shield of light around him.

Suddenly, the runes that Nestor had conjured vanished, and his eyes widened in shock. His fingers moved in a blur, but no new runes appeared. In contrast, Naiad was winding up for another attack, with water already appearing next to her and forming into a serpentine shape.

"Shit," he muttered as his panicked eyes went to the four golems in the corners of the room, which then began to move. Naiad didn't waste a moment, launching a water dragon at the closest golem. A moment later, bits and pieces of bronze were sailing across the room, but the other three golems had already sprung into action.

One of them charged at Valeria. Given that she couldn't see through the aura it emanated, she assumed it was much stronger than her and did her best to dodge and weave while Naiad dealt with them. She

got in a few good hits, but otherwise remained on the defensive until a water dragon appeared to tear the golem into scrap metal.

But the entire fight lasted about a minute, during which Nestor had vanished.

"Bastard!" Valeria angrily shouted as she ran for the door, not even taking a moment to thank Naiad for her intervention. Naiad didn't seem to mind, though as she followed immediately.

The two burst out into the hallway only to see that the door to the lift had closed. Valeria sprinted over and tried to call it, but there was no response.

"That fucking ass!" she shouted in frustration.

[Can you get it open?] Naiad asked, her body language speaking of calm but her tone speaking of the much darker and more violent thoughts she was not giving voice to.

"I'll try," Valeria said as she began looking for a control panel. "What in all the hells *was* that?"

[It was most certainly someone in Leon's body, but his mind was not there…] Naiad said. [Someone must have somehow seized control of him…]

"Does that mean we can't harm him when we find him?" Valeria asked, suddenly concerned that they wouldn't be able to harm Nestor if they managed to find him.

As a response, Naiad only offered a quiet, [… We must be careful…]

Valeria scowled as she got back to work, though she did spare the time to whisper, "… Thanks, back there. You covered me, and I appreciate it."

Valeria didn't hear Naiad respond, but in the corner of her eye, she saw the river nymph briefly glance at her by her shadow and slowly nod in her direction.

—

Nestor swore under his breath as he stumbled out of the lift far below his relaxation chambers. He'd never been much of a fighter, and in a body that wasn't his and without the lion's share of his powers, he was deeply regretting going to challenge those two, especially when all the power he'd taken from Leon seemed to suddenly dry up.

"Underestimated those bitches…" he murmured as he limped down the hall, unable to spare the magic power he'd need to heal Leon's body for the moment. With the power he'd stolen from Leon all gone, he barely had enough power left in him for a rune or two, not nearly enough to continue fighting. He wasn't sure what happened, but he guessed he must've just overestimated what he'd gotten from Leon. No other scenario made as much sense in his mind, even though he was *certain* that he'd stolen more during their brief exchange.

His options ran through his mind. He could hole up down in the lower floors and restrict the access those women had to the rest of the facility, but such a passive act was hardly one that appealed to him. Besides, he doubted either of them would just leave in good time. He only had one more golem, though, and until he brought the entire facility back online, his labor force was going to be essentially just him until he got the facilities in the deeper parts of the lab back up and running.

His expression darkened as he realized that there was only one way he was going to be able to defeat those two and fully secure his lab without destroying it in the process: to fully seize Leon's body. But that would take time and power, neither of which he had in abundance.

Down the hall, he saw his most prized golem, the last intact one that he possessed, hurrying over.

"Your Highness!" it cried as it bent down to give Nestor something to lean on.

Nestor was happy to let it take some of his weight, and as he directed the lead golem on to his destination, he asked, "Is your task complete?"

"Yes," the golem replied. "The prisoners have been fully secured for further draining. The main crystal should be fully charged within eight weeks at our current rate of power consumption."

Nestor smiled bitterly, knowing that that wasn't going to be fast enough with those ladies breathing down his neck. He'd have to take more drastic measures to secure his position. He needed more power, and he needed it *now*. He could go all the way down to the other end of the hall and slowly drain what the prisoners had built up, but there was a much better source of magic power right there with him…

He glanced down at his golem. The entire thing was a work of art, with broad shoulders, a patterned chest plate featuring hundreds of Thunderbirds in flight, and dozens of modern runes all along its joints. The way its bronze plates weaved together like scaled skin, the brief hints of silver-blue light that peaked out from beneath it that hinted at the lightning wisp inside, the flexibility of its form, it all made Nestor smile to see his creation so lively and so beautiful.

Without hesitating for longer than a second, Nestor used the scant traces of power in the air and that Leon's body had regenerated to draw another 'collection' rune in the air and directed it at his golem. It was small and unsuited for combat, but the rune was enough for his current purposes, especially since Nestor had built all of his golems to accept any draining that he needed to subject them to.

The golem froze as it bore Nestor down the hallway, magic power rippling out from it and into the 'collection' rune. A moment later, the bronze form collapsed into a heap of plates and tiny scales as the lightning wisp within was snuffed out, Nestor's rune having consumed all of its magic power and funneling it back into Leon's soul realm, where Nestor would be able to collect it again with the rune he still had down there.

With that, Nestor thought with only a modicum of sorrow at having destroyed his most prized creation, he'd have the power to enact his next steps a little quicker than he'd anticipated.

With no thoughts spared for comfort or his station, Nestor sat down right there in the hallway. He then got as comfortable as he could and closed his eyes, letting his consciousness sink down deep into Leon's core, then into the younger man's soul realm.

'My *soul realm, now,*' Nestor thought as he opened his eyes on Leon's throne, a smile on his face.

When he saw what was waiting for him, his smile instantly died, replaced with fear and immediate panic.

Chapter 506: Round Two

Leon waited with bated breath, his eyes unwaveringly locked on Nestor. He saw every tiny movement of the older man's magic body, and at the first sign of his return to Leon's soul realm, Leon would spring into action. He'd done everything else he could do until then, so now he had to wait.

Above him on her perch was the Thunderbird, watching Nestor as well, but also occasionally sparing a disdainful glance for Xaphan. She and Leon had spent the past few hours going over his plan and making sure he had everything ready, but he'd insisted on reviving Xaphan. The demon now stood not too far away, the fires on his body now reignited and raging in a visual sign of his rage.

When Nestor returned to Leon's soul realm, he'd have quite the reception waiting for him. Even worse for the ancient man, though, were all the runes carved into the ground around Leon, as well as the complete lack of runes hovering in the air around him.

None of them had to wait for long. It took less than half an hour after Leon made his first move in reviving Xaphan for Nestor to open his eyes and 'disconnect' from his throne. As soon as he did, Leon sprang into action, not bothering with talk or threats. He wasn't about to give Nestor a single opening.

Leon activated the first rune on the ground, and Nestor was pulled off the throne with enough force to slam him into the dirt in front of the marble platform face-first almost hard enough to bury him up to his shoulders. The older man shouted in surprise and then again in pain as he was magically man-handled. He raised a hand and began drawing in the air, but Leon simply activated another of the runes on the ground in front of him and the lines Nestor had drawn were erased, dissolving into tiny motes of light that then vanished.

Nestor's eyes widened in fear as he pushed himself off the ground just enough to look up at Leon, who stared back at him with nothing but hate in his eyes. Without hesitation, Leon activated the third and final rune, pouring every scrap of power he had in his soul realm into it. Nestor's body subsequently locked up just as Leon's had hours before. His limbs lost all strength and he limply fell back into the dirt, unable to move so much as a finger.

The only part of his body that remained under his control was his mouth, and for that, Leon almost immediately began to regret as Nestor began to shout incoherently, his words muffled and distorted with his face pressed down into the ground.

Leon was in no hurry to pick the man up, while Xaphan began to laugh at Nestor's current state. The demon had argued quite vociferously for killing the man, but Leon had acquiesced to the Thunderbird's request to leave Nestor alive for just a little bit longer, so even though it was quite gratifying to see, Xaphan still wasn't too happy.

Leon hurried over to his throne, slowing down just enough to deliberately step on Nestor's back just before he ascended the few stairs to his throne's platform. There were few things Leon wanted to do more than sit down upon his throne and go and figure out what was going on outside, but for the moment, he only inspected his physical state with Nestor immobilized.

He was a little worried to see that his physical body and his connection with Maia were still not quite in control, but he quickly fixed those issues by simply resting his hand upon his throne and using the magic in his soul realm as a sort of binding material.

Leon breathed in contented relief as he felt the presence of Maia's power once more in his soul realm, flowing into and then out of it like a river, carrying with it hints of cooling rage, anxiety, and a strange sense of trust that confused Leon a bit. He tried to communicate with her, but it seemed that the connection wasn't fully healed, yet.

But as much as he wanted to go to her and to see that she and Valeria were all right, now that he had reasserted his control over his soul realm, Leon turned his attention back to his distant kinsman. It was time to deal with him permanently.

As he walked back over to the fallen Nestor, Leon pulled a blood-red ruby out of his pocket, one of the gems he'd retrieved from his family's vault. Upon it had been carved a fourth rune, which, unlike the previous three, had not been specifically taught less than an hour ago to Leon by the Thunderbird—instead, it had been inscribed with the most familiar of the ancient runes to Leon: 'prison'. The success of the previous runes had given Leon some confidence, but this was the moment of truth for his skills, the moment which would signify his success in this contest.

Leon stopped over his fallen kinsman, who still struggled to make himself heard. Leon thought he heard the words, 'stop!' and 'wait!' but he paid them no mind. Nestor hadn't stopped, and neither would he.

"Don't worry," he said as he aimed the ruby at Nestor's back, "this won't kill you. But if I were in your shoes, I wouldn't consider this to be all that different from death."

The ruby began to glow as Leon's magic power whirled around him like a cyclone. All of the power in his soul realm that he could command was channeled into the ruby, and it began to glow like a bright red star.

"You know," Leon said as the ruby gathered his power, "even after erasing your 'collection' rune and reclaiming the power you stole from me, I was a bit worried that I still hadn't enough to make this work, but the power you so *graciously* pumped into my soul realm just now ought to more than ensure my success…"

Leon spoke no more, instead choosing to picture exactly what he wanted the rune to do in his mind, and ignoring Nestor's continued muffled protestations. Through his magic that was powering the rune, he let his will direct it, bestow upon it both its functions and its limitations. Nestor would be imprisoned within it, but Leon didn't want the man thrown into an endless void never to be heard from again.

No, he wanted Nestor on a *very* short leash—or, at least, he had been *convinced* to leave Nestor on a short leash rather than broken and dead. Leon had to be careful that his true desires didn't overpower his actual intent, and he devoted every spare shard of brainpower that he could to concentrating on Nestor's imprisonment, on impressing that purpose upon the rune, *willing* the universe to then change accordingly.

The light of the ruby grew brighter and brighter until Leon felt like he was actually holding a star. But he kept going, suppressing any doubts that crept into his mind that might poison his rune and give Nestor more room to maneuver than he was to be allowed.

This searing red light reached down to envelop the older man, who seemed to be shaking—Leon hoped in fear—in response. Leon pushed, and, with an ear-piercing crack of thunder, Nestor vanished from

view and the light emanating from the ruby immediately cooled to a duller, though still quite vibrant, glow.

Leon stared at the ruby, having just enough time to shake his head in discomfort from being so close to that sound and to wonder if everything worked out as he'd intended. He had a worryingly small reserve of magic left over, and he knew that if this didn't work, then he'd have little recourse but to hope that Xaphan and the Thunderbird could do something.

A moment later, his fears were put to rest as a wail of despair came peeling out of the ruby.

"AAAAAARRGGHHHHHHHHHH!!!" Nestor cried. "I HAD IT!!! FREEDOM WAS IN MY HAND!!!"

Leon grimaced more and more with every word, eventually just setting the ruby down on a nearby table and putting some distance between himself and Nestor, giving the man some time to get used to his new circumstances—though Leon stayed more than close enough to keep his eyes on it and make sure that his rune worked as intended.

"Well done," Xaphan grumbled from the entryway of his pavilion. "I still say you should've killed him, but it's nice to hear him crying like that."

"I was sorely tempted to snuff him out," Leon admitted. "But I have to agree with you, this is both the worst and the best thing I've ever heard…"

The two stayed there, listening to Nestor's lamentation for a few more seconds, but it couldn't last for long. Nestor, after a few seconds, calmed down, and Leon walked back over as the Thunderbird fluttered down to the ground and assumed her human form.

"Well-executed," she said. "I, personally, would've trapped him *before* checking on the throne, but you can't argue with results."

Leon nodded to her in acknowledgment, but his attention remained solely fixed upon the shining ruby that now held the magic body of Nestor trapped within. Nestor's cries had subsided, and Leon felt a wave of killing intent erupt from the stone. His body crackled with silver-blue lightning, but nothing more came from the ruby than that killing intent.

After a moment, Leon relaxed and the Thunderbird took a position at his side, both staring down at the ruby.

"How are you doing, Nestor?" Leon asked with fake concern. "Is it roomy in there? Comfortable? Is there anything I can do to make your stay more enjoyable?"

Xaphan chuckled, but the Thunderbird maintained a more serious demeanor.

"Things look good from here," she said, her yellow eyes piercing through everything that the stone was, analyzing its capabilities.

"Thank you," Leon said with genuine emotion. "This wouldn't have been possible if you hadn't shared with me those runes…"

"It was your plan, to begin with," the Thunderbird said with a shrug.

"Still, you have my thanks. Is there anything we ought to do with this thing?"

"That would depend on whether or not Nestor is going to cooperate." The Thunderbird took an even closer look at the ruby, practically pressing her face against it. She held herself there for several long seconds, and when Nestor remained silent, she pulled back with a deep frown. "Seems like he won't be. Might be better to let him stew a bit before coming back for a chat. For now, you can put him somewhere the demon can watch."

"Huh? Do I look like a jailor to you?" Xaphan replied, clearly offended as his flames flared up for a moment.

The Thunderbird glared at him, the force of her displeasure dampening his fires by a noticeable degree. "You have nothing better to do, so keep an eye on the guest."

Leon took a deep breath as Xaphan quietly grumbled but offered no further resistance. He placed the ruby holding Nestor on a nearby table, and after some reassurances from Xaphan that it would not move, he then made for his throne. He could spend the next few days doing nothing but dealing with Nestor in there, but with Nestor secured—at least, for the time being—he needed to get back out into the physical world and link back up with Valeria and Maia.

"Will you stick around for a while?" Leon asked the Thunderbird as he quickly walked over to his throne.

"I might need to stretch my wings a bit, but I won't be far," she said.

"I suppose that's as good as I'm going to get."

Leon wasted no more time. He sat down upon his throne and closed his eyes, his heart beating madly in his chest in dread at the thought that this wasn't going to work.

Fortunately, his fears were unfounded as he soon woke back up right where Nestor had sat down, in the stark, unadorned hallway with the fallen golem lying in pieces only a few steps away. The very first thing he did was try to communicate with Maia again, but again, he failed. It seemed he'd have to find her the old-fashioned way and hope their connection wasn't permanently damaged.

Leon spared the golem a quick look of pity before he left; it had seemed far more sentient than the rest of the golems he'd seen, and Leon couldn't help but wonder if it were fully so, like the stone giants.

With that reminder of the loss of Lapis and the stone giants, Leon's distaste for Nestor deepened.

When he glanced around at his surroundings, he found that he was in a long nondescript hallway and had little idea where he was or where he should go now. Eventually, he just picked a direction and started walking. He saw a couple doors on either side of the hallway, but his destination was the closer of the two ends, where two more, far bigger and more important doorways were located. He was hoping that one of them contained the lift, but since they were identical, he could only guess.

Upon his arrival at the door, Leon immediately knew that it wasn't the lift, for he could sense a tremendous amount of magic flowing through the walls, far more than he ever sensed coming from the lift.

His curiosity piqued, he decided to spare a few seconds to check this door out, anyway. After all, he remembered Nestor saying that he'd imprisoned Justin somewhere within this place, even though the events of the past few hours had somewhat overshadowed that revelation.

Pushing open the door, Leon found that the room beyond was quite large, though not to an unreasonable degree. Any other details, however, were immediately lost upon him as he saw countless vines hanging down from the ceiling directly over platforms not unlike the roots that had bound Xaphan in his prison. All-together, Leon guessed that there were about forty-eight platforms in the room, each much smaller than Xaphan's prison, more suited to holding smaller things, but it was immediately clear to Leon what this place was.

Upon all of the first row of platforms, Leon saw skeletons entangled within the vines. Leon spared these remains not another thought, they weren't who he was looking for. He pulsed his magic senses throughout the room, searching for Justin.

And there, in the back row, so entangled within the vines that only his head, hands, and feet were visible, was Justin Isynos.

Chapter 507: Obsolete

Valeria sighed deeply as she stepped back from the lift panel.

"There's no way I'm going to get this damn thing to move," she said with a deep scowl. "The power requirements are too great for me to power myself, and besides, I think the lift has been physically locked wherever that Nestor guy took it, but I can't say for certain."

[But it isn't going to move?] Naiad asked.

"No," Valeria said as she stood up and stared at the panel with a look that spoke of nothing but violence and fury at this deceptively simple enchantment that was preventing her from following Nestor. "This is only a controller enchantment, and a secondary one, at that. All it does is call the lift, it doesn't actually have anything to do with how the lift functions. With the lift otherwise disabled, this enchantment is useless."

The two stood there in the hallway for a long time, neither saying a word. They hadn't spoken much in the half-hour or so since the fight with Nestor, focusing almost entirely on trying to catch up with him after he fled.

"Do you... why do you think he looked like Leon?" Valeria hesitantly asked, her face becoming lined with worry.

[I don't know...] Naiad responded as a look similar to Valeria's passed over her bronze features. [I can say that that was Leon's body, though. Somehow, this 'Nestor' seized Leon's actual body.]

"What?!"

[It was Leon's body, but it wasn't Leon in there,] Naiad continued, her tone turning fearful. [I'm... not certain Leon is still alive...]

Valeria's look of worry deepened into one of fear and horror. At that moment, to her, it seemed like she'd convinced the man that she loved to accompany her to find her father, only for him to die, and

they didn't even succeed. Instead of returning home with Leon and her father, now it was starting to look like she had lost both.

She immediately dropped down on a knee and started working on the panel again, though she knew it was probably pointless. It was a simple enough enchantment that if there had been a way to get it to work that she could find, she would've found it by now. But she couldn't help it, and just waiting around wasn't something she was good at.

After a few minutes, though, she had to stop, for she heard the sounds of something sliding to the floor from behind her.

Turning and drawing her weapon, Valeria was, instead, greeted by the sight of Naiad sitting on the ground hugging her legs, her forehead pressed against her knees. The sight of someone so powerful and aloof in such a vulnerable position had her gawking for an almost unseemly amount of time. Eventually, though Valeria relaxed and hurried over to Naiad instead of fruitlessly examining the enchantment behind the control panel.

"What's wrong?" she asked in concern as she kneeled down next to the river nymph, wondering if perhaps Naiad had been injured in a way that she hadn't been able to see.

Naiad lifted her head enough to look at Valeria, her lake-blue eyes shining with tears. But she said nothing, and dropped her head back to her knees, conveniently lowering her head down far enough that Valeria couldn't see the emotions playing out across her face.

It was clear enough to Valeria that Naiad didn't want to talk about whatever was going on, but Valeria wasn't in any mood to let this go. In their situation, she considered anything that could drop Naiad to the floor too important to let slip past.

Sliding over next to Naiad and taking a seat, Valeria remained quiet for a short moment, then asked, "Is it about Leon? And his body being stolen?"

Again, Naiad said nothing, but Valeria did her best to put pressure on her to talk with her presence.

"If you need to talk, this… isn't the *best* time, but it may be your only chance to vent if all this goes pear-shaped," Valeria stated as her eyes drifted back in the direction of the lift. With it out of commission, she truly believed that talking for a while might help them to clear their heads and think of something else to try. As they were, they were stuck and going nowhere.

[It's… nothing,] Naiad said unconvincingly into Valeria's mind.

"Are you sure it's nothing?" Valeria quietly asked, trying to be as supportive and calming as she could. "I know that we've had some… *differences* of opinion for a while—and that's understandable given where we stand—and I would like to apologize for anything I've said that might've offended you. At least in the past few hours, I've been stressed and anxious, I've been dreading seeing my father again, and Leon's missing. I was unable to use those emotions for anything else, so I lashed out at you, and for that, I'm sorry."

She heard Naiad sigh, with it being perhaps the only time she'd ever heard the river nymph make an audible noise.

"I would also like to thank you," Valeria continued. "Without you, I would've been killed here by those golems. I don't think I would've even put up a good fight, they would've torn me to bloody ribbons in no time flat."

[It's… Do you know how Leon and I met?] Naiad eventually asked, cutting off anything else that Valeria might have wanted to say, her tone just a little annoyed and a lot depressed and melancholic, as if she were remembering something painful.

"Something about him stumbling upon you in the forests east of the Border Mountains and you helping him to get back to Legion lines," Valeria answered. "He wasn't too specific, I just thought it was something that was only for the two of you to know."

[Elise knows as well,] Naiad explained. [I… did some things to him. Some things that were almost too much for him to forgive, and it made our relationship from there on… *difficult*…]

Naiad proceeded to tell Valeria the story of Leon being brought to her by one of her subordinate nymphs, and their subsequent interactions, ending with her dropping Leon off back in the forest after extracting a pledge of support from him.

"That…" Valeria murmured, not knowing quite what to say and being more than a little angry, offended, and disgusted all at once.

[It wasn't my proudest moment, though it's one that I only started regretting lately,] Naiad continued. [Especially over the past day. I almost ruined something magical and that brings light into my life before I had it out of my fear of turning into a Gorgon. I love Leon more than I ever thought possible, but my fear nearly cost me his love. He forgave me, and for that, I couldn't be more thankful, but it doesn't erase my shame…

[And now, with what that other Gorgon told me, I know that Gorgonism isn't even incurable, that it could very well not even *be* a concern for me anymore!]

"That's… a *good* thing, though, right?" Valeria asked. "I mean, you and Leon have a stable relationship, and now you can set aside a fear that almost made you do something heinous and irreversible."

[Maybe…] Naiad replied. [Or, maybe with the reason for our coming together in the first place now gone… it will change what we are. What we mean to each other. It renders *us* obsolete!]

Valeria nodded, understanding on an intellectual, if not emotional, level.

"I… don't think that anything is going to change for the two of you," Valeria said. "Have you seen the way he looks at you? He's not going to let you go for anything. I doubt he even cares about Gorgonism anymore—or, at least, he's not scared of it. I'd be willing to bet you could transform into a Gorgon right in front of him and he wouldn't let that change your relationship at all."

Naiad lifted her head again and glared at her, as if silently accusing her of not knowing what she was talking about.

"These things, *what* we are and *who* we are related to don't matter to him, at least not in the ways that they might matter to us," Valeria further explained. "If they did, I don't think he'd have ever let me go.

My father ordered his father's death. My father personally killed his grandfather. I think anyone else would've killed me as soon as they could've, or used me in some way to try and strike at my father.

"But Leon didn't do that. I know that he *wanted* to, but he didn't, and instead took me in when I was my lowest and gave me the support I needed to get back on my feet. It's his actions that count, not his words or his thoughts."

Valeria almost was tempted to try and pat Naiad on the shoulder as comfortingly as she could, but she refrained at the last second. She didn't think the river nymph would've appreciated it, and a moment later, Naiad asked something that would've frozen her, anyway.

[How do you know he has forgiven everything? That he won't go back on his word to you to let your father go? I can sense a lot of pain and anger and frustration whenever he looks at you.]

"He… does?" Valeria asked, having never really gotten that impression from Leon. He'd always seemed genuine and up-front whenever he affirmed their agreed-upon peace. However, the more she thought about it, Leon *had* reassured her quite a number of times, perhaps more times than someone who wasn't contemplating breaking that agreement might.

'Or maybe I'm overthinking things…' Valeria thought to herself, trying to batter down those thoughts.

"He'll stick to his word," she said with as much confidence as she could muster, but it wasn't much. "I trust him. Our past is kind of rocky, but despite all of that, I know him, and I trust him. He won't break his word to me."

[I hope you're right…] Naiad said, though she hardly sounded convinced.

"I am," Valeria replied, her confidence a little more apparent.

Naiad seemed to take a deep breath and then straightened up. [No use stressing about it. Being stuck here won't do us any good.] The river nymph stood up and made for the door, with Valeria right behind her.

"Did you think of something?" Valeria asked.

[You could say that,] Naiad replied as she raised a hand and conjured a small water dragon. With a wave of her hand, she sent the dragon careening down the hallway toward the door, showing Valeria exactly what was on her mind.

The dragon smashed into the door, exploding into a torrent of water that then came flooding back toward them.

Valeria saw that the door was completely unscathed, without even the barest hint that an eighth-tier equivalent magical being had just tried to force her way through. "I… think all you're going to accomplish with that is making our feet wet…"

[We'll see…] Naiad replied as she conjured another water dragon. [All I need is a little bit…]

"… Of what?" Valeria asked as the second serpentine dragon was sent on its way, only to meet with the same success as the first.

[Such a door can't be airtight, can it?] the river nymph asked as an explanation as a third dragon appeared at her side. [I don't need much, I just need to get enough water through the cracks…]

The third dragon was sent charging down the hall and smashed against the door, without any effect that Valeria could see. A fourth and a fifth followed, and she couldn't help but marvel at the powers that Naiad commanded, for she wasn't even breathing hard despite this impressive display of magic. However, her lack of obvious success made the only thing that Valeria was happy about was that the water Naiad was conjuring was apparently being drained somewhere, for the water level wasn't rising.

After a dozen water dragons crashed against the lift door, Naiad finally stopped.

[That ought to do it…] she murmured into Valeria's ear as she led the younger woman over to the door. [That had better have worked because I can't maintain that pace for *every* door we come across.]

"I should be able to handle those," Valeria responded a little defensively. "It's just that this damn lift isn't following the commands I've been giving it!"

Naiad didn't say anything, but instead pressed her hand against the doors. Valeria sensed some kind of magic pulse push out of the river nymph's arm and into the door, and a moment later, the door practically exploded as all the water that Naiad had managed to force into the tiny almost imperceptible gaps and cracks flash-froze. The door wasn't so much damaged, though, as it was completely popped out of its frame, accompanied by a flash of white light as the enchantments within it were disrupted. The door then fell backward into the lift shaft, not hitting anything for a worryingly long time.

"Holy hells!" Valeria cried as she ducked back from the sudden onrush of ice.

Naiad, however, took a few steps forward and stuck her head into the now-accessible lift shaft. After a moment, she then turned back toward Valeria and smiled.

[I can see the lift. It's far, but not out of reach.]

Valeria joined Naiad at the door and stared down into the inky black abyss, and far *far* below them, she could just barely see the top of the lift shining in the dark, *much* farther below them than she'd thought even the deepest floor they'd been to had been.

"I can't jump that far," she said with a worried look.

[Who said anything about jumping?] Naiad conjured another water dragon that swept her up as easily as such a thing might if it were made of flesh and bone. [Follow me down.]

The dragon then surged forward into the lift shaft and turned, crashing into the walls of the lift shaft. It then angled down, carrying Naiad down the shaft about as safely as such a thing could. Valeria almost expected the thing to fall, but when she saw the ice along the wall left in its wake, she understood: the dragon was anchoring itself to the wall with ice, keeping its descent completely under control.

Valeria stared in amazement at the degree to which Naiad was able to control her magic, and quietly wished that she could do such things as well. She silently swore to herself to double down on her training when all of this was over, and then she called upon her power. Without hesitation or another moment of thought, Valeria threw herself into the shaft after Naiad, using her ice powers to anchor her feet to the ice left in the river nymph's wake, using it like a rail that she then slid down with ease.

It was an exhilarating descent. Valeria moved at speeds along the walls of the lift shaft that would've made a mortal sick, but instead, she had fun, and she had to fight the urge to laugh and holler as she descended. By the time she joined Naiad at the bottom—or, at least, on top of the lift where it had come to rest, the doors that Naiad had forced open still lying on top of it—her face was practically split in half by her uncontrollable smile.

But, she hadn't had so much fun that she hadn't been able to notice something unusual about the lift shaft: it had a subtle twist to it, with each floor not directly underneath the one above or directly above the one below. It was as if the entire facility was designed like a spiral staircase, with the floors as each stair that extended off the lift shaft, or the central support for the staircase. It was a strange feature that wasn't otherwise apparent, not even when using the lift, but it allowed for each floor to have much more vertical clearance than they might otherwise have since there were no floors above them.

[We're here,] Naiad said. [Whatever Nestor is doing, he should be on this floor. Let's go crush him and take Leon's body back.]

"I'm with you all the way," Valeria said, smiling at Naiad as she said this. To her surprise, Naiad actually smiled back, though it was so quick that Valeria almost missed it.

Before Valeria could comment on it, though, Naiad tossed the fallen lift door away like it was made of driftwood and then smashed through a maintenance panel on the roof of the lift, allowing the two ladies to then drop down into the lift itself. Valeria wasted no time and got the main lift doors open, allowing them onto the floor where Nestor had fled.

Her smile died as they pushed into the hallway beyond. She still hadn't found her father, and she had no idea how they were going to drive Nestor out of Leon's body.

Chapter 508: Vengeance or Forgiveness

There he was, in the back of the room. Justin Isynos. One of the men responsible for the murder of his father, his uncle, his grandfather, and the destruction of his House.

Everything else in the room vanished, as far as Leon was concerned. He had eyes only for Justin, and he started to slowly stalk over, a dark look crossing over his face.

As he walked over, he took in the sight of the man. Justin had been completely enveloped in vines, with only his face, hands, and feet visible. He was clearly unconscious, with his head slumped over and his eyes shut, and Leon could detect not a single hint of his eighth-tier aura emanating from him. However, Leon could detect that the vines that bound Justin had enormous amounts of magic flowing through them. From what Leon could tell, this flow of power originated with Justin and disappeared somewhere in the ceiling, where the vines were hanging from.

Leon arrived at the platform where Justin was being held and climbed up with single-minded alacrity. The platform itself was about waist-height for him, but Justin was being held upright only an inch or two off the ground, so Leon didn't have to crane his neck to look at the man's face.

His heart racing in his chest, Leon stared at Justin's face. Blood roared in his ears, his hands twitched, and power was unconsciously being pulled from his soul realm and into his bloodstream.

It struck Leon that he could kill Justin right here and now. No one was watching, even Xaphan and the Thunderbird didn't seem to be paying too much attention to what he was doing, being perhaps more interested in each other or in Nestor's imprisonment. So, he could do it. He could take this opportunity to end Justin's life and no one would be the wiser. It would be the easiest thing to do, and with all the space in his soul realm and his expertise in fire magic, Leon could clean up any evidence with ease.

No one would know.

Leon's instincts demanded that he take this opportunity. Rage and fury were boiling within him, and the sight of his father lying dead in their old home demanded that he pay Justin back in kind.

But as he thought about his father, Leon was suddenly reminded of the many lessons Artorias had tried to teach him about mercy, about patience, humility, and generosity. About being *noble*.

Leon, as much as he wanted to, as much as his body was demanding that he do so, didn't immediately kill Justin. He stood there, staring at the man's unconscious body, shaking yet unable to move, furious yet almost terrifyingly calm.

His instinct was to summon his blade from his soul realm—it would've felt so *right*, so *perfect*, to end Justin with the Adamant blade of the Thunderbird, but unfortunately, as he suddenly realized as he reached into his soul realm, his blade wasn't there. He'd dropped it when Nestor had invaded his soul realm, and he had no idea where it was now, though he had a strange feeling that it was still right where it had fallen from his grasp.

How he knew that, he couldn't say, but it was a comfort that kept him from panicking about its whereabouts.

As a poor replacement, Leon drew out a hunting knife. It was barely enchanted enough to hold its meager edge with little maintenance, but in the state Justin was in, it would still only take a single slash to end the man's life.

And no one would know.

Just one quick slash.

Leon thought about his father. Every swing of the shovel he made when digging the grave, every stone of the ruined obelisk that he laid as a cairn, every moment he spent the night before waiting for his father to die, all of it flashed through his mind, fueling his desire for vengeance, demanding bloody retribution.

But, after a few moments, his mind drifted to a few other thoughts. His father paying a troll so he wouldn't get in their way, respecting the troll's right to live and its claim over the bridge. He thought of Trajan; so decisive when dealing with his enemies, but also magnanimous and merciful in victory, forgiving many of the mages who rebelled in Ariminium and ending the war with the Talfar Kingdom in a way that would minimize the risk of another war between the two Kingdoms breaking out.

'What would they think if they could see me now?' Leon wondered. *'What would they urge me to do?'*

He still had Xaphan and the Thunderbird in his soul realm, he could always ask them for advice. But he knew what they would say. Kill Justin, end the threat. In this situation, that was for the best. Valeria would never find out unless he told her.

'Valeria…' Leon felt a twinge in his heart at the thought of her. The way her hair glittered in the sun, her skill with spear and glaive, her protectiveness to those she cared about, and her dedication to her training.

He liked her, perhaps enough to even consider it romantic. That much he was willing to admit. But all of his reassurances to her about committing to their agreed-upon peace over the past few weeks had been, to an extent, hollow. He'd been not only trying to convince her again and again that his intentions were honorable and that his commitment to peace was genuine, but also trying to convince himself to follow through. But there was no more time for vacillating. It was now or never.

Leon clenched his fist around the handle of his knife and raised it to just a few inches from Justin's exposed throat, preparing to slice right through and let the man bleed out. For all that had just flashed through his mind, he still only had Valeria's word that he was a good man, that he was acting to protect his wife and to bring his daughter to their home. Leon had no personal experience with Justin to inform his decision, and given Justin's power, that made freeing him perhaps the single most risky thing Leon could ever do. All the other decisions in his life that had led him to this moment, all those near-death encounters and rash actions that led to them, paled in comparison to the possibility of letting Justin go.

His face began to contort as his conflicting desires warred in his mind. He wanted peace, he wanted Valeria to be with him forever, but doing so would require that he either kill her father and lie to her for the rest of their lives about his fate, or let him live.

Neither were particularly attractive options.

Leon stood there, his knife raised for a long time, long enough to get a better idea of what was happening and for his vision to expand back to include the rest of the room. The vines entangling Justin were leeching his magic power—probably quite literally sucking out his mana, as far as Leon could tell. When he'd first found Xaphan, the fire demon had been similarly bound and chained, with the great roots that bound him using the magic power they siphoned from him to provide power to the prison.

Justin, at this moment, was nothing more than a magic power generator. Judging from some of the other forms that Leon could see in the room, he wasn't even that big of one.

A few of the platforms were devoid of vines or things to entangle, but most were not. Of those that weren't empty, all but one were clearly dead, either a desiccated husk of some strange creature he couldn't identify or nothing more than vines and odd, alien bones. The one living exception apart from Justin was just a few platforms over, where a huge crystalline entity was bound, the thing towering over Leon at about twelve feet tall.

It took Leon a few seconds to realize, but he guessed from its form that it was an ice demon much like the five that he'd seen out in front of the colossus. It seemed that at least one demon had survived the colossus, only to be brought down here to be used as a resource. From what Leon could tell of its aura, the thing was only barely clinging to life, though the fact that it wasn't dead was something that amazed him.

He had no intention of trying to help it. He doubted Xaphan would appreciate him trying, and if it weren't for the fact that he wanted some peace and quiet to think about the issue of Justin, he would've asked the flame demon how he ought to deal with the captured ice demon.

It was a viscerally horrific thing, and it only grew more so the longer Leon stared at the vines and the corpses within. A few of them looked vaguely human the more he squinted at them, and he couldn't help but wonder at what their last moments were. This wasn't an abandoned facility like Xaphan's prison was, so there would've been no doubt in any of their minds—assuming they had that kind of self-awareness—that help wasn't going to come once they were stuck. That they were going to die within those vines, their blood being siphoned off to feed the power needs of this facility.

As Leon's eyes turned back to Justin, he couldn't help but lightly smile to himself, knowing that no matter what he decided to do, Justin had still suffered for coming here. He'd lost all of his people, and he'd been stuck in these vines for months, leaving him drained and at Leon's mercy.

Leon couldn't stand there forever. He had to make a choice. There was no way around that, but his conscious mind wasn't coming to any decisions. As much as he liked Valeria, his need for vengeance was *powerful*.

'Which is it?!' he demanded of himself, pushing himself to make a choice. Vengeance, or peace. Solidify Valeria and anyone she and Justin might be connected to as his enemy or make peace with them and hope that they could forge some kind of alliance. Indulge his more primitive side, killing Justin and implying that he didn't need the help, or accept that he was flawed, that, in the words that Roland had spoken to him only weeks ago, he could be more than he was, more than the barbarous savage killing everything in his path and bringing nothing to the universe but pain and suffering.

Screaming in rage and frustration that had built up for more than four years, Leon raised his knife one last time, stepped forward, and lunged toward Justin. The relatively cheap metal, with Leon's power backing it, sliced through the vines like they were spider silk, but bit not into Justin's flesh. Instead, Justin's hand dropped from where it had been restrained, now freed.

With another swipe and another scream of fury, Leon's knife cut through the vines that bound Justin's other hand, freeing it in turn.

Leon's eyes were watering, and his knife felt as heavy and cumbersome as a bag of bricks. It wasn't easy, but his choice was made, and his vengeance was not going to be taken out on Justin—at least, not right now. He hoped that Justin would make a similar choice when he woke up, and the uncertainty only made it all the harder to follow through with his choice.

Brushing the unshed tears from his eyes, Leon muttered an apology to his father and then started sawing and slashing at the remaining vines holding Justin in place. The older man fell to the platform in short order, the vines no longer restraining him.

Leon breathed deeply. It had only taken a moment, not even a dozen slashes with his knife, but he felt like a mortal who had just run a marathon. He staggered back from Justin's crumpled form that was still half-buried in the vines that had clung to him and turned away.

His mind was practically locked up with what he had just done, as if his own brain were shocked at his decision. His hands were shaking as if to say that it wasn't too late, that Justin was still weak and

vulnerable, that it would only take one more swish of his knife or a brief burst of lightning and vengeance would be his.

But, as a salty tear rolled down the side of Leon's face, he knew that even if Justin died here as his instincts were demanding, it wouldn't be over. He'd still have to deal with Valeria in the short term, and then whoever 'Lord Kamran' was in the long term.

Nothing would end with Justin's death. Leon repeated that over and over in his mind as he wiped his eyes again and turned back to the fallen man.

And it was a pathetic sight that awaited him. Cutting the vines had not woken Justin, but from their cut ends they slowly leaked a trickle of bright red mana, the magic-rich blood that they were siphoning from his body. Leon's face wrinkled in distaste, and he approached Justin once again.

It wasn't too difficult to remove the severed ends of the vines from the man, but Leon still didn't take too much care in ripping them from where they'd anchored themselves in Justin's flesh. Each location celebrated the vine's removal with a little spurt of blood, and after taking out a few, Leon reluctantly conjured a few healing spells from his soul realm to apply to the wounds. He wasn't about to go through all of this mental anguish just to have Justin bleed to death at his feet.

He couldn't help but laugh at the dark possibility, though.

'It'd be fitting, for the universe to fuck me like that after I'd finally sorted this out…' he thought as he pulled the last vine from one of Justin's legs.

Once he was done, he lay Justin out as comfortably as he could, pulled all the vines away, incinerated them with a quick blast of fire, and then sat down on the edge of the platform to wait for Justin to wake up. With four of Leon's healing spells on his body, his wounds were closing fast, and Leon figured that it wouldn't be long now before he regained consciousness.

Leon then leaned back a little, letting his eyes wander about the room without actually looking at anything, for nothing in the room interested him in the least, not even the ice demon only a few feet away.

His decision had been made. Now, he just had to prepare himself to live with the consequences.

Chapter 509: Justin's Weakness

Leon sat down upon the platform that Justin had been imprisoned on, his eyes wandering the room. He felt surprisingly at peace despite the magnitude of what he'd just done; Justin would likely wake soon, and when he did, Leon's entire world could—and probably *would*—change.

But he'd also finally made his choice, he'd follow through with his promise with Valeria and give Justin a chance to make peace. His decision was made, he could live with whatever came next.

As he waited, his eyes drifted once more in the direction of the great ice demon that was just as enveloped in vines as Justin had been, though given the size of its body, it had much more than just its head, hands, and feet sticking out. The thing was still alive, but only just.

[Xaphan,] Leon whispered into his soul realm, [I found an ice demon up here…]

He felt the flame demon's magic senses pulse out of his soul realm and take in their surroundings. He was a little concerned that Xaphan might mention Justin, but fortunately, the demon was far more concerned about the things that mattered to him rather than to Leon.

[Ahhh,] Xaphan crowed. [I know him.]

[You do?]

[Yes, he was imprisoned with me way back in the day. I told you that your Clan imprisoned five demons of great power, but only two agreed to form contracts with them. This one was of the other two, who stuck to his ideals and refused to bow.]

Leon nodded, remembering that Xaphan had said the two who, like him, refused to bow to his Clan had managed to escape, leaving him behind. The demon had speculated that they had returned to the Void, but it seemed he was mistaken.

[I guess he must've come here for some reason,] Leon said. [You think those other demons in this place were his doing, as well?]

[I'd say that would be a safe bet to make.]

Leon nodded again, the story making some sense in his head. The demon likely would've been drained of at least some of his powers, like Xaphan had been, so instead of returning to the Void, Leon guessed he must've gone somewhere remote where he could force blood sacrifices to be made to him. He must've somehow known about Nestor's place in some form or fashion, though, and come here when he thought his powers were sufficient to take it. At some point, he summoned demons, though whether they were to aid him in taking Nestor's place or to enforce his rule over whatever humans he'd conquered, Leon could only guess.

Regardless, whatever went down, the ice demon had found his way here and been captured by Nestor. Now, he was nothing more than a magic power generator, keeping this place running despite its advanced age.

[I think I'll leave him there,] Leon said.

[I would recommend the same,] Xaphan replied. [Though, he looks like he's in a much worse state than I was; if you were to cut him down, he wouldn't live for longer than a few days. No reason to worry about him. Do you need assistance with anything else?]

Leon glanced back at Justin, who was beginning to stir. The older man's aura was still weak and barely able to be sensed, showing just how weak Justin was. Leon doubted that Justin would be able to harm him, even if he tried with all of his might.

[No, I think I can handle this myself.]

[I'll be here, just in case,] Xaphan said as his attention slid back down into Leon's soul realm.

[Thanks,] Leon responded as he turned to face Justin.

It took the man a few more minutes to open his eyes, and when he did, his eyes cracking open just enough to take in his surroundings, he found Leon standing over him, looming like an angry titan. His

brilliant blue eyes met Leon's gold, and though neither spoke for what seemed like an eternity, an entire conversation was had. The simple fact that they were here now and in the positions that they were was enough information for both. They knew where each other stood.

Leon spoke first. "The man who runs this place has been dealt with."

Justin didn't move. He simply lay there on the floor, staring up at Leon standing over him.

"I cut you down," Leon continued, confirming what Justin had probably already guessed while letting the implication settle in his mind. "I found you here, weak and imprisoned, and I released you."

Justin took a long, deep breath and tried to push himself up, but he was too weak and fell back to the floor. It was all he could do to just roll over onto his back so that he could see Leon better.

"… Why?" he croaked, his voice sounding dry and gravelly as if he hadn't drunk anything in months—which, Leon realized, he probably *hadn't*.

Leon smiled, his face a cross of quiet fury and amusement at the situation. "What an innocuous word. *'Why'?* And yet, it's so heavy. Justin Isynos, you murdered my father, you murdered my grandfather, you murdered my uncle, and yet when I found you vulnerable and near-death, I released you. I wonder if a man like you would even understand."

Leon took a menacing step forward, but Justin didn't even flinch. His face was one of tired resignation, as if, no matter what was going to happen, he would accept it, he would not run from it.

"The answer's a bit complicated," Leon continued, his eyes locked with Justin's, his tone dissonantly light-hearted and casual, "I suppose I can credit several people with my decision. My father, Artorias, who always tried to teach me the benefits of compassion and restraint. My mentor, Trajan, who tried to teach me when to forgive and when not to.

"I'll admit, as a side-note, that none of these lessons stuck particularly well, but I'm slowly learning.

"And that brings us to the third person who convinced me to do this. Valeria."

At the mention of his daughter, Justin's eyes went wide, but he said nothing. Leon, on the other hand, seemed to be reveling in his position of power over Justin, his smile growing wider and wider as he went on, enjoying every second that Justin's life was in his hands.

"I've had to balance all of this with the Thunderbird constantly telling me to kill my enemies, to leave them no room to strike at me when my back is turned. I'll admit that that's the advice that's always resonated with me the most. No mercy, no quarter. This is what I prefer, if given the choice."

"Then… why?" Justin repeated, his voice not sounding any more energetic. He wasn't even trying to defend himself, to rise from the ground, call upon his magic, and place himself on a more equal footing with Leon.

And Leon knew why: his magic was gone, sucked out of him by those vines, and even if he were able to regenerate all of it, it would still take days before he was in any position to challenge what was happening right now.

"I would like to try this out," he said, though his confident tone was at rather stark odds with how much he'd pained over the decision only a few minutes before. "The Thunderbird has told me to be ruthless, but she's also told me to keep certain things in mind. I can't do everything myself, I'll need friends. If I can make peace with an enemy, as Valeria hopes we might, then it kills two birds with one stone: I gain an ally and deprive an enemy of a portion—however small—of their forces. Besides, I like your daughter, and I would like to try and be a better man for her, and for my other loved ones."

Justin closed his eyes, appearing almost at peace.

After a while, he asked, "Where is she? Valeria? I assume she's still in the capital?"

"No, she was fired from her position as a Royal Guard when you left, she's been following me ever since. She came with me to this place, and the last I saw of her, she was safe. She was with a powerful mage, someone whose power I trust greatly, Valeria's probably safer than we are right now…"

Leon's voice faltered a little. He didn't know how well either Valeria or Maia were doing, and if he hadn't found Justin here, he would never have stuck around in this place. He would've left to find them as soon as he could. But he felt Maia's connection with him slowly recovering, so he wasn't as anxious as he was right before he confronted Nestor.

Justin's reaction was a little more subdued than Leon expected. The man hardly seemed to care, continuing to lay there with his eyes closed.

The smile on his face faltered a little in light of this seeming indifference, so Leon asked something else, something that he'd been dying to know for a long time.

"I've told you my reasons for not killing you, not that it seems to matter at all. So let me ask you the same thing: why?"

He didn't have to be clearer than that, he and Justin both knew what he was talking about. Of course, Valeria had told him why Justin had come here, but it was something Leon wanted to hear from the man himself.

He didn't have to wait long, Justin seemed almost excited to tell him, with his eyes opening and a brief, unsuccessful struggle to rise up right before he started to speak.

"I came here because Lord Kamran ordered me to," Justin said, his tone injected with more energy than when he was asking about his own daughter. "He took my wife hostage in a raid on my home. I did everything within my power to get her back, but in the end, I was forced to submit to him.

"But I had annoyed him, and when he received word that an enemy of his had left a child behind here, he ordered me to find him—*you*—and put an end to you. He was also enemies with the Thunderbird Clan, so when I found out that your father's line was descended from that Clan, I had to target your paternal family, as well."

Leon's smile grew thin. "Valeria seems to think you a good man, but I would hesitate to call these the actions of a good man…"

"I want to return home, and it's not like anyone would make a fuss about a few people like you dying off."

Despite the inflammatory words, Justin had settled back down, speaking as if he were commenting on the weather rather than talking about the killing of Leon's family. But for all that that infuriated Leon, he kept himself calm and collected with rather terrifying ease.

"That's a whole lot to unpack," Leon said sarcastically. "Let's start with—"

"Let's not start at all," Justin interrupted. "If my daughter is here, she'll see me. I don't want that. *At all*. Not like this. Leon Raime, you have more cause than most to kill me, in that I take some comfort that my death will be from someone I've wronged rather than from someone I haven't. I want you to kill me. Before Valeria finds me."

Leon cocked his head, his smile still plastered all over his face. "This is new," he thought out loud. "I'll be honest, I've never had someone ask me to kill them before."

"There's no need to lose yourself in the novelty, all you need to do is open my throat and then walk away." Justin leaned his head back as far as he could, leaving his neck completely bare for Leon to strike.

"Justin Isynos," Leon replied, "I did not kill you when you were stuck in those vines. What makes you think I'm going to kill you now?"

"If you have any mercy or compassion, then you'll spare my daughter the sight of her crippled father," Justin said as he closed his eyes again.

"Define 'crippled'."

"My magic has been taken, and my body has been ruined. I'm no better than a first-tier mage. My powers won't come back without more work than I think I can manage."

Leon almost burst out laughing at this display. He shook as his lips pulled away from his teeth, his eyes closed, and he had to turn his head away from Justin before he could bring himself back under control.

"And to think," he said after a moment when he turned back to Justin, "I've been paranoid and shit-scared of you for so long, and yet when I finally find and confront you, you're not even resisting; instead, you're literally begging for death. I have to say, I'm both delighted and profoundly disappointed. However, if you want to die, you'll have to off yourself, I made my decision about whether or not I'd kill you when I cut you free. You don't now get to check out so easily–I may not be killing you, but that doesn't mean you're forgiven, I still expect you to try and redeem yourself for your crimes."

The edges of Justin's mouth began to curl. "My crimes are philosophical," he said. "Never have I tried to kill someone who didn't deserve it, whether by action or blood."

"Do you not consider being sent here to murder a child a crime that you are committing?" Leon asked, his voice still deceptively civil and light, though his aura was starting to take on a hint of killing intent.

"I was sent here as a form of exile," Justin said. "Either I would kill the son of one of Kamran's enemies, or I would never return. Either way, he wins. I was never expected to actually find you. But if I did, I would've killed you without hesitation. The Thunderbird Clan was tyrannical, they ruled over the Kingdom of the Storm since the fall of the Primal Gods and Devils. They did not do so without shedding an ocean's worth of blood, and many more despicable things besides. You were a child, yes, and every

death of a child is a terrible thing, but the legacy you're inheriting as you gain in strength is one that the universe is better left without."

"Tell me of these things, then," Leon said as he crouched down to get more on Justin's level. "Tell me of these crimes that have damned me to death before I could do anything more than eat, sleep, and shit."

"The genocide of the Maharala, Typulian, and Ergarden peoples," Justin began, calling upon it so swiftly that Leon couldn't imagine he was making it up. "The massacres at Sereni, Itapoli, Isynia, and Gorgollex. The Princes, Princesses, and other high-born members of your Clan have been guilty of rape, murder, and the proliferation of slavery for generations. Your Clan made the Kingdom of the Storm so dependent upon them that when their leaders failed to return after the Nexus' last Reconstitution, the entire Kingdom fell apart into anarchy. Even now, no one has risen to take up the mantle of the Thunderbird Clan, and the region is the weakest and least powerful of the Seven because of all this infighting. Your Ancestors were lawless tyrants, they were base criminals, and they were vile, unrestrained people. People lament the chaos left in the wake of their fall, but no one laments the Thunderbird Clan."

As Justin spoke, he opened his eyes again and stared directly at Leon as his smile widened.

"Now, kill me, Leon Raime. Avenge your father and your father's family. End me, and spare my daughter the pain of seeing her father reduced to such a painful existence."

Leon didn't move. He stared at Justin, both of them smiling at each other. Whether or not Justin was telling him the truth wasn't something that he could tell, but he suspected they might not be completely accurate. Justin wanted him to kill him, so he was poking at any potential loyalties Leon had to his Clan.

'That's not going to work,' Leon thought with some satisfaction.

"Your daughter will find you alive and… as well as you are," Leon said as he stood back up. "No matter what happened in the past, they don't excuse you coming to kill me, though in that judgment I'll readily admit my bias. Still, I promised her that I would try and make peace work between us, and while you may be all 'woe is me' right now, we'll see if that holds up when coming face-to-face with Valeria. When that happens, we'll have more words to break with each other."

Leon leaned down and grabbed Justin like a ragdoll and slung him over his shoulder. Justin was much lighter than Leon expected, though given how injured he was, he figured he shouldn't have been so surprised. The man was thin and bony, as if all of his muscles and extra body tissue had been sucked out of him with all of his magic power.

But Leon didn't spend too much longer thinking all of that over. Instead, with a smile of victory on his face, with Nestor defeated and Justin quite literally in hand, he began to stroll back to the door. It was time for him to reunite with Maia and Valeria.

Chapter 510: The Moon Stone I

Leon exited the magic power generator room—he couldn't think of anything else to call the place—with Justin still limply slung over his shoulder. A part of him was still demanding that he set Justin down and do as the man asked, to kill him before Valeria could find them, but by now, that part of him was growing smaller and weaker with every step he took.

For his part, Justin didn't argue when Leon picked him up. He didn't even struggle. Perhaps that was because of his extreme weakness, but Leon had a feeling that it was more than that; Justin was accepting his fate, despite arguing against it only a few minutes before.

Leon wasn't in too much of a hurry to get him to talk right now. There would be time enough for that later when they secured their position here, or even after they got back to the other side of the Forest of Black and White. This place was still technically Nestor's, and Leon had no idea if there were other surprises waiting for them.

However, it did occur to him that he had a good resource to ask.

[Ancestor,] Leon said, hoping the Thunderbird was listening. His hopes were founded, and a moment later, the Thunderbird responded.

[Is there something you need, *Descendant*? Maybe some advice on how to get that man on your shoulder to talk?]

[No, that I think I can handle on my own,] Leon replied, wondering just how much Justin would resist his questioning if Valeria were to join in. [I was actually wondering if there was anything else that might be here that I should keep an eye open for.]

[I have little idea what is kept here, your guess would be as good as mine,] she replied. [However, I suppose if you found the storage crystal for the magic that powers this place, it might be useful to grab. Who knows what you might be able to do with such a thing?]

Leon glanced around at the walls of the facility. This far down, there was little decoration, but he could still sense a monumental amount of magic power flowing through the walls. If he could access that power for his enchanting work, then he figured he might be able to accomplish a great many things…

More than that, his mind drifted back in the direction of the room where he and Nestor first met. That moon stone was still down there, assuming Nestor didn't move it for some reason after seizing Leon's body, along with Leon's blade, if that strange feeling he had of its location wasn't inaccurate. However, if Leon could trust anything that Nestor told him, he thought it safe to trust the older man when he said that the moon stone was dangerous beyond reckoning. Taking such a thing into his soul realm, where Leon was most vulnerable, wasn't something he was keen on doing.

But then, something else occurred to him, something that he knew Xaphan might not be too happy about.

[Maybe I'll leave this place relatively intact,] he reluctantly stated. [I don't know if you were there to see it, but there's something here that Nestor obviously believed was worthy of great magics used to secure it: a fragment of the local moon, or so he claimed, which outputted a great amount of light magic. Nestor told me that it was his study of this thing that left him too infirm to respond to his father's call to arms way back then.]

[Interesting. Take me there, I am intrigued and wish to see this thing for myself.]

Sensing something in the Thunderbird's voice, Leon asked, [Do you recognize this description?]

[It strikes a vague chord within me,] the Thunderbird said. [However, there are many things it might be. No use speculating when it's practically right there, though. Take me there and I have no doubt that I'll know what it is.]

[I'll do that, then.]

Leon smiled as he walked down the hall, looking forward to what was to come next. He had Nestor, he had Justin, and in the ideal scenario, he'd be walking away with a tremendously powerful artifact, and possibly as many as two great storage crystals for magic power, for he intended to visit Xaphan's prison on his way back south. The place had still been powered when he'd left, and given its age and the fact that it no longer had to hold Xaphan prisoner anymore, he believed that the few years since had not been enough to drain what remained of its power.

With all that had happened over the past couple of days, he knew that he couldn't rely solely upon his own power, no matter how potent it was. He had to augment it with other things if he wanted to accomplish all that he wanted to do, and these facilities were like ripe apples just waiting to be picked, as far as he was concerned, even if the Thunderbird Clan had taken almost everything that had any value. It wasn't like these places were going to be getting up to anything else ever again, so he might as well take what was left.

As he walked, he heard something that broke him out of his thoughts: a loud clanging sound from the other end of the hall, coming from the lift as far as he could tell. He felt a brief burst of panic as he thought that maybe Nestor had sabotaged something before he was beaten, and he started running over with little care paid to Justin's comfort.

However, as he ducked into a nearby alcove to set Justin down, he heard the doors to the lift slide open.

'Golems?' he wondered as he began to channel his magic, the absence of his family's sword felt quite keenly as his fingers curled on nothing but air. His heart began to hammer away in his chest with suddenly spiking anxiety; for all that was happening right now that demanded his attention, he knew that he would never properly relax until that weapon was returned to his hand.

Leon flooded the hallway with his magic senses as he prepared himself for a fight. However, as he saw who exited the lift and were making their way down the hall, he relaxed as much as he was able, smiled, and bent back down to pick Justin up again.

A moment later, he ducked out of the alcove with Justin back over his shoulder and ran almost right into Maia and Valeria, both of whom practically jumped out of their skin as he showed himself.

He saw immediate relief cross over both of their faces, but a moment later, their guards went up as Valeria demanded, "Who are you?!"

"I'm Leon," he replied, suddenly realizing that they must've run into Nestor. He had to fight an immediate urge to descend into his soul realm to smash the ruby imprisoning the man and letting his magic body fade away, ending the man properly. "I assume, then, that you ran into Nestor while he was in my body?"

Valeria nodded, though she didn't lower her weapon. Maia, on the other hand, let her aura fade and her posture soften as she stared at Leon.

[It's… really you?] she whispered into his mind.

By this point, their connection wasn't too strong, but it was enough for Leon to respond.

[Yes,] he replied, giving her a loving smile and holding out his free hand.

Maia wasted no time rushing over to take it, and as soon as their skin touched, their connection, which had been slowly healing by itself, was instantly mended, flooding both with the other's emotions. They stumbled a bit under the sudden onslaught of emotional information, but it wasn't anything they weren't used to, so they straightened up a moment later with Maia resolutely certain that Leon was who he said he was. She pulled him in closer and pressed her forehead against his.

However, when she did this, Justin shifted in his grasp, showing Valeria just who Leon was carrying.

Her glaive dropped to the ground as her expression fell into something that resembled both relief and horror. She didn't scream, but it looked like she wanted to.

Leon pulled away from Maia, his smile fading, and said to Valeria, "I found him. He's alive."

Valeria's relief at seeing her father was short-lived, quickly replaced with concern and worry at seeing the state of him. There wasn't much time for a long reunion, though, as Leon had to quickly explain what had happened to him while he was gone and Nestor's current state, during which time all four managed to reactivate the lift and head back up to the first comfortable room that Valeria and Maia had found that hadn't also been completely wrecked.

Once there, Justin was laid down to rest, for he had fallen unconscious not long after reuniting with Valeria. Whether it was out of shame, guilt, or plain old exhaustion and pain, Justin hadn't said a word to her the entire time he was awake. In fact, it seemed almost as if he were avoiding her gaze, though since he was slung over Leon's shoulder, Leon wasn't really able to confirm that.

Valeria herself didn't say much, either, and Leon wasn't of a mind to force anything. Once Justin was set down on a comfortable sofa, though, he, Valeria, and Maia were able to have a conversation.

"So," he said as he straightened up, "I still have some business to conduct here, but it shouldn't take too long. Naiad, will you come with?"

Maia glanced at him with a questioning look on her face, but she nodded her agreement.

Leon nodded back, then turned to a slightly confused Valeria and asked, "Can you watch over your father? It would probably be best for his recovery if he didn't move too much… You two should be fine, I don't think there are any more defenses in this place that would pose you any threat."

His words were innocuous enough, but they carried with them several implications that gave Valeria some rather obvious pause. Leon understood what he was saying, though, and gave her all the time she needed.

After several long seconds, she said, "I'll keep watch over him, we'll still be here when you come back."

Leon met her gaze and held it, trying to communicate everything he was feeling with his eyes alone. From the way her cheeks slightly reddened and the single step she took toward him, he felt like he got across at least the gist of what he wanted to.

"There are a few things in this place that I want to check out before leaving. Shouldn't take too long, a few hours at the most. Unless something comes up before then, we'll be able to leave before the day is out… Actually, it's probably getting late, it might be better if we stay the night and leave in the morning."

The three agreed, and Leon and Maia left the room, leaving Valeria alone with her unconscious father.

The two were silent as Leon set a leisurely pace back to the lift. It was a fairly awkward and tense silence, and one that Maia eventually broke as they entered the lift.

[Is it entirely wise to leave her like that?]

Leon, as he examined the lift controls to try and figure out a way to get it to go back down to Nestor's lab, replied, [Maybe. Those two have much to talk about, I'd think, and I trust her not to run away. Do you think she will?]

As Leon began playing with the enchantments that controlled the lift in much the same way that Valeria had when she opened the doors, Maia said after a brief, thoughtful pause, [No, I think she'll stay.]

[You sound confident of that,] Leon said as he pried off the control panel after a brief search. [You also sound like you don't totally hate her. How bad did things get while I was gone that your attitude has changed so much so quickly?]

[Things were bad,] Maia admitted, though she adopted Leon's more casual tone and down-played the violence that she and Valeria had experienced together. [We fought many golems, enough that I wonder if there are even any more in this disgusting pit.]

[We'll have to see,] Leon replied as the lift finally started to move down. [While we're at it, I want to see if there are any intact golem assemblies down here. Given who was in charge here, I can't imagine that there aren't any workshops for creating the things around…]

[Valeria and I found several empty rooms, so things like that might have been taken when the other humans who lived her abandoned it, though many storage chambers that were quite full.]

Leon frowned slightly and said, [Let's hope that when they took whatever it was they took, they left the assemblies intact. Even just one would honestly be quite fascinating. Probably alone it would make the entire trip up here worth it, let alone everything else…]

Leon trailed off as he again thought about what it would mean to have Nestor in his corner, assuming he could ever get the man to talk. Nestor was without a doubt the best enchanter he'd ever met, and if they could move past all of this, then it would be a great boon for him. Still, his anger and fury at having been possessed couldn't be overstated, and it would be a *long* time before he ever trusted the ghost with anything more substantial than a few questions.

The lift came to a halt on the lowest floor, and, with great caution, Leon and Maia walked out into the hallway. Fortunately, no golems were waiting in the wings to ambush them, and it was a straight shot to the massive chamber holding the moon stone. While little had changed, Leon was a little disheartened to see that Nestor had not failed to close the dome of light when he left.

Leon immediately began walking toward it while Maia lagged behind a little bit, her eyes wide with wonder as she took in the sight of the orbiting glyphs and the mirrored floor.

When Leon arrived at the dome of light, he directed his thoughts toward the Thunderbird and asked while hoping she was listening, [Is there… Is there anything you can tell me about this thing?]

The answer was delightfully swift.

[Yes, it's a robust containment ward designed to keep something from escaping.] the Thunderbird's tone was imperious, yet didactic; she was clearly reveling in the chance to teach Leon some more after their training sessions, so recently re-started, had to be postponed for this trip. [It's nearly impossible to escape without the correct key so long as the ward remains powered.]

The key Leon knew to be some kind of enchantment that he guessed only Nestor would know, putting it effectively out of reach so long as the ghost remained uncooperative. However, he latched onto something else the Thunderbird had said.

[So long as it remains powered?] he said. [Is there any way that we can de-power it?]

[Of course, though it might take some time,] the Thunderbird replied. [These wards were designed to keep something *in,* not *out.* You'll also want to consider that we might not be able to get it back up and running again. Whatever is locked within will without a doubt not be sealed again without serious time and technical knowledge to fix what we'd have to break.]

That gave Leon some pause. He didn't think Nestor was lying when he said that the moon stone had poisoned him, so he was leery about leaving it lying around without defenses, but he also didn't want to take it into his soul realm to keep an eye on it.

Taking a few steps away from the dome, he asked, [There's a stone in there, Nestor said it was a fragment of the local moon. It radiates an immense amount of light magic, enough that Nestor said it poisoned him and left him bedridden. Is this something to worry about? Shou—]

Before Leon could finish asking his question, he felt the full weight of the Thunderbird's attention come flooding out of his soul realm and sweep through the chamber.

When she spoke again, her tone was grave. [I couldn't get a good look at it, but if I'm right, then that rock has absorbed at least a portion of the power of a Primal God.]