

Storm King 511

Chapter 511: The Moon Stone II

[I couldn't get a good look at it, but if I'm right, then that rock was touched by a Primal God,] the Thunderbird said, her tone grave. [Probably more than touched, though, if these wards are truly needed...]

Leon cocked his head and entered a more guarded pose, with Maia beside him doing likewise after seeing his caution, but he doubted it would make much of a difference if the thing was actually dangerous—he was just grateful that the dome of light was still in place and that the stone hadn't done anything reckless quite yet. The power of the Primal beings that once ruled this universe was still *far* above his own capabilities.

[So,] he continued with uncertainty dripping from his voice, [I take it that I *shouldn't* disable the dome, then?]

[That would not be wise,] the Thunderbird replied. [Such powers are beyond your ken right now, and a thing so suffused with divine power cannot be left for anyone to find. It must either be destroyed or hidden and well-protected.]

Leon scowled. He had to open the dome to retrieve his sword, but he didn't know how to do that without shutting the entire thing down.

He sighed, and as he did, something else occurred to him. [Nestor told me that he thought it had been touched by a Universe Fragment, not a Primal God. Does that change anything?]

He could practically feel the Thunderbird scoffing as she said, [If he was stuck in there for as long as he was, there would be no way for someone like him to mistake the power in that moon stone. He knew exactly what he was experimenting with, and the power pushed back against him.]

Leon sighed again as Nestor was revealed to be even less honest than he'd appeared, and he hadn't been particularly honest to begin with.

[So... what should I do now?] he asked. [My sword is in there...]

[I ca—] the Thunderbird began, but she was cut off by the smooth, yet depressed and defeated voice of Nestor speaking in a slow and resigned cadence.

[There are many failsafes built into this place. If you were to try and disable that dome, then the entire chamber would come crashing down to bury the moon stone.]

Leon scowled as the voice of his distant kin filled his mind and then shivered in disgust as he was reminded of what Nestor had done to him. [You finally speak,] he growled, revulsion oozing from every syllable.

Ignoring Leon's tone, Nestor said, [If you want to open the dome, I can tell you how.]

[I wouldn't trust anything you told me even if it were somehow made of gold,] Leon shot back. [You lost any and all credibility with me when you *possessed* me!]

[You'll not be hearing me make any apologies,] Nestor replied, causing Leon's scowl to deepen. [I was desperate, and you are inadequate. The best possible solution would be for our Honored Ancestor to throw all of her support behind me, rather than you.]

[My mind has been made up,] the Thunderbird said, speaking to both Leon and Nestor. [I have promised my support to Leon, and so to Leon will go my support. However, if you ever want to return to the physical world again, I will highly advise you to do the same.]

There was a long pause as Nestor seemed to contemplate the Thunderbird's words, during which time Leon began to plan out exactly what to say to the old Prince when he returned to his soul realm. Until the moon stone was dealt with, he could stomach Nestor speaking up like this, but his elder kinsman wasn't going to have such freedoms for long.

After a long moment, Nestor said, his voice still dampened with defeat and resignation, [It seems that I have little choice if I want to see the Clan rise again...]

As Nestor spoke, Leon felt a familiar pain in his head as the knowledge to open the dome was pushed into his mind by Nestor. Again, he was reminded of the man's possession of his body and that he'd interacted with Valeria and Maia, and Leon made a mental note to try and make sure that Nestor couldn't dump information into his head like this as he pleased, assuming such a thing was possible—though he had no reason to think it wasn't.

The method of opening up the dome wound up being deceptively simple, little more than a single 'open' rune combined with a drop of his blood. This ensured that only someone as knowledgeable as Nestor and possessed of the same power would be able to access his most important research project; fairly powerful protections, to be sure, but not robust enough for Leon's liking.

With a grimace, Leon pricked his finger for a drop of blood and retrieved a bit of spell paper and ink. A few moments later, he had a suitable entry into the dome. He and Maia entered the place, and the latter froze as she laid her eyes upon the moon stone. Leon almost did likewise, but he forced himself in a slight panic to look around on the floor for his blade, and he let out a breath he was unconsciously holding when he saw it still lying on the floor where it had been dropped.

Leon hurried over and picked the blade back up. It might have been nothing more than wishful thinking, but he felt a slight pulse of magical power coming from the blade as his fingers wrapped around the hilt, as if it were celebrating its return to his possession.

As he stood back up, his blade resting comfortably in his hand once again, he turned to see Maia staring alternatively at him and the moon stone.

"What should we do with this thing?" she asked out loud, her voice an absolute delight to his ears.

"I'm still figuring that out," Leon replied. "Give me a few minutes, I think I need to speak a little more with the Thunderbird."

Maia's eyes narrowed, clearly unhappy as Leon, from her perspective, seemed to just stand there not doing anything even though she knew things weren't that simple.

Leon at least had the good graces to give her an apologetic look and a squeeze of her hand before he turned his attention back to the demon and ghosts that had taken up residence in his soul realm.

[How do I deal with this thing?] he asked for anyone to respond. [If it's dangerous enough to have poisoned Nestor, then I don't think taking it into my soul realm would be advisable, nor am I comfortable leaving it around like this, even with defenses as powerful as what it currently has—*especially* since I want this place's power storage crystal.]

[No, taking that thing into your soul realm would probably kill you in a matter of days,] Nestor replied, and Leon felt a tacit sense of agreement from the Thunderbird. [Now that the ancestral blade has been returned to your hands, it would be best to level this entire mountain. There's little remaining here for anyone, so better to not leave it open for squatters.]

[Nothing else?] Leon asked incredulously. [Are there no enchanting supplies here? Golem assemblies? Notes into magical research of any kind?]

[All of that was taken when my team departed millennia ago,] Nestor replied. [Right now, there's little more than a couple magical power generators and some readily-available raw materials—though I suppose if you *really* want some bronze and steel bullion, then there's still quite a bit here.]

[No silver?] Leon asked. [No gold? No great stockpiles of gems for storing power?]

[Let me be clear: everything that could be taken, *was*. That material was needed to maintain control in the south, though obviously, it didn't help. I was left with the barest resources required to keep this place functioning at minimum capacity. I've had to scrounge for everything that I have that I wasn't *so graciously* given by the survivors of those who confronted the Grave Warden. All the knowledge of this place is located in one place and one place only: within my head.]

[What about the storage crystals for magic power? And those magic power generators you mentioned?]

[I was on my way to the generators to top off after you reclaimed your power from me,] Nestor said. [The magic power storage crystals aren't far from there, though there's only one that still has any power remaining.]

Leon paused. [So... when you say 'magic power generators', you really mean those creatures you had entangled in those vines? That man that you captured a few months ago and that dying ice demon?]

[Yes,] Nestor shamelessly replied. [In all the experiments conducted by the Clan, both by myself and those who came before me, we found that nothing generates magic power quite like a living being. Consequently, we designed ways to extract that power and used it on prisoners. Criminals and those who attempted to access this facility after its evacuation were all plugged into the power grid to keep this place running for as long as it could be maintained.]

Leon's mouth curled in distaste, and he felt Xaphan's rising anger. The demon had been similarly restrained in his prison, and it resulted in the extreme loss of power that he was still trying to recover from.

[You do not approve of such actions?] Nestor asked, sounding genuinely curious and somewhat baffled.

It took a moment of thought before Leon could respond. Justin had claimed that the Thunderbird Clan had committed grave crimes in the pursuit of and maintenance of their power, and while he'd never brought up these specific things, Leon was starting to think that maybe there was more to those claims than just a weak man trying to get his enemy to kill him. In this case, Nestor had repeatedly lied to him,

attempted to steal his body, and had admitted to using people like disposable resources in ways that made Leon's stomach turn.

After taking a deep, steadying breath, Leon asked, [How can I activate the failsafes? I would like to take the power storage crystal with me when we leave this place to fuel my forays into the world of enchanting, and I would prefer if this thing weren't just left lying around for anyone to find. I would also like to ensure that the ice demon doesn't subsequently wake up and escape, if possible.]

[Both of those are easy to accomplish,] Nestor replied. [You just have to follow my instructions...]

Leon was skeptical as Nestor explained what had to happen to deal with the moon stone, but after thoroughly examining each and every step in the process, he concluded that Nestor wasn't trying anything nefarious. Still, he asked Maia to head out of the lab and back into the hallway while he went about shutting the place down with several runic consoles that had been retracted and hidden in the floor.

As he went about getting everything ready, he continued to ask some questions about the stone.

[So, this thing was 'touched by a Primal God'. What does that even mean, and why does that impart so much power that it emits such magic?]

Nestor was the one who began speaking first, taking on the stern and didactic tone of a professor attempting to teach a class made of people he thought far too stupid to understand what he was trying to say, the chance to lecture his distant kinsman seemingly getting rid of the elder Thunderbird clansman's defeated tone.

[If you weren't aware, kinsman, this place is known as the Divine Graveyard.]

[I'm aware,] Leon interjected, though Nestor continued as if he hadn't said anything.

[This planar cluster is the resting place for the remains of the Primal Gods and Devils, six planes apiece for each of these two divine tribes. This plane was built from the ground up to be devoted to the interment of many of the Gods.]

Leon blinked as his hands paused in their enactment of the failsafe to bury the moon stone. '*Built from the ground up?*' he silently asked, though he filed that question away for later as he got back to work.

[Such powerful beings were born in the creation of the universe, and their power cannot be simply lost or expended or anything else of the sort. It is integral to the universe, as much a part of it as the Nexus and the planes that surround it. When they were killed, the power of the Gods and Devils had to go *somewhere*, though most of it returned to the universe in various ways—the birth of new planes being the most common. I believe that one of the Primal Gods—or part of one, at least—may have been imprisoned or buried within that moon, with its residual power inundating the moon and causing the moon to take on that power.]

[So, not a Universe Fragment, then?] Leon asked as he processed what Nestor was saying. Nestor had originally told him that the moon stone's unique properties were actually a result of a Universe Fragment, though it seemed clear to him now that that had just been another lie since Nestor didn't seem fazed at all with explaining the stone's link to a Primal God.

[That was just an initial theory I dismissed soon after I began to study the local moon, I wasn't too keen on sharing everything I knew with you when you arrived,] Nestor dismissively replied.

With a sigh, Leon fought back his anger. He and Nestor would have to have quite a few more words in the coming days, but right now, he had work to do.

But before he got to that work, he had just a couple immediately-relevant questions remaining. [There's no way I can use this thing?]

The Thunderbird replied instantly, [No. The powers of genuine divinity and humanity rarely mix well, and your blood makes such an event even less likely. That's probably why you died so young, Nestor, all of that divine power that you breathed in warred with my power in your blood, destroying you from the inside. Not even the divine powers of one that has achieved Apotheosis can easily stand against the power of a Primal being.

[This moon stone will bring you no benefit Leon, so burying it would be the best option—other than returning it to the moon, of course, but that, I think, is a bit beyond your capabilities.]

Leon almost felt Nestor's frustration as the Thunderbird pointedly brought up the death of Nestor's physical body, and it brought a smile to his face.

[There's a lot you just said, I think, that can be elaborated upon,] Leon said as his hands raced across the lab's control console that he'd had to lift out of the floor, [but for now, let's just focus on burying this thing, because there's no damn way I'll be getting it back up to the moon...]

With just a few more runic circles activated, Leon felt the flow of magic in the room shift as the dome of light shimmered and dissipated. All of the swirling runes along the domed ceiling began speeding up, before, one-by-one, freezing in their proper places. Once all were in position, an enormous crack formed in the ceiling, and Leon wasted no more time watching; he sprinted for the door.

He made it with time to spare. He linked up with Maia, slammed the door shut, and both were in the lift and rising before they felt the enormous crash of the dome falling down upon the moon stone, burying it forever in the earth.

Or, at least, burying it for a *long* time. Leon felt a strange sense of regret at letting such a powerful artifact go to waste without even a cursory study of the thing, but he was comforted by the knowledge that there was an entire celestial body orbiting Aeterna made of more of it. While what happened with Nestor meant that any desires he had to study the moon closer didn't go very far, he still knew that the moon was there if it were ever to be needed.

All-in-all, it had taken about half an hour for him and Maia to deal with all of that, the only things left to do were to deal with the ice demon, find the power storage crystal, maybe clean out the raw materials in storage, and then link back up with Valeria and Justin.

There was no doubt in Leon's mind that they hadn't decided to run, and he was looking forward to seeing just what had become of them while he and Maia had been gone. He couldn't imagine their conversation had been peaceful and pleasant given how hurt he knew Valeria had been by Justin's absence.

Chapter 512: Valeria and Justin

For a long few seconds after Leon and Naiad left her alone with her father, Valeria stared at the door, simply contemplating the implications of what Leon had just done and all that had happened over the past few hours. He'd brought her father back to her alive, and he'd left her alone with him seemingly without care that she might take the opportunity to run away.

Given how difficult it had been for the three of them to get so far, however, Valeria knew that she and her terribly injured father wouldn't get far even if she decided to try and run. Still, she appreciated the privacy and the trust that Leon was showing her beyond her capacity to express.

Almost as if he were faking his unconsciousness—something Valeria might have suspected if she hadn't confirmed his state for herself when he first passed out—Justin started coming to a few minutes after Leon and Naiad left. Valeria's heart felt heavy and madly beat as she watched her father slowly wake up, the face of the man she had the most respect for contorting and twisting with pain as he did.

It had been a long time since she'd last seen her father—more than half a year, in fact. She had often wondered how she would react when, or *if*, they ever saw each other again, and anger was usually her dominant emotion. He'd *abandoned* her when he quit the capital, leaving her to the mercies of the Bull Kingdom. It was fortunate for her that nothing wound up happening—thanks, in part, to her association with Leon—but the pain of that abandonment couldn't be understated. Her father was the one person she was related to on this entire plane, he had raised her single-handedly, constantly telling her stories of how they would return to the Nexus with their job complete and finally reunite with her mother.

It was a quiet dream of hers for a long time. She'd never known a mother's love—in that, she could empathize greatly with Leon, even though his lack of such a thing didn't seem to be something that weighed on his mind. Unfortunately, her father's actions had greatly shaken her faith in his ability and desire to make that dream of hers come true.

Justin's eyes opened, but his gaze was hazy and unfocused. Valeria was patient; she wanted to scream and rage and vent all of her anger and frustrations at him, but she refrained. There would be time enough for that later, but for now, she kept her emotions in check as much as she could. She wanted a cool, rational discussion with her father, getting carried away wouldn't do her any good.

She waited a few more minutes for Justin to fully come to, and only started to speak when he focused his gaze upon her and started to sit up on the sofa.

"Valeria..." he whispered, his breath labored and apprehensive, seeming to be quite nervous about her presence.

To a degree, she could understand. From what she could sense, her father was weakening by the second. His aura was flagging and sputtering out, weakening with every breath he took. Already, it had weakened to the point that she could see through it, indicating that his injuries were so severe that he'd descended from the eighth-tier down at least to the fifth.

It was concerning, but he was alive and Leon's healing spells were working well. This, she was not worried about.

"Father," she replied after a moment's pause. "It's good to see you, how are you feeling?"

Justin breathed deeply, clearly trying to force some strength into his body, but his injuries prevented that. He started to sag back down into the sofa as Valeria stared at him, her sapphire-blue eyes unwavering and silently accusing him of a great many things.

"I'm... doing about as well as I could ever hope to be," he answered.

"That's good to hear," Valeria replied. "Leon has told me that he expects you to survive. This greatly gladdened me." Her tone was greatly dissonant with her words; she spoke in such a neutral way that she might as well have been commenting on the speed at which paint dried. "I suppose you ought to know what's happened since you've been gone..."

Valeria proceeded to tell Justin everything that had happened not only with her, but also with the Bull Kingdom, and with how she and Leon's relationship had changed. By the time she finished, she had laid it on thick enough that Justin's face burned with shame and regret, though Valeria's tone had remained almost unchanged throughout. She maintained a neutral and stoic tone, fearing that if she let it slip for even a second, she would never regain her cool and possibly forever destroy any relationship she and her father might yet have.

When she was finished, she paused for a long moment as she waited for her father to speak.

"... I'm sorry," Justin said, his voice hoarse and strained, and not just because of his increasing weakness—his aura had fallen to the point that Valeria could identify it as fourth-tier, and it was showing no sign of stopping despite Leon's healing spells doing good work on fixing his body. "I never should've left back then, but... I had thought that I only needed to come up here, to see what there was to see, and then I could finish the mission I had been tasked with. I had thought that it would've only been a matter of weeks and then we could've left this place for the Nexus. For your mother."

Valeria stared at Justin unblinkingly. "You want to see her that badly?" she asked, a slight undercurrent of barely-contained fury in her voice that prevented Justin from responding immediately. "You would, without speaking with me, destroy everything that I've built for myself so that we could return to a place that we've been banished from? So that you can see Mother again?"

Justin's face grew redder than it already was, though this was both in shame and anger. Both emotions warred in his mind, and in his weakened state, he wasn't able to summon the will to try and contradict his daughter without settling on one of them.

Valeria continued before he had a chance to decide. "I can understand your decision. You desperately want to see the woman that you love again. I desperately want to meet her, to find my mother and become a real, whole family..." Valeria paused for a brief moment as she considered the fact that Leon was in a similar position. His mother was somewhere in the Nexus, having been separated from him almost from birth. "There are few things I want to do more than journey to the Nexus and find her..."

"... But staying with Leon is one of those things..." Justin finished, seeing exactly what was on his daughter's mind.

For the first time, Valeria smiled, though it was thin-lipped and shallow. "As much as you want to go to Mother, I want to stay with Leon. When you left, I was left alone and lost. Everything that I had made for myself had been taken away. But Leon and Elise took me in, supported me in my grief, and barring

Leon's understandable confrontation, have never treated me poorly the entire time I've been with them, despite what you did to his family.

"Father, there is a great capacity for forgiveness in Leon, just as there is a great capacity for power. If he has the support of the right people who can make up for his shortcomings, then I think he will not only become the next Storm King, but I believe he will be a great leader in the Nexus. One powerful enough, even, to force Kamran to return Mother to us."

Justin chuckled weakly. "Maybe," he admitted, though the smile on his face was bitter and pained. "Maybe if Kamran were the only problem, then *maybe* we could have a chance of taking him on. But things are not what they were eighty thousand years ago, when the Nexus was dominated by Clans descended from the powers-that-were. Mankind, pure and righteous, is taking its place in this universe as men like Kamran and the league he is a part of finishes the work of the Great Lord all those countless millennia ago. All those who still bear the signs of the Primal Age must be purged if humanity is ever able to seize control of its destiny."

Valeria listened to her father speak, the frown on her face growing deeper with every word. Her father had never spoken of these things before, never once told her of any leagues or purges even when he taught her about the broad political situation up there.

And then Justin asked a question that Valeria knew she would have to answer, but given what he had just told her, it was even more consequential than it already was.

"Do you love Leon Raime?"

Justin's eyes bored into Valeria, demanding an answer from her, and she wasn't of a mind to resist it. She wanted this part of their reunion over and done with.

"Yes," she answered without hesitation.

"Then you must know the danger you invite," Justin replied, his face expressing no surprise, only a little bit of worry. "Leon Raime must die. That is the policy of Kamran and a great many others who hold vast amounts of power in the Nexus. If you link yourself to him, then you place yourself in great danger. If that link is romantic, they will not allow you to live. If you become Leon's lover, you will not survive their wrath, for they will wa—they *already* want his bloodline exterminated. Kamran and his league have already done so much to ensure that the Thunderbirds and so many others become nothing more than relics of the past, and they will not want to see Leon rise and breed and negate all that they have done for humanity."

"I don't care about any of that," Valeria quietly whispered as she glared at her father. For her, this wasn't nearly as big of a decision as Justin thought it would be. In fact, she didn't even need to think about it to know where she stood on this issue. "Kamran is a man who kidnapped my mother to force you to kill a child. If what you say is true, then he is not only a murderer and a kidnapper, but also guilty of genocide. I would never compromise myself to please a man like that. I will go with Leon, whether or not he reciprocates my feelings. We will gain power, venture into the Nexus, and we will find our mothers. We will kill Kamran and any others he may be allied with. With or without your help."

A long silence followed Valeria's bold declaration, during which Justin just tiredly stared back at her, his aura continuing to fall and already reaching the third-tier. Any lingering magics he had in his body that

gave him his eighth-tier strength was rapidly dissipating and diffusing back into the ambient magic power of their surroundings.

After several seconds, Valeria said, "I would like it if we could set aside our differences. I don't want to be a vassal to Kamran anymore. I don't want us to be beholden to him, or to anyone else. I want us to make peace with Leon, to break with Kamran and find a way to bring Mother back on our own terms. We don't need to kowtow to him."

Justin sighed, partly in pain and partly due to what Valeria was saying.

"I don't think that would work, little one. Even if we could agree on something, I'm too weak now. I have no subordinates left, I have no power left..."

"You're still my father!" Valeria cried, her composure finally breaking from seeing Justin's weak acceptance and seeming utter lack of concern with his fate. "I will *not* allow you just give up like this!"

"I don't know what you want me to do, kid," Justin replied with a sad smile as his aura slid down into the second-tier. "This is pretty much it for me. Without my power, I'll have maybe a couple decades of life left in me before I die."

"Then work to get your power back!" Valeria cried as tears started to flow from her eyes. "You did it once, you just have to give yourself time to heal and you'll be fine! We can go to the Nexus and get Mother together!"

"That's a nice dream, but a dream I think it will remain," Justin whispered. But then, his eyes found Valeria's, and he put on the biggest smile he was able to make, though that wasn't saying much. "But, for you, I will hang on for a little longer. I suppose if I'm grave-bound, then there's little point in keeping anything from Leon. I will tell him everything I know, and then I'll let him decide my fate. Any hope I have of knowing that you and your Mother will be safe will now rest in your—and his—hands."

Valeria could say nothing more. Her calm façade had broken, and she practically leaped over to the sofa Justin was languishing on and pulling her father into the tightest hug she dared to give the injured man.

No matter what he said, no matter how defeated he may feel, she was *not* willing to just let him go like this. But for now, she could live with his decision to stick around at least long enough to tell Leon whatever the younger man wanted to know.

Chapter 513: Leon's Questions

Retrieving the crystal that stored all the power in the facility was fairly easy, at least compared to the moon stone. Leon's only concern had been what might happen to the lift and the rest of the facility once it was no longer powered, but Nestor had been adamant that the enchantments running these things could still be powered individually.

It was still a little nerve-racking for Leon when he found the storage crystal and began the process of disconnecting it and taking it for himself. It was a surprisingly small thing, a rough sphere with a diameter of about two feet, and it glowed bright yellow like a small star.

It was a short process to disconnect it, during which it gradually shut the facility down, ending with all the lights in the place going out. Fortunately, Leon and Maia were strong enough to be able to see

without light, but it was still with some trepidation that Leon absorbed the massive crystal into his soul realm.

[Anything else I can do to shut this place down?] he asked Nestor, not quite trusting the man to tell him the truth, but at least trusting him not to want his property to be taken by any squatters that might happen upon it.

[No,] Nestor replied. [The moon stone has been buried, there is no reason to collapse these chambers. It's all just empty space, now.]

[Not quite,] Leon said as he glanced back at Maia. She had told him that she and Valeria had found quite a bit of raw metals that he thought might be worth grabbing, so he and his river nymph lover made their way back to the lift.

To his immense relief, Leon found that the lift functioned without problems when he channeled his meager, still-recovering magic power into the emergency runic circle that he found in the lift itself, and it bore him and Maia back to the storage rooms where he grabbed practically everything that wasn't nailed down. When he was finished, his entire haul totaled almost a hundred tons of both steel and bronze, along with a small smattering of other materials. Nothing, however, to get too excited about, for all the nice stuff that might've allowed him to start building his own golems had been taken by the rest of the facility staff when they evacuated thousands of years before.

He and Maia also made one last stop to the generator room where Leon had found Justin, and as he'd both hoped and suspected, without the power that both stabilized and drained it of its power, the ice demon had died. Its crystalline corpse now lay upon its platform, the vines around it limp and unable to drain what little magic remained in its body.

Leon was tempted to take the creature's corpse, but he didn't know what he'd do with it. Demonic cores could be valuable, but that wasn't accounting for the demon in question being drained of its power. After a few minutes of thought, Leon decided to leave the demon there. It was dead, he'd let Nestor's lab be its tomb.

With all that taken care of, Leon led Maia back to the area where they had left Valeria and Justin. However, just after stepping out of the lift and before returning to the room, Leon stopped.

"Hey," he said out loud as he turned to face his river nymph lover, his face showing an uncharacteristic amount of worry and dread, "do you mind if we talk for a little while? I... don't want to go back in there just yet, and I'd like to talk with you for a while."

"What is it?" Maia asked, her voice sounding like honey to a man who had eaten nothing but dry bread his entire life even though her tone was tinged with worry. She slid into Leon's arms with an almost liquid flexibility and captured his eyes with hers as she waited for his response.

Leon smiled and held her tighter, relishing having her in his arms. A moment later, he asked, "How are you doing after all of this? The Gorgon, the constant fighting since we entered the Vale, all of it. From my perspective, at least, it seems like you and Valeria were getting along a little better after we met back up."

Maia snuggled into his embrace and said, "I want to go home. I want to work on having children." Leon couldn't help but chuckle as her hands briefly wandered his body, letting his hands do likewise. "But otherwise," Maia continued as she paused in her teasing, "I'm doing all right. Valeria and I... don't see eye-to-eye, and I don't think we ever will. But I... *respect* her a little more now."

Leon could hear the strain in her voice as she admitted it, but he was glad she was able to say it at all.

He asked her, "Would you object to having her stick around for a while longer?"

Maia laughed as she turned her head to look back to him. "How much longer? Sounds like you intend for it to be a while."

"Maybe I do..." Leon replied as he glanced in the direction of the room where Valeria and Justin awaited their return. "Is there anything you want to do? Anything beyond making children, anyway?"

"Is that not enough?" Maia asked with a seductive, hungry look. "I would like to speak with the Gorgon before we leave, if possible. She and I are of the same blood, and I think it would benefit me to touch base with her before we leave her, possibly for good."

Leon hesitated, but he had to admit he was curious as to what the Gorgon had been up to with his blood. "I have no arguments to make against that," he said as something else occurred to him with the reminder of the Gorgon. "By the way, she did give this to me before we split up..."

Reaching into his soul realm, Leon retrieved the scroll that the Gorgon had given him that supposedly contained her 'cure' for the Gorgonism. He hadn't even looked at it yet, though, so whether or not it could work he couldn't say.

Maia took it and it vanished into her soul realm. "I can look at it later," she said with a radiant smile.

Leon had to admit that he was a little surprised given how much she feared turning into a Gorgon, but he just smiled back and squeezed her against his body one last time before pulling away. He loved his river nymph and he longed to return to Elise, but right now, he couldn't afford to have his mind filled with love. He and Justin had to speak, and he didn't want his heart to be weak.

"Let's go deal with this," he said to Maia after a long minute of silence.

Maia gave him a supportive smile and slid out of his grasp, though she remained at his side.

Leon took a deep breath to steady himself and to get rid of any lingering joy in his demeanor that Maia gave him. He wanted to be stern and stoic for this.

A moment later, he pushed open the door and entered the dark room where Valeria and Justin had last been. His seventh-tier eyes easily pierced the near-total darkness and saw that both were still there, with Valeria sitting in a chair next to the sofa where Justin lay. Valeria's eyes were a little red like she had been crying, while Justin looked weaker than when Leon had left, with his aura dwindling to barely first-tier. If his aura fell any further, Leon didn't think that Justin would have any power left.

"We're back," Leon said, stating the obvious as he and Maia walked in. "Our business here is done, so I think we ought to have a bit of a chat and then we can get out of here."

He walked over with Maia at his side, a smile on his face as he looked to Valeria. He wasn't surprised to see her still there, but he was appreciative that she hadn't run away, regardless. If he were in the same position, he couldn't honestly say that he would've stuck around.

She smiled back at him, giving him a look that seemed to glow even in the near-total darkness of the powerless facility. Justin, however, was staring around blindly, clearly unable to see in this darkness after losing so much of his power.

Taking some pity on the man, Leon retrieved a small lantern from his soul realm and lit it, letting its dim light set a quiet and somber mood in the room. He then took a seat close to Justin, just across a small table and stared at the silent man in the eye. Justin was quite subdued, barely looking in all directions save for Leon's, and didn't say a word.

When it became apparent that Justin wasn't going to speak first, Leon turned back to Valeria and asked, "Have you two discussed everything you needed to?"

"Yes," Valeria replied in a deliberately formal tone. "My father's desire to die has... *lessened*, and he's willing to tell you whatever you wish to know. I hope, however, that you stick to the commitment you made to aid me in freeing my mother from the grasp of Lord Kamran."

"I haven't forgotten that, I fully intend to help you in any way I can," Leon replied with an easy-going smile. His smile hardened as he turned back to Justin. "So, I suppose we ought to start with the most obvious. Who is Lord Kamran and why does he want me dead?"

"Kamran is a powerful warlord within the Nexus," Justin answered in a flat tone, speaking like a man utterly defeated and to whom these secrets barely mattered enough to remember, let alone keep from Leon. "He is an Anax in the Stormlands, a man whose power is exceeded only by the Elemental Kings, and he has aspirations to succeed the Thunderbird Clan as the next Elemental King of Lightning, or 'Storm King', as they are more colloquially known."

"And that's why he wants me dead?" Leon asked as he cocked his eyebrow. Valeria had told him it was because of his blood and who he was descended from, and while this information didn't necessarily conflict with that, it also wasn't quite what Leon had been expecting to hear.

"It's not the only reason, though I believe it may be the most powerful motivator for his hatred of your Clan," Justin replied. "He doesn't know you exist. If he did, he would've sent more than me to this plane. As it is, he is an enemy of your mother's Clan, the Draconic Federation."

Leon's eyes went wide. "Draconic Federation? That needs some explanation..."

"I suspect you already know what it is," Justin said, his tone not changing in the slightest. "There were seven Great Dragons in the Primal Age, and many more dragons besides. A great many other draconic beings who were not *true* dragons also existed. Nowadays, there are *many* dragon clans, but they are all a part of the Federation, the most powerful organized state outside of the Elemental Kingdoms. This Federation is ruled by a Senate, but the Draconic Senate is dominated by the descendants of the original seven Great Dragons."

Leon nodded, absorbing all of this as well as he could. "Why is Kamran targeting them? I was told that my mother's Clan was under attack not long after I was born."

“And indeed, that was the case. Kamran is a part of a league of his own that was formed by ‘pure’ humans to combat the myriad Clans that have inherited powers from various Primal beings. They count all descendants of the Divine Beasts who were born at the creation of the universe and the Ascended Beasts who rose after that as their adversaries. They claim they advance the cause of humanity by reducing the power of these various Clans.

“About twenty years ago, they launched an attack on the Draconic Federation, doing quite a bit of damage before the dragons got their heaviest hitters, the Great Black Dragon Clan, to mobilize.”

“What was the situation like up there when you left?” Leon asked as a thoughtful expression crossed his face. “And how long ago was that?”

“I’ve been here eighteen years,” Justin replied. “When I left, the fighting had reached a stalemate, with Kamran’s league stalling out against the power of the Dragons. Kamran has many allies, some of them in lofty places, and the Dragons, while considerably more isolationist, have deep wells of power they can call upon. I once heard that due to their power, resources, experience, training, and all that they’ve hoarded over the aeons since the Primal Age, a single member of the Great Black Dragon Clan is worth at least ten mages of the same power level.”

“And he attacked these people?” Leon asked in bafflement. “He did that *willingly*?”

“It was supposed to be an important morale boost, to remove one of the most powerful states remaining that could trace its lineage back to the Primal Age. To show the rest of humanity that they were above these inhuman freaks. And I don’t think Kamran put much stock in those rumors; he considered them inflated draconic propaganda.”

One of Leon’s eyebrows almost shot up into his hairline, though he managed to keep himself from feeling *too* offended by Justin’s ‘inhuman freaks’ comment.

“Lord Kamran was also responsible for many of the purges that eliminated the Thunderbird Clan within the Nexus. When the last Storm King fell here, he left the vast majority of his Clan without leadership, and that made them easy pickings for Kamran and his league.”

“This Kamran must be quite old,” Leon observed.

“Older than I know, certainly old enough to have seen several Reconstitutions of the Nexus.”

“To summarize, then,” Leon said with a sigh, “Lord Kamran wants me and my family dead—and has succeeded in killing nearly all of them, at least on my father’s side—because he coveted their position of power and because he doesn’t like that we bear the power of ancient Divine and Ascended beasts?”

“That would be a simple way of putting it,” Justin said with the barest of nods in Leon’s direction, though he still hadn’t once looked at the younger man since he’d returned.

“What about you?” Leon asked with a dangerous look in his eye, though his aura remained free of killing intent. “Do you still want me dead? You told me that I deserve it if for no other reason than guilt for atrocities committed by my Ancestors.”

Finally, Justin turned to him, his once deep blue sapphire eyes now growing a little hazy and clouded, but still boring into Leon with an unblinking defiance that Leon recognized all too well.

“For the sake of my daughter, I would make my peace with you, Leon Raime,” Justin said, doing an admirable job of both deflecting and answering the question. “As I am now, I have no hope of returning to the Nexus and saving my wife from Kamran’s hands. You and my daughter are the only hope I have for her rescue.”

“And as I just told Valeria, I’ll be doing my best to do just that.”

Justin gave him a long, searching look as if he were looking for any sign of deceit in Leon.

After a few awkward seconds, he simply said, “I hope you are true to your word.”

“I always try to be, though I can’t say how successful I’ve been,” Leon replied. “But regardless, there are some other things that I would like to talk about...”

Chapter 514: Titles

For a while, Leon and Justin’s conversation was dry and without too much emotion. Leon, after everything that had happened over the past few hours and days, was just about done with being passionate about his enemies, especially with Nestor and Justin firmly in hand. Justin, meanwhile, was utterly defeated, and was mostly going along with whatever Valeria wanted him to do.

Leon wondered if the man would ever snap out of this funk, but given the magnitude of what he had lost since vanishing from the Bull Kingdom, he was more than a little surprised that Valeria had gotten him to agree to continue to live at all.

Their conversation remained fairly quiet and emotionless because of their topic, as well. Leon had Justin wax drily of the political landscape of the Nexus as it was when he left. It was still interesting to Leon, especially since it was a world that he knew he would have to enter at some point, but it hardly roused any passionate emotions.

First, Justin told him of the greatest of those in the Nexus, those most visible at the top of the power structure, the Elemental Kings. Their specific titles could vary according to the tastes of the specific monarch, but that was the term for them as a whole, as Justin explained. There were supposed to be seven of these august figures, who, at least nominally, ruled over the entirety of a magical element and in theory would rule over all those beneath them who practiced that element. An almost universal rule among the Elemental Kings was that they had to rule over at least a hundred planes outside of the Nexus where their power could be more permanently felt and consolidated; if they didn’t, then they were seen as too weak to keep their title and would be constantly fighting off challengers.

As a mage who was practicing lightning, fire, water, and wind magic, Leon had been a little concerned and confused, wondering just how they were supposed to rule over everyone of a specific element without coming into conflict with other Elemental Kings. When he asked Justin, the broken man’s response was that it was incredibly complex and that the actual powers of the Elemental Kings were far less than what they were on paper, especially since the titles themselves conferred no magical power; they were political titles, nothing more, taken and kept by those would with the power to do so, and that in practice, the Nexus was extraordinarily divided. It also wasn’t completely unheard of for the Elemental Kings to go to war over the often-divided loyalties of their vassals and subordinate states.

But, as powerful as the Elemental Kings could be, the power and influence they could wield in a place as large and varied as the Nexus was always going to be limited in some capacity, if only due to how the Nexus destroyed and rebuilt itself every hundred thousand years, preventing how ‘permanent’ much of their infrastructure could be. The extra-Nexus planes were usually where the bulk of an Elemental King’s political power lay since these places weren’t in danger of being regularly destroyed.

This was the level of the Thunderbird Clan before its destruction. The Storm Kings ruled over the element of lightning—at least nominally—and were the ruling class of a vast empire that stretched across the universe. Justin told Leon about thousands of planes that owed their allegiance to the Storm Kings of the Thunderbird Clan, and of how widespread their influence in the Nexus was.

So great was the Clan that aside from the very first Storm King, who was appointed to the position by the Great Lord Khosrow after he led humanity to victory in the wars of the Primal Age and whom the Thunderbird Clan usurped, every Storm King after was of the Thunderbird’s direct line. In uncountable millions of years, even as their power waxed and waned, the Thunderbird Clan always held onto the title of Storm King.

At least until they came to the Divine Graveyard.

Directly below the Elemental Kings were the Anakes. An Anax was supposed to be the most powerful position anyone could achieve short of usurping an Elemental King, and the fact that Justin claimed that at least half, if not more, of mages who claimed the title were completely independent even of the Elemental Kings, spoke volumes of their might. If not even the Elemental Kings could exert authority over these people through all the means they had available—or, perhaps most accurately, if these people could *resist* the power of the Elemental Kings through any means they had—then they had certainly earned their titles of Anax.

However, Justin made sure to stress that that wasn’t to downplay the power of the Anakes that were subordinate to the Elemental Kings, it was merely to emphasize their power and level of influence.

This was the place where Leon’s enemy, the Lord named Kamran, stood. He owed no Elemental King his allegiance, despite the traditional powers and domains that the Great Lord Khosrow had laid out.

Leon had no idea who this ‘Great Lord’ was that Justin repeatedly brought up, but he filed that name away for later.

Kamran was a powerful enemy to have, apparently. He was powerful enough to stand against the Elemental Kings without being conquered through not only his personal power but also his vast network of allies, and he hated those with Inherited Bloodlines. His power was effectively that of a god compared to Leon and his meager seventh-tier strength. He’s long ago achieved Apotheosis, and had risen even higher afterward.

Once that was said, Leon had to interject into Justin’s spiel with a few questions of his own.

“Does Kamran have any enemies that I might be able to ally with or exploit?” he’d asked, though he’d frowned when he thought about actually *trying* to form an alliance with these people with his *unique* skillset. “How about the Dragon Federation? Aren’t they at war with Kamran? Could I possibly get them to aid me? Or could I aid them somehow? I’m supposed to be a part of them, aren’t I?”

“Unlikely,” Justin had replied. “The Dragon Federation is terrifically powerful, but also very isolationist and rather xenophobic, even by the standards of the Nexus. Given who they are, I can’t blame them—they inspire a great deal of fear in most people who they come across, so friends are hard to come by for a dragon. I doubt they’d accept someone like you, one who shares his blood with another, into their circles. Maybe I’m wrong, and I certainly don’t have first-hand experience dealing with them, but that’s the impression I have of them. Maybe you could acquire their aid, but I wouldn’t count on it, even if their conflict with Kamran is ongoing and they haven’t been defeated.”

Leon’s frown had deepened when Justin told him that. Xenophobia didn’t mesh well with the picture of his mother that Artorias had painted, but Leon decided to reserve judgment until he could get a little more information. For the time being, though, he took Justin at face value and decided that his mother’s Clan wasn’t going to be one that he’d immediately seek out when he arrived in the Nexus.

Not that he was planning on doing that, anyway, he didn’t want to arrive at her door a beggar hoping for a handout when he didn’t even know why she hadn’t returned to Aeterna in twenty years.

“Any other enemies of Kamran?” Leon asked.

“Kamran’s enemies are legion, though the reasons for that vary. He is an Anax, and one does not rise to that level of power without spilling a great deal of blood and making many enemies. You’ll have to go to the Nexus to get a better idea of who might have the power to aid you in any campaigns against Kamran, for just like here, alliances and loyalties can practically change with the tides.”

Leon nodded in understanding. According to Justin, his Clan had done likewise for many generations, using violence and intimidation to keep their power. He didn’t think so harshly of them as Justin seemed to, but he could still empathize with the man’s apparent dislike of the descendants of the Thunderbird, especially when he took the other crimes Justin accused them of into account.

With his questions answered, even if he wasn’t too satisfied with the answers he received, Leon listened as Justin continued with his explanation of the Nexus’ power structure.

The Elemental Kings and the Anakes were the only titles that were solely invested into singular people. An Anax was one person, an Elemental King was a single person, both having risen to that level of personal and political power. The remaining rungs further down the ladder, however, did not necessarily follow in that vein, for as Justin explained, the Nexus was filled with just as many governments and philosophies as the planes were. Autocracies, democracies, oligarchies, all systems of rulership existed, but they were all organized into classes and de jure spheres of authority and legitimacy by something that Justin called, ‘Khosrow’s Law’.

Below the Anakes were the Basileis. A Basileus was, at least in theory, the ruling body of a powerful administrative or vassal state of an Anakes. These ‘Empires’, as Justin described them, could then be subdivided into Despotates ruled by Despots, and Themata, ruled by Strategoi.

These levels were political, not magical, and so didn’t necessarily correspond to any magical tier—though Justin was quick to explain that because the most powerful person in a political entity was often enough the person given the specific title that it usually *was* associated with the post-Apotheosis magical tiers, of which Leon was told numbered only five.

The example he gave was to describe the political nature of his home. He was from the city of Antiochus, the capital city of the Theme that was ruled by a small council headed by the only man to achieve Apotheosis in the entire Theme. This man, while not a king or hereditary ruler of any kind, was nonetheless given the title of Strategos by the council.

The Theme of Antiochus was furthermore located in a Despotate governed by a large senate that had been elected by the citizens of the Despotate's capital city, which, in turn, elected their Despot from amongst their ranks—usually, only a handful of the most powerful men and women were elected by their fellow senators, showing how close the association between magical tier and political power was even if that association wasn't official.

This Despotate was, in turn, ruled by a single Basileus chosen by Kamran among a dozen other Despotates within his realm.

Again, as Justin finished this explanation, Leon had to interrupt to ask a question.

"If you were so far removed from Kamran, then how is it you managed to get yourself such a mission as killing me? You and Valeria made it sound like Kamran personally gave you this mission."

"He did," Justin replied. "I was born in Antiochus, I did not live my entire life there. Beyond that, while Antiochus is politically distant from Kamran, it's geographically almost right next to his chosen capital city, only *just* far enough away for Kamran to not bother adding it to his personal domain and to assign it to a subordinate to administer. We don't have to get into it right this second but suffice it to say that when I was younger, I thought my prospects in Antiochus weren't bright, so I traveled to Kamran's capital in search of work. I made my way through Kamran's bureaucracy and found myself working as one of his personal agents."

"You must've angered him somehow, then," Leon observed. "I don't think it's standard practice for those who keep their bosses happy to have their families kidnapped and held hostage."

"Kamran isn't entirely predictable," Justin replied. "No one grows as old as he is without accumulating some... *odd* behaviors and habits."

"And you said earlier that you don't know specifically how old he is?"

Justin replied with a shake of his head. "He is older than most others who might count themselves his equals, though," he said. "He's old enough to have accumulated a great deal of personal power. I believe that, if he wanted to, he could've seized the title of Burning King—the specific title of the Elemental King of fire. But he never has, being apparently content to remain an Anax."

"That's... somewhat worrying," Leon murmured as he leaned back in thought. It had always been plain enough for him to see that his enemies were going to be startlingly powerful, but now that he was getting some idea of truly how far he'd have to go, he was starting to feel more than a little daunted.

"You are still going after Kamran?" Justin asked, showing a little bit of life for the first time since their conversation began. "Even now that you're getting an idea of just how powerful he is?"

"I am," Leon said as he turned his attention back to Justin. "As... *concerning* as all of this is, it's not enough to get me to turn back. No matter what, Kamran ordered the deaths of my family, and he used *you* to do much of that..."

The way Leon phrased it and the tone he used made it seem like Justin was just as much a victim as he was of the situation, but the subtle wrath in his eyes told a different story, and it was one that Justin could easily pick up on. Leon was making peace with him, but he wasn't forgiving, and he most certainly wasn't forgetting. No matter the future he and Valeria might make together, he and Justin would never be close.

"Will you be able to tell me about these allies that Kamran has?" Leon asked.

"I can, at least to a certain degree of accuracy," Justin said. "The Nexus is not static, things change all the time as new people arrive from the planes and older generations die out. Surprisingly few people ever achieve Apotheosis, and so immortals are relatively rare and usually in positions of greater power. But controlling those who have time limits to their lifetimes has never been easy for anyone, so conflicts and tensions often break out and wars are waged with fairly high frequency. As a result, alliances and friendships change just as quickly, so the exact compositions of those whom Kamran has allied himself to is nearly impossible for me to guess.

"All of that being said, Kamran has a handful of trusted allies whom you ought to watch out for. The first is a man that you will likely come into conflict with sooner rather than later. He is an influential Despot within the Kingdom of the Storm, those territories—or rather, *vassals*—that your family used to rule over. He has a plane of his own to rule, though, meaning that he cannot be ignored by those with more power, for his influence extends beyond the Nexus. He goes by the name of Aeschylus."

"This man... was he once a vassal of the Thunderbird Clan?"

"He was," Justin confirmed. "He was never one of the most influential men around, especially since his loyalties have typically been quite fluid, but he and Kamran have become quite close since the fall of your Clan. Aeschylus can be thought of as a protectorate of Kamran, rather than a proper vassal, and if any large-scale conflict were to break out involving Kamran, I would say it would be more likely than not that Aeschylus would join on Kamran's side. More than that, it is in Aeschylus' hands that the vault of the Thunderbird Clan now lies."

"Huh?" Leon asked, taken aback by what Justin had just said. He had heard something about an Adamant vault in the possession of the Thunderbird Clan, and how it the most likely place where Jason Keraunos had left the Storm Diamond Universe Fragment when he came to Aeterna, but it had been so distant an idea to him that he hadn't put much thought into it. He'd thought that it would've been lost or hidden away by survivors of the Thunderbird Clan, but he hadn't thought that someone else had taken it for themselves...

"Whatever is inside I doubt Aeschylus has taken possession of," Justin said, providing some balm to Leon's obvious and sudden panic. "The vault itself is immense, as large as a city, but so well-protected that I doubt anyone not of your blood could ever access it."

Leon nodded, though his mouth was slowly turning into a scowl. Defenses could always be breached, nothing would stay secure forever. But he felt lucky enough to know that the vault was still in play and that his chance to retrieve the Storm Diamond and whatever else might be inside hadn't passed.

"Anyone else?" Leon asked through gritted teeth.

“Two more,” Justin replied. “A woman by the name of Antipatra, a Basilissa in the Scorched Lands. She nominally supports a prominent Anax of the Burning King, but in practice, she is much too far away from the centers of power for even these mighty men to hold much sway over her. In fact, only a year before Kamran launched his war with the Dragon Federation, he had just concluded a war with Antipatra’s liege regarding her loyalties.”

“And Kamran won?” Leon asked.

“He did,” Justin confirmed. “The Burning King stayed out of it, though, and let the two Anakes fight it out between themselves. A rather blatant disregard for Khosrow’s Law, but that’s what politics are like...”

Again, Leon cocked his head at that term. It was said too prominently for it to be much of a coincidence, and he wanted to know more, but Justin wasn’t finished telling him what he needed to know.

“And the last person?”

“A man in the Ocean Realm, Triton, I believe his name was, with the rank of Basileus. I never saw him, myself, and Kamran didn’t have much contact with him while I was serving him, but Kamran often told us of his great friendship with Triton, and that if anything were to happen, he could count on Triton’s support, among many others.”

“How many others?”

“That depends on the time of day,” Justin quipped, a little bit more energy returning to his demeanor as he spoke. “As I have repeated, the Nexus is not static, and alliances are constantly shifting. However, Kamran is rather notorious for the number of alliances he has at any one time. There’s a reason why he’s still independent and not beholden to the Burning King, and his many alliances are it, not his personal power—for the Burning King is stronger one-on-one, but his attention must always be elsewhere, keeping the rest of his domain in line.”

Leon nodded, committing these names and their importance to memory. It might be many years yet before he ventured to the Nexus, but he wanted to have a plan ready before he showed up. He didn’t want to go there first and meander around without a clue where he should be or what he needed to do.

‘Aeschylus, Despot, lightning region, the vault,’ Leon thought. ‘Antipatra, Basilissa, fire region. Triton, Basileus, water region.’

His enemies may wind up being quite numerous if Justin’s claims held any water, but at least now he had a few names and places to start.

Chapter 515: Khosrow’s Law

“So, Kamran has enemies,” Leon continued, not letting Justin stop even for a moment, “how about the old Thunderbird Clan? Do you know of any old allies of them that might be willing to aid me?”

“I can’t say, the Thunderbird Clan’s destruction was long before my time.”

Leon nodded in understanding. Justin was barely more than a hundred years old, while the Thunderbird had told him that her descendants had been dwindling for thousands of years. They likely hadn’t been much of a power within the Nexus after its most recent Reconstitution for thousands of years, with all of the enemies they’d made deciding to seek vengeance while they were weak.

"I suppose that just means I'm going to have to make new allies," Leon replied, a note of apprehension in his voice. If the past few days had taught him anything, it was that he needed a lot more time figuring out just who might be his allies for the struggle against Kamran, and then for whatever might come after.

Nestor had seemed like an ally at first, but had wound up trying to possess him. On the other hand, the Gorgon had started as an enemy, but she'd made peace with Leon and his group. To a both lesser and greater extent, both Valeria and Justin were, at least for now, on his side.

Leon wasn't entirely thrilled with these seemingly mixed messages, but after a moment of contemplation, turned his attention back to Justin.

"I think we can give some of these things a bit of a rest," Leon said as he leaned back in his chair and glanced at Valeria and Maia. Both ladies were being quiet and letting him ask his questions, but he could see that both were—quite surprisingly in Maia's case—paying *very* close attention to what Justin was explaining. "However," Leon continued just as Justin was starting to lean back into the sofa, "if I ever need other questions answered once we're done here, I'm sure I'll know where to find you..."

"I can't say we're allied, Leon Raime," Justin said as he sent a look at Leon that was both completely resigned and somewhat hostile, "but I can say that I won't go back on my word. You may consider us at peace so long as nothing about this situation changes..." The older man's eyes drifted in Valeria's direction, so Leon was sure he was referring to something there, but it was too ambiguous of a gesture for him to tell what exactly Justin was implying.

"Then I invite you to join us," Leon replied, a hard smile and harder tone making it clear just how much this *wasn't* an invitation that could be turned down.

"Am I your prisoner?" Justin pointedly asked.

"Not as much," Leon replied as he noticed Valeria giving him a dirty look. "I would prefer to consider it as both a guest and a patient. I'm sure that Heaven's Eye will be able to take good care of your injuries and ensure that you don't do anything that might put our peace at risk. So, I guess that *does* make you my prisoner, but not in a bad way. More of a, 'you killed my family, so now I want to keep an eye on you, but you'll be treated like a guest,' way."

Justin couldn't help but darkly chuckle.

"I... suppose that's the best I could ever hope for, isn't it?" he said, a strangely reassuring smile on his face.

"I suppose it is," Leon replied. "I have some other questions, if you don't mind. You brought up quite a few things during your explanations that don't directly relate to Kamran, but that I think require some elucidation..."

"Then ask your questions."

Leon paused a moment as he glanced at Maia and Valeria. Since both of them had been so quiet, it had been easy enough to almost forget they were here in light of the information Justin was providing, but Leon figured they had some questions of their own. Instead of jumping right into things, he instead asked if either of them wanted to ask something.

Maia's answer was about what Leon expected: a quick shake of her head. Valeria's answer was about the same, which surprised Leon a bit, but he guessed she and her father had already spoken quite a bit before he and Maia had returned.

Turning his attention back to Justin, Leon said, "You mentioned 'Khosrow's Law' a few times. What exactly is that?"

Justin took a deep breath and asked as his reply, "How much do you know about the end of the Primal Age? You didn't ask any questions about it before so I assume you at least know some of it..."

"It was the Age before this one, when the various Primal Beings ruled supreme. It ended in a giant four-sided war between the Gods, Devils, Divine and Ascended Beasts, and humans," Leon replied. "Or, at least, so my understanding of it goes..."

"That's certainly how it ended," Justin said. "Once all of the old powers were gone, humanity was left to rule over what was left. The leader of mankind, the man who had guided us through that dark time and almost single-handedly saved us from complete destruction was the Great Lord Khosrow. He was the only man who ever grew strong enough to directly challenge the strongest of the Gods and Devils by himself. It was by his example and through his wisdom that humanity came out of that war not only intact, but strong enough to seize control of the most prosperous parts of the universe. The demons were thrown back into the Void, the remaining Ascended Beasts weren't numerous enough to challenge humanity; we were victorious.

"This new order, however, *needed order*. To that end, it was Khosrow who laid down the political divisions that exist to this day in the Nexus. He defined what it was to be a Strategos, a Despot, a Basileus, an Anax; he dictated how much authority each was to have, and how they related to each other. He created the system of Elemental Kings that now rule the universe, and which the demons copied in their dark corners of the Void. How the Nexus is run is Khosrow's Law. The Law that Khosrow made was not specific like 'don't kill people', but rather it was a law he imposed upon the new world of mankind, an order to the post-war universe that, for the first time, lacked Gods and Devils and all the other old powers that had ordered it before. It was a Law that was to be as natural as heat, light, and gravity."

"What happened to Khosrow?" Leon asked. This man sounded more than powerful enough to have achieved Apotheosis and the accompanying ageless immortality, yet it was the Elemental Kings who were at least nominally in charge in the Nexus, as Justin had explained only a few minutes before.

"That is one of the greatest mysteries of the universe," Justin replied. "At this point, it's essentially impossible that he's still alive, he's been gone so long. However, no one is quite clear *how* Khosrow died. Some don't even believe he's dead at all, and that he lies in wait for whenever the world of mankind needs him again. The Gods may be dead, and Khosrow himself may be gone, but he's still with us all..."

Justin's eyes began to light up with hope and vigor as he spoke. It wasn't too hard for Leon to see that Justin, while not necessarily believing that Khosrow was still alive, at the very least venerated him. Leon, however, only felt the faintest hint of disdain and antipathy, but he wasn't quite sure why.

After a moment of thought, he decided that he didn't need to ask Justin too much more about Khosrow—he had the Thunderbird in his soul realm, and she could probably give him a much clearer picture of the man than Justin ever could if he was a contemporary of hers.

But Leon could easily figure that Khosrow was likely a big damn deal in the Nexus, if what Justin was saying was true and if his reverent expression was anything to go by. As for Leon, he'd reserve his judgment about the man.

"Is the discrimination against those with Inherited Bloodlines a part of Khosrow's Law?" Leon asked with a cocked eyebrow, wondering if Justin's obvious dislike for descendants of Ascended Beasts was widespread or localized, he wanted to know how institutional it was. He figured it couldn't be quite so bad if the Thunderbird Clan had been the Storm Kings for so long, but if Kamran was anything to go by, powerful people were working to bring an end to the empowered Ascended Beasts Clans.

"It was not set in stone," Justin admitted. "But it was implied given his actions. Khosrow gave up much, including both of his children, in the fight for the freedom of humanity from the tyranny of the Primal Beings. If Khosrow were still around, I believe he'd be appalled to see the descendants of his old enemies hold so many positions of power, especially positions within *his* Law."

"Hmm," Leon hummed in thought, feeling only marginally offended at Justin's attitude, which surprised him a little. He supposed that it was because he was now in such a position of power over the man that it didn't matter what he thought, or it could just be that he was too damned tired to get worked up over what such a broken man thought about him. "You sound quite... *enthusiastic* about this. Are your views the reason you were sent on this in the first place? I mean, I know that your wife was taken hostage, but I can't imagine that you and your family were the only people that Kamran did that to..."

"No, no, Kamran made it a policy to take hostages when he could, if only to make sure that his enemies kept peace treaties... But my personal views on the topic were not the reason why I was sent on this mission, they're hardly unique among Kamran's league..."

Leon's question seemed to sap whatever energy Justin had managed to muster, and he sagged back into the sofa as he gave his answer. He then glanced over at his daughter, who was listening with rapt attention, pressing him with her expectant and encouraging gaze to hold nothing back.

"This is... not something I've ever really discussed before," Justin admitted, his eyes still locked on Valeria, whose face turned a little apprehensive and excited at the same time.

"Not even with Valeria?" Leon asked.

Justin seemed to ignore the question, though he continued with his explanation anyway.

"The ire I drew from Kamran was due to who I fell in love with," he said slowly, his gaze not wavering an inch from his daughter. "It is because I married your mother that I was sent here. No other mistakes were made on my part, but that is what turned Kamran against me. Until that moment, I had been a loyal and dutiful servant of his, and as such, enjoyed his favor..."

"What do you mean...?" Valeria asked as her expression seemed to harden like she was protecting herself from something potentially harmful.

"Your mother..." Justin hesitantly began, before cutting himself off and glancing back at Leon and Maia.

"Keep going," Valeria sternly prodded, not allowing him to ask for privacy or anything else of the sort.

Justin paused only for a moment longer, until his eyes turned back to Valeria and saw her stony expression and softer, but still demanding eyes staring back at him. To both him and Leon, Valeria didn't seem to care that Leon and Maia were present for the reveal of this potentially intimate and private information.

"Your mother was the only child of one of Kamran's oldest and most trusted friends," Justin said. "When this friend unexpectedly died only ten years after her daughter's birth, leaving her daughter alone in the world, Kamran took her in and raised her like his own. He doted on your mother like any true father would, but he would not tolerate her marriage to me. I was below her, in Kamran's eyes, and only dirtied her with my presence. Your mother he imprisoned for defying his orders and to keep her away from me, while I was marginalized and eventually sent here. I think if I hadn't served Kamran so faithfully until that point and if she and I hadn't had a child, he would've had me killed for daring to touch his ward."

"That seems... *extreme*," Leon whispered.

"Said a man who has neither legacy nor child," Justin dismissively replied.

Leon cocked his head in mild irritation. If the blood of both the Thunderbird and the Great Black Dragon wasn't a legacy, he couldn't imagine Justin would think anyone alive had a legacy worth mentioning.

"That's what all of this was about?" Valeria asked, her tone disbelieving as she broke eye contact with her father. "We were sent here because of something so... *natural*?"

"Kamran was also looking for alliances, as he so often was," Justin explained. "He hadn't made his intentions clear—at least, not to me, and your mother never mentioned anything about it—but I believe that he was looking for something a little more substantial than the usual fair-weather fare that most people in the Nexus agree to. Something that could be sealed with a marriage alliance. When I married his adopted daughter, that may have thrown a wrench into his plans."

Leon wrinkled his face in distaste. He almost said something to that effect until his eyes drifted in Valeria's direction, and he froze. She looked *murderous*, and it was to the point that he almost completely forgot what else he wanted to ask Justin.

It seemed to him that Justin sensed Valeria's mood, as well, for he paled a little bit more and stared at her with an almost apologetic look on his face.

"I... think the rest of my questions can wait," Leon said as he sensed the tension brewing between father and daughter. "I think we can stay in this place until tomorrow morning, at least. There doesn't seem to be any more threats here, so let's rest up and prepare to head back west. I think Naiad and I can find another room to sleep in, so we'll just leave the two of you alone..."

"Thank you," Valeria said with a chilly tone, her eyes not leaving her father.

For her part, Maia gave Leon a strange look, but he simply whispered into her mind, [I think the two of them are going to have some *strong* words for each other. Or maybe just Valeria for her father. I have the answers that I needed, and like I said, everything else can wait. For now, let's just get some rest.]

Maia shrugged and followed Leon as he led the way out of the room, leaving the other two behind to hash out their feelings. Leon could understand some of Valeria's obvious frustration and anger, though, for it seemed to him that at least some of what Justin had just told him had been news to her, as well.

He sighed as he let Maia take the lead and show him to another room they could rest in deeper in the facility. There was nothing he wanted more than to rest in the arms of one of his lovers, but this still wasn't the time for it; he still had a dangerous and ancient kinsman trapped in his soul realm to deal with, and he had some follow-up questions for the Thunderbird about things Justin had revealed.

Rest would have to wait just a little while longer.

Chapter 516: Leon's Offered Deal

Leon had no reservations about leaving Valeria and Justin alone again. If they hadn't run away the first time he and Maia had left, then he doubted they'd vanish on him now. So, after seeing Valeria's reaction to Justin revealing some personal information that Leon guessed she didn't know, he felt it was best to give them some space.

To that end, he and Maia found another room to get some rest in. The facility was still completely dark since Leon had taken its power crystal that kept it running, but for the two of them, that darkness was nothing. With nothing else to worry about in the place, Leon felt it was best if they stayed for a few hours before heading back through the Forest of Black and White.

After finding a good room to rest in, he and Maia took a few minutes to quietly cuddle. But as much as Leon wanted to keep that going, he now had to deal with the other enemy he'd found here, and he wasn't looking forward to it. Now that he'd had some time to truly sit back and think about what had happened to him, he was feeling worse and worse.

His body had been stolen from him—for only a few hours, sure, but it was still a violation that had him shivering in Maia's arms. Even worse, that violation had come at the hands of someone he'd hoped might become a family member, someone who could share the burden of rebuilding the Thunderbird Clan. It was making him question much about himself and about how much he'd tried to change recently.

If Justin hadn't been so forthcoming with his information about himself and Kamran, then Leon felt like he might've already resorted to more violent and despicable means that he knew Xaphan and the Thunderbird probably would've recommended. As it was, he was starting to think that their advice of killing his enemies quickly and without mercy held a little more water than he'd recently given it credit for.

It was with all of these thoughts running through his mind that Leon cast his consciousness deep into himself, closing his eyes in rest in the physical world, and opening them upon his throne in his Mind Palace.

The first place he looked was to the table upon which still rested the ruby that Nestor had been imprisoned within. On her perch above sat the Thunderbird in all her avian glory, while Xaphan angrily burned not too far away, his glowing yellow ember-like eyes locked on the ruby and his power called upon and ready just in case Nestor tried anything to escape.

"Did I miss anything?" Leon asked as he stepped down from his throne, using a few errant wisps of mist to do a few superficial repairs to his damaged Mind Palace as he walked as if he were trying to display just how unconcerned he was about the current situation.

"Not much," the Thunderbird replied, her voice booming like thunder. "I was simply speaking with my wayward descendant while you were busy dealing with whatever you were dealing with."

"He say anything interesting?" Leon asked, not surprised too much that none of them were listening to his conversation with Justin.

"A lot of bitter complaining," the Thunderbird replied, her avian face turning up in an approximation of amusement and faint derision.

"I wouldn't go that far," Nestor replied as Leon finally approached the ruby.

"How about you shut your fucking face until we have something to ask you?" Leon asked in a request that was very much *not* a request. "We have some time to ourselves, so let me make something *perfectly* clear here: you are not a guest, you are a *prisoner*. You attempted to steal my body and leave me to rot in my own damn soul realm! If our Ancestor had not convinced me that your knowledge was useful, I would've killed you off for good instead of letting you continue to exist in that little thing."

"Ha!" Nestor cried out in defiant amusement. "You were so eager to accept me into your life before, it would've only been right and proper for you to give up your body for your senior in the Clan!"

Leon rolled his eyes. He wasn't sure if it would work, but in his exasperated anger he extended his left hand let loose with a small gout of flame that enveloped the ruby. He held back a bit on the power as he didn't want to break the thing, but he had to vent his frustrations in some way, even if it wouldn't work all that well.

He was surprised and quite gratified to hear Nestor yelp in pain.

"A bit crude," Leon said as Xaphan began to laugh hysterically not too far away, "so in the next few days, I'll be looking into a better solution for such outbursts. Let me repeat myself: you will speak only when spoken to, and you will earn your keep. If you are not useful, then you will be disposed of. If you are a nuisance, you will be disposed of. By all rights, you should be dead, and if you try pressing my buttons, then I will fix what looks a lot like a mistake right now. You can either fall in line, or spend the paltry remainder of your life entombed in that ruby. Do you understand?"

"You wouldn't *dare*," Nestor replied, only to be answered by another gout of flame from Leon.

The ruby was a relatively fragile thing, but even with all the power he achieved in life, Nestor's magic body was even more fragile. Leon's fire submerged the ruby within it, and Nestor felt the intense heat as well as anyone else, and he hadn't the magic power to protect himself.

He screamed in pain again, and this time, Leon let his fire stay just a little bit longer.

"I'm not going to say this again, '*kinsman*'," Leon said as the fire died down. "I don't care who you were before, not anymore. I don't care if you were the 'Lord of Storm-Shaping' and the 'Chief Researcher' of the Thunderbird Clan. Neither of those will save you if you piss me off, let alone if you try to escape. You

will behave yourself, you will restrain your tongue, and you will be useful. Otherwise, there's no need to keep around a man who did what he did to me."

Just remembering his helplessness at the violation Nestor had subjected him to had Leon fighting the urge to roast him right there without waiting for a response. He found himself dearly hoping for Nestor to mouth off again, if only to give him the excuse to kill him. Given that the Thunderbird hadn't yet stepped in on Nestor's behalf only emboldened Leon, telling him exactly who she was siding with in this conflict as much as it did when she helped him to subdue Nestor in the first place.

The fact that their Ancestor was not coming to his aid seemed to occur to Nestor, too, for Leon could sense his weak magic senses pulse in her direction as the ghostly mage went silent. Leon gave him a few seconds to think things over and come to terms with his situation, a small mercy he granted freely in light of what Nestor could teach him.

But those few seconds passed quickly, and what little goodwill Leon was willing to grant his dead kinsman ran out.

He turned to the Thunderbird and asked, "Is what this shitstick pulled something I'm going to have to watch out for in the future?"

"Yes," the Thunderbird replied, her tone sounding just as amused as she had when Leon returned to his soul realm. "Attacks on soul realms are fairly frequent past a certain level; once you become strong enough to heal from gruesome wounds in seconds, it becomes a more economical use of power to attack an enemy's soul realm rather than continuing to ravage their body. Strictly speaking, possession is rare since it would leave the original body defenseless, but in the case of those without original bodies, such as Nestor here, there are no such risks to temper these actions."

"I'd hardly say there's no risk," Nestor murmured, to which Leon answered with a third blast of fire.

"No one was speaking to you," Leon growled, feeling some cathartic glee in hearing the dead man scream in pain. But, after a second or two, he cut off the stream of fire and said, "Although, I *would* like to speak with you now. How about you? Feeling talkative?"

Leon heard Nestor groaning, and he almost expected the ancient man to defy him somehow, to pridefully give him another reason to roast him. In that expectation, Leon was a little bit disappointed when Nestor sputtered, "W-What do you want to talk about?"

"My expectations," Leon replied, his tone one of slight curiosity and confusion at how easily Nestor had seemingly given in. His paranoia of the man went up, thinking that perhaps Nestor was faking it somehow and just biding his time. "As I said, you were not spared out of any sense of mercy on my part, our Ancestor convincing me to keep you alive with the expectation that you would teach me what you know of enchantments."

"I know a great deal about enchantments," Nestor replied, his voice sliding back into a more cocky growl than the borderline subservience that he'd had only a moment before. "I don't suppose you could be more specific about the kind of knowledge that you seek?"

"I can't, because I want it all," Leon replied. "I want to know every rune in your head, and I want to know how it all works together. *Everything* that you can teach me of enchantments, I want to know."

At that, the Thunderbird finally spoke up.

"It would behoove you, Nestor, to agree. Leon is the last remaining member of our dynasty that yet lives. Any hope we have of seeing our Clan rise again and exact vengeance on those who laid us low rests on his shoulders."

Nestor was silent for a long time before he whispered, "I'd never heard you speak before all of this, and when I do finally attract your attention and get you to speak to me, your words are for the benefit of someone else?" Turning back to Leon, he asked, "What guarantee do I have that you won't just kill me once you decide that I have nothing left to teach you? How can I know that I'll be safe here?"

Leon reached out his hand with the intent to let another gout of flame consume Nestor's ruby for a few seconds, but right before he let loose with his power, he replied, "So long as you prove yourself useful, you'll be kept alive. If you don't prove yourself useful, or if you attempt to subvert me in any way, or try to escape from that ruby, as I no doubt you have the capabilities of doing if left alone long enough, then you'll die. It's that simple. You can take that, or you can die right now."

Nestor was quiet for a long few seconds, and when he spoke again, his voice was laced with bitterness and grudging willingness. "I suppose I have no choice, do I? Very well, Leon Raime, I will teach you whatever you want to know about the art of enchanting."

"And the rest?" Leon asked, not yet lowering his hand, a few sparks of flame erupting from his fingers and landing on the table that held Nestor's ruby.

"I... can accept your conditions..." Nestor grumbled unhappily, a tone which sounded almost magical to Leon's ears.

Leon smiled as his hand dropped back down to his side, his power settling back into his body and losing its fire element.

"Wonderful," he breathed, and the Thunderbird quickly assumed human form, both of their faces bearing mirrored smiles.

"A good choice," the Thunderbird said, her brilliant yellow eyes fixed on Nestor's ruby. "If you had refused even once or continued to protest even further, I would have rescinded my recommendation to young Leon to keep you alive."

Leon, for just a moment, thought he saw the ruby tremble, but he didn't say anything about it. In his mind, though, he thought, *'I think the first thing I'll need to do with this is reinforce the wards that will prevent him from moving...'*

"Do you have any questions for right now?" Nestor asked, clearly trying to ignore the Thunderbird's choice, though from the way his voice trembled, Leon could tell that he was quite hurt by her disregard. If he hadn't tried to steal Leon's body, Leon might've even felt some measure of sympathy for the dead man, but as it was, he just jumped right into this opportunity.

"I was hoping for something of a crash course in golem-craft," he said. "I told you this before, but I ran into golems that you built, as well as stone giants descended from other golems that you left behind. The giants, at least, had achieved sentience."

“Impossible,” Nestor said dismissively. “Sentience, *true* sentience, is impossible to create like that. Sure, there are stories of the Primal Beings that have succeeded in doing so—I think the humans made by the Gods and the demons made by the Devils are the two biggest examples—but for us, even after Apotheosis, we lack such abilities.”

“You dismiss them too easily,” Leon replied.

“For good reason, I’ve attempted to create life in such a way many times. You could even say that it has been my life’s goal, to create fully sentient and self-aware golems.”

“And yet, when told of your success, you ignore and dismiss it out of hand?”

“I would not believe a word you tell me right now,” Nestor shot back, though it was quite understandable in Leon’s eyes. “Anyway, to turn back to the topic at hand, golems are created when a wisp conjured by the divine power of one who has achieved Apotheosis is placed inside of a suitably enchanted frame. The resulting golem is entirely under the control of its creator, unless the creator specifically opens them up for others to manipulate, as I did for most of the golems I created.”

“Seems foolish,” Xaphan muttered as he took a few steps closer. “Such creations shouldn’t just be given away like that...”

“I didn’t ‘just give them away’, you asinine brute,” Nestor venomously replied, almost earning him another blast of fire from Leon, until the younger man decided that constantly using pain as a reinforcement wasn’t going to work too well for his willingness to continue teaching him—though he could tell that it was probably still going to be a staple of his interactions with Nestor for a while, yet. “In presenting them to my family, I expanded the powers we commanded by relieving some of the more laborious tasks that branch kinsman and vassals were saddled with.”

“Is such golem-craft common in the Nexus?” Leon asked as the possibilities for such automatons raced through his mind. A civilization without the need for laborers would be a powerful one, indeed, as its citizens would be able to concentrate their energies on higher pursuits rather than preoccupy themselves with their daily needs.

“No, though it isn’t unheard of,” Nestor replied. “Most of the Elemental Kings—at least, back in my day—had legions of such creations working for them, though even as many as they had wasn’t enough to eliminate the need for manual labor.”

“I see...” Leon responded as he began to think. “This is a truly daunting thing to learn, then, isn’t it?”

“It is one of the most complex uses of the runic arts in existence,” Nestor said. “Not even the mightiest of weapons or the most advanced arks that could travel from the edges of the Void and back to the Nexus can compare to the art of building golems, for golems are not just machines, but extensions of the will of the mage who creates them. They are facsimiles of life, and even these poor reflections of humanity are far more complex than anything else you can care to mention.

Leon smiled, though he doubted Nestor’s claims a bit. At the very least, the mention of weapons and ‘arks’ was something he found intriguing. At least for now, though, he’d focus on the golems. He knew that he would have a long way to go before he was making golems, especially since they required wisps, which he already knew that only those who had achieved Apotheosis could create, but he had hours at

least before he had to ‘wake up’ and set about returning south with his spoils. So, with that in mind, he pushed his lingering anger, frustration, and humiliation out of his head as he addressed the man that had put most of it there, “Then let’s get started laying the groundwork for you to pass on your knowledge...”

Chapter 517: Death of the Thunderbird

For several long hours, Nestor and the young Raime spoke at great length, with Nestor getting a feel for Leon’s current skill in enchanting. By the end of it, he wasn’t particularly enthused about Leon’s skill, but he grudgingly admitted that there was some talent there that could be nourished.

It would have to be nourished another time, however, for Leon had to get at least *some* mental rest during the night, and he still had a few things to discuss with the Thunderbird. So, once he and Nestor were finished—with Nestor going quiet as he contemplated what and how to teach the runic arts to Leon and Xaphan returning to his pavilion to meditate—Leon found and approached his Ancestor a mile or so away from his Mind Palace perched atop a low mountain and gazing out at the forest he had created.

He’d flown to her, and he quietly alighted just behind her. She barely even turned her avian head, choosing instead to continue staring out at Leon’s domain. Leon didn’t press her for speech, though, and simply took up a position right next to her, taking a few minutes to drink in the spectacular multi-colored expanse of flora that spread out before them.

It took a little longer than a few minutes for the Thunderbird to finally break their silence.

“In all my years, I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone build a Mind Palace quite like this,” she said, a hint of both mourning and wonder in her sonorous voice.

“I’m guessing most people take the ‘palace’ part of ‘Mind Palace’ a little too seriously for your tastes?” Leon asked, knowing full well that he’d done the same for his first try.

“They do,” the Thunderbird whispered as she closed her hawk-like eyes as a slow, unnatural breeze wound its way through her feathers. “I enjoy it here. It’s not a perfect replica of the outside world, but to my senses, it hardly matters; I haven’t felt the wind or the light of a proper sun in *solong*... I must thank you for building such a place. Even if you did not do so for me, just being here is a privilege that I treasure.”

Leon felt nothing but honesty radiating from his normally so domineering Ancestor, and it was such an unexpected thing that he almost failed to respond. Contorting his face in surprise, confusion, and embarrassment, Leon simply said, “Yeah... uh, anytime. And... thanks to you... for training me, and for advising me. And for being honest...”

That wasn’t all he wanted to say; he wanted to thank her for choosing him, but the words just didn’t come. After all that had happened over the past few days, admitting how badly he had screwed up and how horrific a situation he’d been in was just a little too much to face right about now.

“So,” he continued in a fairly transparent way of changing the subject, “before I hit the hay, I was hoping to get a couple of questions answered, and maybe a pointer or two from you in defending my soul realm from similar invasions?”

The Thunderbird seemed to smile, though her avian face was incapable of such expression. Her wing closest to Leon twitched and he almost thought she was going to pull him in for a hug, but in the end, she didn't.

"Defending against soul invasions..." she whispered. "That's actually not too difficult. You're doing quite well, so far, you just got incredibly unlucky with the first person who tried being so skilled in ancient runes. Without knowing at least that erasure rune I taught you, such people with that kind of knowledge are nearly untouchable."

"So I learned." Leon grimaced in the direction of his compound and fought back the urge to drag Nestor out of his ruby and try to kick his teeth in.

"The best way to defend yourself is to have something of an army in here," the Thunderbird said. "I told you when you first came here to treat this place as if it were real, for it *is* a real place. That should be quite obvious, given how much physical material you store here..."

Leon nodded, though he wasn't quite sure where she was taking this. It was easy enough to think of his soul realm as real—he stored so much here and even Xaphan could exist within it. But he had a little more trouble thinking of it as a place properly connected to the physical universe.

"Does this mean I'll have to start building defenses in here?" he hesitantly asked as his eyes scanned the brilliant forest, his enthusiasm to see it marred by castles and fortresses quite low, but his willingness was high enough that he wouldn't hesitate if it were necessary.

"Not necessarily," the Thunderbird replied, giving him a little bit of comfort. "Doing so wouldn't be discouraged, of course, but I wouldn't say that soul invasions are a popular tactic in the Nexus; as I told you before, to attack someone's soul realm means that a person's magic body has to leave their physical body, their *mind* leaves their physical body, and their physical body is thusly left incredibly vulnerable as little more than an empty shell capable of breathing and not much else. That's not to say it doesn't happen, especially not with some of the more powerful figures in the Nexus who can afford to protect someone's physical body, but such attacks are not so frequent I should think that you need to start building walls and moats and castles in here.

"No, what you need instead is an army."

"An army..." Leon drily stated, his eyes practically shooting up into his hairline in skepticism. "I don't even think most people can *come* here..."

"I don't mean bring people from outside *in*," the Thunderbird countered. "Instead, once you achieve Apotheosis, you'll need to dedicate some of your time to creating wisps and having them maintain and defend this place for you. They'll be your first line of defense against anything attempting to replicate Nestor's assault on your soul realm. Various enchantments will be your second line, and you and anyone else that you have in here will be your third and final line."

"You just said that you *weren't* encouraging me to bring other people in here..."

"And I'm not, but as it stands, you already have two others here not including me who will aid you in defending your soul realm. That living match has already done so, though he predictably failed. Bringing

others into your soul realm is a tremendous risk, but there's no reason not to use what you already have."

Leon reluctantly nodded.

"Besides, there'll be a time when your soul realm may even be connected to the rest of the universe," the Thunderbird continued, causing Leon to look at her in shock.

"How would *that* work?" he wondered aloud. "Why would I even *want* that? Wouldn't directly connecting my soul realm to the universe just make it vulnerable to anyone who came across it?"

The Thunderbird shrugged as much as her avian frame would allow. "Depends on the nature of that connection," she said. "By that time, though, it'll hardly be something you'll need to worry about. Forging such a connection is something *far* beyond your capabilities. It's even something beyond just about anyone below the level of an Elemental King if my estimations of their power are correct."

Leon frowned, but he accepted her judgment. There was a great deal more in the world of magic that awaited him, so much more left to discover and learn about beyond even Apotheosis. He had no idea what kind of power he might wield if he ever reached the end of that line, if there even *was* an 'end' to that line.

But, with the Thunderbird's mentioning of the Elemental Kings, and with her brief spiel regarding his soul realm defenses seemingly over, Leon turned to something else he wanted to ask her.

"When speaking with Justin, he told me of a man named 'Khosrow'..."

Leon wasn't sure what to expect when he said that name in the Thunderbird's presence. Stoic indifference, most likely, with the Thunderbird regarding the man with the dispassion of one who thinks himself *far* above the subject of the question. He expected to maybe get a little bit of a more unbiased view of the man from the Thunderbird, assuming she even knew who he was.

He was not expecting the Thunderbird to suddenly freeze up as the sky above them turned black with storm clouds in the blink of an eye. He didn't expect lightning to dance around the peaks of distant mountains, or for deafening thunder to come crashing down upon his soul realm a few seconds later. He never would've guessed that the Thunderbird would turn to face him, fury etched into every line of her avian face, her eyes burning silver-blue, her aura skyrocketing and filled with killing intent.

"Khosrow..." she growled, sounding far more like she had the first few times Leon had seen her years ago, like the spirit of a furious and vengeful god rather than the softer and gentler tones of a mentor and their student.

The Thunderbird's gaze bore deep into Leon while her tremendous aura settled around his shoulders like a rucksack of bricks on a mortal.

"For what reason did that man invoke the name of the dead?" the Thunderbird demanded, her voice resounding in Leon's ears like a hammer to his eardrums; Leon barely managed to remain standing as his head shook and he almost lost his sense of balance as her killing intent swept over him.

After taking a moment or two to right himself, Leon asked, "He was—he was just explaining the political establishment in the wake of the fall of the Primal Gods and Devils!"

The Thunderbird stared back down at him for a long moment, her blazing silver-blue eyes seeming to search through his entire being, seeking any hint of deceit. Of course, she found none, and when it became apparent to her that Leon wasn't lying, she averted her gaze and went silent. The dark clouds overhead slowly dissipated, the thunder was silenced, and the lightning in the distance ceased.

When the Thunderbird turned back to Leon, her eyes had returned to their usual shade of eagle-yellow.

"I... apologize, Leon," she said softly, her voice no longer hitting Leon like a ton of bricks. "I lost myself a little, there. Khosrow and I... have history. *Bloody* history."

"I think that was obvious," Leon replied as he fought off the last few traces of killing intent that the Thunderbird had suffused the air with.

"I... Allow me to explain why," the Thunderbird said as she shifted back into her human form. Her bronze physique practically sparkled with health in the light of Leon's soul realm, but she had a terrible look of hatred and dread in her eyes that sent shivers down Leon's spine, and when she spoke again, she did so with a grim tone, one that held no traces of levity or unseriousness.

"Khosrow... is the man who killed me," she said, and Leon immediately understood her anger for the man. "I was one of the last of the Ascended Beasts alive in the Nexus during the wars at the end of the Primal Age. I'd outlived all seven of the Great Dragons, I'd seen the fall of the Primal Gods, and I'd even participated in bringing the Primal Devils to their reckoning. And yet, when Khosrow and I fought, I lost."

"Why did you two fight?" Leon asked. "Was it for any particular reason? Or was it just because you were one of the 'Old Guard', so to speak?"

"I attacked him," the Thunderbird replied. "I did so with three of my closest friends at my side, the Heavenly Wolf, Cait Sith—an Ascended panther strong in the ways of darkness magic—and Bennu—one of the first children of the Phoenix, and the only one of her progeny to be born as a Phoenix rather than a human. Not long after the last of the great campaigns had been fought and he'd established his new order, Khosrow, the Great Lord of all mankind, lead a final push toward our lands since we refused to bow to him and acknowledge the changes he'd brought to the universe. To do so would've meant to acknowledge his supremacy over us. So, we went out to meet him in battle."

"And you lost?" Leon asked apprehensively, his opinion of Khosrow diminishing quite a bit.

"Yes and no," the Thunderbird replied. "I and my friends perished, but our Clans survived. Khosrow was mortally wounded in the battle, and his followers took him away to try and heal him. Wherever they took him, they did not succeed, for Khosrow was never seen again. His campaign was halted in its tracks, and my Clan went on to seize the title of Storm King only a few millennia later when Khosrow's handpicked Elemental King of lightning ended his own long life.

"It took a long time for me to realize what had happened and to reorient myself to my new position. It wasn't until my children and grandchildren had passed on that I was able to directly speak with my descendants as easily as I am with you right now. But I was informed that Khosrow had disappeared after that fight. The wounds we inflicted him were mortal, though, as much as any wounds could be. His body had been ravaged, his soul realm had been destroyed, and his magic body had been torn asunder. With the magic left in his physical body, he couldn't have lasted longer than a few days after being carried off that battlefield, and indeed, he was never seen again."

“He must’ve been incredibly powerful to stand against you four all alone...” Leon said, though in his tone was the implied question of whether or not Khosrow *had* fought them alone.

“He was the most powerful human I had ever seen,” the Thunderbird replied. “Even to this day, I have never seen a human exceed his capabilities. He’d brought his soul realm *into* the universe as a physical place, making it nearly impossible to destroy and granting him a great deal of power over the physical world. He could essentially create things at will in the physical world using the Mists of Chaos, just as you can here in your soul realm.”

Leon’s eyes went wide. “He could... just *create*?” he asked in wonder.

“He could,” the Thunderbird confirmed. “In him, humanity finally had an answer for the greatest powers that the Gods and Devils could command, including their great collections of Universe Fragments. He could also teleport across the universe practically at will, and so long as his soul realm existed, his body could not be destroyed. It also drank in much of the power from the Nexus, granting him magical might beyond what any other being at the time could muster, with the sole exceptions of the Kings of the Primal Gods and Devils and the Great Dragons.”

“How did those beings fall, then, if they were so powerful?” Leon asked.

“Khosrow led all of humanity,” the Thunderbird explained. “He did not face them alone. They took grievous casualties, but humanity has never wanted for replacements. Their nearly endless hordes, the allies Khosrow had made—including me, for a time—and the timing of his strikes—usually right after the Gods and Devils had worn themselves down by fighting each other—allowed him to come out on top in these wars and usher in this age of humanity.”

Leon nodded in understanding, though he couldn’t help but find some admiration for Khosrow bloom in his heart, even if the man had wound up being an enemy of his Clan, in the end. More than that, though, he found himself imagining himself with all of that power, to be able to create whatever he wanted at will and to have an effectively limitless supply of magic power.

“So, he’s dead,” he said after a few seconds of fantasizing. “That resonates with what Justin revealed about him. It seems like the system he built endures, and that he’s greatly venerated in the Nexus.”

The Thunderbird clicked her tongue. “Such veneration shall never be found within me. Khosrow was greedy and duplicitous, he deserved a painful death!”

Leon smiled bitterly, recognizing much of his own anger in his Ancestor. Khosrow had, by her own admission, been an ally of hers, at least for a time, but the two of them had wound up killing each other.

And now, it was Leon’s goal to find a way to reclaim his Clan’s position within that system.

As he considered that, Leon couldn’t help but frown. It seemed that Khosrow’s Law wasn’t going to be kind to him, if Justin’s accounts of how those with Inherited Bloodlines were treated was anything to go by.

If that was going to be the case, then he wasn’t sure if he wanted a place *in* Khosrow’s Law.

“There must be a way...” he murmured aloud as something occurred to him, something more ambitious than just about anything else he’d ever considered. The Thunderbird turned to look at him, but Leon didn’t say anything more.

If Khosrow’s Law was as definite as it seemed, having survived for millions of years, then what Leon had the sudden urge to do was madness. He clamped down hard on that urge—a single person couldn’t *possibly* challenge that system, they couldn’t *possibly* build one of their own to replace it...

‘*Could they?*’ Leon wondered as a smile of desire spread across his face. If he could reclaim his family’s old titles and powers as the Storm King, then maybe...

The smile on his face grew wider as a hint of ambition glittered in his golden eyes.

Chapter 518: Leaving the Lab

It was a fairly short night for Leon, mostly because of his conversations with the Thunderbird, Nestor, and starting his tutelage under the latter. A lot had been given to him to think about and to practice, and now he was greatly looking forward to returning home and getting in some much needed rest.

One thing that he still had to figure out, however, was his relationship with Valeria. Now that he and her father had made their peace, even if Leon wasn’t ever going to forget what Justin had done, there was little reason for their relationship to stay the same. He knew that he was definitely attracted to her, and that the only real reason he’d stayed away from her was because of Justin.

Now, that obstacle was gone, and Leon wasn’t sure whether or not he wanted to try and see where the two of them might go. At the very least, though, he knew that Elise would probably be ecstatic, and even if he didn’t do anything immediately, she’d probably start to pressure him to make a decision.

As Maia began to stir beside him, Leon smiled in a self-deprecating way. Here he was with a gorgeous woman snuggled up against him and another one waiting for him back in Vale Town, and yet his thoughts were filled with romantic notions about a third.

‘*Maybe I’m a greedy person?*’ Leon wondered half-seriously, which began to grow more serious the more he thought about it.

If neither Elise nor Maia minded, and Valeria wanted to explore their relationship, then Leon thought they could all make it work between them. There wasn’t much of a reason to hesitate anymore.

And yet, hesitate he did. As much as he wanted Valeria and as much as his greedy side—he briefly wondered if this was influenced by his draconic ancestor, though he hardly had any proof that that side of him had any great influence upon him—demanded that he go to her immediately and make her his woman, his calmer, more rational side was telling him to wait. After all that had happened over the past couple of days, he wanted to know where she stood. With her father back, she might want to devote her time to helping Justin heal and regain his lost power rather than being with Leon and his two other lovers; she hadn’t expressed much interest in Elise or Maia, after all, so she had fewer options for physical and emotional fulfillment than his other lovers did. She’d have to give up a share of his attention to the others that she otherwise would have from anyone else, while potentially getting no attention from them in return.

Leon couldn't help but frown as he considered that possibility. He didn't want her to leave, and he felt like he owed her at least a little bit for following him so far—despite helping her to find her father and paying her the salary that she'd asked for months ago.

"What are you thinking about so early?" Maia asked, her voice straining from just having woken up, her eyes squinting as they struggled to stay open even in the near-total darkness of Nestor's unpowered lab.

Leon smiled at her as she stretched in his arms, and said, "Us. You, me, Elise. I had a question for you, though... when you think about our future, is it just us three that you see? Can you imagine anyone else there with us?"

Maia froze for a moment, then turned her lake-blue eyes toward Leon, narrowing them slightly.

"I assume you're talking about someone in particular?" she asked.

Leon, without hesitation, replied, "Valeria."

Maia averted her gaze, and Leon thought for a moment that she was about to blow up at him. Instead, she simply murmured, "You could do worse."

Leon was silent for a long moment after she said that. Through their connection, he couldn't feel any rage or hatred, but he couldn't feel much of anything else, either. He sighed, supposing that this was probably about as positive a reaction as he was going to get from her, especially given how mistrustful and antagonistic Maia had treated Valeria over the past few weeks.

"Maia," Leon whispered, feeling her tense up a moment as the power of him saying her true name hit her body, "that wasn't really an answer..."

Maia pushed herself against Leon a little more, though Leon figured that was mostly instinctive after he used her name. That certainty, however, was called into question when a moment later Maia responded, "I don't mind. She's not bad. You could do worse."

"I'd prefer if you could look at me when you say that, and if you could be more specific," Leon said, gently taking her chin in one of his hands and tilting her head up to look at him. "This is a gigantic decision that will affect the rest of our lives. I don't want this to be a convenience thing, or a snap decision. I get the feeling that you're not totally sold on this, though, so I'll wait for your answer. If yes, we'd probably be adding another member to our family, because I know that Elise will say yes, and I'm coming around to the idea, as well. If no, then our family will remain us and Elise. Whatever happens next has to be unanimous among us.

"And if you do say that it's fine, that you give your consent for this, I want you to know that you will never take second place to Valeria. None of you will be ignored. That, I'd swear on my soul realm, on my blood, and on my name."

Leon had felt a few twinges of uncertainty and fear as he was speaking, leading him to need to affirm their relationship again. No matter what happened, he wanted to take the path of greatest happiness and least regrets for everyone.

"While you think about it, we should probably get up. We've got a long way to go before we get home, and I'd like to get going as soon as possible."

Maia nodded and slid out of his arms.

The two were silent as they dressed and left the room they'd hunkered down in for the night. Only a minute or two later, they were knocking on the door where they'd left Valeria and Justin the night before, and after a few seconds, the door slid open to reveal both silver-haired people dressed and wide-awake.

"There you are!" Valeria cried out as she opened the door, her face split in a huge smile that seemed completely at odds with her usual reserved stoicism and the terribly stressful few days they'd suffered through. Her demeanor was so bright that it almost seemed to cut through the darkness of the powerless facility. "I almost thought I was going to have come find you two and wake you up!"

"Sorry," Leon said as he and Maia slipped into the room. "Didn't realize we were so late..."

"It's not that late," Justin said from the sofa he'd obviously slept on, his voice and appearance a little more energetic than it had been the day before, "my daughter is just eager to return to the Bull Kingdom." His face was illuminated by a small orb of light hovering over a sheet of spell paper which Leon recognized as a small candlelight spell that Valeria had clearly packed. With the facility's power crystal now in his possession, it was the only light by which the now-mortal Justin could see.

"There's not much else for us to do here, is there?" Valeria asked.

"Not that I can think of," Leon replied. "I think it's best if we leave as soon as we can. Put all of this behind us."

"I think that's about the best idea that's ever been had," Valeria replied.

"I don't know," Leon said as he slowly walked over in Justin's direction, "putting cheese on pasta was a spectacular idea, whoever first thought of that was a damned genius. Hopefully, we'll be able to at least approach its ingenuity with whatever we come up with to get you back south..."

Justin raised an eyebrow in amusement. "I assumed I was going to walk," he said half-sarcastically.

"No," Leon definitively replied. "There is too much awful, terrible, murderous stuff between us and the Bull Kingdom for us to be slowed down by someone as injured as you."

"I'm aware, I was only joking," Justin said, cracking a brief smile. "Perhaps a litter with an air rune to make it float? Tie me down well enough and you'll be able to easily run without worrying too much about me keeping up."

Leon nodded. This was a fairly common tactic down in the Bull Kingdom, and he had no reason to think it wouldn't work here. Fortunately, since Maia and Valeria had trashed the room when the golems attacked and most of the furniture had been destroyed, they had no shortage of wood to work with. Their only problem was finding enough of sufficient size and getting it all stuck together—the nails that had been used in the creation of the furniture all had strange twisted ridges that Leon could guess made them much better than straight nails, but they had no way to get them into the wood in a timely manner. After about half an hour, though, they'd found enough wood to make a litter, used ice as ad-hoc adhesive, and Leon put the requisite glyph on the bottom, letting the litter float a little more than three feet off the ground.

It looked like crap and Leon anticipated it falling apart sooner rather than later, but for what tools they had available to them, it was about the best they could do.

A moment later, Leon picked Justin up and gently set him down upon the litter, testing its strength. Once they were confident that it was as stable and secure as was feasible, they immediately set off for the entrance of the facility.

It was depressing walking through the place after having seen how majestic it was only twenty-four hours before, and the small group didn't speak much until they'd walked out the front door. Leon paused a moment to contemplate trying to take the eyes of the wrecked Thunderbird colossus, guessing that they would've made for great enchanting material, but decided against it; he just didn't want to spend that much time here, and he figured that if the eyes were needed badly enough, he'd always be able to come back when he was stronger get them.

It was barely even dawn when they exited the facility, which cheered everyone up a little. It meant that they had plenty of time to move, and they spent it as well as they could getting across the grassy field. Leon set a quick pace, but didn't quite go fast enough to tax anyone's abilities as he was keeping an eye on Justin's litter. Justin seemed a little uncomfortable, especially with the ice that had been used in its creation, but it remained aloft, and Leon didn't care about much else.

As they made their way through the field, Leon had a brief thought about taking the corpses of the ice demons, but a quick inspection with his magic senses indicated that there would be little point. Their corpses clearly still had some power in them since they were frosting over the grass around them, but the power was weak that Leon didn't think it would be worth it. Like the colossus' eyes, he was sure they'd be waiting for him if he ever decided to return.

The Gorgon's tunnel was thankfully still there, but no one relaxed until they emerged on the other side.

There was little conversation as they bolted into the trees. They made no attempt to be stealthy since they figured that there was nothing they could do to escape the notice of the stronger beings in the Forest of Black and White, so their priority was to get east across the troll's bridge as soon as they could.

In that, they made good time. Their rapid pace had them passing the pillar and the lake where they'd encountered the Gorgon before noon, and by the time the sun was starting to dip low in the sky, they'd reached the troll's bridge without any notable incidents. Leon and Maia had managed to steer them clear of most threats, and they moved fast enough that they weren't ambushed by any ice wraiths. A few silvers then changed hands from Leon to the troll, and all four were able to easily cross the bridge.

From there, Leon led them on almost a straight shot north, making for the Heartwood Grove. There were no other safe places to rest for the night, so even though he wasn't sure if they'd make it or not, he pushed them on regardless.

It was a fairly hard journey for all of them, but especially for Justin. Despite Leon's well-crafted enchantment keeping the litter afloat in the air, it was still a ramshackle thing, and with Leon pulling it and being none-too-gentle, Justin was tossed and thrown around rather more than was comfortable. But he wasn't about to complain; he'd lost essentially all of his companions that had come with him to Aeterna in this place, he could deal with a bit of discomfort to reach safety before it got too dark.

Fortunately, the group reached the Heartwood Grove just before the last rays of sunlight vanished behind the distant mountains. It had been a hard run of more than fifty miles through rough terrain and with the stressful knowledge that slowing down even a little bit meant likely death, but they had made it just barely in time.

None of them were in the mood to set up much in the way of sleeping arrangements. They simply found a good place to collapse, and did so. For all intents and purposes, their business was done in the Forest of Black and White, barring one last trip Leon wanted to make to his old home and Maia's request to visit the Gorgon once more; everyone was eager to reunite with Elise—at least, everyone but Justin, on that front—and return south.

Chapter 519: Justin's Request

When Leon's group awoke in the Heartwood Grove, the sun was already high in the sky, showing that they had all been much more tired than they had realized—they'd slept for more than twelve hours. Without the unknown fate of Justin or a mysterious Thunderbird Clan base in the mountains to push them onward, however, no one was in too much of a hurry to leave.

As a result, Leon said that it ought to be fine for everyone to rest up for the day in the grove and return eastward the following day.

It was a relief for the other three, perhaps especially for Justin since he wasn't looking forward to another rushed trip strapped to the litter. As with the previous time they'd visited, the peace and quiet of the grove weighed heavily upon all of them, and Maia and Valeria found themselves going off to be alone among the Heartwood trees despite everything that had happened recently.

Leon, however, didn't follow suit. He almost did, which would've left Justin alone—not that he seemed to mind since he let Valeria leave with nothing more than a nod of acceptance—but Justin instead asked Leon to stay for a few minutes.

"What is it?" Leon asked with some confusion and suspicion as he paused and turned back around to look at Justin, who was laying back on a bedroll, his body still too weak to move much on his own.

"I was just hoping we could stay to talk a little bit," Justin replied, his voice sounding much stronger than his appearance suggested, leading Leon to think that maybe it wasn't so much weakness that was keeping him down as it was needing to learn to move again without all of his power granting him superhuman strength and speed. The loss of the mental enhancements that came with the fourth-tier likely didn't help matters, either.

Leon stole a glance off into the grove. The grove was calling to him, and the vague tickling sensation he felt running down his spine had him thinking that it wasn't just an esoteric expression of his desire to be alone in nature. However, he reluctantly turned back toward Justin and sat down in comfortable speaking range.

"What do you want to talk about?" Leon asked.

"I... wanted to apologize to you," Justin said, his gaze lowering in an expression of shame. "When you pulled me out of those vines and during our conversation after, I said many things that I now regret. Worse than that, however, is what I have done to your family. I know that words will never erase what

I've done, but I hope that they can at least be a place for me to start making amends. I know that you must hate me and that staying your blade when I was at your mercy was more than I could ever deserve, and for that, I will forever be grateful."

Leon's eyes narrowed in mild suspicion while the rest of his face contorted in surprise. Justin had, indeed, said many things that led Leon to think that he didn't regret his actions. To hear an apology break from his mouth was something he never thought would've happened, and especially not so soon.

"Where is all of this coming from?" Leon asked after a moment of stunned silence as Justin gave him some time to process his statement.

"After you and your river nymph companion left us, my daughter and I had a long talk," Justin replied with a heavy tone and a heavier look. "She helped me to get a little bit of perspective, to see beyond my current situation. I... was not in the proper state of mind when I asked you to kill me, and that you didn't despite what I've done is a mercy that I don't deserve. But Valeria helped me to see what might be with your help. What the future might hold if I help you. She helped me to see what my wife might think of me if I don't turn back from the course I've laid out for myself and upon which I've already traveled a long way."

Leon began to slightly frown the more he heard. The way Justin was acting now was a little more in line with the man that Valeria had claimed him to be, but Leon couldn't help but think that it was a ruse, some kind of trick to get him to lower his guard for when Justin had the strength to act against him again.

However, perhaps a little more telling about Justin's thoughts about him was the fact that he hadn't apologized for the dehumanizing things he'd said about Leon and others with Inherited Bloodlines.

"Leon," Justin continued, "let me say this in no uncertain terms, for I want there to be no doubt as to their meaning. I am sorry for coming here to kill you. I am sorry that I killed your father, uncle, and grandfather. These were not honorable acts, and I regret them very much."

Leon remained silent, unsure how to take Justin's apology. It was so blatant that it couldn't be ignored, but Leon was at least grateful that it didn't come when he and Justin were in the company of others. If other people heard those words, it would put pressure on Leon, whether it would be stated or not, for it would be expected of him to forgive Justin, or to at least say that he did.

"I... need to think about that," Leon finally said after a long moment of silence.

"I understand," Justin replied. "Such crimes that I have committed against you and your family are not those that can be easily forgiven, if they can be forgiven at all. I can only ask for your patience and mercy to allow me to show you my contrition. If you have need of anything that I can provide, then you only need to ask for it, and it shall be yours."

"Such promises are dangerous," Leon said with a sly look, trying to put what had just happened behind them with some slightly less-serious talk.

"And yet, they are necessary if we are to move forward," Justin responded. "I understand that you intend to aid my daughter in rescuing my wife from Kamran?"

"We hadn't really worked out any details, but I was intending on doing that," Leon said. If Valeria joined his family, as he was starting to allow himself to hope that she might, then her mother would be part of his family, too. He was already intending on finding his own mother, besides, so what was another?

"Naturally, I will do everything I can do to aid you in that goal, as well," Justin said. "I may have sunk to a dark place during my captivity, but I now hope to make things up to you, to patch things up with my daughter, and rescue my wife. I can't do any of that powerless. Would my regaining power be an issue for you, Leon?"

Leon gave him a long, hard look. There were always magical oaths he could ask Justin to swear to, but he wasn't sure how effective they would be on someone who had lost their soul realm. As he thought on the problem more, he figured that a bit of trust could go a long way. Justin as he was now was no threat, and so long as Leon kept up with his training, he never would be. He doubted he'd reach the Nexus anytime soon, so there could be decades or even centuries for him to watch Justin and look for any signs of betrayal.

In short, it was risky, but not as much as it appeared on the surface.

"I don't have an issue with it..." Leon said with an ominous warning, leaving any threats he might've been tempted to make unsaid. But with the serious and weighty way that Justin nodded his head in gratitude, Leon had a feeling that the man had gotten the message anyway.

"Now, then, Leon," Justin continued, "there was something else I was hoping to bring up with you..."

"What is it?" Leon asked, his irritation rising for a moment before he smothered it. He wanted to head out into the grove and spend some time relaxing amongst the trees, not speak with Justin, despite how consequential their talks might be.

"I said many things to you the other day, one of them being how people like you, those with Inherited Bloodlines are treated in the Nexus."

Leon nodded.

"Things are not as cut-and-dry as I made them out to be, there are many in the Nexus who hold no grudges against your kind, and many who openly prefer alliances and friendships with those of bestial lineages..."

Leon had to stifle a grimace—even though it seemed like he was choosing his words and thinking about what he was saying, Justin still wasn't using the most *flattering* of language.

"... But there are many more who openly despise your people and put in great work to lay them low."

"Yes, and you said that Kamran is one of them."

"Yes, yes he is. To be one of your kind in the Nexus is not a safe position... and neither is it to be *attached* to one like you."

"Are you scared?" Leon asked, his tone more incredulous than accusatory. It almost sounded like Justin was about to try and convince him not to go to the Nexus.

“Not for me,” Justin gravely answered. “My words were honest and genuine when I said I would aid you. If you go to the Nexus, then I shall be at your back, fighting alongside you with all that I have. No, my concern is for my daughter...”

One of Leon’s eyebrows elevated, but he didn’t interrupt despite Justin leaving enough room for him to interject.

“Are you interested in Valeria?” Justin pointedly asked, not beating around the bush.

Leon almost burst out laughing. When they first met, he’d been incredibly attracted to her. She was gorgeous, to be sure, and her body seemed almost tailored to his preferences, but he’d spent so long trying to convince himself not to think that way about her that he was a little worried he’d internalized it somewhat. Even with his thoughts of the past day or so leading him to try and see if she might be willing to join his family, he still felt an instinctive rejection begin in his throat and almost make it past his lips.

But he caught himself. Justin was treating this with deadly seriousness, if his expression was anything to go by, and since it concerned his and Valeria’s future relationship, Leon didn’t want to treat it with anything less than the same.

“I am,” Leon replied, and for clarification he added, “Physically, romantically, intellectually, no matter how you might want to phrase it, I am interested in her.”

Justin sagged into his bedroll. “I was worried that you were,” he murmured in dejection. “It was clear to me that she had some interest in you from how she spoke of you, but then she confirmed it before we left that place...”

“You make it sound like that’s the worst possible thing in the world,” Leon said, part of himself wondering if he ought to be offended by Justin’s tone.

“It is,” Justin replied, causing that part of Leon to become a little more persuasive. “It would be better if the two of you remain separate. To be attached like that to someone like you is a terribly dangerous thing. She will already be putting herself in great danger in following you to the Nexus, but if she were to bear you a child, she would eternally doom herself in the Nexus. In the incredibly likely scenario that you should fail, then her fate would be to join you in death. But if you two are separate, it would improve her chances of surviving your suicidal stand against Kamran. I cannot see that happen to her, she is all I have left...”

“You don’t ‘have’ her,” Leon growled, his offense having grown practically with every word that Justin spoke. “She is her own person, and so am I. What we are to each other is none of your business. I’m guessing she understands the risks?”

“She does, I explained them to her when we spoke,” Justin replied, his tone indicating to Leon that Valeria hadn’t taken his warning to heart, especially since he was now entreating him to leave her alone. “For her own safety, it would be for the best if you and she maintained a certain distance—”

“Did you say all that because you’re genuinely concerned about her, or because you don’t want any hypothetical child she might have to be mine as well?” Leon demanded, his voice remaining quiet and steady, though taking on dangerous tones as killing intent started to wind its way through his aura. “As a

matter of fact, is that the reason you wanted to apologize in the first place? So that I might feel a little more inclined to take you at your word and stay away from her?"

"No!" Justin insisted. "I meant every word! I intend to aid you as much as I can in your quest to take your revenge! But my daughter means *everything* to me, and I can't just sit by and not do anything while she throws away any future she might have outside of you!"

Leon rose from where he was seated, glaring at Justin like a hawk eyeing prey, his golden eyes glittering the light of the sun that shone through the leaves of the nearby Heartwood Trees.

"What we become, where we take our relationship, is *none* of your business," Leon said with a tone of finality, any notion of Justin possibly following through with his promise to do anything he asked vanishing like it hadn't ever been said. He wasn't sure if he could possibly say anything more without raising his voice or even possibly getting violent if Justin continued to insist, so instead of further escalating things, he simply turned away from Justin and walked out into the trees, leaving the silver-haired man to wallow there alone and on the brink of tears, unable to move, unable to do anything besides just lay there and fear the future.

Chapter 520: Maia's Answer

The further Leon went into the Heartwood Glade, the more furious he became at Justin's 'apology'. While the apology itself had seemed genuine enough, Justin had not once said anything about feeling sorry for his attitude towards those with Inherited Bloodlines, showcasing that the attitude that allowed him to do what he did with a fairly clear conscience hadn't changed. What was more, he showed his true colors when he got to the *real* reason why he wanted to talk: to try and convince Leon to not get together with Valeria.

Leon, if he were being honest with himself, only wanted Valeria more after Justin said that. He even toyed with the idea of going to find Valeria as he walked away from Justin just to spite the man.

But he recognized that as a dangerous mindset to have. He knew that Valeria loved her father, for all his faults, and she wouldn't appreciate that kind of motive. Besides, while Leon was hardly the greatest social expert, he was still able to perceive that starting a relationship out of spite wasn't a good way to make it last.

So, instead of heading off to find Valeria, he instead decided to take a longer walk through the grove to clear his head. He needed to plan how to get back south to Teira, something which he figured would take at least a week even at the fastest. He had to get the items he'd buried in his old home, Maia had to meet with the Gorgon, he had to revisit Xaphan's prison and take the large power storage crystal there, and he had to visit the archives below Argent Palace.

After all of that, though, he didn't know quite what he would do. Without any further trouble in the Bull Kingdom that had him constantly moving around, without anyone in the Royal Legions to answer to, Leon felt kind of lost. He felt a brief pang of loss in his chest as he remembered Trajan; the Prince had done many things for Leon, but one that he was only now starting to appreciate was the sense of order and structure that Trajan gave him. Leon rarely had to wonder what he was going to do like he was now in that brief year and a half he was with Trajan.

'Maybe some time to not do much of anything...' he mused, the idea appealing to him. Some time alone to be with Elise, Maia, and Valeria while whiling away his days in his enchanting workshop sounded utterly delightful. He'd have to go further south at some point, if only to investigate the other points on the map from the Cradle, and he had to visit the stone giants at least one more time to hand over their dead.

He'd make time for the stone giants soon, but heading further south wasn't something he necessarily needed to do with any urgency. Now that Justin had been taken out of the picture, he could just as easily stick around in the Bull Kingdom for a few years while he spent his time learning from the Thunderbird and Nestor, brushing up his skills and power until he was in a more secure position. He didn't want to find himself completely powerless down in the Four Empires where the vast majority of locations on the Cradle's map were located.

As for what he was going to make with those refined skills and powers, well... he had some ideas. Upgrades to his flight suit, building magic weapons into his armor, some defensive wards that he'd thought up and wanted to experiment with, and maybe even some things that weren't directly related to combat if he was feeling particularly adventurous.

As Leon walked through the grove, his thoughts filled with the possibilities of the future, he sensed something that pulled him right back to reality: hints of a powerful aura that was completely alien to the peaceful and serene nature of the grove. Not violent, not acting against the peace of the Heartwood trees, but definitely something that had him feeling a little bit concerned.

Leon projected his magic senses, and when he saw the source of that aura, he didn't know if he should be terrified, mildly irritated, or happy that something on his list of things he needed to do was being taken care of so soon.

The Gorgon was in the grove, and she was meeting with Maia.

He paused and simply surveyed the scene. His instinct was to rush over and investigate, but Maia didn't seem to be in any danger judging by her body language, and the feelings he could perceive through their connection didn't lead him to think that she was in any distress. If anything, she seemed completely at ease, silently speaking with the Gorgon about something. Hells, Maia and the Gorgon were even in the natural state of river nymphs: without a stitch of clothing on.

At least, Leon initially assumed that the woman Maia was speaking with was still a Gorgon. It was certainly the same being that his group had encountered several days before, but after a few moments, he saw her step out of the pond that she and Maia had been sharing. As with all beings of their nature, they had merged with the water, leaving their lower halves invisible to his eyes.

However, when the Gorgon stepped out of the pond, what she revealed wasn't a long serpentine tail, but a pair of shapely human legs that could entice lust out of just about any lady-lover in the world. Leon couldn't help but stare for a few seconds before he shook his head and pulled his mind out of the gutter.

So, the Gorgon was no longer a Gorgon, at least as far as he could tell. Now that he knew that something had changed, he could sense a similar change in her aura, with it seeming a little more 'fluid', if such a term could even describe such things. It flowed and ebbed with a water-like fluidity, in contrast to the

heavier and less 'active' aura she had before, which made sense if she were changing from a creature of stone magic to one of water magic.

It wasn't until the Gorgon—the term no longer applied, but Leon had no idea what else to call her—turned her head in his direction and smiled that he realized he'd been staring and that she'd caught him. A moment later, Maia turned in his direction and flashed him a brilliant smile and an inviting wave of her hand.

Leon took a deep breath to steady himself and to bolster his resolve not to stare at the nude Gorgon, then began to walk over. As he approached, a similarly nude Maia held out her arm to him, and when he gratefully took it, she gently pulled him into the water, completely disregarding the water that soaked his clothes.

[What's going on?] he asked with concern, though with the Gorgon just standing there smiling at the two of them, he wasn't quite as on-edge as he otherwise thought he would've been.

[She was waiting for us to return,] Maia replied, keeping her fingers tightly intertwined with his. [She wanted to show us that her cure worked.]

"It worked?" Leon asked aloud.

[It did,] the Gorgon replied. [I am no longer afflicted with the curse of Gorgonism, as you should be able to tell...]

With a theatrical flourish, the former-Gorgon spun around, showing off her enviable body seemingly without a single care.

"It seems... very obvious," Leon replied as he shamelessly took a closer look—if she didn't care about her state of undress, then he resolved not to, either. However, what he at first thought he might see—some kind of sign that her legs were illusory or otherwise not real—he only saw real flesh. Just smooth ivory skin, toned thighs and calves, hips just right for...

He averted his gaze back to Maia before he could let that line of thought continue. His river nymph lover clearly sensed his mental state, because she only laughed and pressed herself closer to him with a mirthful look in her eyes. He guessed that she might have some things to say about his wandering eyes, but given what he could feel through their connection, he didn't think those things would necessarily be all that bad.

[I have to wonder,] the former-Gorgon said as she finished her pirouette and stepped back into the water, submerging her restored legs about up to her knees, [does this change anything between you two?]

Leon cocked an eyebrow as he looked back to the former-Gorgon. He felt Maia momentarily freeze up and he picked up out of the corner of his eye a brief glare sent the former-Gorgon's way, and he wondered what that was about. Making him even more confused was a hint of fear that he felt in Maia, and a little taste of something that felt like dread.

"No," he said after a moment spent reeling from the question. "As far as I'm concerned, this changes nothing. Hells, at this point, I wouldn't leave Naiad if she actually became a Gorgon... though I am grateful that it seems we'll never have to test that..."

Leon gave Maia a teasing smile and she pinched his arm.

[I didn't think your relationship would change, not from what I can see from the two of you,] the former-Gorgon replied, her lips turning up into an almost motherly smile.

"How long have you been here?" Leon asked.

[A while,] she replied. [As I was just telling your mate when she arrived, I wasted no time using your blood to fuel my rebirth—none of it remains, by the way, assuming you even care about my reassurances. I am now almost as I was before I became the monster you knew.]

"Almost?" Leon asked, one of his eyebrows rising as his golden eyes locked on the former-Gorgon in muted alarm and curiosity.

[Almost,] she repeated. [I'm afraid that these years haven't left me untouched...]

As the former-Gorgon trailed off, Maia brought her back with a quick question.

[You can't bond with anyone, can you?]

The former-Gorgon turned back to her kinswoman with a bitter smile. [No, I can't, though I'm curious as to how you knew that...]

[It's in your aura,] Maia replied. [It feels... *closed*, if that makes any sense...]

[It does, a little,] the former-Gorgon replied. [I was never planning on mating with anyone—never really saw much point in it, personally—but still, it doesn't feel good to have my options now limited. If I was to never mate, I would've felt much more comfortable about it if it were my decision alone, rather than something forced upon me by circumstance.]

"And yet, you became a Gorgon in the first place because you never mated with anyone," Leon pointed out. "Was that intentional, or was that not a choice you made?"

[I decided not to,] she replied with a thoughtful look. [I suppose my choice was made back then, wasn't it? Thank you, boy, that makes me feel a *little* bit better...]

Leon nodded awkwardly. "Sure. No problem. Happy to help, that's me."

[I'm sure it is,] the former-Gorgon said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

"So, what was the cure, if I may be so bold as to ask?"

[Did you not look at the scroll I left you?]

Leon gave the former-Gorgon a sheepish look. "I had a lot going on at the time..."

The former-Gorgon gave him a long, disapproving stare, but she refrained from giving voice to whatever was in her mind. Leon decided not to press things too much, so he, too, said nothing more.

[I used basically the same potion that was written on that scroll,] she said as Maia pulled it out of her soul realm and unfurled it.

When Leon glanced at it, he saw that it wasn't overly complicated, but he noticed that nowhere on it was his blood written.

"How does my blood factor into this?" he asked.

[Do you see where it says 'catalyst'?] the former Gorgon asked with an exasperated sigh. Then, without waiting for either Leon or Maia to say anything more, she said, [Well, I think I have nothing more to stay here for. Everything that I wanted to say has been said. The cure is in your hands, we have no more business. Good luck to you both, thank you for cooperating with me and for not killing me when you had the chance.]

The former-Gorgon began to walk out into the grove as she spoke, and while he briefly had the thought to go after her and ask her more questions about what she would do next and to get some better details about the potion, he paused. Maia wasn't moving, and she still had her hand on his arm. When his eyes met hers that were filled with great expectation, he found that he couldn't leave, no matter his remaining suspicions of the former-Gorgon.

And so, only a few minutes later, the former-Gorgon vanished into the trees, and Leon doubted he'd ever see her again. He was inclined to think that it was a good thing, so with one last frown in the former-Gorgon's direction, he turned his attention fully back to Maia.

[How are you doing?] he asked his river nymph lover.

She smiled at him and replied, [Better than ever.]

She took a step forward and wrapped her arms around Leon's waist, using all of her eighth-tier strength to hold him close and not let him go anywhere. She was still completely sans clothes, but unlike how she usually acted, there was little about this embrace that was sexual, and Leon could pick up on it. She just wanted to be close to him, so he wrapped his arms around her and held her as she was him.

They stayed like that for a long few minutes, just basking in each other's company, before Maia spoke again.

[I... was afraid that you might leave,] she said. [My 'aunt'—it's weird calling her that—said that you wouldn't, and Valeria said that you wouldn't, but I still needed to hear it from you.]

Leon gave her a disbelieving look, one that was almost hurt. [That was never going to happen,] he whispered back to her as he pulled away from her just enough so that he could look her in the eye. [I've had other opportunities to leave, I think, and plenty of time to think of a way out of that oath that you had me swear when we first met. It's been a *long* time since I even thought about trying to do so. I love you.]

[I know,] she replied. A moment later, her bronze cheeks flushed as her lips were pulled back into a shy smile. [I... I apologize that I keep making you say it...]

[I'll say it as many times as you need to hear it,] Leon replied. [Don't ever be sorry about it. If you're feeling self-conscious or insecure, just come to me or Elise. We'll be sure to kill those thoughts dead, because we are not going *anywhere* without you.] Leon paused a moment as he glanced around at their Elise-less surroundings. [... Uh, metaphorically speaking. You know, in our relationship. We're not going anywhere in our relationship... without you...]

Leon regretted continuing to speak almost as soon as he started, and he trailed off as his brain finally kicked in and forced him to stop before he said something stupid.

Fortunately for him, Maia didn't seem to be offended and just smiled at him as his cheeks reddened.

[I think I'll be fine with it,] she said. When Leon gave her a slightly confused look, she clarified, [Valeria, I mean. I don't think that she and I will ever have the same relationship as Elise and I do, but... if you love her, and if she loves you, then you two should see where that could lead. Just so long as you don't neglect me or Elise, that is.]

Leon wasn't sure how to respond to that, words just didn't seem adequate enough. So, he held Maia tighter and opened up his emotions to their connection as much as he could, letting her feel just how much he cared about her. His love poured out of him and into her, and her body shuddered in response.

[I have only one condition, though,] Maia added as she swiftly regained her composure, sending a tiny little tremor of panic running down Leon's spine. [When we get back south, I want you to teach me how to read this paper. And, I guess, to read other things, too.]

Leon laughed as he pressed his forehead into hers.

[That, I can do,] he said.

The two stood there in that pond for a long while, basking in each other's presence, not saying or doing anything more.