

The Storm King

#Chapter 1: The Forest of Black and White

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The plane of Aeterna was filled with a multitude of Kingdoms and Empires. In the center of the plane was an immense continent, tens of thousands of miles in all directions. It was surrounded by an even larger ocean, extending tens of thousands of miles further.

The most powerful and prosperous empires were located near the center of the continent. There, mages had a command of magic that bordered on the divine. Closer to the edge of the continent, however, the nations became less prosperous, less populated, and less advanced. In the far north was located an isolated state, known as the Bull Kingdom.

This kingdom was flanked on its northern and eastern border by high-impassable mountain ranges, in the south by a wide gulf, and in the west by the Endless Ocean. But even further north, deep in the Frozen Mountain Range, were a number of comparably temperate vales inhabited by tribes of people who scoffed at the southern lords and their knights. These people were hardy, fearless, and territorial. Theirs was a violent and typically short life.

But as ready as The Bull King's Legions were for battle, as eager as those northern warriors were to spill the blood of their enemies, there were places in those Northern Vales that even they were loath to enter.

One of those places was the Forest of Black and White, which took up the entirety of one of the smaller vales. No tribe had ever lived there, and few even dared to approach the mountain passes that led to it. It was a place of horror, of terrifying bedtime stories told to the children of the tribes. If they were not brave against their enemies and true to their friends, the wraiths and evil gods of the forest would come to take them in the night.

The vale was one hundred miles east to west and seventy miles north to south, and the Forest of Black and White covered almost the entirety of that land. The forest received its name from the trees of dark bark and brilliant green leaves, and the trees of pale white bark and deep, twilight blue leaves that are most commonly seen within it.

Many strange and otherworldly beings called the forest home, from the vicious beasts of flesh and blood to the spirits of ice, earth, and wind. But perhaps the strangest beings

that lived in this forest were two men, a father and son pair, who built their home deep within the eastern reaches of the forest in a large clearing of purple grass.

The father was tall, well-built, and looked roughly in his mid-twenties—though he was at least a decade older than that. He had black hair, warm brown eyes, sharp features, and a straight nose. The son was a youth of sixteen, slightly shorter than his father and with a skinnier build. His features took after his father for the most part, except for his bright golden eyes.

The son, Leon, was dressed in a loose-fitting shirt made of dark green woven grass—a specialty of the nearest tribe—with brown leather pants and boots. He had a hunting bow slung over his shoulder, a quiver full of arrows on his back, and a knife at his leather belt. His father, Artorias, was largely dressed the same, save for a light brown fur coat and a longsword at his hip.

Artorias watched Leon as he tracked the beast they were hunting, an enormous stag large enough to feed them for several weeks. If Leon wasn't careful, this beast would have no trouble goring him with its horns or crushing his chest with a single kick. Luckily, his father was there, keeping an eye on him.

Without Artorias, Leon was certain he would've long been killed by the beasts of the forest. Artorias was a powerful mage, able to project magic outside of his body and use it to detect everything for miles around himself. This allowed the two to avoid the most dangerous beasts of the forest during the day. At night, however, they relied completely on Artorias' magic power and skill with the blade to fend off the nightmarish creatures that called the forest home. The power and strength of these nocturnal creatures made wandering the forest alone at night an impossible task for a mage as weak as Leon.

By virtue of his strength alone, Artorias had no trouble finding the stag they were pursuing, but this was a learning opportunity for Leon. He wanted his son to learn how to hunt, how to survive in the wild, but most of all, he wanted Leon to learn how to kill.

Artorias had long ago learned the painful lesson that to survive among the mages and warriors of Aeterna, one needed a strong killing intent. In fact, this was one of the reasons Artorias had the two of them live out in the wild. He wanted to hone Leon's killing intent so that he would never falter in the face of their enemies, who even now Artorias was certain were still scouring the Bull Kingdom for any sign of them.

This was not the first time Artorias had Leon take the lead on a hunt. Each time Leon would have less trouble finding his prey and less hesitation killing it. But for all his skill and natural talent, Leon had never brought down anything larger than a wind wolf, let alone another person or the more terrifying and bizarre monsters that live in the forest.

"We're getting closer. I'd say it came through here maybe ten minutes ago, can't be more than a quarter mile away," whispered Leon. He wasn't saying this for Artorias'

benefit; he knew his father could probably see the stag with his magic senses. No, this was so his father knew Leon's thoughts and to justify his actions.

Leon didn't wait for Artorias to respond. He continued onward, following the tracks. Artorias allowed a small smile to appear on his face. Leon was correct, the stag wasn't very far.

As they got closer, Leon slowed down somewhat. He began to regulate his breathing, allowing his heart to calm down. He readied his bow and drew an arrow from his quiver. This was the largest creature he had ever hunted. If he missed and it attacked him, there would be little he would be able to do to stop it.

As he breathed, the magic within the air was drawn into his lungs. From there it entered his bloodstream and upon entering his heart, it fused with his blood to form mana. This mana would then enter his muscles, saturating them with magical power and making him stronger and faster than normal.

When he finished preparing himself, Leon took the last few steps to crest a hill and caught sight of the stag. It was only about three hundred feet away, a distance easily in range of his bow. He took aim, nocked the arrow he'd drawn, channeled his magic through his palms and into the enchantment of his bow, then drew the bowstring. He held it near his cheek for a single heartbeat, then released.

The arrow crossed those three hundred feet in the blink of an eye, but the stag still noticed the sharp killing intent and had time to look over in confusion before the arrow sank deep into its body. The arrow penetrated its heart, killing it instantly.

Leon drew another arrow and prepared to let loose another shot, then watched the stag. After several moments, he began moving towards his kill.

"Good kill, boy. No hesitation," Artorias said with pride.

"Thanks," said Leon, with a big smile on his face.

"Now come on, we have to get this thing home soon as we can. Wraiths tend to be drawn towards death, and we don't want to be caught out here when night rolls around." Artorias allowed Leon only a small moment to savor his accomplishment before getting back to what needed to be done.

The two found a large tree branch, fallen from a huge white tree. Leon cleared off the leaves and smaller twigs while Artorias tied the stag's hooves around it. They lifted it up and, after a few seconds of adjustment, began the trek back home.

Leon had a little trouble as the stag was quite large and he was only a first-tier mage, but Artorias was far more powerful and was able to pick up the slack with ease.

The two made good time, not stopping even for a moment to rest or to admire the brilliantly colored flowers and leaves seen in this forest.

After several hours of walking, the trees and foliage began to thin out. They approached the clearing where they had built a fort, their home for more than a decade. However, the sun had nearly disappeared in the west and creatures were beginning to stir in the darkening woods.

The hair on the back of Leon's neck began to rise, and he felt the eyes of awakened beasts and other nocturnal beings.

"Damn, we need to hurry," Leon said, nervously looking around into the darkened forest.

Artorias, too, was looking into the forest, but he saw much more than just the trees and the dark. He saw the things stalking them among the trees, the black shadows and the pair of cold blue eyes.

"No, stop. Put down the stag." Artorias and Leon slowly put down the stag, as per the older man's instructions. "Good, now stay low and stay put. Concentrate your mana in your legs and should anything get past me, just make your way back home. Don't stop for me or for the stag." Artorias looked at his son, who nodded in response.

Leon watched his father move off into the darkness, drawing his sword. It was a rather unremarkable weapon; a leather handle, round iron pommel, and a straight guard. Though the blade looked to be made of good steel, it seemed to be of a quality that any city blacksmith in the southern kingdom could make with little effort.

But no ordinary smith could make this plain-looking sword.

Despite how plain this weapon appeared, in Artorias' hands, it appeared to be something out of legend, sparking with lightning and rumbling with the sound of thunder.

It was with this sword that Artorias went out into the dark forest.

Leon couldn't tell what all was happening in the dark, but he heard the terrible screeching of banshees and the cracking sound of an ice wraith freezing the ground it was walking on. Every scream from the banshees sent his blood into turmoil, and his mana began to boil. But Leon stayed still, with the utmost confidence in his father. This sort of thing happened often and Artorias had always walked away victorious.

His confidence was rewarded when he saw Artorias' sword, illuminated by the flashes of lightning piercing through the dark of the trees. He felt the wind from every swing and the cold seeping off the wraith.

Soon, the noises ceased, and Artorias returned. No words were spoken between the two. This was normal for them, a hazard Artorias accepted when he decided to come

here. This was a danger that Leon had always known—a danger that he no longer found particularly remarkable.

Compared to the danger that Artorias knew awaited them in the south, these wraiths and their enthralled banshees were hardly even that threatening.

They silently picked the stag back up and continued onward.

Leon still felt the attention of beings in the woods, but they backed off after Artorias' show of force, though never quite leaving completely.

It wasn't until Leon and Artorias reached the clearing of purple grass that they were finally left alone.

In the center of the clearing were four thick wooden walls, fifteen feet high and warded to keep the creatures of the night from approaching. This could be considered the only safe place in the entire vale once the sun went down. The entrance into this fort was a small depression leading to a tunnel about 30 feet away from the walls. Leon descended the familiar dirt ramp and placed his hand on a runic circle etched onto the front of the deceptively flimsy looking door. After a brief flash of light, the door opened.

Upon entering, Leon looked down the underground stone passageway and began to relax from the long hunting trip. He started to walk down the ramp, pausing only for Artorias to close the door behind them. As the door closed, there was a moment where hundreds of runes carved into circular glyphs on the door lit up, only to just as quickly darken again. This confirmed that the door had been locked and the wards had been raised.

The stone bricks that made up this passageway were simply yet expertly crafted. Each brick was cut exactly like the others, and even a mage as weak as Leon could feel the magic flowing through them.

There was another, larger door in the tunnel, and more heavily warded as well. It, too, lit up with magical energy as Leon pushed it open and when Artorias closed it.

When Leon climbed the ramp on the other side leading up and into the fort, he sighed.

"It's good to be home."