

Storm King 811

Chapter 811: The Iron Needle I

Leon enjoyed his brief time in Vale Town. Torfinn was just as welcoming as he always was, despite the years that had passed and the strength that Leon had gathered for himself. Leon didn't get too into the details of why he'd come and what he'd done in the past couple decades when he first walked in, as Torfinn's thanes and more powerful warriors were busy feasting, but once everyone had either drunk themselves unconscious or went home for the night, Leon and Torfinn were largely left alone.

Once relatively alone, Leon spoke at length with Torfinn, reminiscing about the time when Leon and Artorias were still living in the Forest of Black and White, and still made regular appearances in Vale Town. Torfinn was a man that Leon had no reservations about mourning his father with, the pain of Artorias' absence still stinging even more than twenty years later.

Leon didn't get into why he'd come back to the Vales, and when Torfinn assumed it was to visit his father's grave, Leon didn't argue with it. He was certainly going to do that, so it wasn't like Torfinn had guessed incorrectly, but Leon was here for the Iron Needle, though he wasn't about to advertise that fact.

Together, the two spoke long into the night, with only Anzu there to give them any company, though the griffin had decided to catch some sleep while he could. Not once did he return to human form during the feast, which meant that no one tried roping him into any conversations. Nor did they try to seduce him, which Leon wasn't so lucky to get avoid; Freya was older and no longer as forward as she used to be, but other female warriors in Torfinn's longhouse looked at him with heat in their eyes. A couple even acted on that attraction, chatting him up and making veiled and not-so-veiled statements about their plans for after the feast.

With as much grace and politeness as he could, Leon had turned them all down. In the end, not even Torfinn could convince him to stay the night, even though his offer didn't come with sex attached. Instead, after catching up with Torfinn—and Freya, Asbjorn, and Harald when they were still sober and conscious—Leon woke Anzu up, and they left the longhouse so late in the evening that it had become early.

Anzu hadn't been entirely thrilled, but Leon was eager to get to that Needle now that they were so close. Besides, it wasn't like anything was stopping them from returning to Vale Town after they retrieved it.

'If *we* retrieve...' Leon thought with no small amount of apprehension. While he fully believed the Thunderbird when she said that the Iron Needle would not accept any master other than one of her blood, the fact that the Grave Warden himself was unable to take the Iron Needle after killing Jason Keraunos still left doubts creeping into Leon's mind. The level of power that the Grave Warden possessed wasn't easily ignored, yet the Iron Needle had ignored it. Leon's power was but a spark in the wind compared to the Grave Warden's, yet he was here to attempt something that Ambrose couldn't accomplish.

These thoughts bounced around his head the entire way back to the Forest of Black and White. It took a fairly long time, with Leon flying relatively slowly in human form while Anzu coasted along at his side.

They moved at a lazy enough pace that they only reached the edge of the Brown Bear Tribe's vale an hour later when they could've made the distance in half that. Then, instead of flying over the mountains, Leon took them through the pass he and his father had always used to reach the Brown Bears.

He was ninth-tier, but the Frozen Mountains Range was a place where humans couldn't live. Without constant human habitation, monsters and beasts roamed the snowy peaks, made strong, fierce, and wild by the unforgiving landscape. So, Leon took them through the pass, both for safety and nostalgia.

They emerged on the other side as the sun started to peak over the mountains on the other side of Leon's home vale. Almost as soon as it did, Leon breathed in and, for the first time in almost two decades, he smelled home again. The bright, vibrant colors of his childhood home, the sheer diversity of plants adding their aromas to the vale, it all brought him back to a simpler time, and he couldn't help but stop at the mouth of the pass, looking out over the sea of green and pale blue leaves, interspersed here and there by pockets of colored grass and flowers of every shade and hue.

"This is the Forest of Black and White?" Anzu whispered, having transformed back into human form as Leon stopped.

"Yes," Leon whispered, quiet joy practically dripping from his tone.

"It's a bad name for such a colorful place," Anzu quipped.

"It was named for the trees," Leon indicated, smiling as he went through the same explanation he'd had to make the previous time he'd brought others to his childhood home. "Though, I think there was a certain degree of irony in the name, too."

Anzu slowly nodded, and stood there, taking in the sights and sounds just as Leon was.

"There is great strength here," Anzu whispered. "And more of my kind."

"Griffins roost in the mountains of the northwest," Leon said. "I found you in the Border Mountains to the south of here, remember. You might be picking up on traces of blood relatives if you're sensing your own kind."

Anzu scowled. "They ceased to be relatives the moment they abandoned me," he growled.

Leon lightly frowned. Anzu had never indicated any kind of resentment for his mother or father, so Leon hadn't thought it much of an issue, though he'd obviously never spoken before reaching the eighth-tier. From his tone, Leon could tell that Anzu had strong negative feelings on the matter.

A few comforting words bounced around Leon's head, but none of them felt genuine enough for him. So, after a moment of awkward silence, Leon laid a hand on Anzu's shoulder and simply stated, "You're my brother, now."

Anzu's lips turned upward, into a bitter smile. "I could ask for no better family," he said.

"I mean, it's *me*, so you probably *could*," Leon frankly replied.

"Never," Anzu replied.

Leon had to fight now to smile like a child promised his favorite candy, and the two descended back into silence.

"All right," Leon said as he reimposed a more stoic demeanor, the purpose of their quest northward coming back to the fore, "let's get going, why don't we? Before we smother ourselves in honied affection."

"I could use a little honey, though," Anzu murmured. "Pork, lightly salted, dipped in warm honey... Or some spiced bear..."

"All right, all right, come on," Leon said, pulling his brother-by-choice down from the mountain pass and into the Forest of Black and White. "We can grab some black-iron bear before we leave, at least."

Together, they strode into the forest, Leon lost in nostalgia while Anzu was lost in wonder. The further they moved, the more Leon wanted to spend more and more time there, from visiting his childhood home, to spending a night in the Heartwood grove and checking out the waterfall where Maia's aunt lived. However, Leon forced himself to clamp down hard on those desires, recognizing that if he started thinking that way, he might never leave. He loved the Forest of Black and White, and now that he was ninth-tier, he felt none of the terror that had forced him out when he was sixteen. He struggled with the ice wraiths found deeper in the forest, but now, he didn't think they'd be any threat at all.

Soon enough, they reached the Divine Scar, the massive rift carved into the western reaches of the Forest of Black and White. Being able to see the entirety of it with his magic senses, Leon was clearly able to see how it had been formed from something falling in a southerly direction—the Iron Needle, no doubt—for the ravine grew both wider and deeper the further south it stretched. At the northern end, it was already fairly wide and deep, but at its southernmost point, Leon, even now, couldn't see or sense the bottom. It was just a gaping black maw, opened by the impact of something powerful a spectacularly long time ago.

Standing at the ravine's edge, Leon stared down into the darkness below. There wasn't an easy way down for someone climbing, but that was hardly an issue for someone like him, who could fly. However, there was a power down there that he could just barely sense, a charge that almost felt like tingles running along his scalp and lifting his hairs one by one.

[My Needle's down there...] the Thunderbird whispered from Leon's soul realm. [There can be no mistaking it. I carried it within my sword for far too long to be wrong. My Needle is waiting for you, Leon.]

[I...] Leon began to respond, but he cut himself off. It was easy enough to explain the distant electrical power he could feel was the Iron Needle, a Universe Fragment that the Thunderbird had told him was essentially the master of all lightning. But he could sense other powers down in the ravine, too, powers that he couldn't quite identify. They were simply too far away, too drowned out by the power of the Needle, or both. Finishing his thought, Leon responded to his Ancestor, [I don't think it's going to be that easy.]

[Of course it won't,] the Thunderbird scoffed. [Life is never that simple, and power attracts power. My Needle has been down there for thousands of years, by the looks of it, and that's plenty of time for other things attracted by the power it holds to take up residence in the crater it left behind.]

Leon clicked his tongue in displeasure. [Given the kind of creatures that live in this forest, that's not encouraging.]

[Worried about ice demons?] the Thunderbird asked.

[Wraiths, banshees, and more besides. Who knows what kind of ancient monsters lived in this forest before them? What could still be down there...]

[Don't get too lost in speculating, boy. This is still the plane of a Grave Warden. It's ruled by an incredibly powerful human who wouldn't let a powerful monster loose into his playground. Not to mention this plane is located almost right next to the Nexus, the center of human power in the universe. If there are monsters down there, none of them would be post-Apotheosis.]

[A monster doesn't need to have achieved Apotheosis in order to threaten me.]

[No, but the list of monsters that *can* is small. And down there, in a place inundated with lightning magic, you'll hold the advantage.]

Leon's frown grew deeper, but he couldn't counter the Thunderbird's claims. He could barely sense what was down in the ravine, or even further into the earth if the Iron Needle hadn't stopped at the southern edge, which Leon suspected. If he had to guess, he'd say that the Iron Needle bit the earth, creating the ravine he now stood above, and continued downward, boring deep into the earth.

But Leon cut those thoughts off. He could only make so many conjectures with what he could sense; he had to start confirming them eventually. So, he straightened up and glanced at Anzu.

"Anzu," he whispered seriously.

Anzu looked at him, his blood-red eyes meeting Leon's gold, and Leon saw both disappointment and understanding there. "I'm staying here, aren't I?" he asked.

"I think that's for the best, yes," Leon answered. "I would love nothing more than for you to follow me down there, but..." He glanced back down into the ravine. "Well, that's a lie. I'd rather you stay out of this place. I'm starting to think that I'd rather I stayed out of this place, too. But the Needle's down there, so down there is where I'm going. And in order to claim the Needle..."

"You have to impress it."

"Yes. I will venture down there alone."

Anzu grimaced, then locked eyes with Leon again. "I'll wait for you here."

Leon nodded. "Don't wait longer than a week."

"A whole week?"

"I'm being generous. Hopefully, this won't even take a day, and I don't want to be left behind."

It was Anzu's turn to clap Leon on the shoulder.

"I'll be here, waiting for you," he promised.

Leon smiled at his griffin, took a few more moments to steady himself, study the ravine, and take a few deep breaths. Then, he did away with his hesitation and leaped forward, plunging almost immediately downward.

The ravine was relatively shallow at the northern end, so Leon reached the bottom quickly. He could see it from the top, so he found nothing unusual yet. But he glanced back up to where Anzu was watching and waved before picking his way around the broken rocks at the bottom of the ravine, following the path south carved by the Iron Needle as it fell from the sky who-knew-how-long ago.

The ground was broken, but Leon didn't once consider lifting off into the air. He couldn't place why, but even here, where he could still see the sky, Leon felt like something was watching him. He felt like if he took off and tried to fly down into the deeper ends of the ravine, he'd only be making himself a target for the things that lived in this pit. So he kept going, his feet never leaving the ground for long.

The ravine grew darker the deeper he went, despite the sky growing brighter as the sun climbed higher in the sky. It started becoming a little clearer to Leon that there was more at play here than just the Iron Needle as the ravine walls started to take on a glossy black look that hadn't been apparent from further up—a clear sign of some kind of darkness magic.

And then, like he'd tripped a wire or stepped on a pressure plate, a torrent of darkness magic seemed to explode from ahead of him, rushing northward through the ravine. Leon barely had time to summon his mental defenses and flood his body with the Thunderbird's lightning before it was on him, enveloping his body in an ocean of inky black darkness and blotting out the bright, sunny sky above.

Almost at the same time, the air was pierced by the shrieking of banshees, and Leon, his magic senses not dampened much by the darkness magic, could feel them flying toward him, eight in number, and each one possessed of around fourth or fifth-tier strength.

Even with his power, the shrieking of the skeletal creatures surrounding by clouds of darkness almost pierced his eardrums, and he felt the magic in his body painfully resonate. The pain was hardly debilitating, and he responded a second later by extending his right hand and releasing his lightning. Eight lightning bolts erupted from his fingers, so bright that the darkness surrounding Leon was pushed back, the accompanying thunder so loud that the walls of the ravine shook, striking the banshees and killing them almost instantly. Leon didn't hold back, and the darkness surrounding the creatures was torn apart, the corpse-like, childish bodies within rent asunder by Leon's power.

In but a moment, the banshees were destroyed. In but another moment, the darkness that the ravine had been plunged into receded, letting the sun's rays shine once more into the depths of the cloven rift.

Leon took only a second to catch his breath, steady himself, and armor up before he proceeded onward. This time, however, he conjured into his left gauntlet's enchantment slot his anti-darkness gem. He also checked his armor's anti-darkness wards once more as he picked his way around the smaller cracks and jagged pillars of the ravine floor.

[I sense... a significant demonic presence within...] Xaphan muttered.

[Ice demons? Ice wraiths?] Leon asked.

[Yes,] was the crackling response.

[Strong?]

[Yes.]

‘*Wonderful*,’ Leon sarcastically thought to himself as he continued onward and downward, unabated.

Soon enough, the ravine started growing deep enough that even the sky above could hardly be seen, and Leon knew that he was straying into the section that couldn’t be seen from above, either. He slowed down slightly, but he could still see and sense his surroundings well enough that he wasn’t any more or less concerned.

Strangely, the ground and walls started to become less jagged and destroyed, like rocks eroding in a river, smoothing out the further Leon pushed.

And then he reached it. The end of the ravine, but not his path. He’d moved for miles, walked at a brisk pace for several hours, and finally came to the wide southern tip of the ravine. Just as he’d suspected, the Iron Needle wasn’t before him, but instead had bored much, *much* deeper into the earth, if what he could sense with his magic senses was at all accurate. There was power further down, in the massive cave it had carved on its way down, blocking his magic senses in a manner completely unlike more common wards. Instead of scattering his magic senses, it was instead like he was being blinded; there was so much power down there, so much magic in the air, that he simply couldn’t see past it. It was like a light shining into his eye, the halo blotting everything else out.

He could feel the lightning magic clearer now, though he could feel everything else, too. A chill in the air, causing his breath to hang, visible, in front of his mouth. The soft, unsettling darkness that blanketed the walls, giving them their glossy texture. The sense of eyes upon him, and hands waiting to claw at his vulnerable human body.

Leon shivered slightly, but with hardly a pause, he plunged deeper into the earth. He was set on getting that Iron Needle, and a few banshees or wraiths or whatever else lived in the Needle’s wake wasn’t going to stop him.

Chapter 812: The Iron Needle II

The abyssal pit that Leon found himself in was deep, so deep that he wondered how it compared to those he’d delved into in the Serpentine Isles. The serpent temple was deep and magically advanced, but the graveyard of the Primal Gods that Leon had discovered was even more so. From what little Leon could sense, this pit that the Iron Needle had cloven into the earth was tremendously deep.

However, there were complications to that estimate. For one, the walls were coated in darkness magic, interfering with what he could and couldn’t sense. Deeper in, he was sensing grass, sky, wind, light, and life, but none of that could be true—at least, not as he was sensing it. Instead, it seemed clear that after about a quarter mile, the darkness magic grew too thick for him to reliably penetrate with his magic senses, leading to intense illusions.

At least, that was his working theory, as otherwise what he could sense indicated a whole new world with its own ecosystem down below the surface of the plane, where it shouldn’t naturally exist.

Another complication to his estimate was that even from what he could sense with any accuracy, caves and branches were splitting off from the main impact path, some shallow, but others deep. Some seemed newly cut, while others were worn down with use or otherwise collapsed.

‘There are more than just a few banshees down here, it seems...’ Leon thought as he conjured his family’s blade. He was already armored following the initial banshee attack, but now the Thunderbird’s lightning coursed through his body, while he brandished the Thunderbird’s weapon, ready for whatever might challenge him in his quest for the Iron Needle.

He didn’t have to wait long for something else to make their challenge known; another group of banshees, hovering in the air, their heads turned upward in a silent scream, suddenly turned and shot towards him at great speed.

Were it twenty-two years ago and Leon still sixteen, such would’ve been one of the most terrifying sights he could’ve imagined. However, he was now thirty-eight and ninth-tier, and a group of fourth and fifth-tier banshees—while stronger than what could be found on the surface—were no trouble. Leon swung his sword in a horizontal slice and let loose with a wave of lightning. His lightning, casting the black, darkness-covered walls in silver and blue, washed across the floor of the rift, practically reaching up to the ceiling, leaving deep burns on the stone floor as it went. It hit the flying banshees and tore their cloaks of darkness from their bodies and obliterated what was beneath.

The banshees floated to the ground, now little more than clouds of ash and a few fragments of bone.

Leon savored his victory for only a moment before moving on. He moved at a fairly slow, but cautious pace, as he couldn’t quite tell what might be waiting for him further in, but he was comforted by the Thunderbird’s presence. She was there, watching his progress from his soul realm. However, she was silent, and he figured she would stay that way until he had the Iron Needle in his hand. With Xaphan taken by his healing meditations, Leon was on his own.

‘Just as it should be for something like this...’

About a thousand feet into the rift past the ravine, smaller additional caves started appearing on the walls. From what Leon could tell—and he was by no means an expert on the subject—the caves were natural. They weren’t smoothly cut into the stone and meandered with a degree of naturalism that he didn’t think any sapient being would emulate.

He didn’t bother with these first few branching caves. He couldn’t sense anything in them, and he was too close for the darkness magic on the walls to obscure much. With his focus on the Iron Needle, he kept moving forward.

Unfortunately, through the pitch-black gloom, he was suddenly confronted with a massive cave-in, barring further progress. It appeared to his magic senses about another thousand feet down, appearing through the gloom of the dark shroud cast over the caves like it was appearing from mist.

Leon paused and, after studying the cave-in from a distance, backtracked a little bit. Sure enough, only a few steps back were all that was needed to cause the cave-in to disappear once again, creating an illusion of a perfectly-cloven shaft leading straight down into the earth, where Leon could sense the charge of lightning that filled the air emanating from.

With a frown, Leon advanced once more, until he could see the cave-in with his own eyes through the darkness.

He inspected the cave-in as much as he could, but as far as he could tell, there were no ways around it without deviating from his path. But once that realization dawned on him, he noticed a small cave to his right, one that looked more deliberate than the others he'd seen. It cut into the stone and made an immediate ninety-degree left turn, appearing to bypass the cave-in. Unfortunately, Leon's magic senses hit a shroud about halfway down this tunnel and sent back images of green fields and warm sunlight.

Leon scowled, but he saw no other immediate options than trying to dig, and he could sense no threats. So, he stuck his head into the mouth of the tunnel and glanced further down.

The tunnel was straight and narrow, but not so much that Leon couldn't fit if need be. However, there was a shimmering shroud of darkness partway down, similar, though not identical to the teleportation shrouds in the underground temple on the third of the Serpentine Isles.

From what Leon could sense, there was darkness and lightning magic within it, but no light, ruling out spatial magic.

'Not a portal, then...'

Leon advanced down the tunnel, stopping about a dozen paces from the shroud. He couldn't sense what was creating it, but he wasn't going to take any chances. He retrieved a sheet of spell paper from his soul realm that had been inscribed with the ancient rune for 'open' and held it in front of him. He breathed deeply, clearing his mind of all distractions, running a few bolts of silver-blue lightning through his mind just for good measure, and then concentrated on the definition of open that he wanted.

Ancient runes were imprecise things, responding to will and intent. There were bespoke runes for anything and everything, any effect imaginable, but they quickly grew so complex that they were impossible to guess and transcribe. That was why, Nestor had taught Leon, it was better to memorize a few more 'basic' ancient runes. After all, Nestor had argued, why memorize the runes for 'open lock' and 'open door' and 'open barrier' when he could just memorize 'open' instead? The more open concept meant that the rune needed more willpower and concentration to be effective, vastly increasing its chances of failure, but it was easier than trying to figure out the runes that had narrower and narrower scope. An 'open lock' rune might be better at opening locks, after all, but that was another rune that Leon would need to memorize.

So, Leon filled his mind with visions of the shroud in front of him parting like curtains, allowing him access to the path beyond. He chanted 'open' in his mind again and again, filling his head with what he wanted the rune to do. Once he felt like he was ready, he channeled magic power into the sheet of spell paper, activating the rune.

The rune began glowing with arcane light, and Leon felt his magic begin to turn along the lines of the rune. His magic reached out almost of its own accord, touching the shroud, and just as Leon had seen it in his mind, the shroud parted, pulled to the side as if by invisible ropes and stagehands.

With a smile, Leon strode forward, his rune still brandished, and passed the shroud unharmed. As soon as he was past, however, the shroud snapped back into place like it had never opened.

But Leon was through, and he found himself in an almost identical tunnel that he'd just come from, just leading to the other side of the cave-in—he hoped.

That hope was forgotten completely as a wave of killing intent flooded the tunnel. It wasn't even close to the most intense Leon had ever felt, but he still felt a shiver run down his spine. He brushed aside that momentary primordial fear and advanced, and when he reached the end of the tunnel, he found that his hopes were correct, and it led to the other side of the cave-in. What he hadn't expected to find was that that side of the rift was densely populated.

Enormous pillars of ice stretched from the floor of the rift to the ceiling, a distance of some four stories. At first glance, they seemed to be acting as supports, holding up the weakened ceiling. They were certainly doing that as far as Leon could tell, but there was an enormous amount of water magic flowing through them, and he could see beneath the frozen white surface blue lines that resembled some kind of circulatory system.

He counted more than a dozen of these huge ice pillars just in the vicinity of the side tunnel alone, and from the wide base of each of these pillars, ice wraiths were stepping out into the rift. No openings were letting them out, they were simply walking out of the pillars like a human might through an open door. The pillars, Leon figured, weren't hollow, but the ice wraiths could live inside them anyway, merging their icy forms with the pillars themselves.

Leon counted more than three dozen ice wraiths, all emitting vast rivers of killing intent directed at him, their seventh-tier auras towering. His eagerness immediately took a slight hit: he was ninth-tier and strong, but he was deep underground now, and thirty-six seventh-tier beings were still a threat.

So, Leon immediately made to reduce that threat. Lightning danced across his body as he lunged forward, the strength in his movement carrying him clear across the rift to the first of the ice pillars, from which four ice wraiths had come. He swung his blade and struck the first ice wraith, not giving it enough time to even raise an arm in its defense. With an explosion of lightning and thunder, the ice wraith practically vaporized on the spot, while the other three at its side were shattered, their remains scattering across the rift with the force of Leon's magic.

The pillar, too, suffered greatly, Leon's lightning blasting a chunk off its base and cracking much of what was left. A few errant stones fell from the ceiling, shaken loose by Leon's uncontained strike, and he glanced back at the cave-in. These seemed like ice wraith houses, or some equivalent at least, but if they were holding up a weakened ceiling...

Leon immediately resolved to have more care in his attacks, but as the ice wraiths started moving against him, he knew that he couldn't simply stop at this point.

With thunder and lightning that he took greater care to contain, Leon blazed around and through the ice wraiths, his sword turning their icy bodies into snow with each swing. The ice wraiths countered with great blasts of ice, attempting to catch him or hinder his movements. However, his power was great enough that they couldn't stop his rampage.

Soon enough, he stood nearly victorious, with only three ice wraiths remaining. Not a hint of fear could be seen within them, nor had their killing intent wavered. The ice pillars had taken a little more damage, but all were reasonably intact, ensuring the ceiling wasn't going to come crumbling down around Leon's

ears. However, the ice wraiths weren't finished, and as Leon made to fix that particular problem, another made itself known.

Deeper in the rift, from the extensive cave system that it seemed to intersect with, darkness had gathered throughout the short fight. As Leon was about to finish the skirmish, that darkness practically exploded outward, accompanied by the wailing of hundreds of banshees. Leon, given his history, knew that something like this was going to come at some point, and wasn't caught off-guard. That being said, his magic still became a little more turbulent and harder to control, so as he struck one of the last ice wraiths around him, an arc of lightning whipped upward and shattered one of the pillars.

Leon swore and leaped back as a large quantity of stone came crashing down, though fortunately, the ceiling as a whole remained intact.

It took only a moment for Leon to get his power back under control, and in the next moment, he hurled a pair of lightning bolts so bright that Leon almost blinded himself. Both of the remaining ice wraiths were annihilated by these bolts, and Leon was able to turn his complete attention to the oncoming horde of banshees now bearing down upon him.

Without hesitation, he pointed the tip of his blade down the rift at the banshees closest to him and released a storm that he'd been gathering within himself. Lightning surged out of his blade in a great wave, filling the rift, yet remaining entirely within Leon's control. From the depths of this storm of silver-blue lightning, a shape emerged. This shape was a near copy of the Thunderbird, though rendered entirely in curling silver-blue lightning and barely more than half the Thunderbird's size.

This lightning bird that Leon summoned raced down the rift ahead of Leon's lightning wave, power streaming off its shape. It was a lightning bolt in the shape of the Thunderbird, acting as autonomously as one of Maia's water dragons, though it wasn't so detailed as to have feathers or eyes.

Still, as the lightning bird crashed into the oncoming tidal wave of banshees, the dark beings seemed to disintegrate as they came too close. Leon's power streaming behind the lightning bird caused Leon's lightning to flash across any banshees the lightning bird missed, destroying them, too. And then even further back, the rest of Leon's lightning wave came rolling in, cleaning up those paltry few who even survived that.

With one great expression of power, Leon rendered the entire oncoming horde of banshees into dust, ash, and faint wisps of darkness magic dissipating in the rift.

As silence once more descended upon the rift, the last echoes of the banshees' shrieks and Leon's thunder dying down, Leon took a moment to catch his breath and savor what he'd just done. If he could've known twenty-two years ago that he'd be able to do what he just did in only a little over two decades, he would've been shocked beyond words.

And, for a second, Leon thought of Artorias. He couldn't remember his father struggling too hard against ice wraiths, but then again, they never encountered them in great numbers while he was growing up—at least until Roland's journey to find Heartwood Amber. And then, Artorias hadn't been able to keep every ice wraith off their group without a little help from the knights.

That those very same creatures were so easily killed was something that Leon was having some trouble wrapping his head around. Thirty-six of the creatures, and more banshees than he cared to count, all gone in barely more than five minutes.

‘There’ll be time enough for this later,’ Leon admonished himself as he pushed forward, the Iron Needle closer now than ever.

He faced no further challenge as he advanced, though he passed by several more enormous ice pillars holding up the ceiling. Though he sensed power flowing through them, he didn’t dare do them significant damage for fear of bringing the vast amount of stone above him crashing down. As far as he was concerned, if the ice wraiths were now intimidated enough to remain in their humble abodes, then so be it.

However, as he pushed ever downwards, he paused at a curious sight. The darkness covering the walls was growing thinner and the stone around him rougher. He could still sense vast amounts of darkness magic in the rift, but it seemed that whatever power was causing it to coat the walls was weakening.

Even further in, he was surprised to find bones. Not many, and certainly not human, what he found were large bones of some creature with longer and thicker limbs than his entire body. While he couldn’t say they all came from the same creature, he only saw a single skull in the entire pile, and couldn’t help but stare in awe.

The skull was enormous, perhaps as large as the Thunderbird’s entire body. Its face was relatively small, however, located on the bottom portion of the skull. The creature’s massive forehead was dominated by a roughly triangular plate of shell or harder bone or something that Leon wished Anna were here to identify, while to the sides of the dead monster’s face were two pairs of long, curved tusks of gleaming ivory. Though the skull appeared to be old as far as Leon could tell, the tusks were still deadly sharp, and the teeth within the monster’s maw were as well.

‘A native?’ Leon wondered as a few more doubts started to creep into his mind. It wasn’t too surprising that there were more than ice wraiths and banshees down in the rift, but something so large...

Leon frowned and hoped that he wouldn’t have to encounter anything quite like it deeper in. However, as he walked past the skull and pushed even further into the rift, the large open tunnel before him suddenly melted away, revealing something he hadn’t even realized was hidden until he’d passed the illusion concealing it. And he found himself confronted by a massive wall of carved stone blocking further progress down the rift. Upon the wall were reliefs of dozens of different monsters, though in the center, dominating the entire façade, was one that looked remarkably like the skull Leon had passed by only a few minutes before.

An enormous amount of magic was flowing through the wall, and Leon saw no obvious doors nor an intuitive way to get the wall out of his way.

“Damnit,” Leon whispered as he quickly started evaluating ways to get past it. He supposed he could try to blast his way through, but the brute-force method didn’t appeal to him as a first resort. He wasn’t sure how much that might destabilize the tunnel around him, nor did he know quite how the magic flowing through it would respond. In his mind, attempting such a course would be a terrible idea.

But even with a longer, more in-depth inspection of the wall, he couldn't see any way to get it to move out of his way.

There were, however, more caves behind him and to the sides of the wall, many of which the banshees had come from. With a grimace, Leon realized that if he wanted to get past this wall, he was likely going to have to brave this tunnel system, and whatever monsters called it home if he wanted to get past this wall and find the Iron Needle.

But the fact that there was a wall here at all concerned him, indicating some potential sapient resistance to his progress, ice wraiths aside. And as he thought about that, he stared at the monster so prominently displayed on the wall, then at the skull in the tunnel behind him, and for the first time since entering the rift, began to feel a twinge of dread settling into the pit of his stomach.

Chapter 813: The Iron Needle III

Two days after entering the caves beneath the Divine Scar, Leon found himself confounded by two big problems.

The first was the caves were extensive. Miles upon miles upon miles of stone tunnels, nearly all natural as far as he could tell, spider-webbing deeper and deeper into the plane.

His second problem exacerbated the problems of the first: his magic senses were almost useless for navigation. Illusions riddled the tunnels, fooling his magic senses and trying to turn him around. It often wasn't until he got fairly close to the illusion that he was able to see it for what it was, meaning that his magic senses had been essentially relegated to a more personal range rather than being able to easily map out the underground. After all, if he couldn't trust what his magic senses were telling him, then what use were they?

Leon was frustrated, but he clamped down on that with patience. After the first day of wandering the tunnels as systematically as he could, he returned to the surface to speak with Anzu. He'd told his griffin to wait a week, but Leon honestly hadn't been expecting it to take that long. After that one day, though, Leon started worrying that it might take longer than that, and thus needed to link up with Anzu to hash out a new plan.

They settled on Anzu staying at the top of the Divine Scar for a month, and if Leon needed longer than that, the griffin would return to the Brown Bears for another month. If Leon still hadn't shown himself by the end of that, Anzu would return home. They both had comm lotuses from Tikos, of course—with some gear made by Leon's researchers to enhance the flower's capabilities—but Leon had already tested his and found that it didn't work that well so far beneath the ground. Or because of the illusions, or the aura of the Iron Needle, or a hundred other reasons he was able to think of off the top of his head. He wasn't sure which one was the problem, only that his comm lotus, even with the improvements made to its capability, wasn't working well enough to stay in contact with anyone once back down in the tunnels.

But back down into the tunnels he went anyway once he and Anzu were on the same page. He wasn't ending his expedition just because it was a little frustrating—to do so would only prove that he was unworthy of wielding the Iron Needle, and with the Thunderbird herself watching his every move, even

with her apparent refusal to make so much as a single solitary chirp, he wasn't going to even entertain the idea of backing down.

So, two days after first venturing down into the rift, Leon found himself still without any idea of where he should be going. He wasn't entirely lost thanks to a plethora of markings he'd left on the rough walls of the caves as he went, but there were so many tunnels to explore that it was hard to stay oriented regardless.

On the plus side, he hadn't encountered any more banshees or ice wraiths, though that wasn't to say his time beneath the earth had been all that peaceful. Every few hours, he'd encounter a larger tunnel or cavern, some even coming close to rivaling the gigantic cavern that housed the graveyard of the Primal Gods beneath the Serpentine Isles in size, and rarely were these larger areas uninhabited.

Huge serpents, their eyes milky white, venom dripping from their exposed fangs and burning holes in the floor. Great black spiders big enough to tear apart a carriage with their chelicerae alone. Even a few troops of apes, their tough bodies covered in strange blue fur, but only tall enough to brush against Leon's hip when standing fully erect. Strangely, Leon found the apes to be the most problematic to deal with, given their relative strength—most of the apes were sixth and seventh-tier—and strong cooperation between themselves.

However, his proudest kill down in the caverns was a male lion, about the same size as the snow lion he'd killed to awaken his bloodline, but ash-colored and strong in earth magic. The lion seemed to be blind, but he kept an eye on Leon anyway, and with the equivalent of eighth-tier power, Leon actually had to work a little to kill him.

So, as Leon trawled the caves, he also made silent plans to give Elise the lion's hide to have tailored into something or somethings. Its fur had been the softest Leon had ever felt, and he'd had some trouble even skinning the beast it was so tough.

But above all, Leon was thankful for what he hadn't yet encountered rather than for the weakness of the creatures he had: any living example of the creature whose skeleton he'd seen earlier, which even now still decorated the cave entrance, and which had been carved into the wall blocking further passage down the Iron Needle's path. He hadn't seen any further signs of artificial structures, either, which he wasn't sure was a good or bad sign.

It wasn't until the end of the second day, however, that things started to get more interesting than engaging in mindless violence against creatures as sapient as the average tree stump.

He'd been trying to figure out some way to navigate back to the path that the Iron Needle cut into the rock but on the other side of the carved wall, and experimenting with the slight charge that he could feel in the air. There were variances in it, the charge of buried lightning drawing him onward into the tunnels. Unfortunately, simply following the strength of the static-like charge like a game of hot-and-cold—which he felt could only be coming from the Iron Needle—led him to several dead ends.

It was with disappointment in his heart from yet another dead end that he set off on a new path and was immediately confronted with a cavern on the other side of an illusion. The cavern had been blasted to pieces by powerful magic, shattered stone covering the floor, wide cracks swallowing vast piles of

rubble, dust falling from rents in the cavern's ceiling, and slight traces of earth and wind magic still in the air. Most of all, however, was a huge bloodstain nearly covering the far side of the cavern.

The bloodstain was faint and fairly old—nearly a week, by Leon's estimation—and had been nearly covered by falling dust. However, whatever had made the bloodstain had been dragged down one tunnel, leaving a trail that Leon found easy enough to follow.

The bloodstain didn't travel far before disappearing—the corpse it came from likely having been picked up or brought into a soul realm, Leon figured—but fortunately, the tunnel it was taken into didn't fork too many times. When it did, Leon found it easy enough to examine tracks and continue following a trail that had started at the beginning of the bloodstain.

The track was made by some quadrupedal creature with large claws if the scratches in the rocky floor were any indication. By the length of its gait, Leon thought that it was not only about twice as large as Anzu in his griffin form, but had also been moving at a fairly decent clip.

'Possibly feline,' Leon had speculated. 'Wind magic, too, if this slight magical residue in the air came from it and not what it killed. Wind magic seems strange to have in a cave, but a large predator has other methods to secure prey than just magic. Might be fun to fight, though. Maybe social animal if it's bringing food back? Possibly sapient, too... Might as well check it out, not like I've found anything else worth investigating...'

Leon's speculations didn't cease until he turned a corner and passed through yet another illusion. What was causing these things he couldn't be sure. The walls were no longer covered in darkness and he couldn't detect any signs of runecraft—modern runecraft, at any rate. Given his lack of expertise with darkness magic in general and illusion magic in particular, Leon couldn't make any more concrete assertions about the illusions.

However, when he passed through that illusory barrier and saw what was on the other side, such thoughts were far from his mind.

He saw trees, trees with wide, red leaves shining like stars. Glowing blue flowers illuminated much of the dirt floor and the immense cavern beyond. He smelled grass and flowers, bringing some comfort, but this underground forest was terribly uncanny, and not just because it was somehow growing thousands of feet beneath the surface of the plane. Rather, there were no birds, no buzzing of insects, no wind blowing through the leaves. The ceiling of this immense dome-shaped cavern, at least twenty stories high at its lowest point, was dotted with glowing crystals, making the dark ceiling look like the night sky.

In fact, as Leon stared at it, he realized that it was an exact copy of the night sky. He identified not only the closest eleven stars, those that revolved around the other planes of the Divine Graveyard planar cluster that Aeterna was a part of, but also noted the bright white crystal in the very center of the domed ceiling was without a doubt the Nexus.

With a deep breath, Leon forced his attention back to the problem at hand instead of staring in wonder at what he was now seeing. As he did, he took special note of the magic in the cavern and identified a prominent current, something that felt fairly familiar. He'd used something quite like it in the graveyard beneath the Serpentine Isles and had seen the ninth-tier tree sprite do likewise when it was

manipulating the enchantments in its canopy. There were ancient runes at play in the cavern, likely keeping the ceiling from collapsing given Leon estimated that the massive Frozen Mountains lay directly above, and he presumed also ensuring the forest didn't die off from lack of sunlight.

Leon quickly got his head back in the game. Thankfully, now that the cavern had somehow turned into a forest, Leon found that tracking the thing that had made the bloodstain was much easier. The loamy earth beneath his feet was soft and left tracks easily, which the creature he was following hadn't bothered to hide. Given how it had seemed to crash through the underbrush, Leon could plainly see its lack of caution, and thus, its lack of fear.

He forced himself to remain on guard as he followed the trail through the dark forest, over hills, and even a stream at one point. At another point, he encountered half a dozen banshees, practically rising from the ground as he proceeded. They numbered half a dozen, but a single bolt of lightning was enough to destroy the entire lot. Leon hardly even slowed down, let alone stopped.

What succeeded where the banshees failed was reaching the end of the trail. Leon walked out into a clearing and, for the first time since leaving the carved wall, found something that looked built by sapient hands.

'Or claws, or whatever,' Leon thought, not having much confidence in there being any human civilization down so far beneath the Frozen Mountains.

In the center of the clearing was a ring of seven stone monoliths, each one about four stories tall. Upon them were carved various animalistic figures of all shapes. Notably absent from any of the monoliths was any identifiable script or magical runes. In the center of the ring of stones was what seemed to be some kind of table or altar, circular and rising to about waist height for Leon. It was large enough to fit a large elephant with room to spare, and given that it was stained reddish-brown by what Leon recognized as long-dried blood, it had seen many creatures laid upon it.

Leon frowned as he took it all in, his eyes drifting toward the largest of the monoliths. It was simpler than the others, though for a reason that had Leon more curious about it than the others: it depicted only a single creature, the same tusked monstrosity that had been carved upon the wall near the entrance, the same kind of creature whose skull tracked all newcomers to the cave system.

This creature had been carved so that its eyes glared down at the table as if to evaluate a sacrifice...

'... Though that could just be me making assumptions...' Leon thought. For a moment, red eyes and golden hair flashed through his mind, and he wondered what that adventurous Princess would make of this place.

He found little else within the clearing and began to explore the rest of the cavern, using any large tracks he could find to guide his path. Unfortunately, with the disappearance of the tracks of the large cat creature he'd followed before, he found little else within it, other than signs that it was inhabited by fairly weak creatures and a few more large passageways that he could explore. These tunnels were particularly large, however, two so much that they seemed almost like further extensions of the cavern rather than tunnels unto themselves, save that the ceiling dropped to only about fifty feet high within them rather than more than two hundred.

Leon was rather disheartened by this. Two days had been frustrating enough passed wandering around these tunnels, and while he'd given the place a cursory exploration, he felt like he could spend at least a month checking every one of the underground forest's hidden nooks and crannies, let alone beginning on the new tunnels, forested and not, that he'd found.

'Time for a change,' Leon decided as he stared back in the direction of the stone circle. 'I am not going to spend months down here,' he vowed to himself.

Upon returning to the monolithic stone circle, he started looking the place over in greater detail. He didn't find anything particularly new, but he did sense a strange conflux of magic in the air around the bloodstained table. There were no identifiable enchantments, but as magic flowed through the cavern and around the clearing, it seemed to slow down above the table, swirl around a bit, and then flow back outwards into the currents already running through the underground forest.

The more Leon stared at this strange phenomenon, the more he was convinced it was the work of some kind of ancient rune. For what purpose, he couldn't say definitively, but he could hazard a guess.

The table was heavily bloodstained, that much was plain to see for anything with the power of sight. '... And smell,' Leon noted with some displeasure. Given how sacrificial it seemed, Leon made the logical jump to the obvious: this was a place of sacrifice, probably to whatever tusked creature was so prominently represented upon the largest monolith.

This created some concerns for Leon. Firstly, it meant that to argue against the presence of sapient creatures down in the forest seemed a terrible idea. While the monoliths were old and worn smooth where they hadn't been carved, the sacrificial circle had been used for that apparent purpose as recently as a week or so prior.

Secondly, it possibly—or probably, in Leon's mind—meant that the gargantuan skull back at the entrance of the rift was likely not the creature depicted on the wall and the monolith, but rather just one of that creature's species. There were undoubtedly more he'd have to contend with. Given the ritualistic dominance they had, and the presence of strong monsters down in the tunnels, Leon guessed that they were probably strong enough to pose a threat to him, if not stronger.

Not an encouraging thought, but one he couldn't ignore, despite having not a lot of trouble with the locals thus far.

Thirdly, he guessed that the magic around the table was doing some work to identify when a sacrifice had been made—or so he hypothesized. And with that hypothesis came a mad idea, one that he liked the more he thought about it.

So, after about an hour of wandering around the clearing, he decided to take that risk and began to prepare. If he was going to do what he wanted to do, he might find a way past the wall and closer to the Iron Needle. But it was also a terribly dangerous thing to do, though how dangerous he couldn't say, not without knowing more about what was down in the caverns, first.

Before he set out, he started setting up wards around the clearing. Nothing particularly fancy, but if he was going to what was on his mind, then he wanted every possible advantage he could bring himself. Fortunately, there was quite a bit of magic in the environment, allowing him a fairly sizable budget for such things.

He set up a light shield that he could call upon if needed. It wasn't too strong, but anything was better than nothing. He also set up an illusion to show that everything beyond the sacrificial table was just fine. Then, he took advantage of that fact by placing a large number of explosive spells—both fire and lightning—around the monoliths. He then prepared all of his antimagic gems, gave his gear one more check, and thusly finished his preparations. He didn't want to go too hard on the potential defenses and make them obvious to whatever might come.

With a wave of his hand, Leon conjured the corpses of five seventh-tier apes from his soul realm and dropped them on the altar without much ceremony. Almost immediately, he felt the magic power flowing above the table flex slightly, and he hurriedly turned himself invisible and retreated to the edge of the clearing. He replaced his family's sword with his new thunder wood bow and tried to clamp down on the excitement that he might finally have a chance to use it in a real combat scenario.

He waited for not too long amongst the trees. He didn't sense anything with his magic senses, the forest seeming as dead and silent as it had when he first entered it, so the first indication of the newcomer was when its shadow passed overhead, startling Leon more than he cared to admit.

He glanced up at what he just arrived and nearly all of his eagerness for battle disappeared.

What he saw above him, flying as if it were swimming through the air, was a massive beast, its head as tall as the Thunderbird itself. Two huge, wickedly-sharp tusks jutted out from the sides of its small face, and its head was dominated by a massive triangular plate. The creature was covered in brownish-orange hide, which looked faintly scaled to Leon's eyes. It was clearly a quadruped, with a long, sinuous, lean, muscular body, and a furred, cat-like tail waving about in the air behind of a similar color.

Most concerning of all, however, was that its aura, as far as Leon could tell, matched that of Anastasios and the Grand Druid. This monster was the equivalent of a tenth-tier mage.

Chapter 814: The Iron Needle IV

'Shit, shit, shit,' Leon repeatedly cursed, wondering just in the hells he'd been thinking.

The tusked beast above him, the equivalent of tenth-tier, twisted about in the air and brought its massive head down closer to the offering of meat that Leon had left upon its altar. Leon heard it sniff a few times, and then the monster pulsed with magic in a manner reminiscent of a human using their magic senses.

Leon, still invisible, froze as the magic washed over him. To his immense relief, the monster didn't seem to notice him.

The monster opened its strangely small mouth and began to dig into the meat. It still hung in the air like an eel floating in water, seemingly completely at ease with itself in the cavern, showing such a degree of confidence in itself that Leon almost forgot to breathe.

It was only a matter of minutes before the monster had devoured Leon's entire offering, and then it finally ascended back into the air. In these few minutes, Leon managed to get his body back under control and dull his panic. As his anxiety fell, the reason why he'd done this returned to his mind, and he steeled himself for what he now had to do.

The monster had been depicted on the wall blocking his way to the Iron Needle. That, along with the monoliths and altar, made it clear enough to him that this monster was probably not only the lord and master of at least some of the cave network, but that there were other things—or there had been—down here capable of revering, if not outright worshipping this creature.

Leon supposed he couldn't blame them, tenth-tier was only a step away from Apotheosis and achieving divine status.

The monster began to fly away, its small arms and legs paddling in the air like a swimming dog. Its body movements were languid and relaxed, but it moved with great speed over the underground forest, and Leon moved quickly to follow. He'd summoned the beast with an offering and hoped that following it would lead him to the Iron Needle.

Not the best of plans, but it was a plan, and he considered it better than wandering around the cave system for weeks trying to find his way through.

The monster cut a relatively small silhouette head-on, and so was able to fly down into one of the larger tunnels attached to the underground forest with ease.

'Not the one it came from,' Leon noted. The beast had originally come from the opposite direction, if he wasn't wrong—though the creature was surprisingly subtle for its power. Its aura, while powerful and overwhelming when Leon stared at it, did not flood the caves and put pressure on him. That made the monster surprisingly stealthy for its size and power.

But as soon as that thought crossed Leon's mind, it was almost immediately destroyed as the monster led him past yet another illusory veil and into another massive cavern. Like the last one, this one held an underground forest. In contrast, however, this forest had been completely frozen over, with the dirt hardened by cold and ice covering the dead, leafless trees. Spread throughout the cavern were more than thirty ice pillars of the sort that had housed the ice wraiths back at the rift's entrance. These pillars dwarfed those in size, however.

The monster's aura, as it flew into the cavern, practically exploded outwards, staggering Leon with its power. He'd been flying himself to keep up with the monster, and damn near fell to the ground.

The pillars, on the other hand, suffered worse. All were damaged by this expression of power, cracks racing across their surfaces. The half-dozen pillars closest to the monster splintered and almost fell apart, only held together by a wave of ice that instantly grew from their bases to cover their surfaces.

Leon grimaced slightly at the sight of eighth-tier ice wraiths at the base of the pillars, using their demonic magic to keep the pillars intact. At the same time, a horde of banshees made their presence known with terrible shrieks as they flew out of a pit of darkness covering one of the massive cavern's walls. Several ice wraiths began launching huge ice spikes at the monster Leon was following, but the tusked thing hardly seemed to care as these attacks from seventh-tier equivalent lesser demons broke or bounced right off the tusked creature's scaled hide. It swiped one of its relatively short and stubby claws at the nearest ice pillar, and a wind blade shattered the thing in its entirety, sending a veritable mountain of ice shards falling to the ground. In the same motion, a cyclone began turning around the monster and swept out to envelope the entire horde of banshees. In but a moment, their terrible shrieks were silenced.

Leon stared in awe at the almost careless expression of power. The largest concentration of ice wraiths and banshees he'd ever seen, and the creature was completely unfazed.

With another swipe of its claws, a second and third pillar were annihilated, and when the tusked beast roared, a shockwave was projected in front of its open, toothy maw. Just about all the ice wraiths on the ground were shattered as completely as their ice pillars. Leon himself was thrown from the sky and hit the frozen ground, his veil of darkness partially dissolving away before his armor's enchantments managed to get it back up. Still, all the air was driven from his lungs and his body was wracked with pain. No significant damage was done to him thanks to the strength of his armor, but it was clear enough to him that taking on the tusked beast was not something to take lightly.

The tusked beast didn't seem to notice him, thankfully, or if it did, it didn't consider him a threat.

'Perhaps due to the offering?' Leon wondered, though he wasn't keen on testing that particular theory.

In any case, with just a few more roars, the cavern was cleared of ice wraiths. The air had been filled with ice and snow, but not so much that Leon lost sight of the tusked beast. So, he took back to the skies and did his best to continue following it. He didn't know where it was going, but at the very least, it was hostile to banshees and ice wraiths, and he fully supported it in its expression of that enmity.

However, as the tusked beast continued flying through the caves, gracefully sliding through the air like it was swimming on the surface of a placid lake, they encountered no more wraiths or banshees. They did find a few more powerful creatures, but all hid as soon as the tusked beast made its presence known. For its part, the tusked beast hardly seemed to take note of them, leading Leon to wonder just why it bothered to clear out that cavern of ice wraiths, assuming it wasn't simply because they were stupid enough to get in its way.

Perhaps more significantly, they passed through three more enormous caverns with underground forests, each one separated by more and more intricate cave systems that Leon did his best to memorize. Thankfully, it was mostly the illusory veils he had to keep track of to know where he was.

Along the way, the tusked beast stopped at one more location with a monolithic circle just as decorated as the one Leon had found, and it, too, had been filled with offerings: three large bears were piled up like lumber on the altar, while a huge stag, its hide the color of and glowing like moonlight stood off to the side, its head held high and sharp antlers covered in blood. It radiated the aura of a seventh-tier mage, and if Leon had to guess, had killed and stacked those bears, indicating a not-small degree of intelligence.

The tusked beast descended upon the bears with the same gusto as it had devoured Leon's offering, the stag watching all the while. Only when the tusked beast was finished did the stag finally move, and when it did, any doubts that Leon had of its intelligence faded away: it lowered itself in an obvious bow as the tusked creature's eyes fell upon it.

The stag remained lowered as the tusked beast continued to coldly regard it, but after almost five excruciatingly-long minutes, the tusked beast finally growled, and a bead of light appeared in the exact center of its massive forehead plate. The bead couldn't have been larger than one of Leon's finger bones, yet it radiated an incredible amount of power, and when it gracefully fell upon the stag, all the power it contained was absorbed. The stag didn't grow such power as to seem to ascend a tier, but it did

grow greatly in power, and slightly in stature. Its coat even seemed to shine more brilliantly, and Leon briefly wondered if it still would if he were to hunt it.

However, with the creature so clearly having won the tusked beast's benevolence, Leon's wondering was brief and not particularly serious.

In fact, he was more upset that he could've possibly gotten a bead of light like that himself if he hadn't hidden from the tusked beast, though he wondered if it would see his power as a threat. Bestowing power upon a seventh-tier stag was one thing, but a ninth-tier human was another—at least, it would be for Leon.

Soon enough, the tusked beast continued its journey through the caverns, and Leon followed it. Unfortunately for him, the tusked beast soon came to another wall marked by its carved image, but the tusked beast passed cleanly through the wall like a dolphin into the ocean. Leon's eyes about leaped out of their sockets, the wall having seemed without magic of any kind before then, and bearing no sign that the tusked beast had just passed through it after. Leon was unable to replicate the feat, the wall seeming completely solid and unchanging for him.

He momentarily considered trying to blast it down, but once again, his eyes traveled upward to examine the ceiling. His earth magic was still dismal even compared to his water magic, let alone fire or lightning, and the wall had already proven itself to be more than it seemed. While he filed away the brute force attempt for later, for now, he decided to let it be. At the very least, he knew that a good way to get the tusked beast—or a tusked beast, if there were more—to appear was to offer something at one of the monolithic shrines.

So, Leon landed at the base of the new walls and started his examination. However, he'd barely been in contact with the ground for five seconds before a wave of ice appeared at the last fork in this tunnel and came rushing down toward him.

With a roar of surprise and anger, Leon leaped into the air, dropped his invisibility—it wouldn't stand against his retaliation, anyway—and called upon his fire. He extended one of his hands, but instead of bright orange flame, the black fire of the Great Black Dragon sprang forth. In but a moment, this fire had grown larger than Leon's body, and in another, large enough to cover a quarter of the tunnel. Leon pushed outward, and his black fire met the oncoming wave of ice, and Leon wasn't surprised to see the ice prove itself lesser. His fire, practically unparalleled in its destructive capabilities, vaporized the ice on contact. He briefly thought he'd made a mistake as the resulting water vapor exploded outward, but it was contained to the other side of his fiery wave and didn't do any notable damage to the tunnel itself, thankfully.

As his fire reached the fork where the ice had come from, Leon let it die, revealing a dozen ice wraiths standing there, all looking about as surprised as their nearly-featureless faces could express. Eight of them were seventh-tier, three were eighth-tier, and the last Leon was shocked to see was ninth-tier. This last one was larger than any wraith Leon had seen until then, standing a full head-and-shoulders above the eighth-tier wraiths at its side, and its cold blue eyes stared back at Leon with clear killing intent.

But instead of making another move as Leon expected, the ice wraiths vanished back into the tunnel they'd come from, leaving Leon otherwise in peace. Whether that was due to his power over fire or for

some other reason, Leon couldn't say, but he was left wondering if they'd been trying to attack the tusked creature, its wall, or him. He had been invisible, after all, though, with ice wraiths, he had no way to know.

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For two more weeks, Leon ran around the tunnel system, creating a mental map of the place and getting an idea of just where everything was and what inhabited each location. In that time, he came to the hesitant conclusion that whatever had made the stone walls had also made the illusory veils and the monolithic shrines. In the case of the latter, it was clear enough that they'd been made by the same person or people, but after taking some time to examine it all closely, it became much clearer.

As far as he could tell, the carved walls, monolithic shrines, and illusory veils were all created with ancient runes, allowing him to salvage a little bit of his pride. His studies into ancient runes with Nestor hadn't gone into such great detail that he could easily understand what was going on with these enchantments, but he knew enough to identify—and possibly even control—ancient runes when he found them.

When it came to controlling them, however, it was much easier said than done. It was easy enough to drop illusory veils, but they never stayed dropped for long. Leon couldn't get rid of them all and rely upon his magic senses fully again. Every time he tried to get rid of one, no matter how quickly he moved, it would always be back in place before he reached a second.

His other big problem was the carved walls. He'd discovered two more, and based on his internal map of the tunnel system, all four of the walls he'd discovered so far led deeper underground than any other tunnel could take him. In these two weeks, he'd finally started finding the limits of the tunnel system, with the walls the only obstacles left to his exploration.

Or at least, the only passive obstacles. After the encounter with the ninth-tier ice wraith, Leon followed the tunnel it and its fellows retreated down, eventually finding the largest grouping of ice wraiths he'd ever seen.

He'd discovered the largest cavern in the entire tunnel system, the thing practically as large as the entire Forest of Black and White far above. And the entire thing was infested with ice wraiths, almost a hundred of their pillars holding up the ceiling far above. The air between the ground and the ceiling was choked with thousands of banshees—thankfully passive and quiet with Leon making stealth a high priority. In those numbers, he guessed that even the low-level banshees could cripple his use of magic power for at least a little while, leaving him at the whims of the ice wraiths if he were to attack mindlessly.

Fortunately, he didn't think he'd need to attack them—at least, such were his thoughts when he first found them. There were a few more 'cities' of ice wraiths, but none were so large, and all were easily bypassed by other tunnels.

So, once his explorations were largely done, Leon focused his attention on the four carved walls. He'd made a few low-power magical probes into them, confirming some of his fears that to get past them with force would take enough power to probably collapse the tunnel around him. At the same time, the way through them wasn't immediately clear.

In the end, though, Leon managed to detect exceptionally faint traces of magic that only revealed themselves when he took in the entirety of the walls in as great of detail as he could, and even then, the currents of magic weren't so much directly sensed as they were detected by how they affected the ambient magic around him.

Leon hazarded a guess that these were the 'strings' that controlled the ancient rune or runes within the carved walls. It would certainly explain the strange magical phenomenon that occurred when he saw the tusked beast pass through it like water. The problem he faced was that each wall had more than twenty magical currents flowing through it, and he hadn't the faintest idea how exactly to pluck these strings to get them to allow him past the walls.

In the end, Leon had decided that the best way to figure out how to operate these walls would be to observe from those who already knew. Fortunately, he knew how to summon the tusked beasts, though he wasn't quite as eager to do so now as he was before.

In the two weeks he'd spent exploring the underground, he'd encountered a—or the—tusked beast twice more without trying to, and both times, they'd been collecting an offering at a shrine. The first one rewarded the dark panther-like creature with another bead of light, raising it from a fourth-tier creature to a fifth-tier creature. The second time, however, a sixth-tier griffin had brought a meager offering of only two relatively small wolves. The griffin had stood proudly as if boasting of its offering, but the tusked beast, if Leon had to guess, had taken offense.

The griffin was destroyed on the spot, obliterated by a single roar of the tusked beast before being subsequently devoured.

Suffice it to say that Leon was a little more apprehensive about laying out offerings after witnessing that. However, he realized that it was going to be necessary the more he studied the walls. Everything else he did, from probing the walls with destructive magic, to trying to use his own 'open' rune spells, to trying to randomly pluck a few of the strings of magic led to absolutely nothing else happening.

So, with no other choices readily apparent and not wanting to spend years and years down in the tunnel systems, Leon made up his mind and went hunting for a suitable offering that would summon a tusked beast that he could again follow. Invisibly. Carefully. Using every hunting trick he knew to not be seen by the creature and destroyed for trespassing on its turf.

Chapter 815: The Iron Needle V

It was easy enough to get Tusk back out into the open—'Tusk' being the name that Leon decided upon for the tusked beast, for at this point, three weeks into his expedition into the Iron Needle's cave system, he knew that there was only one of the tusked beasts. He'd summoned it several times with offerings, never once showing himself. His foresight proved itself on the second attempt when Tusk grew suspicious at the lack of creature there to take credit for its offering, and even growled so loudly that the entire cavern shook and with such obvious intent and pattern that Leon knew it was speaking something.

He just didn't know the language, for its words certainly weren't anything resembling sounds a human could make, let alone the common tongue.

After that, whenever Leon laid out an offering for Tusk, it would speak again, its aura filling with killing intent more and more—though, it would always take Leon’s offering anyway. It would fill the cavern with its magic senses every time, but Leon’s invisibility held.

It was through this process that Leon learned it was a singular creature and not a whole family of them. The patterns on its body and the little nicks and scars he could see were proof enough without its voice and similar behavior.

Fortunately, Leon’s risk-taking wasn’t in vain. Tusk never attacked directly without an obvious target, and Leon was able to learn much from watching it pass through the carved walls now that he knew what he was looking for. It was a complex thing to manipulate ancient runes, though, and it had taken four attempts for Leon to memorize the strings he needed to pluck, where to pluck them, and how hard.

Once that was done, he left for the surface again. The ice wraiths hadn’t moved back to secure the entrance, so it was easy enough for him to return and link back up with Anzu.

“Brother!” Anzu called out as Leon emerged from the underground for the first time in three weeks.

“Anzu,” Leon warmly replied, pulling his griffin into a tight, if brief embrace. “How have things been topside?”

“Boring,” Anzu complained. “A few ice wraiths have attacked every now and then whenever the sun sets, but I’ve handled them!”

“How many have you killed?” Leon asked encouragingly.

“Twenty!” Anzu exclaimed, retrieving three ice wraith cores from his soul realm as proof.

Leon’s eyes about bugged out of his skull at the sight. His father had killed quite a few ice wraiths himself, but in the years Leon had lived in the Forest of Black and White, Artorias had never managed to get three cores. Since one was enough to power the enchantment that awoke both his Bloodlines, he could feel himself almost start to salivate at the sight of three of the things.

“Well done,” Leon praised, and Anzu stood up straighter and seemed to preen with Leon’s compliment. “Be careful, though. There have been some stronger ice wraiths than I’ve ever seen before down below. If they make their way to the surface, don’t think too hard if you have to run.”

“I can take them!” Anzu declared.

Leon sighed. “Just use your best judgment, Anzu. Please.”

Anzu deflated slightly but nodded along.

“So, other than a few ice wraiths, any other excitement?”

“Nothing to speak of,” Anzu reported. “Went hunting a few times. Filled up on bear. Is it time to leave yet?”

“Not yet,” Leon said as he clapped Anzu on the shoulder. “Still need this damn Needle. I think I’ve finally started to make some progress on that front, but it’s going to require something that... well, I would like to hear from back home before going further. Have they been in contact at all?”

"A few times," Anzu stated, and Leon fought the urge to visibly cringe.

"Right..." he whispered.

'Seems I got a bit too fixated on the Needle,' he critiqued himself. 'They're going to be so happy with me for not calling sooner...'

"Duck and cover, then," Leon said to Anzu, his playful tone not at all accurately reflecting the regret and self-recriminations going through his head at that moment.

Anzu, however, didn't even give him a dirty look, and simply smiled and ducked behind a tree, peering around it like a small child playing hide-and-seek.

Leon forced himself not to laugh at the sight, then conjured Tikos' comm lotus from his soul realm, held in a silver and glass container covered in an intricate web of glyphs. He then carefully schooled his expression to remove any traces of amusement, and then activated the enchantments on the container.

The glass chamber holding the small lotus immediately went opaque with white light, and a circular screen of light appeared above it, two feet in diameter. This screen was also nothing but opaque white light for a short while until it pulsed and the white light dissolved away, leaving what almost seemed to be a window to another screen projected by a second lotus.

Once the image resolved on the projected screen, Leon found himself staring at three rather upset ladies, their expressions equal parts angry, worried, and elated. The sight struck more fear into his heart than Tusk had ever managed in Leon's three weeks beneath the Forest of Black and White.

"Leon," Elise said, her tone warm, but her eyes narrow and cold.

"Elise," Leon replied. "How're things back home?"

"Things are fine," Valeria stated with more warmth than Elise. "Is the hunt for the Needle going well? Have you gotten it?"

"No," Leon said, and a look of disappointment momentarily flickered across his silver-haired lover's face. "It's at the bottom—or near enough, at any rate—of a massive cave system. I've been exploring that system for the past few weeks, and I'm at a point where I don't think I'll be coming back to the surface until I have the Needle. Figured best to see how everyone's doing before since this thing doesn't work down there..."

The comm lotuses that Tikos could grow could only speak with the tree sprite without assistance. As a result, Leon tasked some of his people with Magical Research and Development to come up with a solution. The silver and glass containers were their eventual solution, though the design was still being iterated upon. It allowed for easier communication than comm stones since the stones required far more power and were harder to make. Leon had had to field quite a few requests for getting more lotuses, but as of yet, neither Tikos, Helen, nor Elise had been able to figure out how to mass-produce them. They yet remained only flowers that Tikos itself could grow, and given its other duties, Leon was reluctant to have the tree sprite do nothing but grow comm lotuses all day.

He'd settled for just a few hundred, which Tikos had been more than happy to provide.

“Why has it been almost a month since you got in touch, husband?” Elise interjected before Leon could continue. “You’re about to go even deeper, but why haven’t you come up before now?”

“I... was concentrating on the expedition,” Leon replied. “Had to get this Needle in order to get home, so that’s what I was doing. I apologize for not staying in constant contact, but I had little time for coming back to the surface so frequently. You know it’s not that I didn’t want to speak with you...”

Elise frowned, but after a moment, her expression relaxed. “I know, my love, it’s just frustrating not being there with you.”

“Probably best that I’m here alone, honestly...” Leon said, and he gave them all a brief rundown of all that he’d done in the past few weeks. “... so I’m finally about ready to try my luck with those doors.”

“Is this ‘Tusk’ going to be a problem?” Maia asked aloud, breaking her silence for the first time that call.

“I’m hoping not, but... I can’t say for sure. I’m going to plan on it, and hopefully, I’ll be pleasantly surprised.”

“If only it were that easy...” Valeria whispered.

“I was actually contemplating revealing myself to it. It hasn’t made any overtly hostile moves against me so far, but...”

“Don’t try it,” Maia immediately replied. “You’re new. You’re strong. You’re in its territory. Get the Needle and leave. No more.”

Leon thinly grinned but nodded.

“Leon,” Elise said, drawing his attention. She stared at him with great intent, any anger that had been present in her at the start of their call now gone, replaced with both love and worry. “Make sure to come back home. With or without the Needle. Just be sure to come home.”

“I intend to, love,” Leon whispered. “But now, I should get going.”

“Make us proud,” Valeria said with a teasing smile.

Maia nodded to him, a ghost of a smile gracing her face. Elise did likewise, and the four exchanged words of love once more before Leon ended the call.

With a sigh, he gave Anzu a quick hug, and then it was back underground. His brief time on the surface had been delightful, but he wouldn’t find the Needle up there.

—

Leon stood before the first wall, the one near the entrance of the rift. He reached out with his magic power and sank into the stone. His magic power penetrated surprisingly easily when it hadn’t been changed into its elemental form—his lightning and fire had barely managed to so much as smooth a bit of the carved stone, let alone scratch or damage the walls in any way. Even his meager earth magic hadn’t managed to sink into the stone. And yet, his element-less magic managed it without trouble.

Leon only contemplated that fact for a moment before he started plucking at the strings of magic within the wall that controlled the ancient runes that would grant him passage. It was a complex ‘song’, but

Leon had memorized it after watching Tusk get through. But memorizing it and playing it perfectly were two different things, so while Tusk didn't have to slow down in its approach of the walls, Leon had to stand in front of this one for more than an hour plucking away until he felt the magic within and around the wall shift.

With a grin behind his helmet, Leon quickly surged forward and, with only a moment's hesitation, jumped at the wall...

... and passed right through as easily as if it weren't even there.

He landed upon the stone ground on the other side, none the worse for wear, and he breathed a sigh of relief. He found himself in a stone tunnel just like the one he'd left, leading further down, closer to where he could feel the omnipresent charge of lightning magic in the air coming from.

'Seems those lessons in ancient runecraft aren't going to waste...' Leon thought to himself, feeling both grateful to Nestor for the lessons, yet also glad that the dead man wasn't around to see him struggle so with the wall.

Leon stood there feeling proud of his accomplishment for all of a second and a half before a wave of magic power washed over him, emanating from the wall behind him. His armor was already on, so he immediately ducked down and went invisible again, uncertain as he was as to what that was.

The wave of power moved quickly, racing down the tunnel with incredible speed. Given what he could sense of the power, it was no great leap for Leon to conclude that this was some kind of sensor and that he'd likely made some kind of mistake either in his passing through the wall or in his immediate arrival on this side.

'Probably alarms, too,' he thought as he used his power to lift himself into the air and begin flying down into the tunnel as subtly as he could. He was more comfortable flying out in the caverns where Tusk wouldn't be actively searching for him, but now that he was on this side of the wall, he didn't want to take too many chances with a creature so strong in wind magic, and so took extra precautions.

He hadn't moved out of sight of the wall behind him before an earth-shaking roar resounded from far beneath him, one laced with potent killing intent and a tremendous aura. So great was the aura that several small holes were torn in Leon's invisibility shroud, though they were fixed but a moment later.

A great wind then blew through the cave, and along with it came barreling in Tusk, riding the wave at a mind-bending speed. Despite this speed, Tusk stopped just short of the wall, all of its momentum arrested in less than a second, and stared at it with curious anger evident even in its alien face.

Leon, through all this, froze in the air. Tusk's arrival had sent him flying into the cave wall, though with his armor on, Leon hardly felt a thing as he crashed into the stone. Instead, he kept his eyes trained on Tusk and maintained as complete stillness as he could, for fear that the tenth-tier beast would sense even the smallest disturbances in the air with him so close and it so attentive.

Tusk continued staring at the wall for a quarter of a minute before its long, sinuous body circled about to stare down the tunnel carved by the Iron Needle's impact, and then surveyed the area immediately around the wall. It growled challengingly, but Leon remained still. It then seized control of the air around

them and began spinning it into a powerful cyclone, and only then was Leon's shroud of invisibility finally torn from him.

Leon was hurled through the air, now fully visible, until Tusk's eyes fell upon him, and Leon knew that he'd been seen. So, without any further reason to be subtle, Leon called upon his own mastery of wind magic, which he'd rarely called upon in battle, to steady himself within Tusk's cyclone. The cyclone wasn't overly powerful, perhaps dangerous to mages sixth-tier and below, but it was little more than a probing strike for either Leon or the massive tusked beast.

So, Leon hovered in the air, buffeted yet steady within the cyclone, while Tusk stared at him, its eyes narrowing in caution and suspicion, each sizing the other up.

And then Tusk began to speak, not in the growling cadence it had used before at the monolithic shrines, but in a tongue understandable to Leon, if rather archaic.

"Here thou art, small rat," Tusk stated, its deep voice shaking Leon to his core, and causing the tunnel to quiver like a scared kitten. "Weeks thou hast graced mine home, yet nary even a whisper of permission given... Why hast though come, small rat? I care little for thy kind, and less for creatures as rude as thee..." Tusk 'swam' through the air a little closer, letting its aura press down upon Leon with what felt like the weight of the whole mountain range above.

Leon hovered strong, ignoring the pressure as much as he could, thankful that his armor was taking at least some of the pressure off even if he felt Tusk had reached into his chest and taken hold of his heart.

"Apologies for intrusion," Leon stated, straining his voice to not sound too concerned by Tusk's aura. "I'm but a humble explorer, mapping out these fascinating tunnels."

Tusk glared at him and hissed. "None such explorers exist as well-armored as thou art, small rat. Thy lies go unappreciated."

"I speak no lie!" Leon protested. "I'm here exploring a portion of my home I've never seen before!"

"Thy power betrays thee, small rat," Tusk growled, and Leon, even with his face hidden behind his helmet, stifled a grimace. "Rats such as thee art not motivated by mere curiosity, thou art after some prize, some reason to brave these dark depths... Tell me why thou hast come, small rat."

Leon bitterly grinned behind his helmet. He was trapped by Tusk's power, though he thought he might be able to break out if need be.

'But do I need to?' Leon wondered. 'I've given this thing offerings without asking for anything in return. It's not trying to kill me, yet... Maybe it would be amenable to my goal? I can't imagine it will be, but... I shouldn't resort to violence without trying peace first.'

Leon took a deep breath and made eye contact with Tusk, who was rapidly losing patience with his prolonged silence.

"I'm here for something important to me!" Leon shouted just as it seemed the creature reached the limits of its patience.

Tusk paused, regarding him coldly. "Small rat, thou thinks to raid my home for treasures, thinking them open for the taking? That they hold no value to mine own self? I shalt make thee a singular offer: leave now and never return; thou art not wanted here, and thy wants shalt not see satisfaction."

Leon felt the tremendous weight of the tusked monster's killing intent increase, but not unbearably so.

"What I seek has no owner!" Leon shouted back.

"All in these depths belong to mine own self," Tusk countered. "Thou hast no claim to anything down here."

Adding emphasis, Tusk's power intensified and Leon found himself slammed down into the tunnel floor. Realizing that Tusk would not allow him past, Leon grimaced and summoned his anti-air magic gem and, after taking a deep breath and whispering a plea for help to his tau pearl, activated it.

For just a moment, Tusk's grasp of him was shattered, and Leon sprang up, his body coursing with lightning, increasing his speed so far beyond mortal limits that he slipped beyond a mortal's ability to visibly track. At the same time, Leon re-engaged his invisibility enchantment and charged under Tusk.

As far as he was concerned, Tusk was more than within its rights to deny him access to its home and were he not here for something as important as the Iron Needle, Leon would've heeded its surprisingly polite request to leave.

But he was here for the Iron Needle, so he couldn't just turn around and leave.

Tusk roared in rage and the cyclone around this side of the carved wall spiked in power. Leon's shroud of invisibility was rent apart again, and though Leon activated his anti-air magic gem again, Tusk still moved quickly enough to grab ahold of him again.

Leon gritted his teeth in frustration, but Tusk lifted him off his feet and telekinetically hurled Leon back against the carved wall. Leon felt the ancient runes within the door activate again, and he was thrown clear through the wall, though damaging it not at all. Tusk followed, and Leon caught himself on the other side of the wall and kept flying back as Tusk slithered through the air in front of its image upon the wall.

"There shalt not be a second warning, small rat!" Tusk roared as it halted in front of the wall. "Return to my home at thine own peril!"

With that, Tusk turned back around and vanished behind the wall again, while Leon could only sigh in disappointment, and begin planning how he was going to deal with this setback.

Chapter 816: The Iron Needle VI

Leon stared at the carved wall, frowning deeply as he pondered his problem. Eventually, he walked over to a boulder, cleared off the tiny remaining shards of ice from when he'd blown through the ice wraiths camping outside weeks earlier, and took a seat.

He needed the Iron Needle, he wasn't leaving without it. He'd repeated that thought many times in the past few weeks, and it was as true now as it was every time it had run through his head. And yet, Tusk wasn't going to let him through.

'It's not exactly in the wrong, is it?' Leon thought. Here he was, in Tusk's territory, attempting to break into Tusk's own home. Tusk was perfectly within its rights to kick him right the fuck out, as far as Leon was concerned.

And yet, Leon *needed* that Needle. He couldn't imagine that the Needle was in Tusk's possession, even if Tusk might disagree. Besides, the Iron Needle was a possession of his Clan, and if Tusk *did* lay claim to it, then Leon would only consider it stolen rather than simply lost.

'No, I'm not leaving just yet...' Leon vowed. *'Just going to have to get a little more creative...'*

He wasn't here for Tusk's treasures. He wasn't here to steal from Tusk, he just wanted to repossess his Clan's property... which made him feel just a little awkward about how much of his Clan's property he'd passed on before, and his many declarations to leave all of that behind.

But those were the thoughts of an angry boy who'd just had his body stolen. He was ready to accept whatever of his Clan's legacy that he considered necessary, and that included the Iron Needle.

And that meant that, as sympathetic as he found Tusk's actions, he couldn't back down. The only question that remained was how to proceed.

He kicked himself for not revealing himself sooner when his offerings might've won him a little more respect and leeway from Tusk, but he couldn't imagine a few meals measured well against a Universe Fragment, even if that Universe Fragment wasn't actually in Tusk's possession at the moment. Or so Leon assumed, anyway.

'Try peace again?' Leon wondered. *'Or just assume it will fail and proceed accordingly? Would leaving another offering and attempting one more parley on somewhat more neutral ground be a good idea? Tusk can talk, sure, but how much does it know of civilization? If it's a solitary creature, as it seems to be, it might not have much respect for organized discussions and mutual agreements.'*

Leon found it damned hard to decide how to proceed. On the one hand, he didn't think that going the diplomatic route was an option, not anymore. The time for that had come and gone, as far as he was concerned, but was that an excuse to just give it up? He was sorely tempted to just try and blast his way through, doing away with all tact and diplomacy, but against a tenth-tier Ascended Beast—especially since most Ascended Beasts were stronger both physically and magically than their human equivalents—that seemed a method of suicide rather than a plan that might actually win him his Iron Needle.

He sat there on the boulder for a long time, debating with himself over just how to proceed. He desperately wished he could ask the Thunderbird, or anyone else for that matter, but doing so would violate the spirit of the expedition. He was here to seize the Iron Needle himself, and while asking for advice might not be beyond the pale, Leon didn't think it was time for that yet. He still had other options.

With a deep sigh, he decided upon the diplomatic route. At the very least, he didn't want to say that he didn't try to make things work peacefully, even if his attempts came too late. Even if attempting to treat Tusk like Leon would another human was doomed to fail.

It wasn't long before Leon found himself before the closest of the sacrificial altars, the carved monoliths staring down upon him, the largest depicting either Tusk or some other creature of the same species. The now-familiar magics flowing around the altar were still there, just waiting for proper sacrifice to engage themselves.

For a brief moment, Leon wondered just who had carved these monoliths, but given the lack of script, it was impossible to say. They were remarkably well-carved, and showed little signs of aging, though he supposed there was probably some magic at play in that regard. The monoliths looked like they could've been carved just the day before Leon arrived, or a million years before, there was no way for him to tell which.

All he did know was that the image of Tusk on the largest monolith glared down at him with what now seemed a baleful gaze, even if its face was altogether too alien for such an expression to be read into. Leon scowled lightly and reached into his soul realm, retrieving the corpses of two seventh-tier spiders that he'd killed the week before that had tried to turn him into dinner, and laid them down upon the altar. They were large creatures, their body masses each were probably ten times that of Leon's, but they fit well enough on the altar.

Leon waited a moment, expecting the magic in the stones to activate with two strong sacrifices laid upon it.

He waited a little longer, his concern growing exponentially with every passing second the altar stayed dormant.

He waited a full minute, and then another. He waited five minutes before his scowl deepened about as far as it could. The magic in the altars wasn't activating, despite it having done so for less than what he was currently offering before he'd passed through Tusk's wall.

Leon, still frowning, collected his offering and hurried to the next closest altar, through many miles of tunnel and cavern, and tried again, but this time added several fifth and sixth-tier ape corpses along with the spiders.

And still, the altar remained dead. His sacrifices weren't being accepted.

He pulled the corpses back into his soul realm, his mood dark. The corpses didn't have much value to him personally, but he wasn't one to waste his kills. But with his sacrifices rejected, Leon now had to ask himself again: what now?

—

Leon wandered the tunnels for two days, planning his next steps. Complicating his thoughts was the fact that Tusk never once showed itself, as far as Leon could tell. It was as if Leon's presence had caused it to hunker down in the lower tunnels, possibly out of fear that Leon wasn't alone or some other reason that Leon couldn't possibly guess.

Regardless, it left Leon in a bit of a bind. He needed to get past the carved walls, but that was a losing prospect with Tusk still down there. So, if he wanted to make a chance for himself to snag the Iron Needle, then he needed to get Tusk out of those tunnels somehow.

During these few weeks in the tunnels, Leon had noted a couple things about Tusk that he planned around. The first was that, until the altars stopped working for him, Tusk always picked up its offerings in a timely manner. The second was that while it didn't go out of its way to exterminate the ice wraiths and their pet banshees from its tunnels, Tusk always slaughtered them whenever it encountered them.

So, Leon figured if he could somehow get the remaining ice wraiths in the tunnels to act up, then perhaps Tusk might come out of its tunnels to put a stop to the violence. What had Leon more concerned about that particular plan was how to get the ice wraiths to attack him or make noise without killing them all—while their deaths wouldn't give him trouble sleeping at night, he wanted to leave Tusk a sizable mess to clean up, with as many ice wraiths running around as possible. That meant he couldn't simply kill them all for Tusk.

He also wasn't sure if he could even get the ice wraiths to attack him, follow him, or go on a rampage throughout the tunnels, killing all of Tusk's worshippers. If he provoked them, and they did nothing, then Leon would have just wasted his time.

'Not like I'm running short of that, though,' Leon thought with a smile. He had plenty of time to try things out, but if the ice wraiths didn't work out, then he'd have to start getting particularly creative to get Tusk out of its caverns, and he didn't want to out-and-out declare war on the creature. He just wanted the Iron Needle, and then he'd be out of Tusk's metaphorical hair.

Before all of that, however, he needed another piece of context, and fortunately, that piece came relatively quickly.

By his estimation, some powerful creature made a sacrifice to Tusk at least twice per week at one of the altars, and he soon found a large snow lion dragging a large corpse of a fallen stag, clearly meant as its sacrifice. The lion dragged the stag onto the round altar, and Leon felt the ancient runes around him fire up. However, Tusk never showed itself. The sacrifice seemed to be accepted, for a drop of light appeared and entered the snow lion, but it appeared as if from nowhere, and as far as Leon could tell, it wasn't because Tusk was invisible. It was simply as if the tenth-tier creature wasn't there.

So, with a heavy sigh, Leon realized that his options were even more limited than he'd thought they were. He briefly wondered if Tusk was somehow tracking him, and would know if he was still in the cave system, but after taking an hour to give himself as thorough an examination as he could, he found no strange magics upon or around him that would indicate such.

'Not that that means I'm not being tracked...' Leon thought with a touch of bitterness.

So, he decided to go with his initial plan, and see if he could get the ice wraiths to make enough noise to rouse Tusk and get it out of its lair. But first, he would need to make a few preparations...

—

Leon stood in the mouth of the tunnel, staring out at the largest collection of ice wraiths that he'd ever seen. The massive cavern they were housing themselves in was filled with their pillars, and the ceiling choked with thick sheets of banshees, lazily floating about, just waiting for their icy masters to have need of them.

Leon was about to give them that need.

He traveled with not only several fully built and prepared Lightning Lances, but also the materials to build more. However, in this case, he'd decided to try something a little more radical, placing a great deal of trust in his armor and the strength of its enchantments.

He removed the base of a Lightning Lance and rigged up a slightly different firing mechanism. That way, he could hold the barrel and fire it over his shoulder, giving him the ability to use the weapon without setting it up first, though his aim was terrible and it wasn't as powerful as it could be—the main power source and most of its control enchantments were contained in the base, after all. Still, he figured he could get off one very inaccurate and rather underpowered shot by wielding it by hand as he was, and when his enemies were as thickly-gathered as they were, accuracy wasn't needed.

So, he stood there in the mouth of the tunnel, his shroud of darkness obscuring him from view—to his immense relief, as he felt like a fool hefting the large barrel of his weapon like a tree trunk—and took aim at the closest ice pillar. He did his best to stay on target, but his sights were designed for a completely different firing position, so it wasn't particularly easy.

Still, when he thought himself ready, he channeled his power into the weapon's enchantments, and once they were charged up, he manually manipulated them to get the weapon to fire. The barrel was a long tube of steel nestled within another long tube, encasing a series of heavily enchanted rings. These rings pulled another enchanted cylinder of iron through the barrel, accelerating it to a fantastic speed. One of the better modifications that Leon's researchers had made was shallow spiraling grooves etched into the interior of the barrel, which caused the iron cylinder to spin, increasing accuracy.

That accuracy went to waste as Leon's shot went wide, missing the massive ice pillar not too far in front of him. For just a moment, Leon frowned, his lightning magic still flowing through him and increasing the speed of his perceptions enough to fully appreciate that he'd just missed such a massive target. Thankfully, in such a densely-packed cavern, he still hit *something*, and that something was another ice pillar about two miles further back. Even with the reduced strength of the weapon and the distance it had to travel, the round still hit with force great enough to heavily damage the pillar, causing thousands of cracks to spread across the pillar's surface and nearly bring it down completely.

And it was like Leon had kicked an ant hill; thousands of ice wraiths came pouring out of the hundreds of pillars in the cavern. The cavern was almost the size of the Forest of Black and White itself, and the ice wraiths had made it their home, so with their home attacked, they came out in force.

As was their wont, Leon noticed that most of them were seventh-tier. It seemed rather strange, but he'd not seen a single ice wraith less than sixth-tier, though he assumed they had to exist in some capacity, maybe. He'd have asked Xaphan, but the demon was still making himself scarce, immersing himself in his recovery.

Every pillar had at least one eighth-tier ice wraith in addition to the hordes of seventh-tier wraiths. Some of the larger pillars had multiple, and from the largest pillar in the center of the cavern, Leon saw the one ninth-tier wraith that he was already somewhat acquainted with emerge. The air filled with the killing intent of thousands of murder-happy wraiths, and the banshees above screeched in unison. Even encased in his enchanted armor, with a tau pearl there to provide extra support, Leon fell to his knees in pain as his magic rampaged through his body beyond his control thanks to the banshees. In the same

moment, his shroud of darkness was ripped off, leaving him completely exposed for all the wraiths and banshees to plainly see.

Leon almost buckled from seeing thousands of powerful beings turn in his direction almost all at once. It wasn't surprising that they'd found him so quickly in their own home, but it was quite frightening, nonetheless. With great effort, Leon got his magic back under control, he pulled his jury-rigged shoulder cannon back into his soul realm, and he turned around and ran right the hell away, quickly vanishing down the tunnel he'd come from.

For a moment, he wondered if his bait had been taken, but the killing intent and cold, dark auras that flooded into the tunnel not far behind him proved that it had. He smiled for a moment as he ran, noting that hundreds of banshees were flowing into the tunnel behind him, their dark smoky bodies concealing completely any ice wraiths that might be coming, too.

As a ninth-tier lightning mage, Leon knew he could easily outrun all of these creatures, and this pursuit made that abundantly clear. The banshees could move quickly enough for their power level, but they were all between the third and fifth-tier, and unable to capitalize on the natural speed of darkness. The wraiths were faster, despite water and ice magic not being suited for speed. So, Leon forced himself to slow down, always keeping himself just in sight, often turning to throw lightning bolts at the oncoming banshees whenever he led them through a long enough tunnel.

Along the way, a number of pre-arranged traps were activated, causing great explosions of fire and lightning that killed many more banshees, and in the holes his traps punched, Leon noticed that there were, in fact, ice wraiths among them, to his immense relief. He didn't think banshees alone, no matter how thickly massed, would be enough to get Tusk off its ass.

He could've filled the tunnels with hundreds of traps if he wished. He figured he could fill them with enough to destroy the entire tunnel system, assuming he didn't run into any unexpected support and reinforcement enchantments, but instead he hit his pursuers with what he hoped was just enough power to keep them hooked and on his tail. He was always just ahead of them, always hitting them hard and keeping them angry. And soon enough, he burst out into another titanic cavern.

This cavern was, like all the others, filled with life. It was hundreds of square miles in size, and the strange underground forest that grew in it provided more than enough sustenance for a thriving ecosystem—an ecosystem that was almost immediately thrown out of balance as banshees and ice wraiths came exploding out of the tunnel behind Leon. Even worse, in the distance Leon realized that the ice wraiths hadn't been so stupid as to simply follow him, they'd sent several large forces through other tunnels to try and cut him off, these forces pouring out of other tunnels and into this cavern at almost the same time.

He smiled with the initial success of his plan, but it would all be for nothing if Tusk didn't take this provocation. So, instead of trying to escape the wraiths and banshees, he turned to run deeper into the forest, toward the closest of Tusk's altars. To his immense relief, even as his destination became clear, none of his pursuers elected to stop, not even as other powerful creatures began howling threats with this cold invasion of the cavern.

Leon came to a stop right in front of Tusk's monolith at the altar site, and only a moment later, the cavern air above him was filled with banshees. A few silver-blue lightning bolts scattered them, but they

didn't put even a dent in their overall numbers. Still, it was enough to give him space, even as hundreds of ice wraiths closed in around him, with the ninth-tier wraith leading them.

This wraith locked eyes with Leon and slowed down a bit, seeming to hesitate a bit to approach Tusk's altar. But with a few more electric incentives from Leon poking small holes in its pursuing force, the powerful wraith came forward, its aura tremendous, its killing intent thick.

It extended a hand and launched a wave of ice like a tsunami, but Leon countered with a wave of his own, his made of black fire. These two powers met almost exactly between them, causing a tremendous explosion that just about cut the entire cavern in twain. A forty-foot trench was cut almost a mile long between them, and the entire cavern shook, but what came next completely blew that out of the water.

A roar that crashed down upon them all resounded through the cavern, drowning out the shrieking of the banshees and the howling of the other beasts. The ice wraiths were largely silent creatures, but so many of them had the air just a moment before filled with the cracking sounds of water flash-freezing, but even this was completely overpowered by that roar.

With a wide smile of vindication, Leon turned and saw Tusk flying into the cavern from another tunnel, rage as etched into its alien face as Leon thought possible.

His bait had been taken, and it was time to enact the next part of his plan.

Chapter 817: The Iron Needle VII

Tusk roared again, and the weight of its furious aura caused many of the weaker banshees far above to simply drop from the sky, stone dead, the smoky darkness that covered their bodies dissipating to leave the childlike corpse behind.

Leon stood in front of Tusk's monolith, surrounded by ice wraiths, knowing that he had to move now if he wanted to live. So that's exactly what he did; he leaped into the air, catching himself with his power, as he pulled his gear into his soul realm and transformed into his Thunderbird form. In the same breath, he conjured the invisibility ring he'd made for this form and activated it, fading from view.

He was fortunate that Tusk had taken the ice wraith's attention, otherwise, they might've interfered. As it was, Tusk's entrance had the entire horde but those closest to Leon's former position turned to face it, and even they didn't get in his way. So, as soon as he was invisible, Leon began tearing off toward the nearest of Tusk's carved walls.

He'd barely flapped his wings once when a gust of wind blew through the cavern—wind itself, let alone a gust so strong, wasn't present underground, so Leon knew exactly who that gust had come from. Indeed, the gust began to swirl about, and banshees began to fall by the dozens from above, even as they shrieked and attempted to do something about Tusk's magic. But it was like a mortal screaming at the tides to halt, and Tusk slithered through the air a little closer, summoning a cyclone that tore through the banshees with great ease.

The ice wraiths on the cavern floor began to summon their magics, but Leon, in his Thunderbird form and with more lightning flowing through his body than blood, reached his target tunnel before anything else happened, and he flew as fast as he could right in. Not too far away was an illusory veil, which he

crashed through with as much speed as he could manage in the winding tunnels, and everything behind him vanished, leaving nothing but the impression of more tunnels to his magic senses.

But he could still feel the ground shake and the magic around him reacting to the massive concentrations and expressions of power he'd left behind. The air grew colder as the ice wraiths did their thing, only for all the air around him to be sucked back toward the cavern, and then be expelled, giving him something of an expected speed boost which he struggled to control—clearly, Tusk wasn't going easy on the ice wraiths who'd trespassed into its tributaries' territory, and right onto one of its altars.

Leon knew that Tusk was going to win that fight. The ice wraiths had a tremendous amount of force with them, with hundreds of seventh-tier and dozens of eighth-tier wraiths, along with their massive gathering of banshees, but they only had one ninth-tier wraith, and Leon couldn't see them taking on the tenth-tier tusk even with all of that, not with what Tusk had already demonstrated to him earlier. That meant he had a limited amount of time to get to the carved wall and get through before Tusk could respond. Less, if Tusk allowed the wraiths to flee.

Fortunately, with his lightning magic, Leon was incredibly fast, and he reached the nearest carved wall in a matter of minutes. He was miles away by this point, but could still feel the battle taking place back in that cavern. He briefly wondered just what he might find if he were to go back after the battle was over, but after a quick shake of his head, he put that thought out of his mind and focused on the task at hand.

First, he tossed a spell down on the ground—or more accurately, conjured it in the air and slammed it into the ground with his talons—and felt the faintest of light screens go up, spanning the entirety of the tunnel right in front of the carved wall. Any creature of sufficient power or size passing through the screen would break it, and alert him—hopefully, he couldn't be entirely sure the enchantment would work so far underground and with so many disparate magics flowing through the environment.

Then, he reached into the carved wall with his magic power and did as he had done several days before. In but a moment, he was on the other side of the wall, and he tossed down another alarm spell. With those in place, he was confident he would be warned when Tusk inevitably won the fight with the ice wraiths and returned to the lower tunnels.

In that case, he tossed down a few more trap spells, intending to slow the monster down and possibly collapse the tunnel if he could. It would take quite a bit of effort, though, so he assumed it would fail, and possibly only anger the tenth-tier beast even more than it already might be, but he ignored his doubts and tossed down a few more traps.

Then, without further ado, he flew onward, his magic senses filling the tunnel and all ahead of him.

Unfortunately, 'all ahead of him' turned out to be about a hundred feet, despite his physical eyes telling him otherwise; there was some kind of ancient enchantment at play that was interfering with his magic senses, preventing him from using them to scout ahead.

'Frustrating, but I can work around this,' Leon confidently thought. His eyes were sharp, and though his sense of smell had weakened considerably in his avian form, he could still hear quite well, and quite acutely sensed the changes in the magic around him.

However, he was still taken a little off-guard when he turned a corner in the tunnel as it delved deeper into the earth and found the tunnel rapidly shrinking until it reached a plain stone wall about twice as tall as Leon, with a regular-sized door set in it.

Leon had to practically stop mid-air, but he managed to not crash and landed in front of the door. A moment later, he was back in his human form, fully armed and armored.

The door was locked tightly both physically and magically, but Leon was able to coax it open in a matter of seconds with an ancient 'open' rune, indicating that the enchantments holding the door closed were modern rather than ancient. That seemed a little odd given the ubiquity of ancient runes before now, but he wasn't going to question his good luck.

The other side of the door revealed the atrium of a spectacular underground palace, though one that felt a little constricted and uncomfortable to Leon's tastes given the lack of windows or illusion enchantments that might simulate the outdoors.

Beautiful furniture was everywhere, the floor was polished black granite, and fur rugs made from all kinds of powerful beasts were abundant. Ornate weapons and silkgrass banners depicting various wild animals adorned the walls, and just in the atrium alone, Leon counted half a dozen hearths.

And yet, not a single soul to enjoy this splendor to be seen. The palace was empty, quiet, and with the lack of magic lanterns, quite dark. The hearths were lit, but given the size of the atrium and the open halls beyond, the firelight didn't reach quite as far as it needed to. The palace was as oppressive to Leon's sensibilities as it was opulent.

Leon afforded himself only a second to take all of this in before he charged onward. Even here, with all the magic in the walls ensuring the place was comfortable and habitable, Leon could feel the omnipresent charge of the Iron Needle calling him onward, growing ever stronger the closer he got to it.

He raced through halls too large for any but the most egotistic human to build, through rooms that, despite having human-sized furniture, were enormous, more than enough for Tusk to fly through comfortably, and past scenes of opulence and luxury that they wouldn't have been out place in the palace at Ilion or Evergold. Yet Leon was single-minded, focused entirely on finding the Iron Needle and getting out before Tusk could come home.

Even then, in the back of his mind, it seemed fairly obvious that Tusk was, at least some of the time, assuming human form, but he never speculated as to why, or any other questions related to it. As far as he was concerned, he was trespassing in Tusk's home, and he just wanted to grab the Needle and leave.

The only time he ever reconsidered that desire, as weak as that reconsideration may have been, was when he passed by a chamber filled with soft light and sparkling metal. He paused as he ran past and shuffled back, his mouth hanging open as he beheld the piles of gold and silver ingots and coins that lay almost obsessively arranged on hundreds of tables in the long hall, the jewels arranged in like piles, every color of the rainbow represented by some gleaming or sparkling gemstone. While Leon had little eye for art, the paintings and statues that lined the walls were clearly well-made by experienced artists and many of differing styles leading Leon to think that they'd been done by different artists and weren't simply the product of Tusk itself.

He wanted to continue to the Iron Needle, but there was something within him that demanded he take all he now surveyed. Every shiny he wanted in his soul realm, every gem from the smallest amethyst to the largest diamond taken, all down to the grain of gold dust. It was with great willpower that he ripped himself away from the hall.

‘I am no thief,’ Leon repeated to himself over and over again. His instincts screamed at him to go back, but his resolve was strengthened immeasurably when he heard a loud pinging sound resound through his helmet, followed almost immediately by another—his alarms on both sides of the carved wall had been tripped, leading him to believe that Tusk had already finished with the ice wraiths and was now speeding his way.

He didn’t hear his other traps go off, but he had confidence that they did. Instead, he focused on following the lightning magic he could sense, and from the way it had grown stronger, he thought he was drawing quite close to his destination. He proceeded, his form becoming enshrouded in darkness once more as he activated his invisibility enchantment.

And then he opened a door at the end of a long, tall hallway, lined on both sides by ornate columns of black quartz intricately carved with images of various beasts all bowing to Tusk—or some other individual of the same species—and was met with an aura of lightning magic so intense that he could almost taste it. The palatial walls gave way to rough-cut stone, and he found himself standing in another natural-seeming tunnel.

Leon projected his magic senses forward and realized that this short tunnel intersected with the rift carved by the Iron Needle’s impact, and a few thousand feet down the tunnel to his right was the first carved wall that he’d hit on the way down.

To the left, the tunnel went much deeper, but Leon almost hesitated to continue. The last time he was here, he hadn’t seen them, but now that he was deeper, he saw the rift walls lined with dozens of skulls of varying size, all of Tusk’s species. Many were much, much smaller than Tusk’s, and a few were even larger than its was. Some were small enough that Leon thought them to be examples of juveniles of Tusk’s species. He saw no other bones, however, and the skulls were lined up along the wall on simple stone plinths that had been specially built for them, if the fact that their sizes matched those of the skulls were any indication.

‘Seems I found their graveyard...’ Leon thought as he slapped down another alarm spell and continued onward, giving the skulls a few more curious glances as he passed them by. ‘Or something like one, anyway...’

It was curious to him that they were left here, along the path to the Iron Needle, and that one was outside of the wall—the largest skull of the collection, at that. A few of the skulls even looked like they were burned by lightning, though all seemed intact as far as he could tell. None were smashed or damaged aside from the fractal, spiraling lightning burns that those few sported.

He hadn’t stopped moving, but he was thrown out of his musings when he sensed a deep killing intent backed by Tusk’s powerful aura growing dangerously close. He was still invisible, but he didn’t want to take any chances. He was already moving quickly, but he began running as fast as he could maintain down the rift to the Iron Needle’s resting place.

The charge grew stronger and stronger the further he went, and faster than it had anywhere else in the cave system. This power wrapped around his body, entered his body as he breathed, and almost seemed to whisper in his ear. It was a sweet sound, but all Leon could understand was a plea for him to continue.

As he did, the walls grew darker, though not with darkness magic. Instead, he could smell the ionized air, the tell-tale stench of lightning, indicating the walls had been burned black. The ground grew softer and sandier; Leon imagined the power of the Needle had shattered many of the stones in the rift.

Even further down the rift, the ground became broken up more and more with twisting columns of black crystal that Leon recognized as fossilized lightning: sand that had been melted by a lightning strike and solidified into crystals, resembling frozen lightning.

They were beautiful, humming with lightning magic that had Leon's blood singing. In fact, as he passed below one, a bolt of lightning shot out of it to score the already-blackened ceiling, the bright yellow-white nearly blinding Leon for a moment even as the rift shook with the sound of thunder.

If Leon hadn't been trying to avoid attention until this point, he would've jumped in uncontained joy at the sight and the sensation of such power. Despite being a lightning mage, Leon could practically feel his blood vibrating in his veins and his hair standing on end.

But all of that was nearly forgotten when a human figure sprinted through the door to Tusk's palace, leaped into the air, and twisted back into Tusk's shape.

"SMALL RAT!" Tusk boomed, its voice echoing down the rift, its aura shattering several of the closer columns of fulgurite—though not, Leon noticed, the skulls of its dead race.

Leon slowed down, trying to remain inconspicuous even with his invisibility, but he proceeded onward anyway.

"THOU SHALT PROCEED NO FURTHER!" Tusk roared, and like the rift was breathing out, a tremendous gust of wind came from deeper within, a gust so powerful that Leon was forced to stop and brace against it to not be carried away. Unfortunately, his shroud of invisibility was torn apart, leaving him exposed to Tusk's wrath.

Immediately, Leon felt Tusk's power constrict around him, but in the same moment, his rage spiked. He wasn't going to be captured and humiliated again, thrown away like old trash at best, slaughtered like a pig at worst. Instead, he breathed in, absorbing the lightning magic that inundated the tunnel, and let loose with all the lightning magic he had within him at once.

His body seemed to explode with silver-blue lightning, all of it directed in Tusk's general direction. The wave of lightning passed over the many columns of black crystalline fulgurite, causing each of them to discharge the lightning magic they had contained within themselves, adding to Leon's massive strike. At the same time, thunder rocked the tunnel, dust and sand fell from the ceiling, and for a moment, Leon felt like the ceiling was about to come crashing down.

But the ceiling held, and Leon's powerful strike hit Tusk, sending the creature flying back and so knocking it off balance that it lost control of its power for a moment.

Without hesitation, Leon leaped into the air and began flying, using all of his power to force himself down into the rift. He couldn't see the bottom, there being what seemed like another infuriating wall another mile or so down there, but Leon pushed all of his power into moving as quickly as he could.

"THOU SHALT DIE, THEN, SMALL RAT!" Tusk roared as it righted itself in the air, and Leon felt the air around him constrict again, but with his distance, it was weaker. Changing magic from lightning to wind, Leon managed to power through these restraints and keep going.

Tusk roared again, and this time, Leon sensed a massive attack building behind him. Without even looking, he concentrated all the lightning within him and seized control of the considerable lightning magic around him, and directed it all behind him. Almost instinctively, he formed the magic into the rough shape of a bird of prey, demanding that it go and stop Tusk. Acting semi-autonomously, this formed power was launched back just as Tusk's gale came howling down into the rift.

Leon's power rose to meet it, gathering power as it passed by the dozens of twisting fulgurite columns, and when it hit Tusk's gale, it felt like some cosmic giant had grasped the tunnel and shook it with all its might. Rocks fell from the ceiling, Tusk roared in frustration, and Leon ignored it all and kept descending.

The tunnel remained largely intact, but Leon noted with some satisfaction that Tusk had slowed considerably as it pursued him over the fulgurite columns; and for good reason, it turned out, as when the tenth-tier beast strayed too close to one, it exploded in a shower of lightning, bathing the monster in yellow-white lightning and causing it to shriek in pain.

Leon could sense the power contained within the fulgurite column, and didn't envy Tusk getting hit with it one bit, even if he were jealous of that power.

When he came close enough to the deep wall in the rift to see details, he noted that it wasn't carved with the likeness of animals, not even some image of Tusk or its ancestors. Instead, it was almost entirely featureless, lacking even a door. Judging by its surroundings, it was a relatively recent addition, which Leon assumed was meant to either secure the Iron Needle or contain it.

He leaned a little more towards the former when Tusk practically exploded in anger, screaming so loudly that Leon wouldn't have been surprised if his family heard it all the way back in Occulara, "THAT SHARD IS MINE!!! THOU SHALT NOT STEAL IT, SMALL RAT!"

"THE IRON NEEDLE BELONGS TO MY CLAN!" Leon shouted back. "AND IT WILL BE OURS AGAIN!" To punctuate his declaration, Leon slammed into the wall, sensing few enchantments within it. He concentrated on the idea of 'open' to mean breaking through a lock, smashing through an obstruction, crashing through a wall, and then slammed an 'open' spell upon the wall, backing it up with all the power he could bring to bear.

The wall held admirably, but as Leon's silver-blue lightning burned its surface black, and as his 'open' spell undid the magics within it, it cracked. Leon smashed his armored fist against it again, and the stone softened and crumbled. A third time Leon hit it, and then a fourth, each time hitting it with another 'open' rune. And with that, a hole just big enough for him to squeeze through opened.

Tusk screeched in unabated fury as Leon slid through the opening, pursuing him with a spike of sharp air. Leon, however, whispered to the tau pearl, and a shield of light blocked Tusk's strike. Tusk's power instead helped Leon squeeze through the hole, hurling him into the tunnel beyond, almost choked

completely with long, twisting, root-like columns of crystalline fulgurite, sparkling in the light of contained lightning and the lightning that still danced over Leon's body. So filled was the tunnel with the substance that Leon had to almost halt to find a way through it all.

Fortunately, Tusk seemed unwilling to follow him past that wall, and the choked tunnel was short. Leon shimmied past the twisted fulgurite columns, ignoring Tusk's threatening, indignant roars, and entered the chamber just beyond the tunnel.

And, finally, after more than a month since he left home, after weeks spent wandering these tunnels, and after Tusk's best attempts to stop him, Leon laid his eyes upon the Iron Needle.

Chapter 818: The Iron Needle VIII

Laying eyes on the Iron Needle for the first time, there was a part of Leon that was profoundly underwhelmed. This was one of two artifacts upon which his Clan had been built, and yet it hardly looked the part taken all by itself. The Thunderbird had shown him a light projection of the thing before so Leon knew what he was looking at, but it still felt just a bit flat for him.

The Iron Needle was essentially exactly what the name implied: a simple sliver of iron about as long as Leon's hand from the base of his wrist to the tip of his middle finger, without so much as a single scratch upon its surface.

However, even though it appeared simple, it was plain enough to Leon's senses that it was anything but: the aura surrounding it was so inundated with lightning that arcs of multicolored lightning flashed about the underground chamber Leon now found himself in. The thing's aura was so strange and otherworldly that it could not be mistaken for anything but a strange and extraordinarily powerful artifact with great command over lightning magic.

The Iron Needle rested upon a rough pillar of stone, burned completely black and given a glassy texture from the nearly ubiquitous lightning raging around. Surrounding the pillar was absolutely nothing save for the chamber itself, a crater thinner at Leon's end, and wider at the far end. The ground, ceiling, and walls were, just like the Needle's pillar, scorched and polished by tens of thousands of years of raging lightning.

It made more than a little sense that nothing else was in the chamber, for at any one moment, a dozen bolts of some strange-colored lightning were flashing around the chamber. Lightning of every color, from red, blue, and yellow, to green, purple, and even a bolt or two of black lightning, thundered around Leon, and even a few reached toward him—or rather, toward the tunnel he was now standing in front of, showing exactly how the twisting, root-like tangle of fulgurite pillars had been formed.

Leon just stared, his mouth hanging open, his eyes wide, his arms slack at the sight before him. As a lightning mage—and an uncommonly powerful one, he'd say if he were feeling particularly proud—this place was the definition of a paradise, with a few splashes of some ironic hell around for good measure. Even though he'd left Tusk murderously furious at the only apparent entrance to this chamber, Leon had no room in his head for anything but the Needle before him.

Each lightning bolt was terrifically powerful, though not so much that Leon thought it beyond his ability to control or absorb. All of this horrifyingly attractive power sprang from the Iron Needle, which seemed

to radiate an endless amount of lightning magic. Magic just poured out of the thing like water from a burst dam that had been holding back the ocean.

Leon could feel himself almost salivating. Such an artifact, if he could seize it, would propel him so far ahead of his peers and everyone else on this plane save for perhaps the Grave Warden. His greed and desire dwarfed the brief moments spent eyeing up Tusk's treasure collection. He *had* to have the Iron Needle, there was no other option for him to take.

With one step forward, finally dipping his toes into the chamber proper for the first time since his arrival, Leon learned just how foolish it was to screw around with the Iron Needle. A bolt of silver-blue lightning erupted from the Needle and slammed into him, hurling him back against the fulgurite columns with such incredible force that Leon smashed right through several of them. Vitrified sand crumbled around him and yellow-white lightning that had been contained within the lightning-made glass exploded, bathing him in the Iron Needle's power.

His armor survived and mitigated much of the potential damage, though Leon noted bitterly that its exterior had been practically painted a black darker than any he'd ever seen before. Were his armor any weaker, then it might've failed him.

As he pulled himself onto his feet and caught his breath, he redoubled his caution, noting that this was only a single bolt from the Iron Needle. In the same breath, however, his curiosity increased exponentially, for it was the lightning of the Thunderbird that the Needle had used to repulse him—but then again, Leon knew that the Thunderbird had, at least in part, gained her power *from* the Iron Needle, so he wondered if it were more accurate to say that her power was the Needle's power.

He wondered what he might be able to gain from taking the Iron Needle. A Universe Fragment that had absolute control over lightning had to have secrets he could uncover.

Grinning, Leon stepped forward, and almost immediately, green lightning poured out of the Iron Needle. Leon held out a hand and, calling upon all of his skill in lightning magic, managed to redirect the torrent just around him, causing enormous damage to the fulgurite behind him but avoiding taking any direct damage himself.

Then, his magic still projected, Leon began to advance. He moved cautiously, though, even with the Iron Needle's lightning crashing down upon him and slowing him down. The torrent of lightning remained constant, but that made Leon more and more cautious with every step he took. If the Iron Needle was such a powerful artifact, he figured it was hardly using any of the power it had available to it, yet it wasn't responding to his advance.

Forcing one foot in front of the other, Leon finally made it back into the chamber proper and expected the Iron Needle to hit him with something powerful again, but the torrent of green lightning remained consistent. His grin rapidly turning to a suspicious scowl, Leon continued to advance.

'Maybe this is it?' he wondered. The Thunderbird had struggled to claim the Iron Needle, but from the way she'd described the event, the main problem she had was with other beings attempting to snatch the Iron Needle out from under her. Given her insistence that the Iron Needle wanted to be subjugated beneath one of her blood, Leon wondered if this was just token resistance the Iron Needle was putting up.

Not like it was sapient by human standards, though, so Leon wasn't expecting an answer.

As he reached the Iron Needle's plinth, Leon was straining, but not too hard. The green lightning hadn't grown any stronger, but neither had it abated at all. He was still managing to get it to curve around him, but he now had to take hold of the thing emitting the lightning and hope that he was able to master it.

Leon outstretched a hand, committing all available focus to his magic, keeping the spigot of green lightning from hitting him. As much as he could control it, it was still dreadfully powerful.

His fingers approached the Needle, lightning curving around them. A single spark hit his gauntlet, and Leon almost flinched from the sudden pain. His fingertips in just a moment grew so close that the green lightning was being practically blown backward as Leon protected himself from it.

And then he had it; he closed his fingers around the Needle and the green lightning ceased immediately.

Leon froze, the sliver of iron in his hand, all magic flowing around and through it seemingly stopped. For all intents and purposes, he now held a completely unremarkable sliver of iron in his hand. But he didn't dare release his lightning magic, nor open his hand just yet. Instead, he stood there and waited for a whole minute. Only when he was certain that the Needle was truly done did he slowly retract his hand from the plinth and bring it closer to his body.

It was only when he was relaxing his death grip on the Universe Fragment that it finally made its move. His fingers slowly uncurled as he surrounded the Iron Needle in his aura, ready for anything, but as he laid his eyes upon the simple sliver of iron, a bolt of black lightning erupted from the Needle. Leon attempted to stop it, but his prodigious control and skill over lightning magic was for nothing as the black bolt passed into his body through his hand, crushing all defenses he threw up in its way like they were wet paper in front of an avalanche until it reached his mind.

The bolt of black lightning hit his brain with all the speed and power that lightning bolts are wont to have, and Leon's mind went dark. His eyes closed immediately, and he collapsed, unconscious.

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When Leon awoke, he found himself laying down in a black void, nothing but a dim light in the distance to give him any context for where he was. Despite this near lack of light, when he glanced down at himself, he found that he was completely lit, as if he were standing in the middle of a field on a bright sunny day. He was fully clothed in leather pants and a green silkgrass shirt—basically what he would've worn on any old day when he was still living in the Forest of Black and White with his father—but otherwise, he was unadorned. No armor, no weapons, and when he attempted to reach into his soul realm, he could feel nothing.

Leon bolted to his feet, his heart rate spiking, his eyes swiveling about as he attempted to identify where he was. A few sparks of lightning magic danced about his fingers when he called for it, showing that his power was still there even if he couldn't feel his soul realm, but that wasn't a particularly great comfort.

The last thing he remembered was seizing the Iron Needle, but before he could attempt to try and reconstruct anything that might've happened since then, he heard a terrible roar in the far distance. It sounded rather muffled, as if the air was thicker in this space and preventing the sound from traveling.

'That would certainly explain how difficult it is to breathe,' Leon noted before noting a rapidly-approaching pinpoint of light.

He scowled as he recognized what now approached: Tusk, fury in its gaze, and murder in its aura. It roared again, and Leon felt all of the air around him violent shudder, several small cuts opening all over his body as his clothes were practically shredded.

Leon responded by throwing a weak, if quickly-formed lightning bolt, and then assuming a more defensive stance, forming as much lightning in his body as he could.

Before his lightning spear even reached Tusk, the black void changed, with stone walls springing up all around him and the door to Tusk's palace appearing right in front of him. Tusk roared again as it vanished from view, and Leon glanced around him.

It now appeared that Leon was standing in the hallway of skulls right before the final wall guarding the Iron Needle, and the wall separating this hallway from the rift beneath the Divine Scar far above.

Without hesitation, Leon turned to the Iron Needle's chamber and began running for it, but he hit some kind of invisible wall. There were no enchantments that he could identify, no magic in the air that could lead him to understand what was happening, he simply couldn't even run in that direction, the air in the hallway was too thick.

He scowled and began running for the carved wall above instead of making for Tusk's palace. However, Tusk appeared in front of him, roaring out an earth-shaking challenge as it took shape from thin air.

"SMALL RAT!" Tusk roared. **"THOU HAST COME FOR DEATH!"**

Leon summoned his magic and sprang backward until he hit the invisible wall again. Tusk pursued him but didn't hit him with any wind magic despite having him dead to rights. Leon wasn't sure why, but he wasn't going to start hitting Tusk with his own magic...

... at least, until he felt a well-spring of power open up within him. His body flooded with power, lightning practically leaking out of his body like water from a thinly-woven basket. He felt like he'd suddenly raced up to the tenth-tier, and then beyond, experiencing something that felt a lot like Apotheosis.

He could... reach out and slaughter Tusk as easily as a ninth-tier mage squeezing a mortal rat to death. He'd just need to surround Tusk in his magic power—not even using his lightning—and *squeeze*, and Tusk would pop like a grape.

For just a moment, Leon was about to do just that, his hand extending as his power rushed outward, but he stopped, senses elevated so much by this sudden power that even the tenth-tier Tusk seemed to move in slow motion.

'I'm in its home,' he thought. *'I'm surrounded by its dead kin or kith... I think. Does it not have the right to defend itself from intruders?'*

Leon scowled, silent criticisms running through his mind for how he'd handled this whole expedition. Tusk was a tenth-tier, he knew that he should've tried to peacefully claim the Iron Needle at least once

before entering Tusk's home uninvited. He doubted it would've made much of a difference, but he'd never know now.

Leon let his hand fall. He wasn't sure what was going on, where he got this power from, but he *had* this power, and he wasn't going to kill Tusk in its own home for doing something so heinous as defending its territory.

Instead, Leon channeled this new power into escaping, darting past Tusk so quickly that the creature only started to react after Leon had already passed it. He reached the carved wall at the bottom of the Divine Scar in a moment and charged right through, intending to head for the top and figure out his next steps. He wasn't leaving yet, that was for sure, but he needed to—

Leon barely even saw sunlight before the tunnels and rocks around him fell away, dissolving into mist as he once again found himself standing in the black void. Tusk wasn't there, thankfully, and after a moment of thought, Leon wasn't too surprised.

He'd already started to suspect what was going on, but now he felt like it was becoming clearer.

He came to a halt, noting that all of that power that had flooded through him in the previous moment was now gone. He couldn't say he was surprised, though.

In the distance, he saw a flash of light and the appearance of a humanoid figure. That figure strode towards him with anger in their steps, but Leon stood firm, neither advancing nor retreating as the figure approached.

Soon enough, they came close enough for Leon to recognize them: he saw the massive frame, the skin so dark that the glittering black scales around his red-orange eyes were almost invisible, and the long black braid that hung behind his back. The human form of the Great Black Dragon.

Leon's more taciturn ancestor approached much more quickly than he appeared to be, and in only a few seconds, he was upon Leon, swinging a fist into Leon's jaw before Leon had a chance to react, even with lightning flowing through his body.

"Pathetic, boy," the Great Black Dragon growled as Leon went sprawling. "And you think yourself a worthy inheritor of *my* power?"

Leon rolled as he hit the ground and sprang back to his feet. Without a word, he launched himself at the Great Black Dragon. There was to be no running from this one, and he wasn't going to beg or chat with the Great Black Dragon—or whatever it was in front of him.

But ghost of his dead ancestor or not, his opponent seemed to bob and weave effortlessly, letting Leon's fists injure nothing but air. He let Leon swing half a dozen times before striking Leon in the chest hard enough to send him flying backward twenty feet.

All the air was pushed out of Leon's lungs and he thought a couple of his ribs had cracked, but despite the pain, Leon shot back to his feet and charged again.

But again, none of his attacks landed, and the Great Black Dragon sent him back to the floor a third time, this time with a humiliating slap across the face hard enough to bloody Leon's nose and slice open his cheek.

It took Leon a moment to get back up this time, but he did, and he decided that enough was enough. Engaging the Great Black Dragon in a fistfight wasn't going to get him anywhere, and his pride be damned, he needed to win this. When he straightened out, silver-blue lightning danced across his body, and he let loose a veritable thunderstorm upon his ancient ancestor.

The Great Black Dragon hardly seemed to care as he lunged forward, crossing more than thirty feet in a single step, and slammed his feet into Leon's side, cracking more of his ribs and fully breaking two.

Leon went down a fourth time, his chest bloody, his breathing labored, his mind wracked with pain, anger, and humiliation. But he stood back up; this wasn't the worst he'd been injured, not by a long shot, and he wasn't going to bow to whatever this was. He was going to force *it* to bow to *him*.

He changed his strategy and called upon black fire. His fists erupted with the power of the Great Black Dragon, and for the first time since they'd engaged each other, Leon saw something that approximated anger in the Great Black Dragon's red-orange eyes.

"I don't need to prove to you that I'm a worthy inheritor of your power," he growled around his pain and breathlessness, "I already am."

Without hesitation, Leon lunged forward, but just as his lead fist was about to make contact with the motionless Great Black Dragon, a smile crossed his dark face, and he vanished, leaving Leon alone in the black void.

Leon stood there, letting the fire burn on his fists for a few moments longer as he scanned his empty surroundings for more threats. When none came, he let the fire die, but he remained on his feet.

His pain began to dull, however, more so than it should've.

Then the void was illuminated by a bright, momentary flash of light from behind him, and five seconds later, Leon heard thunder so loud that it rumbled in his chest. The dark ceiling of this void space brightened slightly, revealing itself to be nothing but storm clouds, and Leon felt the charge of gathering lightning magic around him.

Sure enough, a lightning bolt fell from the sky above him, striking him with pinpoint accuracy.

For just a moment, Leon's entire existence became pain. For as powerful as he was with lightning magic, as resistant as he was to its effects, Leon's entire body flared with indescribable pain, but as much as he wanted to collapse and scream, Leon took it all, slamming his jaw shut and forcing himself to remain standing.

And as quickly as he was struck, his pain ended, but everything went dark anyway.

—

Leon woke up on his back in the Iron Needle's chamber, the charge that had filled the air before now little more than a simmer where before it had been boiling in the air. Lightning no longer surged around the room, but instead danced a merry jig up and down his body, every bolt a different color and feeling slightly different.

After blinking blearily, Leon took this in, and then glanced at his right hand, where the Iron Needle now rested, practically purring with power. He clenched his fingers and the Iron Needle's power filled him so

quickly that he had to relax his fingers and stop absorbing power after less than a second, lest it fill him so quickly that his body was damaged.

And from the depths of his soul realm, he felt an outpouring of such pride and joy that he was momentarily overwhelmed, and the Thunderbird's voice resounded through his mind.

[You have done it, Leon,] she said. [You have proven yourself the inheritor of my will, and the last, best chance of our Clan rising from the grave; you have mastered the Iron Needle...]

Chapter 819: The Iron Needle in Hand

Leon couldn't keep the grin off his face: the Iron Needle was his, and he hardly knew what to do now, such was his joy. His face hurt from how widely he was smiling, and he erratically paced about the chamber where the Needle had awaited him, unsure what he should do. The Thunderbird didn't help that much, either, as she remained silent ever since he'd woken up, despite the enormous amount of pride and joy that he could feel almost radiating off of her down in his soul realm.

But after several minutes of pacing off some of his excess energy and cackling like a villain in an over-the-top play, he finally sat back down on the smooth ground, the rock having been transformed into a smooth, black, glassy substance from thousands of years of constant lightning rolling about the chamber.

A moment later, he awoke in his soul realm. He'd brought the Iron Needle with him, pulling it into his soul realm at the same time that he'd mentally directed his magic body to wake up. Now, it floated just before him in front of his throne, not a single spark of lightning to be seen, but to Leon's magic senses, the thing was like a sun had just landed in his Mind Palace.

"Leon..." the Thunderbird in her human form whispered from just a few paces away, her tone dripping with pride, her smile somehow wider than Leon's. "I knew you could do it, but I'm so happy to be proven right."

Leon flushed at the blatant pride and pushed himself off his throne to better examine the Iron Needle. He reached out for it, but hesitated just as his fingers were about to brush against the Universe Fragment.

"It's fine, it won't hurt you," the Thunderbird whispered. "If you had not taken control of it, it wouldn't have allowed you to bring it here."

Without any more hesitation, Leon grabbed the Iron Needle and held it tightly, but relaxed his grip as, once again, the Iron Needle began sparking with multicolored lightning and his soul realm began to fill with power faster than it ever had before. Leon knew the dangers of growing his soul realm too quickly and didn't want to try his luck holding the Needle for too long—though the possibility of reaching the tenth-tier even faster than the Hesperidic Apples could get him was strong in his mind.

'How... what do I do with it?' Leon asked, his voice tinged with awe at the power he could sense within it. "It's... It's too powerful to do any one thing with..."

"Nestor should have a proper containment unit for it by now," the Thunderbird said. "Until then, it's safe here. It has accepted you as its master, it will not harm you. It *cannot* harm you."

Leon continued to grin as he stared at the little sliver of iron in his hand. Were it not for the fact that radiated such power, it would've been completely unremarkable, just a long, dull needle.

"You said once that this used to be seated in the family sword, right?" Leon asked. "Should I put it back?"

"With your power, no," the Thunderbird resolutely replied. "To *master* the Iron Needle is something wholly different than *becoming* the Iron Needle's master. You are weak compared to the Needle, and have never even studied it, let alone used it in battle. You can sense the cosmic-level power within it, can you not?"

"Cosmic-level... that's a good way of putting it," Leon whispered, his eyes not wavering from the Universe Fragment in his hand.

"Anything and everything that can be achieved with lightning magic the Iron Needle can teach you, but it doesn't have sapience, it can't teach you as I have this past score of years. You must learn to interpret what it tells you, but even then... it will take a long time. I held it for millions of years, and it taught me to wield our family's signature lightning. If you wish to learn anything from it, instead of using it like a simple weapon—as so many of my *lesscreative* descendants have done—then you will time and a lot of patience."

Still smiling, Leon finally tore his eyes from the Needle and said to his ancestor, "When it comes to learning new things, I have patience in abundance."

The Thunderbird smirked. "Only sometimes, Leon, but I think you'll do well in this regard."

"I hope so," Leon whispered as he looked back to the Iron Needle. "I hope so."

His smile began to die; his elation at accomplishing what he'd set out to do still ran through his mind like a raging river through a thin canyon, but he was starting to remember exactly what lay beyond the Iron Needle's chamber.

'Tusk is still out there, and probably furious...'

Aloud, Leon stated, "I should get moving. The sooner I get home, the sooner I can study this. And the creature whose home I invaded to get here is probably waiting just outside, ready to obliterate me as soon as I show myself."

"Indeed," the Thunderbird said, offering no more comment. "You can leave the Iron Needle here with me, I will look out for it. For now, carry on with your other duties."

Before Leon could respond, Xaphan chose that moment to finally wake up and, in his crackling voice, roared, "By the Primal Devil King's mighty cock! You got the damn thing!"

"Yes I did, demon," Leon smilingly said as he laid the Iron Needle down on Nestor's old table, noting that instead of lying there flat, the Needle began to float above it almost as if it were unwilling to touch something so plebian as a crudely-made wooden table.

He then walked back to his throne, summoning his family's sword to his hand as he did. He noted the Iron Needle start to float toward the sword for a moment, but almost as soon as he thought about telling it not to, it stopped in midair.

'Hmm, curious...'

As he closed his eyes and returned to the physical world, he heard Xaphan asking, "I *need* to examine this!"

He also heard the Thunderbird sharply replying, "Not a chance!"

Everything else Leon tuned out as he woke up in the physical world and glanced back at the sharply-inclined shaft that the Iron Needle had carved as it fell to the earth. He had several miles back to the surface, and after seizing undoubtedly the most valuable thing that Tusk likely thought was its own, he wouldn't be surprised if he were pursued all the way to the surface, or even further than that. And being a tenth-tier equivalent being, he wasn't sure how he was going to get it to let him go.

But he had the Iron Needle, and that had to count for something. If worse came to worst, he supposed he could just pull the Needle out of his soul realm, try to aim it at Tusk, and then hope for the best. He'd gone down into Tusk's lair hoping that he could get out without even being noticed, but assuming that violence of some kind would have to be employed on his way out. Now, with the obvious dead end he'd found himself in, it seemed that assumption would prove itself correct, as much as he would've preferred another way.

When he'd first gotten through the lower carved wall, this tunnel had been so full of fulgurite that he'd barely been able to move. The Iron Needle's 'test', he supposed it could be called, had eradicated nearly all of it from the tunnel; only a few shattered pieces were lying scattered about on the ground, and a few crystal stumps still attached to the walls here and there.

With an intrigued frown, Leon scooped as much as he could gather or pry from the walls into his soul realm. Each of these crystals held an enormous amount of lightning magic that he hoped he might be able to make use of. Normal gemstones were able to hold element-less magic power, after all, but the fulgurite created by the Iron Needle seemed able to hold far more than even a sapphire might be able to. Such crystals would have narrow purposes, but in those purposes, their utility would be unparalleled—assuming, of course, that he was able to reproduce their creation.

'Lightning Lance batteries would be incredibly efficient if I can...' Leon mused. *'And if I can revert that lightning to element-less magic power, then that would be even better...'*

Something to take up his researchers' time, he supposed. They needed something else to work on, given that many were upset with his focus on more militaristic projects.

But he could only put off heading back out into the shaft for so long if he wasn't intending on trying to carve his way back to the surface with his meager earth magic skills, and given the state of the burned walls, he didn't think that was going to happen any time soon. He had to face Tusk if he wanted to leave in a timely manner.

He returned to the wall to find that Tusk hadn't deigned to seal the hole he'd punched through on his way in. Its aura was still outside, clearly waiting, but as Leon paused to again try and think of a way out, he noted that the massive beast's aura had changed. Where before it had been raging and wrathful, equal parts killing intent to magic power, now it was much calmer, more serene.

With much curiosity, Leon floated up to the hole and cautiously projected his magic senses through.

Immediately, he sensed Tusk hovering on the other side of the wall, the beast casually flying about in a way that reminded Leon of the way he might slowly pace as he waited for something to happen. But only a few seconds after his magic swept over the beast did it stop in place and glare imperiously down at the hole in the carved wall.

“Well, small rat? Art thou going to proceed?”

The beast’s projected voice was still loud, but it didn’t exert the same pressure upon Leon’s eardrums as it did before, it didn’t even rock the tunnel around them. If anything, Tusk sounded almost accepting, or at least not as angry as it was before.

With as much caution as he could muster, Leon hesitantly flew up to the hole—after giving his armor a quick once-over to make sure it was still intact, which it thankfully was.

When he reached the hole, Leon stayed in it and glanced out, ready for anything, lightning rushing through his veins, the tau pearl in his cuirass simmering with magic power. But as Leon revealed himself, Tusk didn’t move to strike. Instead, it floated about two hundred feet further up the shaft, staring at him with great intensity. Parsing the beast’s emotions was impossible for Leon, so he just assumed it was glaring at him with significant anger.

“Thou hast claimed the shard,” Tusk grumbled, its tone filled with reluctance and deep frustration. **“Mine congratulations are extended to thee.”**

“Congratulations?” Leon shouted back, mildly confused. “Didn’t you just an hour or so ago claim it as your own?”

Tusk huffed, the force of its breath sending the dust and sand that accumulated at the bottom of the shaft scattering around them, though made no further aggressive motions.

“Mine claim rested upon the beneficence of the Planar Lord. Thou hast claimed the shard, and in doing so, mine own claim hast been rendered moot. Bound I am by ancient accord to accept thine act of theft.”

‘Planar Lord?’ Leon curiously thought. *‘Is he talking about Ambrose? An ‘ancient accord’ with him over the Iron Needle?’*

“Are you willing to allow me free passage?” Leon asked, putting that issue aside for a couple seconds.

Tusk seemed to mull his question over for a few more seconds before responding, **“Thou hast left mine other treasures unmolested. Mine feelings towards thee art less than cordial, but neither art they hostile. Thou art free to go, if thou wishest.”**

Leon edged a few inches further out of the hole. “Gratitude for the hospitality, then. Might you accompany me to the exit, that we may exchange a few more words?”

“I would have escorted thee anyway, small rat,” Tusk replied. **“The purpose of mine Planar Lord hast been fulfilled, but trust thee I do not. Thou art deserving of death no longer, though generous welcome thou shalt not receive.”**

“Fair enough,” Leon half-muttered as he slid a little further out of the hole. As Tusk continued to not attack him, he took flight once more and began drifting upward, going faster and faster as it became clearer and clearer that Tusk wasn’t going to break its word, despite its apparent anger and antipathy.

As he drew level with the beast, and then began to drift further up, Tusk moved to match pace, and soon enough, they were both flying fairly slowly up the shaft.

“You said something about a ‘Planar Lord’,” Leon said. “I think I might be acquainted with the man in question. What is your relationship with him?”

“Mine own business, small rat,” Tusk replied. **“Thy questions shalt go unanswered, I desire only thine absence. Thou hast caused chaos enough in mine domain, and should thou continue to press upon mine patience, thou shalt know deadly wrath, raw and unfettered, and the shard shalt once more be mine own possession.”**

“Fair enough,” Leon repeated, though a little more dejectedly. He asked no more questions, reasoning that if he wanted to know about Tusk, he could just ask Ambrose directly at some point.

Soon enough, they arrived at the upper carved wall, and without so much as a moment’s thought, Tusk projected a few strands of magic and pulled them both through the door.

“Begone, small rat, and never return.” Tusk didn’t say anything more, but remained hovering in front of the carved wall and glared at Leon, making it absolutely clear even in its alien body language that it wasn’t leaving until Leon had made himself scarce.

With an awkward smile, Leon made his way back up the shaft, past the cave-in, and to the surface once more.

It was late afternoon when he emerged, and though the sun wasn’t shining directly down into the Divine Scar, Leon still felt more than a little comfort in the sight of the bright sky. He quickly took flight again and flew with all haste back to Anzu at the northern tip of the long ravine cloven by the Iron Needle as it hit the ground.

Anzu was napping in his griffin form when Leon returned, but it seemed that all the young griffin needed was to feel his aura wash over him to wake. As Leon’s boots touched the ground again, Anzu was on his paws and almost barreling Leon over in his haste to welcome him back to the surface.

After a few seconds, Anzu changed back to human form and asked, “Is it done? Did you get it?”

“It’s done,” Leon confirmed. “I have the Iron Needle. Now, there are a couple last places I’d like to visit, and then we can get the hells back home. What say you to that?”

Anzu laughed and threw an arm around Leon. “Let’s go!”

—

Leon and Anzu’s cheer lasted only a short while, as Leon’s most heavily prioritized stop before they could return home was his childhood home, and the memories that were brought to his mind as he drew near dampened his mood. Seizing the Iron Needle was one of his greatest acts so far, as far as he was concerned, but recalling his father’s death banished all elation despite only an hour or so having passed since his accomplishment.

Anzu, sensing Leon's shift in mood, didn't speak so much as a word. Leon had told him of this place before, so though it was his first

Chapter 820: Service of the Stone Giants

Leon and Anzu didn't stay in Leon's childhood home—or what was left of it—for long. By the morning of the next day, they were already preparing to leave, though not before Leon sat with his back against his father's Heartwood tree once more. He figured it was probably just his imagination, but it almost felt like the tree, or the tree's aura, was wrapping around him in a warm embrace. He felt safe here, even without the walls he'd known so well growing up, or his father still there to kill all threats that came.

But as much as Leon wanted to stay around his father's grave for longer, he had the Iron Needle and needed to return home. He'd spent a long time talking to the Heartwood tree that had grown out of his father's body, imagining that he was filling his father in on all that had happened when last he was here, but that hadn't taken all night. Once he was finished and fell silent, he'd called up his family back in Occulara. Fortunately, all of them being high-level mages, he wasn't waking anyone up despite the lateness of the hour.

Elise, Maia, and Valeria were all happy as he was that he'd managed to succeed in his expedition, and Leon learned that Nestor had finished his modifications to Leon's lab and the containment unit for the Iron Needle, that they may study it in controllable conditions. So, with that in mind, Leon and Anzu took flight again that morning and headed west.

They all but traced their way back the way they'd come, only stopping when Leon wondered aloud if Anzu still wanted to hunt for some bear or whatever he might find up here. Anzu simply replied that in the weeks Leon had been underground, he'd hunted to his heart's content, and showed the now *five* ice wraith cores that he'd managed to collect as proof.

Leon's eyes about bulged out of their sockets in surprise, and he silently led them back to the mountain pass.

From there, it was on to the Brown Bears, with whom Leon and Anzu stayed for a short while. Torfinn was, of course, the perfect host, and Leon took a few hours to reminisce with the old man. Torfinn was still only fifth-tier, and while that did extend his life span by quite a few decades, his hair was graying and his face was already showing quite a few wrinkles. Leon wasn't sure how much longer Torfinn might have, so he decided to spend the night. He didn't know if he'd ever come this far north again, especially not with the Iron Needle now in his possession, so while he wanted to return home quite badly, he also didn't want to leave and regret not having spent just a little longer in the Chief of the Brown Bear's presence.

That day went by quickly, with Torfinn bringing Leon on a tour of Vale Town that he hadn't had time for before heading to the Forest of Black and White. Torfinn showed Leon all the expansions the city had undergone, and how many markets had sprung up to support all these people. There was even now a fairly sizable district built just to support merchants who made the perilous journey from the Bull Kingdom for silkgrass.

Leon took the opportunity to purchase quite a few bolts of silkgrass for relatively cheap—he still happily overpaid because even at four times the price in Vale Town, silkgrass was still cheaper here than it was

in Occulara—and even purchased what he might need for Tikos, Helen, and Elise to try their hand at what had never been achieved before: growing silkgrass outside of the Northern Vales.

The next morning came almost too soon, and Leon and Anzu had to set out again. Torfinn threw them another feast not only the night before, but also the morning of their departure, and Leon left Vale Town with almost the entire Brown Bear Tribe there to see him off.

It was a somewhat bitter departure, though, knowing that he might never see any of these people again. Already, nearly all of the tribesmen that Leon had casually known from his childhood were dead or had retired out into the countryside. Torfinn and his thanes were about the only familiar faces left in Vale Town.

If Anzu sensed his solemn mood—and Leon thought he could, given he was utterly uninterested in hiding it—he didn't mention it. They simply allowed Torfinn to escort them to the outskirts of the city, and then took flight again to head south.

This time, however, they were going to go on a different flight path. They'd stopped in Teira on the way north, and Leon didn't want to stop at too many places on the way south again. Instead, his intent was to head a little more eastward, and visit another people whom he hadn't seen in a long while...

—

The Crater Tribe of stone giants were much as Leon had left them. Their capital 'city' in the massive crater around the ruins of Nestor's golem construction facility—which the giants called 'The Cradle'—hardly looked like it had changed at all in a quarter of a century. Leon, having seen much change during this expedition, found himself relaxing at the sight.

'Some things never change...' Leon thought as he and Anzu drifted down into the eponymous crater of the Crater Tribe and landed in the front courtyard surrounded by the hexagonal basalt pillars of Rakos' palace.

Neither he nor Anzu had hidden themselves in any way on their flight, not even on their journey over the Border Mountains. Along the way, they'd spotted quite a few mountain beasts, and even griffins, though Anzu hadn't said a word about them, so Leon hadn't brought it up. He was still intending on showing Anzu around, though, so there was time enough for words later.

They didn't have to wait long before Rakos itself and a number of other important stone giants that Leon remembered hurried outside, the speed and grace with which they moved their massive stone bodies proving quite the sight, and bringing back feelings of nostalgia and deep shame within Leon. He'd not done good by Lapis, and had gotten quite a few other stone giants killed during the civil war between August and Octavius, and even still had the mausoleum he'd built in his Mind Palace to remind himself of that failure.

He was here now to hopefully leave the door open for a second try.

"A JOYOUS DAY, TO SEE THE RETURN OF THE DIVINE ONE!" Rakos thundered as it greeted Leon. **"WE HAVE WAITED FOR THE DAY YOU MIGHT REQUIRE OUR PEOPLE AGAIN, AND HAVE SPENT THAT TIME PREPARING."**

Leon cringed slightly at its use of the 'Divine One' title but decided not to make too big of a deal out of it. Instead, he simply responded, "I've been looking forward to reuniting with your people, as well, and hope that we can speak about these 'preparations' you've done at greater length."

Leon smiled at Rakos, then glanced at Anzu after noticing what looked like some confusion in the griffin-in-human-form's body language in the corner of his eye. He then remembered that while he could understand the giants' speech, the same wasn't true for almost anyone else. He gave Anzu a comforting wave to save any questions for later, while simultaneously silently castigating himself for forgetting to mention that on the flight over.

Rakos escorted the two of them inside its palace and to its throne room, and Leon immediately registered that there was, in fact, at least one change: Rakos' throne room was much more packed than Leon had ever seen it. Several hundred sixth-tier stone giants had packed themselves into the throne room and were now watching Leon's entrance with great interest—or so Leon assumed, given their bodies all roughly followed him and made way for him and Rakos. He still wasn't quite sure how the stone giants perceived the world around them, especially since he couldn't sense any magic senses emanating from any of them.

"Lots of your people in here," Leon observed, pausing right before the dais upon which sat Rakos' throne.

Rakos halted in front of its throne, seemingly refusing to sit down while Leon stood. **"MUCH HAS HAPPENED, DIVINE ONE. AFTER CENTURIES OF DISCORD AND DISUNITY, THE TRIBES HAVE REUNITED. THE BLOODLINE OF OUR CREATORS YET EXISTS, AND WE HAD TO MAKE OURSELVES READY TO SERVE."**

"Is that what you've been doing in this time?" Leon awkwardly asked. "Waiting for me to have need of you?"

"YES."

Leon carefully schooled his face, maintaining his default rather stoic expression, but inside he felt some elation, but mostly deep embarrassment and discomfort.

"That... wasn't necessary," he eventually stated. "You are your own people, you could've chosen something else to do with your time."

"YES, WE COULD'VE," Rakos acknowledged. **"WE STAND READY TO SERVE."**

Leon, after a moment, decided to let a smile spread across his lips. "In that case... Has peace with the Bull Kingdom been kept?"

"YES. ALL TRIBES HAVE BEEN BROUGHT INTO THE DIVINE ONE'S PEACE."

"Good. Then focus on reproduction, make as many new giants as you can feasibly support. If you're going to choose to support me and my family, I'm going to need as many of you as I can get my hands on."

"BY YOUR WILL, DIVINE ONE."

"Sidenote: remember when I requested you not call me that?"

“SUCH CEREMONIES, WHEN IN A CONCLAVE OF THE TRIBES, ARE NEEDED.”

Leon, not wanting to make too big a deal out of this, relented, and continued with his business. “Fine, then. Just keep my preferences in mind. But I don’t have much immediate need for your people to come down from the mountains. But I’m working on getting into contact with other remnants of my Clan’s vassals in the far southeast, and if I can win them over to my side, then I’ll return for you. Together, I would have us all ascend to the higher planes of this universe, even to the Nexus itself. And I would have your people join us when we leave.”

“WE LIVE TO SERVE, DIVINE ONE,” Rakos declared. For the briefest of moments, Leon wondered what the other giants in the throne room felt about this, but his wonder was immediately answered when, without exception, they all raised their arms into the air and began to thrum. It sounded like singing, and Leon remembered the Crater Tribe doing something similar when he confirmed to Rakos and Lapis that he was of the Thunderbird Clan by hitting Lapis with a silver-blue lightning bolt back when he’d first ascended to the fifth-tier.

When they all quieted down, Leon said, “I would stay in the crater for a day or two. I’d like to rest and explore this place, if there are no objections...”

“THERE ARE NONE,” Rakos stated, and Leon waited a moment before responding just in case there were any other giants who wished to dispute that point. As a result, for that moment, silence fell upon the throne room.

“Very well,” Leon said. “Look forward to the day that I return. I’ll see if I can leave anything here that you can use to get in contact with me, just in case you find yourself in need of anything.”

With that, other than a few more platitudes, Leon’s meeting with the stone giants ended, and he and Anzu were eventually left alone—though not before quite a few of the giants, who Leon learned were the ‘Chiefs’ or ‘King’s of the other Tribes that had united under the Crater Tribe, came to introduce themselves and offer similar words of praise that Rakos had already given.

But, finally, Leon and Anzu walked back outside, still watched with something that Leon identified as awe by a great many stone giants, but otherwise left alone.

“That was...” Anzu began as they calmly walked out to the edge of the maze of trap-rocks that covered nearly the entire floor of the crater. “That was quite something.”

“You don’t remember the giants?” Leon asked.

“I remember them quite well, actually. It’s just... even I could tell they were being pretty subservient, but I don’t remember them rolling over so quickly the last time we came here.”

“I was returning to them their dead and my apologies for my part in getting their people killed,” Leon quietly stated. “I wasn’t asking them for anything then. Now, I was asking them to prepare to join my Kingdom... whenever I finally get around to building on.”

“And they didn’t hesitate to agree!” Anzu excitedly replied. “I guess, I just thought that they were just a little more stubborn.”

"No, they've always been pretty deferential. Too much so, I think..." Leon trailed off at the end, speaking more to himself than to Anzu, but Anzu didn't hesitate to jump on his statement.

"Too much? How so? I would've thought many strong and loyal retainers would be a good thing. I've heard that loyalty is always in short supply, a Lord can never have enough. So why is their showing of loyalty bad?"

"I didn't say it was *bad*, just that they had *too much*. It's not *bad*, it just makes me feel awkward." Leon frowned and thought of Nestor. "*Some* have made the claim that because stone giants are so deferential that that means they have no free will. I... believe otherwise. Or I want to. They don't make it easy. If they had some kind of request or condition to join me, then I think I'd feel better about this. This die-hard loyalty isn't something I really know what to do with."

"Accept it," Anzu simply stated.

Leon sighed. "I suppose that's all I can do. This is what they've stated they want. Or so Rakos has stated, anyway, and I haven't seen any evidence that it's lying. No reason to turn them down other than my own discomfort."

"This is a good thing."

"Yes, yes it is. They've made their choice, and they've chosen me. I'll accept it."

Leon didn't continue, and Anzu let the silence between them extend for a while. Leon turned his attention from the crater walls, where the stone giants had built their many cave-palaces, and from where even now many thousands of them stood watching them, and to the interior of the crater, in the maze of black, twisted, hexagonal pillars erupting from the ground.

"You want to go and see where I found you?" Leon asked, finally breaking that silence.

"Yes," Anzu simply, but seriously replied.

Without another word, Leon led Anzu into the rocky maze. He could remember where he'd found Anzu as clear as crystal, and it wasn't too hard to find it again with his magic senses bathing the entire crater with his power.

He'd told Anzu of how he'd found him, of course, but that had been during a time when Anzu hadn't been able to talk back. Since Anzu had managed to assume human form and actually exchange words with Leon, neither of them had ever broached the topic of when Leon had found Anzu.

"... It was just over here," Leon said as he led Anzu through the passages formed by walls of uneven, rocky pillars, eventually coming out into the wider space where he'd first seen the albino griffin. "You were laying down right there, so young that your eyes hadn't even opened."

Leon gestured to the spot in question, and Anzu stared at it with an inscrutable look on his face.

"I wasn't sure how long it might've taken you to open your eyes naturally, but I got them open with a healing spell," Leon narrated. "When your eyes opened, you looked right at me, and then promptly ran away."

Leon smiled at Anzu, who looked to him with a somewhat embarrassed look.

"You did come back," Leon continued, "though it wasn't until the next day. I think you were probably hungry and looking for food. Regardless, after you came back to me, you stayed at my side, with few exceptions, ever since."

"Those few exceptions being when you left," Anzu said, his voice low and tone emotionless. That one statement twisted itself into Leon's heart like a knife, and he was about to apologize when Anzu suddenly lunged forward and threw his arms around Leon's waist. "Thank you," Anzu whispered. "Thank you."

Leon blinked rapidly, removing any sign of watery eyes, and returned Anzu's hug. Again, neither of them spoke, their embrace saying all that they needed.

When Anzu pulled back, his eyes were dry, though there was a wet patch where he'd pressed his face into Leon's shirt. Leon chose to ignore it.

"If it's all right," Anzu hesitantly said, "could I fly around a bit? I know it's been a while, but... there's still a chance that I have blood relatives around here..."

Leon frowned lightly but nodded. "No need to ask, brother. Just... I'd like to leave tomorrow morning. Can you be back by then?"

Anzu nodded. "Won't take that long. Just want to look. See what I might've been."

Leon smiled lightly and clapped Anzu on the shoulder. With that, Anzu shifted to his white griffin form and, after locking his blood-red eyes on Leon one more time, took to the skies and began flying off into the distance.

More than a little worried, though trusting in Anzu's power and judgment, Leon tracked his little brother through the sky. Anzu never got too close to any other griffin, though Leon wasn't sure if it would've mattered if he did, for he couldn't sense any griffin in the Border Mountains at the human equivalent of seventh-tier, let alone any of Anzu's power. Any other griffins that Anzu might've wanted to talk to would've been fairly smart by animal standards, but they wouldn't have been sapient.

Still, Leon was worried. He couldn't help it, he didn't know what he would do if Anzu never came back. Though, he supposed he understood Anzu's position a little better, now.

So, he waited, posting up on one of the huge hexagonal pillars outside of Rakos' palace, and resolved to stay there until Anzu returned.