

## Storm King 31

### Chapter 31: The Fight

When Artorias and Leon had returned home just a few hours before, they had no inkling that this night would change everything about their lives forever. It was just a night like any other.

They hung up the two wind wolves they hunted in the ice shack, while Artorias prepared some dinner and Leon meditated. Almost a week had passed since Roland and his party had left, so life had largely returned to normal. Leon went to bed relatively early, but Artorias stayed up for a while longer, as he wanted to take some time to look at the stars and think.

*'We should leave this place since I've been identified. But where should we go? Going further east is too dangerous, and west is too populated...'* Artorias felt that Roland was worthy of trust, but it never hurt to be careful. The only thing that gave him pause was what Leon would think about the move as he still hadn't brought it up with his son, yet.

He dozed off without deciding on anything not long after sundown, but he was awoken when he heard a loud explosion and felt the shockwave rush through the ground. He jumped to his feet, took a moment to look around and shake off the last vestiges of sleep, then charged back to his house to grab his sword.

He heard the torrential flooding of the tunnel and knew that the fort was under attack. To confirm it, all the runes on the obelisk began flashing a dark red, and it gave a deep rumble that echoed throughout the forest.

Leon, shocked and bleary-eyed, emerged half-dressed from his house.

"Leon! Get back inside, now!" Artorias shouted, and Leon blinked once in confusion before the reality of the situation sank in and he ducked back inside, slamming the door shut behind him.

Artorias heard a few dull thumping sounds coming from the tunnel, and a few moments later, five men jumped over the walls, landing in the grass just off the stone courtyard. He recognized Adrianos, and his blood began to boil from rage. *'Did that paladin betray me?! He promised that he wouldn't speak a word about our location!'* he thought, thinking for a moment that his impression of Roland was wrong and the paladin was to blame. But, he put that out of his mind for now. There would be time enough for placing blame when these intruders were dead at his feet.

Artorias called forth his magic, becoming enveloped in lightning, and let his killing intent pour out of him. Timotheos and his men did likewise. Although their killing auras were slightly weaker than Artorias', they still stood firm against him.

Artorias glared at them. "You all have made a grave mistake in coming here..." he said with obvious rage. He raised his trusty sword, then lunged forward, crossing the distance between him and the closest intruder in a blink of an eye, bringing his blade down backed with all his might and fury.

This man was an earth mage of the sixth-tier, but he barely had time to summon a rock pillar from the ground to block Artorias before the sword came crashing down upon it. The rock blocked the sword, but the lightning that Artorias was wreathed in arced around the pillar and hit the man like a battering ram. He flew backward, with Artorias' lightning magic coursing through him, ravaging his body.

Artorias turned to the next man, but this guy wasn't going to be put on the defensive. This man's dagger wasn't suited to defending against Artorias' longsword, so he simply dropped it and a gout of flame burst out of his hands, directly in Artorias' face. A few singed hairs didn't matter to Artorias, however, and he stabbed out with his sword, piercing straight through the attacker's chest and skewering his heart. Artorias then blasted his opponent with lightning, filling his entire body with it, tearing apart his magical body and shattering his soul realm. The man breathed his last, and Artorias withdrew his sword, allowing him to fall lifelessly to the ground.

Timotheos saw this as an opening and targeted Artorias' exposed back. He swung his sword, sending a sharp blade of wind slicing through the air towards Artorias. Lightning magic was extremely weak on defense but made up for it with nearly unparalleled speed and explosive attack power. Artorias put these traits on display as he seemingly turned into a lightning bolt for a split second and dodged Timotheos' wind blade, which then tore through the wall behind him. The solid and magically reinforced oak logs that made up the wall were sliced clean through, and almost a fifth of the entire wall was cut in half.

Light magic was perhaps the only type of elemental magic that could match Artorias' lightning in sheer speed, but Timotheos used his wind magic to put that to the test as he closed the distance between himself and the lightning mage in a single step. The two men became a blur of whirling swords that crashed against each other with earsplitting shrieks. Artorias' lightning surged against Timotheos and the wind mage countered with blades of wind. The ground shook from the force behind every attack and the other mages couldn't even get close to assist Timotheos.

Adrianos decided to take this opportunity while Artorias was distracted to look for Leon, as the young man still hadn't shown himself yet. He darted towards Leon's house and kicked the door. Artorias had indulged his every paranoia when building this place and had even reinforced the two houses, so the door only bent inwards a little, and held against Adrianos' attack.

Meanwhile, the last of Timotheos' men went to help his injured comrade.

"This is bad, I think this guy is at least late seventh-tier, close to breaking through to the eighth," the injured man said with pain as the other cauterized his wounds with fire magic, though he couldn't do anything about the lightning burns.

The fire mage frowned. Timotheos was seventh-tier as well, but the soul realm grows throughout the entire seventh-tier. A mage enters the eighth-tier once the soul realm grows to have a diameter of one hundred miles. The bigger the soul realm, the more magic the mage has to draw upon. Timotheos' soul realm was only about seventy-five miles, which meant that Artorias probably outclassed all of them in raw power.

"Then we'll have to work together and beat him with numbers and skill," the fire mage said to his injured companion.

By now, Adrianos had realized that he wasn't going to get through the door, not while he continued to limit himself. Roland and his knights all thought that Adrianos was only a fourth-tier mage and Adrianos allowed them to continue thinking that way. This allowed him to go wherever the paladin went and kept him out of the spotlight. But now, he sighed, and ice began creeping over his skin.

He completely unleashed his power, that of the fifth-tier, and began wailing on the door again. This time, it only took three more kicks for the door to cave inwards, barely clinging to its hinges, and Adrianos was inside.

He looked around, but since his magic senses hadn't been able to penetrate the wards on the house, he didn't know where Leon was, or if he was even still in it. But he was and hiding just behind the opened door. He had drawn his hunting knife, channeled all the magic he could into it, then lunged out at Adrianos.

The blade stabbed towards Adrianos' exposed neck, but Adrianos' reflexes were sharp, and he was much stronger than Leon. Icy armor quickly appeared, deflecting the blade and throwing Leon off balance. The spy then twisted his upper body and slammed his fist into the side of Leon's chest. The younger man was thrown across the room, crashing into the wall with a sickening crunch, and fell to the ground. He tried to rise, but the pain overcame him, and he collapsed again.

Adrianos quickly approached, sword drawn, and prepared to stab downwards into the sixteen-year-old. However, just as he brought the sword up, he heard a tremendous thunderclap that shook the entire house, and a scream of pain from Timotheos outside.

In a flash of lightning, Artorias had appeared behind Adrianos, his face shrouded in shadow and his own furious killing aura. In one swift motion, he brought his sword down upon the spy's shoulder, cutting straight through the muscle and bone and all the way through the waist. Adrianos didn't have time to even shout in surprise before his life ended.

With the door busted open and the wards carved into the house's walls disrupted, Timotheos was able to use his magic senses to see his cousin cut down. His face twisted in grief, but he knew this wasn't the time to lose his head. He glanced at his remaining two men.

"This guy's soul realm probably exceeds ninety miles. We're not going to overpower him," he said grimly. "You and I will engage him, you'll prepare the venom and strike when you get an opening." The fire mage nodded and moved to join him, while the injured man began fumbling around in a small pouch he had at his waist.

Inside Leon's house, Artorias took the brief respite to check on his son. Leon was still alive, but Adrianos hadn't just broken a number of ribs, he had also sent some of his power into Leon's body. It wasn't enough to freeze him, but Leon had fallen unconscious from the pain and shock while his body naturally used its own magic power to fight back against Adrianos'.

"Rest here, my boy. Let me take care of this." Artorias whispered, gently placing his hand on Leon's shoulder and sending some of his own power to help drive out Adrianos' ice magic from his son. Then, he stood and calmly walked back outside.

As he stepped back out into the moonlight, Timotheos and his fire mage were waiting for him. Their quick fight had taken its toll on Artorias and Timotheos, as each saw that the other was bleeding from dozens of tiny cuts, and they were covered in bruises. Timotheos even had a large gash on his stomach that he was desperately trying to ignore for now.

Artorias spat out a mouthful of blood, then charged again with a flash of lightning, slashing his sword towards Timotheos. Timotheos parried the attack with a well-practiced swish of his own sword, while the fire mage snapped his fingers and directed a fiery explosion towards Artorias.

For a moment, their view of Artorias was blocked by the bright orange flame, but a blast of lightning cut through it and slammed into the fire mage, severing an arm. The mage dropped to his knees in pain, and the fire dissipated.

Artorias' clothes were a little singed, and his fingers slightly blackened, but that didn't stop him from following through with another lunge at Timotheos.

Timotheos successfully blocked but was forced back a step. For a moment, he contemplated how such a common looking sword like the one Artorias was using was able to stand up to his ornate heavily enchanted black steel blade, but he forcibly stamped down on those thoughts. Artorias' fighting style was extremely aggressive, and it left him with little room for anything but concentrating on his defense.

The fire mage had almost lost consciousness from the loss of his arm, but he clenched his teeth and raised his one remaining arm for another attack. He used all the magic left to him and conjured a small flame in his palm. It was only about the size of a butterfly, and it very gently roiled and seethed. But when the mage pushed it out towards Artorias, it flew across the stone square with blinding speed. It hit Artorias in the back and exploded with great fury.

Artorias cried out in pain, before tearing off his burning shirt. Timotheos swung his sword into the flames, hoping to catch Artorias while he was distracted, but the lightning mage had surged backward in a flash of lightning, stabbing his sword straight through the fire mage's throat.

The dead fire mage fell back while Artorias turned back to face Timotheos. Both men were breathing very hard and had little magic power left in their blood, but their soul realms were recovering their reserves. The two carefully circled each other, never allowing their attention to waver for a single moment, always keeping the other in sight. And that was Artorias' mistake.

Timotheos had circled around Artorias in a direction that left his last man behind the lightning mage, and he had just finished applying a thick black liquid onto his dagger. The injured man was the weakest of the three that Timotheos had picked, but he was still an earth mage of the sixth-tier. And now, he saw his chance. Artorias wasn't paying any attention to him and had left his burnt back wide open. The injured man struggled to his feet as quietly as he could and made very brief eye contact with Timotheos. Timotheos began slowly inching towards Artorias, who narrowed his eyes and tensed up, preparing to lunge forward again.

Unfortunately, the injured man made the first move. He had crept up on Artorias, and when he was in range, stabbed forward with his knife. Artorias realized what was happening, and twisted out of the way just in time, slicing the injured man in half at the hips in the same motion.

Timotheos, too, took the chance to move. While Artorias was turning back around to face him, Timotheos gathered all the mana he had left and channeled it into his legs. He sprinted at the dagger, catching it as it fell from the injured man's lifeless hand. Artorias' eyes widened as he realized he wouldn't be fast enough to block this one, and he braced himself. Timotheos drove the knife home, sinking it deep into Artorias' chest.

But, Timotheos bet it all on this one last attack and now he was in striking range of Artorias. The lightning mage raised his sword and stabbed it through Timotheos' shoulder. The sword traveled down into Timotheos' chest, impaling his heart and shattering his soul realm. Artorias' magic power flooded through him, ripping his magic body to shreds, and Timotheos knew that his life had come to an end.

He lamented that no one would be able to report back Lord Justin. He lamented that he hadn't been able to complete his mission, as even if Artorias died now, his son would still live on. Perhaps most of all, he lamented that his cousin died so far away from home and that neither of them would ever see that home again. All breath left his lungs, and his eyes closed, never to reopen.

Artorias lasted slightly longer, standing amidst the broken and burning remnants of his home. The storage shack had been cut in half from an errant wind blade, large parts of the wall had been cut to pieces, much of the grass was still on fire, and the tunnel was flooded. But he wasn't thinking about any of that right now. He took a few staggering steps towards Leon's house, but the venom that coated the knife in his chest was potent and was already coursing throughout his entire body. The last of his strength left him and he collapsed, unable to move.

"Dad!"

For a moment, he thought he heard Leon's voice, but he couldn't be sure, as he felt his consciousness slip away.

### **Chapter 32: Serana**

Artorias woke in his own bed to the sound of crackling flames and the smell of burning flesh. Sunlight was peeking through his windows, and he knew that it was morning.

He felt weak, far too weak to do much more than slowly run his hands over his body, trying to check his wounds. Timotheos had left him with numerous cuts and bruises in addition to the knife to the chest, not to mention the burns from the fire mage on his back, but Artorias couldn't feel any of them. It seemed like they were all healed!

But that also left him confused. His wounds were gone, meaning Leon must've done something. Artorias did remember thinking he heard Leon's voice before he fell unconscious, but that didn't explain his weakness. If he were healed, then he should've regained enough strength in those few hours to do more than weakly move his hands.

Artorias stopped thinking about that for a moment. He had just woken up, after all, so he cleared his mind, and took a second to chase all the grogginess out of his head. Then, he re-evaluated himself.

His body was devoid of mana. His blood didn't have even a single wisp of magical power within it. His heart gave a startled jump when he realized that, but he was in for far more dire realizations as he continued. He threw off the blanket that was covering him, and he found that the veins in his chest had turned black, and when he tried using his magic body to see inside, he found that his bones were no longer producing blood or mana. All the marrow within him was melting into a black sludge, and the only reason he wasn't screaming in pain, he realized, was a pair of pain-relieving spells on his forearms.

Artorias was panicking now, but his body was so weak he couldn't do any more than just lay there and continue evaluating his condition. As it was, he doubted he would live much longer in this state.

His body was a mess, even though all his surface wounds had been healed. Now, he cast his magic body into his soul realm.

He appeared seated on a throne of white marble on a platform of clouds, high up in a bright, circular throne room at the center of his mind palace. He immediately rose and vanished out of one of the large nearby windows. He didn't stop for a moment to look at anything in the heavenly palace he had constructed but instead flew straight to the edge of his soul realm in an instant.

Normally, the soul realm would always be surrounded by an endless bright grey fog, known as the Mists of Chaos, but that wasn't what Artorias found. The sight that greeted him at the very edge of his soul realm was a blackened mist that was slowly dissolving his soul realm, breaking it apart and swallowing it piece by piece.

At that moment, Artorias knew without a shadow of a doubt that he was going to die.

He experienced a whirlwind of emotions, fear, anxiety, sorrow, anger, fury, and so much more.

He raised his fists and screamed at the heavens, in a primal bellow to vent his frustrations, and when he allowed his arms to fall, his face was covered in tears.

He was dying. He had maybe another day to live, at the rate his soul realm was being consumed.

He stared, hollow-eyed, at the oncoming black fog for a few minutes more, then withdrew his magic body back to his mind palace. He collected himself, then sat back down on his throne.

His eyes opened, back in his house, and he calmed his wildly beating heart. If this was going to be it, he decided, then he would go out with some dignity, dammit! He would honor the memory of his family and his ancestors by not losing his civility in his final moments.

Taking some time to collect his thoughts, he began running through a mental checklist of things he prepared for this event back when he had first started building here.

A few minutes later, his door opened, and Leon entered, dusting off a bit of soot on his shirt as he closed the door behind him. He looked up and saw that Artorias was awake.

"You're up!"

Artorias smiled weakly back at his son. "Your powers of perception are truly legendary, little lion," he said sarcastically. He waved Leon over as best he could and had him pull up a nearby chair. Leon looked alright, no sign of any injuries from the previous night. "How are you doing? I thought you had a few broken ribs at least, but you look fine..."

Leon smiled with a bit of embarrassment. "I did. When I woke up, you had just finished killing that last guy, then collapsed. It was kinda painful, but I carried you in here after digging out a few healing spells to stop the bleeding." Leon nodded to a first-aid box Artorias had made several years ago. It was normally filled with half a dozen minor healing spells as well as an assortment of other materials for use in making bandages, tourniquets, and splints should those spells fail or prove inadequate, but now those spent spell sheets were lying crumpled up in a pile next to it. "Afterwards, I searched those bodies and found some much cooler healing spells. I used two to fix up my ribs, they finished healing a couple hours ago. Then, I used the last one on you, to clean up the last of your wounds. How do you feel?"

“... You did a good job, my boy, you really did. I assume what I’m smelling are our unruly guests being disposed of? Did you find anything interesting on them beforehand?”

Leon shook his head. While Artorias was unconscious, Leon had searched their bodies, stripping them of anything of value he found. They had a fair amount of money, some high-quality weapons, and those powerful healing spells, but little else. There was no identification, nothing that might’ve told Leon where they had come from or why they attacked.

Once he was done with his search, he piled up their bodies and drew three crude fire runes around them. He wanted to burn their bodies until they were completely unrecognizable, then bury the remains in the forest, but the fire didn’t start immediately. After some fiddling around with it, he eventually realized that his fire runes weren’t drawn correctly and tried to correct them. It took him three tries with the runes before he managed to get the bonfire started. At this point, the flames were almost half as tall as the obelisk, and he wasn’t sure if there would even be anything left to bury when the fire died down.

“That’s a shame, I was hoping they might have carried something that might have indicated where they came from, though I guess they would’ve had something like that in their soul realm...” Carrying things in a mage’s soul realm was always pretty risky. If the mage suffered critical damage to their soul realms, then their things could be lost. If the mage died, however, then whatever they had in there would certainly be lost forever, which is why most generally kept their wealth and other valuables locked up in a Heaven’s Eye bank, so their families wouldn’t be ruined if they were unexpectedly killed.

Artorias glanced out of the window for a brief moment, then sighed and turned back to Leon. “Listen, Leon, we need to talk.”

Leon had been absentmindedly looking around but looked back at his father after hearing his uncharacteristically serious tone.

“You did a wonderful job patching the two of us up, you really did. The absolute best you could under the circumstances. However, I think that that dagger I was stabbed with was poisoned.” Leon’s eyes widened in shock and his heart jumped in fear and panic. Artorias used as much strength as he could, and raised his arm, resting it on his son’s shoulder to calm him down. “I’m probably not going to live long enough to see tomorrow morning. You need to keep calm, and listen to me now, ok?”

Leon had no idea what to say, he had never been in a situation like this before and was caught off guard. His face contorted with grief, anger, worry, and formed twisted expressions he had no words for. But, his father had raised him to have a powerful killing intent, raised him in the wilds where death was nearly omnipresent and had taught him about death almost from the moment the young boy could hold a bow.

After a whirlwind of emotion, Leon shut his eyes, grit his teeth, and regained control of himself. His face settled back into his usual stony expression, though not without a few twitches and minor grimaces. He could be strong for now, at least until Artorias had said his piece. No, he *would* be.

When Leon’s face fell back into stoicism, Artorias smiled and continued.

“I’ve never told you about your mother. That was never fair to you, I let my own grief and anger get to me. I’m sorry about that, little lion, I should have been strong enough to tell you about her. A child should know about his parents, especially you, given that the reason she’s not around is the same

reason we're in this vale." Artorias paused, searching for the right words, while Leon listened with rapt attention. He had asked about his mother before, but Artorias had never given him any real, concrete answers.

"Let's see, I suppose we should start when we met. I wasn't much older than you, it was only a few weeks after my eighteenth birthday. I was killing some time with some of my friends at a private arena in Teira one of them owned. It was a nice, chill time. Some booze, some flirty hosts and hostesses, good food. There were some small fights going on for the entertainment of the other patrons, but we were only there to hang out and weren't really paying attention.

"Well, that is, until one person started winning. And not just winning, she was annihilating her opponents with a single wave of her hand! She wasn't even using any elemental magic, she was just tossing them out of the fighting ring one after the other!

"When I finally turned my attention to her after ten straight victories, I was immediately captivated. Hair as dark as night, and these striking gold eyes. In fact, you get your eyes from her, little lion. And her face, her *body*..." Artorias lost himself for a moment, reminiscing about his wife and her extremely fit and well-endowed figure, but a glance over to Leon brought him back to reality.

"Ahem! Serana was exceptionally strong and beautiful, even by the standards of a prideful son of House Raime. Watching her fight drove me and my lady-loving friends almost into a frenzy. When she ran out of scheduled opponents, we practically tripped over ourselves challenging her, trying to get her to notice us.

"She accepted all of our challenges, but only after gouging out ten pounds of silver from each of us. And she beat every one of us in turn." Artorias' face then broke out into a broad smile, and he puffed out his chest in pride. "But I, I was the sole man among us who managed to take one of her strikes and not be immediately thrown out of the ring. Of course, I was pushed right to the edge and just defending against her overwhelmed me, let alone going on the attack, but I will never forget the words she said to me right before hitting me again and finishing the match. She smiled at me, then said, 'Huh. I've decided that I like you.' Then, she kicked me, and I fell on my ass, to the great amusement of the crowd.

"Needless to say, I asked her out, but she just smiled at me and refused. Now, little lion, sometimes, when you want to woo someone, you do embarrassing things that you look back on and think, 'Kill me. Kill me now.'" Artorias chuckled, then began turning a bit red from shame. "I'll spare you the gory details, but she continued to fight there, and even appeared in other, larger arenas. I never missed a single match, and I even challenged her a few more times. We got on good terms, and after some persuasion, I convinced her to come back to the palace and be my sparring partner.

"Half a year later, we were thoroughly in love, and we weren't fighting during those sparring sessions anymore, hehehe...." Leon facepalmed; he didn't want to hear about that.

"... But things couldn't stay that way forever. I asked her to marry me, and she said yes. We were happy as could be for a few weeks while we made our wedding plans until I finally introduced her to my father. He... was not so happy. 'She's just a commoner!' 'An arena whore is no match for you!' 'She doesn't love you, she just wants your name!'" Artorias put on a very high-pitched and nasally voice when he quoted his father, something which he knew would've infuriated the man if he were there.



Leon was bursting with questions, but he kept his quiet. He wanted Artorias to continue, as he didn't forget that his father told him to listen.

"Well, he never did accept us. So, two and a half years later, we lived in the capital, rather than Teira. We were married, I had just broken through to the fourth-tier, been introduced to the king himself, and assigned to his personal guard. Serana had just given birth to you, and she was running our small, private estate by herself. Things were as perfect as they could be.

"But, good times don't last. I remember that day, the day that shattered our lives and forced the two of us to flee all the way to *this* desolate pile of nothing." Artorias' face rapidly shifted, going from a happy smile to a much darker expression, like barely contained fury and anguish. Leon recognized it as the one his face would always shift into whenever he asked about his mother before now.

"It was fifteen years ago, and I heard a knock at our front gate..."

### **Chapter 33: Fifteen Years Ago**

The Raime villa in the Kingdom's capital was very different compared to the other noble villas in the district. The estate was just as extensive as the others, but whereas the other nobles would fill their land with gardens and guest houses, Artorias' villa was surrounded by a dense forest of exceptionally tall trees and thick bushes.

The other nobles' villas were large and sumptuous, filled with magical trinkets and lavish decorations. Artorias' was luxurious to be sure, but it was much smaller, more intimate, and eschewed the gaudy golden trappings of his neighbors in favor of a much simpler and cleaner aesthetic. The walls were bare, bereft of the intricate mosaics and reliefs that the nobility loved. There were no marble statues, no grand columns covered in runes, no multicolored magic lanterns.

It was a small place, built for a private family. The furniture wasn't fancy, and the floors were a dark wood with a shiny finish rather than marble. But that wasn't to say that the place was cheap, either. The land itself was just as large as the other estates in the neighborhood, and the building materials were of a very high-quality, despite their simplicity. Even though he had been exiled from his family, the twenty-two-year-old Artorias was more than wealthy enough to afford this noble estate. He was a newly made knight in the service of King Julius, and the king was generous to his men, especially when the knight in question was the son of his best friend.

The road leading into the villa was small, and it wound through the trees like a snake. Few people bothered going to the villa given the attitude of its residents, but on a seemingly ordinary night fifteen years ago, two men stumbled down this road.

One of these men was tall, with golden hair and equally golden eyes. He was well-built and handsome. The other was shorter and thinner, with sandy hair and light blue eyes. He was covered in blood and was half-carried, half-dragged by the first man.

"Hold on, man, we're almost there." the first man said to his injured comrade. He had a small glass orb in his free hand, with a single drop of blood floating inside. The drop was being pulled in a certain direction, leading the men straight towards the villa. It was almost touching the glass, indicating that they had almost reached their destination.

The first man glanced at the man he was carrying. This was his cousin, Fain. He was one of their clan's few experts on spatial magic, and it was by his power that they had gotten so close to their princess. Unfortunately, the spatial tunnel he created had begun to fray and destabilize near the end of their journey, forcing them out within the capital several miles from their goal and leaving Fain severely injured.

After a few more agonizing steps, the two finally came within sight of the villa. Ryker—the first man—spread his magic senses over the entire estate and saw the family within.

Artorias was in the front courtyard, practicing his techniques with his trusty longsword. Serana was in the bedroom, rocking baby Leon to sleep.

When he saw the baby, Ryker felt his blood begin to boil in fury, but he quickly clamped down on it, proceeded to the imposing front gate, and loudly knocked.

Artorias narrowed his eyes in confusion. *'Who would come calling at this hour?'* Night had long since fallen, so even at a more social household, they wouldn't be expecting visitors. He sheathed his sword, strode over to the gate, and opened it a crack to see who it was.

Ryker immediately pushed the gate open even more, shoved past Artorias, and walked into the villa's courtyard.

Artorias, in surprise and shock, drew his sword. "Stop right there!" he shouted.

Ryker stopped right there. Then, he slowly turned his head and made eye contact with Artorias. His boundless killing intent spilled out and hit Artorias like an avalanche, forcing him to his knees and driving all the air out of his lungs. Artorias hit the ground, unable to lift his arms, or even draw breath.

"What's going on out here?" Serana heard Artorias' shout and came out to investigate. When she saw Artorias on the ground, she immediately grew enraged, her hands turned into fists, and she moved to attack Ryker. But, when he turned back around to face her, her face became one of shock, and she came to a stop.

"Ryker?" she asked. Then, she finally fully processed what she was seeing, and noticed who he was carrying. "Fain!" She rushed forward and took his other arm, then glared at Ryker. She didn't need to say anything for him to get the message, and his killing aura abated, allowing Artorias to stand back up.

"These are my cousins, get our first aid kit!" Serana shouted to him. Artorias stared daggers at Ryker, but after a brief moment of hesitation, he quickly ran towards the bathroom. Then, she addressed Ryker again, with a cold and angry edge to her voice that sent shivers down his spine. "And you, come with me."

They carried Fain into the living room, just off the courtyard, and gently laid him down on a large sofa. Artorias joined them after a few seconds and began applying healing spells to Fain's wounds. Once the bleeding began to stop, Serana turned her full attention to Ryker, who was sitting straight as a board and looked more than a little nervous.

"Speak. Why are you here?"

Ryker's gaze briefly wandered over to Artorias while he thought about the correct words to say, something that Serana didn't miss.

"He's my husband. You will treat him the same way you'd treat me."

This made Ryker's heart go into turmoil. *'This filthy thing has dared to touch the princess?!'* But, fortunately for him, he didn't say that out loud. Given how coldly Serana was treating him for even threatening Artorias, he felt she'd beat him into the ground if he did.

"Lady Serana, the Patriarch has ordered us to find you and escort you back home."

Serana's eyes widened in anger, and she began shouting, "What?! No! He promised me that I could be gone for twenty years, we're not even a quarter through that yet! Who does he think he is, going ba--"

But Ryker cut her off with a single sentence. "The clan was attacked!"

Serana quieted down. Her beautiful face was one of shock, but it very quickly turned back to anger. "What? Who would be so bold as to attack us?"

"We... don't know. But, many of our warriors are dead, and the Patriarch was advised by the Council of Elders to recall every clan member from their adventures. He agreed, and he sent us to you."

"Is that why Fain is so badly hurt?"

"No, the Patriarch ordered us to get you with all haste, and he gave us a dislocation crystal to return. Unfortunately, we didn't possess any crystals that would get us here, so Fain had to create a spatial tunnel to get here as fast as possible. But, this place was a little too far away, and Fain ran low on mana, causing the tunnel to begin collapsing while we were still in it. He struggled to maintain it, but in the end, we were ejected a few miles to the south, right in the middle of the city. At least the people here are beyond weak, so we made it here without being detected."

That derision in Ryker's last comment made Serana give him a dirty look, but she looked away and began pacing in thought. She had many questions, but this wasn't the time for it. Ryker and Fain were her cousins, they wouldn't come so far just to lie to her. So, if the clan was under attack, then as much as she might hate it, they'd have to go home.

"Very well. You can take me back to my father..." Ryker's face relaxed in relief, but immediately tightened up from discomfort and disgust when she continued. "... but my son and husband *will* be coming with."

Ryker was about to try to protest, but when he locked eyes with Serana, he froze. She was smiling, but it was a sinister challenge rather than an expression of happiness. She was daring him to try and refuse.

He was no fool. He reluctantly nodded in agreement.

"Good!" Her face lit up with a genuine smile, one which could make the sun pale in comparison. She then gracefully walked across the room, to where her husband was finishing up tending to Fain. She hugged Artorias from behind, pressing her ample chest into his broad and muscular back, and whispered into his ear, "You won't refuse to come with me, will you?"

Artorias looked around. He loved this place, but his home was still Teira. If he did leave the only regret he might have would be leaving his father and brother behind. They didn't leave things off on the best terms, with the two almost literally throwing him out of the palace, but Artorias was confident that after a few years away, or maybe a few decades in his father's case, they'd be able to reconcile.

Serana noticed the slightly conflicted expression on his face and knew what it meant. She reached around and took his face in her hands, turning him to look at her, and gave him a sweet, tender smile.

"It won't be forever, my love. We'll come back as soon as we can, I promise."

Artorias only took one more moment to think, then smiled back at her and pressed his forehead to hers, whispering his agreement to her. Then, he turned to go to the bedroom to pack a few things and to get Leon.

After he walked out of the room, Ryker spoke up. "My lady, you are the princess of the clan, the Patriarch's only daughter, why would you stoop so low as t-

"You will *not* finish that question." Serana gave a look that could cause a tree to wither and die, and Ryker immediately shut his mouth tight.

Right then, the front gate was blasted inwards with a tremendous roar, crashing through the courtyard and into the wall of the villa. Ryker sprang to his feet, while Artorias ran back into the room holding Leon.

"Were you followed?!" Serana asked her cousin.

"Impossible! No way Fain's spatial tunnels can be tracked!"

"But you said it started breaking down at the end..."

Ryker knew she was probably right as he thought about it, as Fain usually only made short jumps with his spatial magic, but longer jumps were far more complicated. A jump as long as the one they made to get here, there would be no way to completely mask it.

He immediately charged out the door to confront whoever attacked the gate.

Standing in the courtyard were half a dozen men, all dressed in black with their faces covered in featureless masks. There was absolutely no way to tell who they were, but Ryker didn't even try. As soon as he saw them, he opened up with a blast of crimson flame, swallowing up half the courtyard.

The attack did little against their attackers, however. A wall of ice appeared between Ryker and the men, dissolving away the instant the fire died down. The men in black then went on the attack themselves, conjuring enormous blades of wind and spikes of ice and rock to fly towards Ryker. Or, more accurately, to where Ryker had been before the smoke from his flames obscured his position.

Their attacks tore into the villa, tearing it to pieces, but none came close to Ryker.

Ryker took their moment of blindness to send a fireball careening towards the closest of the attackers. Just as it was about to explode on him, a shield of light appeared in front of him, preventing any injuries.

“Tch” muttered Ryker. Even in this brief exchange, he could tell that his opponents were strong, perhaps almost as strong as he was. Maybe he could take them on one-on-one, but this... He sent out another gout of flame, but it collided with an eruption of ice. The two attacks tore up the courtyard beyond recognition but did little to either side.

Before Ryker could follow up with another attack, the ground beneath him cracked open and he lost his balance. It created a brief moment of distraction, but a moment is all that’s needed in a fight. Before Ryker could right himself, two wind blades and a beam of light hit him in the chest, throwing him backward and completely destroying that wing of the villa.

Meanwhile, back in the living room, Serana was just about to head outside to help Ryker when two more attackers burst in through the windows. She reacted quickly, though, and sent them both flying backward with a kick.

This stunned Artorias. He knew she was far stronger than he was, but she was so fast he barely even saw her! His awe grew even more when black flames sprang out from her arms, setting both attackers alight. These flames gave him a palpable feeling of dread, and he held his son close.

These two attackers were injured, but with a quick gust of wind and a flash of light, the flames were extinguished. They threw themselves into attacking Serana, but she responded in kind. Black fire was met with blades of wind and light, and the villa was torn asunder.

Hearing the fighting, Fain blinked awake. It took him only a moment to realize what was happening, and he pulled the dislocation crystal out of his soul realm and began activating it.

Ryker pulled himself out of the rubble of the villa and attacked those outside again, but as soon as he felt the magic of the crystal, he put all of his magic into a single attack. All the ground around him in a twenty-foot radius went up in a tornado of crimson flame that stretched over sixty feet high, and the six men outside briefly retreated. This gave Ryker the space he needed to fall back to the living room.

Serana, for her part, had thrown back her two opponents with a pair of black fireballs, and Fain stumbled over to her side. Ryker burst in and joined them. Artorias wasn’t too far away, covering Leon with his body, but when he saw the other three group up, he made to do so as well.

Unfortunately, Fain didn’t give him the opportunity. Ryker had enough time to give him a disdainful look, while Serana reached back to him in terror after realizing what Fain was doing. The crystal in Fain’s hand conjured a deep black sphere, with a hint of blue in the center, and enveloped them. The last thing Artorias heard before the sphere disappeared was Serana’s voice shouting, “No! Wai- “

And they were gone.

Artorias stared in disbelief, but the two men struggling to put out Serana’s black fire brought him back to reality. He wasted no time and grabbed what he had packed, held Leon closer, and sprinted out of the villa’s back door.

Ryker’s flame tornado died down as soon as he left, and the six other attackers burst in through the ruined walls.

“Shit! We missed them!”

“The Great Lord damn it! Even their princess was here!” another shouted.

“Enough!” the man who was evidently their leader said. He waved his hand, and a spinning ball of wind helped the last two men beat out the last of the black flame clinging to them. “There were two more here, a man and a baby. I think that might’ve been that woman’s husband and child. We’re going after them.”

That implication was not lost on his men. If they killed those two, then this mission wouldn’t be a complete failure. They’d have to kill them eventually anyway, or the child at least.

But, before they could spread their magic senses out over the city and find them, they all felt the attention of those far to the south.

Six people had seen them. Four of their magic senses faltered in fear when they felt the strength that came from these eight men. The leader didn’t pay those four any mind, but the other two came from a giant stone tower in the center of the plane...

“Wait!” he shouted in panic, “It seems the Grave Warden and his disciple have spotted us. We must leave now! Prepare the crystal!”

One of the men pulled out a dislocation crystal of their own and activated it. The group huddled around it and waited. This crystal was clearly inferior to Fain’s, as it charged much slower than his.

“What are we going to do about those two that are still here?” asked one of them worriedly.

“We’ll just have to let Lord Kamran know. He’ll take care of it. Probably send a vassal like Korintholos or Isynos to deal with them. We should worry more about what he’ll do to *us*, though.” the leader responded. Indeed, they had failed. They hoped they’d get off light.

The crystal finally activated, surrounding the eight men in a black sphere, then vanishing.

The battle was exceptionally loud, but it was a very large neighborhood of wealthy people, all with private security. Consequently, it took a little while for the local garrison to arrive. When they did, they found the Raime villa in ruins, with the rubble still burning and immense spikes of rock and ice jutting up from the ground.

### **Chapter 34: Artorias’ Last Breath**

Leon was stunned by Artorias’ story. The attack on the villa, his mother and her cousins ‘Fain’ and ‘Ryker’, these black-clothed men. He had just been given plenty to process, but Artorias wasn’t quite done yet.

“I hid in the forests by the capital for a while, before I realized that they weren’t following me. I rented a room back in the city and laid low for several days. I hoped Serana would return. I waited at an old temple, built back before the first Bull King began conquering his neighbors—when the people there still worshipped the sky. We were married there, and if she came back, that’s where she would’ve gone.

“But she never came. I waited there a week, and she never came.” Artorias’ voice was growing weaker, but Leon could still hear the sorrow and bitterness in it.

"We couldn't stay there. The villa was gone, Serana was gone, and my father had disowned me for marrying her. I could've gone back to Teira, done my best to make peace with him, I doubt he would've thrown his own infant grandson out onto the street. But, I was still angry at him. I took us north, keeping away from prying eyes. The kingdom thought me dead, and that was for the best. No one knows the Great Plateau like my family. There are hidden paths in and out of the Northern Vales, and we slipped through one, arriving here undetected. After meeting and staying with Torfinn for almost a year, I brought us here, and made it our home."

"But it was never meant to be permanent..." said Leon quietly. He remembered a certain 'training expedition' five years ago where Artorias took him south through one of those hidden paths. They stayed far away from any settlements larger than fifty people and made camp several miles away from the outskirts of Teira. Artorias made Leon wait at the camp, then went into the city.

Leon waited almost the entire day for his father to return, and when he did, he made them pack up and go back north immediately. It didn't matter that the sun was setting, they left immediately and were back north of the Frozen Mountains as soon as their legs could carry them.

Artorias' mood had been weird when he returned, too. He'd brought a number of books and maps, but he hardly said more than a few words at a time for the next month.

Artorias nodded to Leon, acknowledging him as correct. "Indeed, this was never meant to be a permanent home. Five years ago, when we went to Teira, I had meant to find my father and finally make peace. I had talked myself into thinking that those who attacked our villa in the capital surely weren't still in the kingdom, they had most certainly moved on by now.

"But when I arrived at the palace, I found it in ruins. My childhood home was completely wrecked, with hardly a single column left standing. I asked a nearby citizen what had happened, and he told me that my father and brother had been killed in the battle that destroyed the palace. No one knows who did it, but their description was familiar: masked men dressed in black."

Leon understood. It was obvious what had happened, after failing to find Artorias, their enemies had guessed that he'd gone to his father for help. They attacked and killed the Archduke, but still failed to find them.

"I should have told you all of this sooner, little lion. It shouldn't have taken this... It shouldn't have taken death to loosen my tongue..." Artorias' voice was growing even weaker. It was becoming a challenge for him to continue speaking, but he needed to. There were a few last things he wanted Leon to know.

"You're not going to die, Dad, just tell me what I can do!"

Artorias sighed and smiled at his son. "There isn't anything that can be done, my boy. You already did everything you could when you used those healing spells. By now, my soul realm is less than ten miles, and I'm not long for this world."

Leon didn't want to believe it, but Artorias wouldn't let him deny it. Leon's hands clenched into fists, but his eyes still remained dry. Artorias appreciated that. He didn't want his last memories of his son to be of him crying.

Artorias took a deep breath. Breathing was starting to get hard, so he had to use it a bit more judiciously.

"Listen, when I'm gone, destroy the obelisk."

"Wha... Destroy it?"

"Yes. Use the circle I designed for it. There's something buried underneath that I want you to have. Other than that, there are maps and books in this house that you will find useful too. And check the sleigh in the ice shack. I got you a present when we were last in Vale Town, supposed to be for your birthday..."

"I... yes." was all Leon could say.

"Do me one last favor, little lion, won't you?"

"Anything."

"Good. Do you remember the ending to the 'Epic of Antares'?" Artorias' face had gone almost bone white, but his expression still turned somewhat embarrassed.

"Of course."

"Look in the front pouch of my satchel."

Leon stiffly walked across the room towards the satchel, and after a moment of rummaging around pulled out two small objects. They were the heartwood seeds Artorias had found when they had gone out to awaken Leon's bloodline! One was glowing a bright gold, so bright that Leon almost had to squint to see it. The other was completely black, like a lump of coal. If it didn't have a radiant magical aura, Leon would assume it was dead.

Leon understood what Artorias wanted, now. At the end of the Epic of Antares, the titular character is buried in the tradition of the gods; his heart is removed and replaced with a Heartwood seed.

Leon's hand clenched over the seeds, and he slowly turned back to Artorias. He looked his father directly in the eye and nodded.

Artorias smiled at his son. Leon numbly walked back over and sat down. Neither spoke for what seemed like an eternity.

Artorias broke the silence when he weakly held up his arm and placed it on Leon's shoulder.

"I don't say this as often as I should, but I love you, my son, and I couldn't be prouder of you."

He didn't have the strength left in him to pull Leon into a hug, but Leon didn't need to be pulled. He gently wrapped his arms around his father, and the two men held each other close.

"I'm going to find Mom. I'm going to find her, and I'm going to make those who separated us and killed our family pay. They'll realize that making an enemy of House Raime was the worst mistake of their lives."



Artorias smiled and gave a weak chuckle. "I'd expect nothing less from my son, and the descendant of the Thunder Kings."

Leon and Artorias separated. Leon didn't quite know what to do with himself. He was shaking, Artorias noticed.

"Get out of here," Artorias said light-heartedly. Leon looked back in confusion. "Go on. You shouldn't have to be here. We've both said what we need to, now go on, let me die in peace." Artorias' usual smile wasn't on his face, but he did his best to get it there.

"Go! I don't want you to watch me die. You're my son. I don't want you to see me die. Go! Leave me to my thoughts." Artorias was more insistent now. As insistent as he could be.

Leon slowly stood and walked to the door. Just as he was about to leave Artorias' bedroom, he turned back and said, "I love you, Dad. Goodbye."

Artorias managed to give him a warm smile one last time, and Leon was out the door.

Leon felt numb. He didn't quite feel what was happening was real, but he walked out of Artorias' house anyway. He stumbled across the cracked and broken stones in the courtyard and collapsed before the obelisk.

He sat with his back against the cool stone for a long time, he didn't know how long. It began raining sometime, but he barely noticed. The bonfire that had consumed the bodies of Adrianos, Timotheos, and the others in the kill team died down, leaving nothing but ash and a few charred bones. Leon still just sat there, completely numb to it.

After Leon left, Artorias let his smile drop. *'This is it, eh?'* he thought. After losing Serana, it was always his dream to find her, to put what remained of his family back together. That would never happen now.

Artorias began tearing up. He couldn't help it. No one wants to die, least of all someone who still has unfinished business.

He kept his mouth shut, though. Leon was all he had left, and he wasn't going to let his son's last memory of him be of a broken man crying out of regret.

Leon had grown into a man he could be proud of. Artorias had done his best to raise Leon in as safe an environment as he could find, and he hoped that Leon would be able to find his own way in the world now. His only regret about his son was that, out of Artorias' own paranoia, Leon never grew up with other people around. He wasn't a social person.

But he was strong. With their enemies still out there, strength was what Leon needed, and that was what Artorias had strived to give him.

Artorias closed his eyes and cast his magical body back into his soul realm. It had yet to fully succumb to the venom that had poisoned him, but it was in complete tatters. Apart from his mind palace, only a few scattered and rapidly shrinking islands were left. Even his grand and majestic mind palace was now beginning to crumble.

It's towers of white gold weakened and collapsed. The windows shattered, and the stone broke apart. The columns supporting the great halls cracked, and the halls went the way of the towers.

Artorias watched the gardens wither and die, he watched the barely visible remains of the light in the mists finally fade away, he watched the darkness break the last of the land in his soul realm and encroach upon his throne room, the last vestige of his once beautiful mind palace.

He sat on his throne of stunning white marble and watched the darkness seep through the doors and windows. The walls were entirely consumed in minutes, allowing the poison to inch across the floor, devouring the granite tiles he had so carefully designed. The walls splintered and fell, and the darkness rushed in.

He didn't see what happened next. He leaned back in his throne and closed his eyes. Tears still rolled down his cheeks as he thought of his father, always so stern and authoritative. He thought of his proud and noble brother, his friends from childhood, all the people he'd known from back home. He thought of the kindness shown to him by King Julius, and of Torfinn, who had always had a place for him and his son in his longhouse.

But most of all, he thought of Serana. The first time he saw her, his first challenge, the moment she agreed to be his sparring partner, and the moment they first admitted their love to each other. He vividly remembered when he proposed, when they were married, when she told him she was pregnant, and the birth of Leon. Above all, he remembered when she was taken from him.

And now, he would never see her again.

The darkness was upon him. His throne melted away beneath him, and the darkness flooded into his magic body, causing it to dissolve away.

Artorias never opened his eyes. He didn't hear the rain fall upon the roof of his house, he didn't hear the howling wind of a growing storm, and he didn't hear the thunder that rocked the heavens.

He didn't see the last light in his soul realm, either. As he succumbed to the darkness, there was one last thing in his soul realm, one last thing the venom couldn't touch. His ancestor flew through the void and watched his magic body disappear. It watched with its bright eyes as the last thing within Artorias vanished, the enormous marble slab upon which the throne sat. Carved into it was an intricate formation of runes and runic glyphs telling the story of an immortality-seeking mortal, in the shape of a bird of prey with its wings spread and talons outstretched. This was Artorias' mana glyph.

Lightning blazed through the bird's eyes, and its feathers sparked and flashed. It witnessed the death of its descendant, and screeched in anger, causing thunder to resound throughout the void.

But Artorias didn't hear it. In his house, his body took one more ragged breath, and never took another.

### **Chapter 35: Burial**

The rain beat down upon the fort. Wind buffeted the trees in the forest and the walls creaked incessantly. Lightning flashed across the sky and its thunder was heard far and wide.

But Leon barely acknowledged any of it. He still sat slumped against the obelisk, not caring about the rain that soaked his clothes or the wind that howled in his ears.

His father had died. Leon didn't need to see him to know; he could feel it. He didn't cry or curse his enemies. He just sat there, unmoving.

The storm eventually passed, Leon didn't notice when. He must've fallen asleep at some point because suddenly the sun was shining down on his face.

He was still holding the heartwood seeds. The golden seed pulsed with light and heat, while the black seed felt cold and icy. Leon gripped the seeds tighter, turned his eyes towards the door to Artorias' house, and steeled himself for what he now had to do.

He began moving his stiff body, struggled to his feet, and shook his limbs awake. He slowly walked to Artorias' house, stopping just before the door. He took a deep breath, pushed the door open, then walked inside.

Unlike Leon's house, Artorias' bedroom and living room weren't separated, so Leon saw his father immediately. Artorias was still lying in bed, looking almost like he was peacefully sleeping if it weren't for the grayish tone his skin had taken on.

Leon knew he was gone, but just to be sure, he checked Artorias' pulse and made sure he wasn't breathing. Then, he carefully removed the fur blanket covering him and gingerly picked his father up, hooking his arm around Artorias' cold back and legs.

Leon carried Artorias back outside and laid him down on the stone slab that Artorias used to cook on. Leon had no intention of ever using the slab for cooking again, so he didn't much care about keeping it clean.

He retrieved his hunting knife from his house and came back outside, looking like he was sharpening it on a whetstone. He walked back to the slab and continued to sharpen his knife. Leon's face was stony and detached, but the irregular clinking of the knife against the stone betrayed his agitation; he was going through the motions of sharpening the knife, but his hands were shaking.

He stood there, pretending to sharpen his knife for several more minutes, but he couldn't stall forever. Eventually, he put the whetstone down and took a deep breath.

Leon had no experience cutting open a person, but he had skinned many an animal in his years of hunting, so he had some confidence he could do this. He placed the blade of his knife against Artorias' abdomen, just under the sternum, bit the inside of his cheek to banish the last of his reluctance, and put pressure down on the knife. The blade slowly sank into Artorias' skin and Leon carefully sliced downward, until he had enough room to reach his hand in.

As Leon began reaching his knife hand into Artorias' chest, slowly moving organs and cutting through muscle, he didn't realize he was being watched. Deep within his soul realm, his ancestor observed everything. The Thunderbird seethed and stewed in its anger, flying in tight circles around that tiny island in the mist. It had been watching the decline of its clan for years beyond counting and seeing one of the last of its descendants fall destroyed its usually aloof nature. Lightning arced throughout Leon's soul realm as the Thunderbird watched Leon prepare Artorias for burial.

After a few more laps around the island and watching Leon fumble uncertainly with his knife, the Thunderbird finally lost its last tiny reserve of patience and landed on top of the throne. It stared down at the figure of Leon sitting on the throne with his eyes closed, and lightning began surging out from its feathers and into the young man.

Outside of his soul realm, Leon grew momentarily nauseous and he stumbled back a little. Then, his eyes glazed over and the shaking in his hands stopped. Just as he reached back towards Artorias, he heard a voice.

**[Don't remove his heart. Cut it open and place the heartwood seed within.]**

The voice was incredibly deep and inhumanely resonant. Leon was sure without a shadow of a doubt that he'd never heard it before. But, he implicitly trusted it. He could feel that it meant him no harm and that it knew far more about this matter than he did. But, the Thunderbird would take measures to ensure Leon forgot the voice once he was done. It had a reputation to maintain, after all.

Leon hadn't created a magic body yet; the type of artificial magic body he currently possessed was just a weak thing many ancestors would often create for their descendants, so they could access their soul realms during bloodline awakenings. Only an exceptionally powerful soul residing within a weaker soul realm can create something like this, and it allows the one who made it certain advantages.

For instance, the Thunderbird was currently using this direct connection between it and Leon's mind to suppress Leon's emotions, allowing the young mage to work without the sorrow and anger he felt affecting him. This connection also allowed it to speak to Leon. The old legends Leon was familiar with had changed throughout the millennia, and the information presented within wasn't quite accurate. The Thunderbird corrected Leon, as the heart should never be removed when burying someone with a heartwood seed. The proper ceremony was for the seed to take root *within* the heart, not replace it.

With the help of his ancestor, Leon's work rapidly sped up. He quickly located Artorias' heart and made a small incision with his knife. Then, he removed his hand, put down the knife, and grabbed the golden heartwood seed. He supposed that the black seed would've worked, too, but he wouldn't feel right using it. The golden seed was far more appropriate for a burial worthy of divinity.

With the utmost care, Leon slid the heartwood seed into the hole he'd cut into Artorias' heart and removed his hand for the final time.

With that, the most uncomfortable part was over. Leon went back into Artorias' house, grabbed a shirt, and pulled it over his father. For a brief moment, Leon contemplated making a casket with some of the scrap wood, but then he heard that deep voice from within again.

**[The aura of the seed will surround him. He will be untouched by decay.]**

So, without a need for a casket, Leon moved on to the last item on the agenda: where to lay Artorias to rest. And he knew exactly where.

He walked right up to the obelisk and located a runic circle near the bottom that was on the opposite side from the others that controlled the obelisk's functions. Leon placed his hand within and began channeling his magic into it, causing it to activate. There was a slight delay of about five seconds, enough to make sure that the activation wasn't by accident, and then Leon removed his hand.

The circle glowed a dark red, and after a few seconds, cracks rapidly spread out from it and spiderwebbed all over the obelisk, shattering it into countless pieces. The heightened magic density in the air due to the obelisk immediately rushed outwards now that the obelisk was gone, and Leon could

sense that the aura chasing away the forest monsters was now coming solely from the wards in the walls.

Leon began kicking and throwing away the shards and chunks of the obelisk, and after grabbing a shovel from the remnants of the storage shed plus ten minutes of digging, he found a large wooden box beneath the remains of the obelisk's stone base. He pulled the box out of the seven-foot-deep hole he was in and set it aside for the moment.

This was it, right in the center of the fort was where he would bury his father. Leon cleared away a few more bits of stone, making enough room for Artorias, and he respectfully placed his father within. Half an hour with a shovel got him enough dirt to cover the grave, and for a finishing touch, Leon used the loose rocks and broken stones from the obelisk to construct a small cairn above the grave.

With the deed done, Leon finally internalized that it had happened. Since the day before, there had been a large part of him that wasn't quite accepting the events of the past couple of days, but now he was coming to terms with reality.

Within his soul realm, the Thunderbird stopped suppressing Leon's emotions, but it wasn't done exerting its influence over its descendant. The bright mists surrounding the island darkened in an instant, causing rain to fall and wind to pick up. But, most startling of all was that lightning began to strike the throne, and more importantly, Leon.

The young man himself didn't realize it in the state he was in, barely registering anything outside of staring at the cairn, but his body became flooded with magic power, far more than when the obelisk was increasing magic density in the area. This magic spread throughout his body, fusing with his blood and coursing through his veins. It was absorbed by his internal organs and much of it was even stored in his heart. But, most critically, it was seeping into his bones.

After the ritual, Leon was well on his way to becoming a third-tier mage, he just needed a bit more time to allow his bones to adapt to his magic. But now, with the help of the Thunderbird, his body was overflowing with magic and a great deal of that magic was being consciously directed by the Thunderbird into Leon's bones.

The Thunderbird had taken off and was flying around the island again, but it was still very easily controlling its magic, using it to benefit its descendant. But, for the briefest of moments, a reddish-orange light pierced through the storm clouds, bathing the island in light, then disappeared as fast as it had come.

The Thunderbird lazily turned its head in the direction the light had come from, but nothing could be seen. The dark clouds were thick, and no more light was shining through. But, the Thunderbird could still vaguely sense it, the other in the mists.

**[Finally feel like joining us?]** the Thunderbird asked, its voice casually booming and echoing throughout Leon's soul realm, but its question was met with silence.

**[I guess not. Does it truly mar your pride so much that our descendants actually produced such a miracle? How many childless marriages have our lines had?]** The Thunderbird waited for an answer it knew wasn't going to come before continuing.

**[Shall I take this as you not knowing? Well, well, well, look who isn't so infallible now.]** It chuckled to itself, though its avian face couldn't smile or make anything resembling human emotion.

**[Well / know how rare such a child is. And he needs some help. I will show him my favor and promote him to the third-tier of the magic realm.]** The Thunderbird once again glanced out into the distance, towards the eyes it knew were closed.

**[You should do something, as well. He awakened his blood, that you now deny him his own power actually sickens me a little. Ah, well. Not like I can force you to do anything. But I will continue watching over this growing lion. I must do this, he is my last descendant. Or the last with awakened blood and thus the only one that matters, anyway. All my other branches have seen too many dormant generations to awaken their power, now...]** It morbidly laughed to itself at the capriciousness of the universe and calmly watched the lightning fall upon Leon.

**[My last true descendant. And to think, my clan was once one of the mightiest in existence, ruling great swathes of the Nexus and had subjugated entire planes! They even outnumbered *your* clan at their peak. And now this young man is all that's left.]**

As the Thunderbird immersed itself in memories of a more glorious time, the lightning stopped crashing down upon the throne, the rain stopped pouring, and the wind died down. The Thunderbird had stopped flooding Leon's body with magic. It no longer needed to, given what it could sense coming from Leon's bones.

It took one last look in the direction that light had come from, but after seeing nothing, the Thunderbird flew back out into the mists.

### **Chapter 36: Ambition**

Leon sat in a daze in his ruined courtyard for several more hours before his stomach growled loudly enough to grab his attention. This finally brought him out of his stupor, his hunger forcing him to realize how unseemly his behavior had been. He understood that there was nothing wrong with mourning, but he had almost completely shut down.

He got to his feet with a sigh and with one more look to the cairn, he walked to the ice shack. He had no desire to cook anything, so he just grabbed some bread and a couple dark blue fruits, and started walking back outside, until he remembered one of Artorias' last instructions. The sleigh was over in the corner, still laden with everything Artorias had brought back from Vale Town.

Leon went over to it and took a look at what was packed away on it. It was almost all food and Leon began taking sacks of grain, fruit, and potatoes and tossing them over in a nearby corner. Buried beneath all the food was a leather bag. Leon grabbed it and immediately opened it.

What was contained within was a magnificent long coat, made of the Snow Lion's fur and trimmed with its mane. It wasn't bulky, so Leon could fight in it if he had to, and was damned stylish to boot. There was also quite a bit of extra fur still in the bag, as the Snow Lion had been very large, but what drew Leon's eye was the last item in the bag, a small necklace made from one of the lion's fangs. Leon hadn't even realized Artorias had taken one after skinning the lion.

His fingers closed around the fang, and he fought back tears. His sorrow didn't last long, though, before it was replaced by rage. His hands began to shake again, but where it was out of shock and sadness before, now it was out of extreme fury. In his sixteen years of life, Leon had never truly been in a position to experience such intense anger and rage, and he stepped back from the sleigh, putting the lion coat down.

He tried to suppress his anger, but now that it was upon him, he couldn't. His body became filled with adrenaline and his killing intent soared. He burst out of the ice shack and grabbed a woodcutting ax out of the storage shack. In his blind rage, there was only one thing he could think to do. Walking over to the charred remains of the five men he'd burned the day before, he began wildly smashing with his ax.

There wasn't much left from the bonfire, but there were a few bones that now crumbled to ash under his onslaught. It didn't last long, but he felt a little better when it was over. What little remained of the five who attacked the fort was now crushed and scattered to the wind. But with this small amount of catharsis came some mental clarity. It wasn't long past noon now and Leon knew he couldn't stay here. Even if the obelisk was still intact and keeping the wraiths and banshees away, he knew he was still too weak to deal with most of the creatures in the forest. Leon estimated that he wouldn't last a single month in the Forest of Black and White without Artorias.

Leon looked at the lion's fang in his hand again. This was his hunting trophy, and he would wear it proudly. He put the necklace on, and after a brief moment where he glanced at the stone cairn, he quickly went to his house. He grabbed the largest backpack he had and packed a few changes of clothes. Returning to the ice shack, he put enough food to last three days in as well. Then, it was on to Artorias' house.

His father had far more possessions than Leon, most of them far more valuable as well. The best example of this would be the longsword that had almost never left Artorias' side. Despite its simple and unexceptional look, that sword had been passed down through House Raime for generations, serving mages of all calibers, from first-tier novices to seventh-tier titans. Archduke Kyros had given it to Artorias after his first battle, so he could continue to protect the House. Now, it was Leon's turn to take it up.

But the sword wasn't all there was, as the books Artorias had were also extraordinarily valuable. Most were historical or cultural texts, books that Artorias had Leon read during their lessons. Others were more practical books on the basics of magic or compilations of legends and myths. Leon examined each and every book, sorting them by importance. By the time he was done—and there weren't many books so he was done fairly quickly—he had chosen four to take with. The first was about defensive wards and enchantments, the second was the history and legends of House Raime, but the third and fourth books were untitled and beyond rare. One was a detailed explanation about the enchantments and magical formations devised by House Raime, and the other was an introduction to House Raime's signature lightning magic.

Next, Leon took out Artorias' maps. These maps were far more precious than the rest of the books, as they showed the hidden passages through the Frozen Mountains that had been discovered by the Raime Archdukes, and the Thunder Kings before them, among other things. Leon selected a few choice maps from the collection, one that showed his chosen path south, another was a map of the Great Plateau,

one more was of Teira, and the last was of the old palace complex in the city, even showing the location of the private Archives.

Finally, Leon moved on to the wooden box from under the obelisk. It had a locking enchantment placed upon it, but the lock wasn't even as robust as the locks placed on the doors of the fort. The box was locked more to keep insects away from what was inside the box. But even with that in mind, Leon dispelled the lock with surprising ease. He suspected that Artorias had written the enchantment to allow him to open it.

The box was very large, almost big enough for Leon to curl up inside if he wanted. But, oddly enough, there wasn't much within. There was a smaller box that contained three metal tubes with one hundred silver coins each and a couple of documents. These documents were of the utmost importance for Leon and Artorias, as they were their birth and citizenship records.

In addition, Artorias had packed away a card made of gold, with the words 'Heaven's Eye' printed on one side, and a string of numbers and letters that Leon couldn't quite make out due to the heavy enchantments placed upon the card. This card would allow its holder to access the accounts and vaults associated with it. Leon decided to give the bank in Teira a look, now that he had the card. He wasn't too worried about them leaking his identity, as even he knew of the Heaven's Eye Merchant Guild's reputation.

So, into his pack went the books, maps, his birth records, the silver coins, and his golden card, and around his waist went his family's sword. All the other books, maps, and documents went into the chest. Leon was about to lock the chest, but something occurred to him. He went back to the ice shack and grabbed the rest of the lion's fur. He couldn't take the pelt with him, there was still far too much of it for him to be able to spare the room. So, he placed the fur inside of the box. It wouldn't rot away within, and Leon planned to hide the box, so he could return someday and take everything else he couldn't carry. These books and maps were all very rare and valuable, after all, even though they weren't important enough for him to pack.

He knew exactly where he would hide the box, too. He walked over to his house, ax in hand. With a few good swings, he cut away some of the wooden planks that made up his floor. The supports and foundation of the house slightly raised it above the ground, but Leon wasn't planning on hiding the box in that crawlspace. Instead, he grabbed a shovel and began to dig.

The work went surprisingly quickly. Leon was momentarily confused as to why his body felt so vigorous and energetic, but when he inspected himself on a whim, he realized that his bone marrow was producing mana! He hadn't even noticed in his stupor of the past couple days, but his bones had finally fully adapted to magic, and he had become a third-tier mage! His heart beat in excitement, but he wasn't particularly in the mood to celebrate. So, instead, he turned back to his work, but that small amount of good news was just what he needed to put the spring back in his step.

By the time he was done, the hole was about five feet deep, and the sun had almost fallen past the mountains in the distance. Leon didn't mind; he'd wanted to get a good night's rest before leaving, anyway. He grabbed the box and placed it down in the hole, then pushed the mound of dirt in his living room over it.



Now, he was largely done with his preparations. There was only one more thing he needed to do when morning came, then he could leave. There was no way he could leave before then, though. He couldn't just stay here, either. The wards in the walls could keep the banshees away, but a determined ice wraith could still force its way in. It would take a while for the wraiths to realize that the fort was now vulnerable, but Leon would be long gone by then.

This was going to be his last night in the only home he'd ever known. He walked around the fort, burning every detail into his mind. He'd known that he'd eventually leave, but he never thought it would be under such circumstances. A deep melancholy set in, as he finally came to the small pond behind his house.

He took off his clothes and jumped in, knowing that it would probably be his last bath for a while. Without realizing it, he fell asleep as he relaxed.

He awoke just as the sky was beginning to brighten, and when he realized the time, he moved swiftly.

First was breakfast. Some bread, fruits, and dried meat saw his belly filled.

Then came the harder part. There was no guarantee that those who sent that kill team here wouldn't send anyone else, so he didn't want to leave anything behind. He ran through the buildings one more time to make sure he wasn't missing anything, then he grabbed his pack, put on his lion's fur coat, and secured Artorias' sword around his waist.

On the outside of all five buildings in the fort was a small runic circle, placed on the back wall protected by a sliding wood panel, and operated just like the runic circle that destroyed the obelisk. Leon placed his hand within each one in turn for several seconds, channeled some magic into the circles to activate them, then stepped back and waited for the fire runes carved into the foundations to do their thing.

It started slowly, just a little bit smoke, but the flames started by the runic circles soon consumed the storage shacks and the two houses. The remaining pelts caught alight, and the food in the ice shack became more than a little overcooked. What remained of the storage shack collapsed upon all the tools and spare materials it housed, but Leon didn't care about any of it, as it had all been acquired in Vale Town and was thus of relatively low quality compared to what he would soon see in the south.

It took the houses slightly longer to burn, but the flames that spread over them were relentless and they joined the shacks in a conflagration in due time.

Leon calmly watched his home burn. His heart wept, but he managed to keep his eyes dry. He glanced at the cairn and steeled himself for the future. He found his mind turn to a conversation he'd had with his father not too long ago. Artorias had told him that he was ready for his Mana Glyph. This mark would come to represent him, and its creation was not to be taken lightly.

Leon knew what he wanted his to be, now.

Deep within his soul realm, a dramatic change was happening. Nothing about the island itself was changing, but a small amount of the Mists of Chaos that surrounded the island were being pulled in towards the throne. The mist gathered, condensing into an extremely bright light.

Sensing this event, the Thunderbird very quickly came back, flying out from the mists to watch. After several more moments, the force pulling on the mists lessened, then vanished, allowing the endless mists to be pushed back off the island. But that bright light stayed.

It hovered over the throne, occasionally pulsing, but otherwise not doing much else. But, the Thunderbird continued to watch with patience. That patience was rewarded, as the ball of light began to form a line of floating runes, then it curved downwards until it formed a simple runic circle. After a few more minutes, the runes finished forming, and the light died down somewhat.

The circle floated down and burned itself into the back of the throne. The Thunderbird couldn't help but laugh when he read what it said.

'I am Leon Raime, son of Artorias and Serana, descendant of the Thunderbird and future King of the Heavens!'

**[HAHAHA! YES! I would expect nothing less!]** The Thunderbird's eyes narrowed in approval, and it beat its wings in happiness. This Mana Glyph was far simpler than the vast majority, but it perfectly represented Leon. Leon himself had no desire for opulence and luxury, but he wanted to find his mother and avenge his father, but to do those he would need strength. He knew he was far too weak right now and only by aiming for the absolute peak would Leon find the power he needed, even if he couldn't even fathom what that meant right now.

But, he would. The Thunderbird couldn't do much more than what it had already done, but it knew that it only had to be patient for Leon to gain the power to come here himself. At that time, the Thunderbird felt it would be much more willing to speak with its descendant than it was when they first met during Leon's bloodline awakening.

So, it was with an elated heart that the Thunderbird flew back into the mists, confident that it had its first proper successor since the old Storm King died, over eighty thousand years ago.

As for Leon, he took one last look at the cairn, then he turned around and descended into the tunnel, leaving the fort behind.

—

The Thunderbird wasn't the only being that had been closely watching over Leon these past few days. On an island at the center of the sea that lay at the heart of Aeterna thousands of miles to the south, was an immense stone tower. At the very top of this tower sat a man. There was a look of profound surprise in his eyes after he saw Leon slice open Artorias' chest and leave the golden Heartwood seed.

"Well, this boy is just full of surprises, isn't he..."

### **Chapter 37: West**

"What kind of surprises, Master?" asked the apprentice at the top of the stone tower.

"Well, I never would have guessed that he'd know the proper method of burying someone with a Heartwood seed. I'd thought records of that particular ritual had long been forgotten on this plane, unless..."

The Apprentice waited a moment for his Master to continue, but the Master remained silent. Just when the Apprentice was about to ask what the Master meant by 'unless', the Master said, "Oh well! No use speculating about it now! I'll keep an eye on the boy and if I see anything too concerning, I'll act on it.

The Apprentice respectfully bowed, then disappeared back into the tower. The Master took one last look back north before following.

*'That Old Hawk isn't speaking to him, is he? That would be the most surprising thing of all...'*

—

The tunnel leading out of the fort had been flooded when Timotheos' team attempted to sneak through, but it had drained in the days since. Of course, that didn't fix the shattered stone walls, which had begun to sag and were clearly close to collapse.

Leon hurried through, but not so fast that he didn't close and lock the inner door. The outer door was still battered and broken from Timotheos breaking out, but Leon didn't bother fixing it, as he had no time, and it hardly mattered now anyway.

He bolted out of the tunnel and kept up his pace as he vanished into the tree line. There was no time to lose, he had to make it to the pass by sundown, or he'd almost certainly be caught and killed by ice wraiths.

First was to go north. The Divine Scar lay between him and the pass, and there was no way he was going to climb down that thing. Leon blazed past the trees and underbrush of the forest, slowing down only to adjust his pack and keep his sword tight around his waist. The bright and vibrant colors of the forest held no interest for him, and he was in too much of a hurry to appreciate them even if they did.

But, before he made it far enough north to pass the Divine Scar, he did come to a full stop once. There was a beast in his way, an enormous monster with pitch black fur and claws like the sharpest of knives: a black-iron bear.

Leon wasn't being subtle as he hurtled through the forest, and the bear noticed him before Leon noticed it. Had this been a week prior, Leon might've relished the opportunity to test himself against such a foe, but now, he just wanted to get out of the vale.

The bear was busy feasting on a large deer, but it raised its bloody snout and glared at Leon with its tiny red eyes. There was a brief moment of silence where the two just stared at each other, waiting for the other to make the first move. The bear broke that silence by shambling a few steps towards Leon, pushing itself onto its hind legs making itself almost fifteen feet tall, and gave a roar loud enough to startle smaller animals half a mile away.

Leon took the hint and bolted. He turned east and sprinted off deeper into the forest, while the bear turned back to its kill.

After that mercifully brief encounter, Leon didn't run into another living thing on his journey. He was making a ton of noise, and anything he might've seen had noticed him first and gave him a wide berth.

After heading into the trees for several hundred feet, Leon turned back to the north, until he judged that he had gone far enough, and swung back around to the west.

He glanced up. He was making great time; it wasn't even noon yet. When he and Artorias usually made this journey, they went at a much more leisurely pace, but on the other hand, something like the black-iron bear might've sensed Artorias' radiant aura and cleared out before laying eyes on the two men.

That being said, Leon was still pleased with his progress. But, he didn't slow down. He was a little hungry and getting a little tired, but just the thought of the ice wraiths kept him moving.

All this time, he was thinking. He wanted to find out who those men who attacked him were and why they attacked his home, and the best place to start was with Roland, to question him about that man-at-arms he'd recognized. The problem with that was that if Roland were his enemy, then he would probably be crushed as soon as they met. He was only a third-tier mage, after all, while Roland was at the late sixth-tier.

Leon still had some doubts as to whether Roland was involved, but he decided not to seek out the paladin for now, at least until he could look the man in the eye as an equal.

So then, his objective was to seek power first, and only then would he pursue answers. There were a few possibilities in that respect. Artorias had often spoken about the gladiator fights in the southern arenas, which might be one way for Leon to train and gain strength. The thing that gave Leon pause about that was the style. He wasn't too comfortable with fame and attention, so he decided against that for now.

He could sign on with a magical guild. They might be willing to finance his training, but they could also expect quite a bit of work out of him in return. There were few guilds that wouldn't accept a sixteen-year-old third-tier mage, but Leon knew that his gains would be minor until he had spent a good deal of time with the guild and built up plenty of trust. This would tie him down to the guild, and wouldn't give him enough time or authority for him to find out who sent those men.

This left his last option: joining the Knight Academy. He was still young enough to join, and more than strong enough already to graduate. If he were to be knighted by the Bull Kingdom, he could relatively easily gain the strength and influence he needed to investigate his enemies and pursue his revenge.

Leon smiled in anticipation as he ran through the forest. His father had told him enough stories and made him read enough books that Leon had always fantasized about being a knight, especially when he was a child. Now, he might just make good on those fantasies.

No, he decided that he would make good on them. Leon just had to think about the possibility and he was already sold on the idea. He would go south and sign up at the Knight Academy.

With his short-term goal decided on, Leon became excited and picked up the pace.

Fortunately, he arrived at the mountain pass with no difficulties and time to spare. The sun was still well above the mountains, but Leon's muscles were starting to give out. Leon released some of his stored magic out from his heart, turning it into mana, and allowed it to feed his muscles, relieving his fatigue. He walked a good ways into the pass, finding the same place that he'd stayed with the knights when they had passed through, and laid down.

Here, with the mountains surrounding him, the sun had already set, but there was no danger that creatures of the vale would venture out into the pass. So, after a quick meal, Leon fell asleep.

The pass was still dark when he awoke, but the sky was already turning blue. He didn't screw around, wolfing down a few pieces of bread and dried meat for breakfast, then immediately taking off.

This leg of the journey wound up being quite uneventful. It was just a straight shot west and following the first road he encountered north-west all the way to Vale Town.

Just like last time, word was brought back to the longhouse when he was spotted by the warriors on watch. There was some confusion as to why he was back so soon, and why Artorias wasn't with him, but Torfinn loved Leon like his own nephew and prepared for his arrival.

Sure enough, Leon walked through his doors just in time for an early dinner.

"Little Lion! Welcome! Come on in, you have great timing, we were just getting ready for dinner!" Torfinn clapped Leon on the shoulder and led him to his table. The merchants and other warriors in the longhouse shouted and raised their mugs and mead horns in welcome, as well.

Everyone here was fairly familiar with Leon's behavior, so his lack of expression or speech as he followed Torfinn didn't strike any of them as odd. Torfinn himself was his usual jolly self and didn't pay enough attention to Leon to realize anything, either.

When they had sat down, Torfinn waved over some servants and had them bring Leon some food and mead.

"So, what brings you so far away from home?" Torfinn asked good-naturedly.

Leon barely touched the food brought to him. He just looked back at Torfinn's face, flushed from the mead he'd been drinking, and said in a deadpan manner, "My father is dead." Silence broke out over the entire hall, as despite a few other conversations happening, Leon's statement still shocked everyone present.

Torfinn froze as well. "What?" he asked quietly. Leon's expression didn't change, and Torfinn quickly realized that he was being deadly serious, that Artorias was truly no longer in the land of the living. "Wha... What happened?" he asked Leon incredulously.

"Five men attacked us a few days ago. Dad killed them, but they stabbed him with a poisoned dagger. Tried to heal him, but he..." Leon trailed off there, and his gaze drifted to the floor.

A battle between anger and sadness erupted on Torfinn's face, but he still placed a slightly shaking hand on Leon's shoulder and said, "Little Lion, you..." Torfinn paused to choke back some tears, then continued. "You are always welcome in my hall. Before... Before we continue, why don't you get some food in you?" Torfinn gestured to the roasted chicken, baked potatoes, and freshly baked bread in front of Leon.

The younger man nodded and slowly began picking at his dinner.

Silence continued to reign in the hall, while Leon ate and Torfinn processed this information. Artorias was his best friend, a man who came to his aid when the Red Crow Tribe was ravaging his lands, a man who was like a brother to him. But, Torfinn was ultimately a fifth-tier mage who was quite used to death, so he managed to control his grief. He knew he'd be spending this night in the nearby sky temple, praying for the Thunderbirds to guide his brother to the Sky Mother.

Leon didn't attack his food with his usual gusto, but he was still finished quite quickly, as Torfinn was still lost in thought. He politely gave Torfinn some time, and after a few more minutes, the chief turned back to Leon.

"So, what's your plan now, Little Lion?"

"Going south. I intend to join the Knight Academy. I'm too weak to seek answers or revenge right now and enrolling in the Knight Academy sounds like a good way to gain strength. I'll need that strength if I want to find whoever sent those men and cut them in half." Leon said in an even tone, though his voice turned very hateful by the end.

"You know, you could always stay here, there isn't a man among my warriors who would ever sell you out to some southern bastard who comes north."

"I know. Still, have to go. Won't get revenge if I don't." Despite the simplicity of his replies, Torfinn could see the determination in Leon's eyes. He wasn't going to convince him to stay, he recognized that look from Artorias whenever he made up his mind to do something.

"When do you plan on leaving? You could wait a little while, many of our merchants are preparing to go south to sell their silkgrass in anticipation of our alliance with the Bulls being renewed, and you could accompany them."

"I want to leave tomorrow. And I'd rather travel alone. I don't know those merchants, I don't want to travel at their pace, and I don't want to go through Clear Ice Fortress. But, I'd... like to ask for your help with supplies."

"Of course! You are my brother's son, how could I not? But, how do you plan on crossing the Frozen Mountains if not by going past Clear Ice?" Torfinn waved as he waited for an answer, and another servant hurried up. "Just tell him how much food you need, and he'll see that you get it by morning."

"Thank you," Leon said curtly. He spoke a few words to the servant and turned back to an expectant Torfinn. "I know a hidden path through the mountains. My father and I took it a few years ago to visit the Great Plateau."

Torfinn nodded, with a slightly more relieved expression. If Leon was familiar with the path, and if it was one that Artorias had shown him, then that was enough. With all that said, he threw his arm around Leon in a fatherly manner.

"Little Lion, you will always be welcome in my hall. Should you ever need anything, remember that you have friends in the Brown Bears. Now, let's drink to the memory of the Wraith-Killer, and celebrate his life!" Torfinn raised his mead.

All the others in the longhouse somberly raised their cups to join their chief, and Leon followed suit. None were particularly in the mood for celebration, as Artorias had always been a friend to their people, but the Brown Bears weren't given to mourning in public, so they drank. It would be a quiet few weeks in the longhouse after this, for sure.

Leon, for his part, didn't partake in the drinking very much. After less than an hour, he excused himself and went to bed. Just as Torfinn promised, when he woke up, enough food had been brought to him to

last almost two weeks. It was so much, in fact, that he had some trouble fitting it all into his pack. But, after almost half an hour, he finally had everything packed and ready to go.

He met Torfinn as he left the longhouse, thanked him for his hospitality, and continued on his journey south.

### **Chapter 38: The Prison In The Mountains I**

Leon departed from Vale Town early in the morning. Torfinn watched as the young man quickly walked out of the longhouse and down the hill, and hoped he would be alright. He didn't have any specifics, but he knew that without Artorias, Leon no longer had any family to rely upon. He was very tempted to accompany Leon, to make sure his best friend's son was safe, but he had a tribe of thousands to look after, and he couldn't just leave them.

Leon much preferred going off on his own, though, as his time in the Forest of Black and White had made him someone who wasn't very comfortable around other people.

So, down that hill he went, through the streets, past the merchants haggling over the silkgrass they were gathering to bring south, and straight out of Vale Town.

After a few hours had passed, and he had put some good distance between himself and Vale Town, Leon pulled out his map. Five years ago, Artorias had taken him south through a cave system that ran straight through the Frozen Mountains, connecting the Great Plateau to this vale. He did have maps that gave him three other choices, including going through Clear Ice, but this was the route that Leon planned to take, as it was the one he was most familiar with.

His route had him following the road south for several more hours, turning eastward as he entered the forest that surrounded the central plain.

He made camp as the sun fell and kept going the following morning. He guessed that it might take the rest of the day to make it to the mountains, and maybe another to find the right cave entrance. The mountains in that area were absolutely pockmarked with caves, but he was confident that he would remember the correct one.

Things went about as expected, with Leon arriving at the foot of the mountains by nightfall. The next day, he began his search. The environment was rocky and very uninviting, as the forest ended hundreds of feet from the base of the mountains.

There was one mountain in particular that he remembered climbing five years ago, so that's the one he made for. The ground was broken and rather unstable, with small rocks frequently sliding out from under his feet as he made his way up. There were a few caves on the way up, but he didn't stop. Those were far too big for them to be the entrance he sought.

He didn't need to go too far up, only about a quarter mile, an easy task for a third-tier mage. The slope became steeper as he ascended, eventually requiring him to climb with hands and feet, and he slowed considerably. But, not long after midday, he finally located his cave.

It was about a hundred feet up a sheer stone cliff, with very few handholds, but ending in what could only be described as a large platform about as large as the platform he was on when he awoke his bloodline just at the mouth of the cave.

This was the part Leon was most worried about because when they had gotten to this point last time, the then sixth-tier Artorias had decided to pick Leon up and jump straight to the platform. Without his father there, Leon was forced to make the climb.

As he was a third-tier mage, Leon was able to jump about thirty feet. He attempted to display this ability, but the boulder he was standing on rolled out from under him. Leon floundered in the air, just barely grabbing onto a rocky protrusion about fifteen feet up and preventing him falling back down.

The boulder rolled back down the mountain, disturbing other rocks and boulders and causing them to fall. Leon grit his teeth as he watched this cascade into a small avalanche, crashing down into the forest with a deafening roar.

Leon took a deep breath and turned his eyes back skyward. It was a hard climb, with handholds he reached out for giving out under his weight twice. But, after about a quarter of an hour, Leon pulled himself over the edge of the platform and found himself at the mouth of the cave.

Taking a few minutes to rest, Leon walked confidently into the cave. The entrance wasn't that big, only just big enough for Leon to enter without tucking in his extremities.

The air grew colder as he advanced. It was nice and warm out in the sun, but that heat died out not too far from the cave entrance. Leon continued on despite the chill, tightening his coat without missing a step.

The heat wasn't the only thing that disappeared the further in he went, with the light vanishing soon after. This didn't affect Leon all that much, as he could channel enough mana to his eyes that he could see. His vision wasn't as clear as it would be outside, but he wasn't stumbling around blind.

The tunnel grew larger further in, to the point that Leon began having trouble seeing the walls and ceiling. About five hundred feet in, the floor began to gently decline, so Leon was walking down into the mountain, rather than through it.

The last time he was here, he wasn't strong enough to see. Artorias had to conjure a constant stream of lightning in his hand to use a makeshift torch so Leon wouldn't trip on any loose rocks. Leon smiled bitterly as he remembered Artorias' mostly helpful but also slightly mocking smile when Leon had finally admitted he needed the help to see.

The cold grew worse. There was frost on the walls, and even the occasional patch of ice on the floor. The ceiling had faded from view, but not too much, as Leon could see icy stalactites looming out of the darkness.

Half a mile in Leon came to a fork in the cave, with three paths ahead of him. He knew from the map that the path on his left hit a dead end several hundred feet in, while the path directly ahead of him continued down into the depths of the mountain. The path on his right was the one he wanted. It also continued further down, but would eventually even out and give him nearly a straight shot right through the Frozen Mountains. The tunnel was so straight, in fact, that Artorias had theorized that the entire cave system had been man-made.



So, down the right path he went. This tunnel was much narrower than before, like a side passage as opposed to the main hallway. The slope eventually evened out about a mile in, just as Leon knew it would.

But, Leon started to get a bad feeling as he went. This tunnel wasn't in the best of conditions when he was here last, but the walls and floors looked positively dreadful now, with innumerable cracks running throughout the stone. The air was getting colder, too, far colder than what Leon remembered. A few hundred feet later, Leon found out why.

"... Shit," he muttered, as he stared at the cave in. Large chunks of stone and ice now barred his way forward, completely blocking off the tunnel. He wasn't stupid enough to try and move some of it, as that could easily cause other cave-ins, but there wasn't much else to do.

He pulled out the map again. There wasn't any other way through marked on it, and if he wanted to find another way through the Frozen Mountains without going past Clear Ice Fortress, he would need to go all the way back to the ruins of the fort in the Forest of Black and White and unearth the other buried maps.

Leon walked back a comfortable distance from the cave in, and sat down, leaning against the wall. He scoured the map, looking for anything. Nothing jumped out at him, so he pulled out his map of the Great Plateau, to see if there was anything there that could help. All he saw on there was Clear Ice.

He sighed. There was no way he was getting through here. The cave in obviously showcased this tunnel's structural instability, and he had no idea how far down the cave in went. He was far too weak to just go through the Frozen Mountains on his own, there were a great many monsters of snow and ice that would just love to devour a warm-blooded young man, assuming he didn't just freeze first.

Leon looked back at the map again. He didn't see anything obvious, but something did catch his eye. Back at the fork in the tunnel, there was another path that led deeper into the mountains than the one he took. His map didn't show where that path went; it just stopped. There was a very old rune next to it and a messily written note next to that. The note simply said what he already knew, that the tunnel led deep into the mountain. But that rune, he knew that was something else.

Near the exit on the other side of the Frozen Mountains was another fork in the tunnel, but that only had two available paths. One led to the exit, and out of the tunnel, but the other was the same as the tunnel on this side. It clearly descended into the mountain and ended with the same rune.

Leon struggled to remember the meaning of this particular rune. Artorias had made him study runes, especially since Leon had an interest in enchantments, but it was mostly the modern runes that he studied.

Modern runes are similar to an alphabet, with only several dozen runes in total, but each rune having a corresponding sound that can string together in various patterns to form 'words', which are better described as glyphs. These glyphs are utterly incomprehensible to anyone unfamiliar with the language of enchantments, but those who practice the enchanting arts can even speak these glyphs out loud. In fact, most of the written alphabets in Aeterna were based at least partially on these runes.

On the other hand, much older runes—like the one seen on this map—represent ideas or concepts rather than sounds. As a result, these runes could be far more powerful when used for enchantments,

but also far more limited. They could be identified by their distinctive series of wedge-shaped scratches and bore little resemblance to modern runes and letters.

For example, the enchantment placed upon the training sword Leon used to spar with Artorias that glowed in accordance with the magic Leon channeled into it was made with the newer, more common runes. There are several different runic glyphs that can make that particular enchantment, not unlike using multiple spellings for the same word. To do the same thing with ancient runes would require a specific rune, and if that rune wasn't known, then the enchanter is out of luck.

With all that in mind, it makes sense that Leon couldn't remember every single ancient rune he'd seen in Artorias' textbooks, but the one he saw on his map was certainly very familiar. He'd seen it before, he knew it.

He sat and pondered it for a while. He figured that the implication here was that these tunnels both went down into the mountain towards the same place, which could potentially mean a way through, bypassing this cave in.

Leon wasn't that eager to go down there, however, as he still couldn't remember what the rune meant. It wasn't 'death', he knew that one. It wasn't any of the seven elements of magic, as he knew all those as well.

He stood back up. There was little point in staying here, and he was getting a little cold despite his coat, so he started walking back to the tunnel fork, where it was warmer.

But what was that rune? Leon could just kick himself for not bringing along his book with ancient enchantments, but he had left it in the sealed box he had buried, alongside those other maps.

Leon glanced down at the map again, examining the rune again.

*'Box? No, that's not it. Locked, I think, something to do with locks. Box and lock. Lock and box. Safe? Vault?'* He mulled it over for a few minutes until it finally struck him like lightning.

Prison. The rune meant prison. But, a prison for what, he wondered.

## **Chapter 39: The Prison in the Mountains II**

Leon walked all the way back to the fork in the tunnel. His route forward was blocked and going all the way back wasn't an option. The only way was to continue further down into the mountains, towards this 'Prison'.

He hesitated for a moment, thinking that maybe going through Clear Ice Fortress wasn't that bad of an idea after all. But, he stomped down those thoughts. Clear Ice is the only way through the Frozen Mountains that is commonly known, and those men who killed his father would've had to come through it. They might have friends waiting for them to return, perhaps even the paladin Roland.

Leon wasn't going to take the risk of going south by the common path. Yes, going the road less traveled was far safer. Or at least, that's what he kept telling himself as he took a step down this tunnel, going deeper into the mountain range.

The entrance to these tunnels was very narrow, just big enough for Leon to enter without squeezing, but it grew larger as it descended. The collapsed passageway, however, hadn't followed this trend. It was of

uniform size for several dozen miles, all the way to where it joined the exit tunnel. But Leon noticed that this passage he was now walking down did continue getting larger.

His limited ability to see put him on edge. The edges of the tunnel faded out into the gloom, and he had long since lost sight of the ceiling.

Living in the Forest of Black and White had given Leon some backbone; he didn't run away easily when anxious. But this tunnel was certainly making it difficult to stick to that record, as its oppressive silence and lack of light were getting to him. His eyes darted around, his heart beat like crazy, and the only thing he could hear was the blood rushing through his head and his footsteps echoing in the immense hall.

Eventually, it grew so dark that Leon began walking alongside one of the walls, so he wouldn't get lost in this gargantuan passage. He could barely make out what was on the map, but the map only followed this tunnel for several miles before ending with the Prison rune anyways. After about an hour of careful walking, Leon had gone past the last point marked on the map, but the tunnel continued going deeper and deeper into the earth.

He did eventually start to calm down, but as his heart rate slowed, he stumbled. He couldn't even see the floor in front of him, even with mana constantly supplying his eyes with magic power, and the floor had suddenly evened out. He had expected the gentle ramp to continue, but when his feet hit flat ground sooner than expected, he almost lost his balance.

With the more even tunnel floor, Leon's anxiety deepened. He figured he was probably close to whatever this 'Prison' was.

The temperature grew warmer as he kept moving. As a third-tier mage, he went largely unaffected by more extreme temperatures, but after another half mile or so, he had to stop and take off his coat.

A few minutes after getting going again, Leon noticed his surroundings getting a little brighter. A very dim light was being emitted from what looked to be a wall a few hundred feet onwards.

He could just barely see that embedded in this wall was a narrow trapezoidal plate about twice as tall as he was. Set in the middle of this plate was the source of the dim light, a softly glowing red runic circle.

Leon closely examined the runic circle and quickly determined that it was meant to open something. Judging by its placement, Leon figured the metal plate was a door and would be opened by the runic circle. There was nothing else around that he could see, just the same smooth stone of the tunnel.

Seeing nothing else he could do other than turn around and leave, Leon hesitantly placed his hand against the runic circle.

There was a bright flash that left Leon blinded for a moment. He quickly jumped backward, straining with his ears to hear anything, but there was nothing to be heard. The tunnel was still as silent as ever, and when his eyes recovered, he noticed that the plate had disappeared. In its place was another tunnel, this one more obviously artificial as it was made entirely of the same shiny grey metal as the plate.

This passageway had the same trapezoid shape as the plate, with the ceiling and floor being parallel, but the floor was slightly wider than the ceiling. Leon could sense an incredible amount of magic power

flowing through the walls. This Prison clearly had a great many enchantments worked into its foundations.

It was a little brighter in the passageway, but not so much that Leon lowered his guard. He was comforted by being able to see the walls again, though.

He took a deep breath and stepped through the open door. He regretted it immediately, as he looked back after a few steps and found that the door had silently reappeared behind him.

Leon's heart sank, and he began searching the door for some way to open it from the inside. Not finding anything, he took to trying to force the door open, but to no avail. His measly third-tier strength didn't even make a dent in the metal plate, not even when he drew his family's longsword and took a few swings in desperation. Fortunately, the sword was completely unblemished, but so too was the door.

Leon sighed and sat down by the door. He needed a moment to collect himself, not to mention he was very hungry and tired.

He had a quick meal while watching the door. There were no runic circles on the inside, and none appeared while he was waiting, which only made Leon start to panic.

He forced himself to calm down, slowing his breathing and closing his eyes. He crossed his legs and began to meditate. For the first time, Leon stopped concentrating on the door and focused on the magic in this place. He was startled, there was an enormous amount of magic flowing through the walls of this passageway, far more than he had initially sensed when the door had opened.

He meditated for a few more minutes to finish bringing his heart rate back down, then stood up. The magic he sensed was flowing like a river deeper into this prison. The door wasn't going to budge, and if there was going to be any way out, he would only find it by going further in.

Leon was far more on edge here than he was in the cave tunnel. This passageway was brighter, and he could see much farther, but he was also trapped in here.

He suspected there was some kind of sound dampening enchantment in the walls because, despite the smoothness of the walls and floor, his footsteps didn't echo. The passageway was dead silent, and this silence weighed down on him, pushing him further into paranoia.

This passageway wasn't nearly as long as the cave tunnels, ending in another door after only a quarter of a mile. Unlike the door at the entrance, this one was clearly not in any working order. There was no runic circle to open it, but the right half had been ripped and torn outwards like some imprisoned beast had forced its way to freedom.

Leon hopped through this twisted hole and found himself in an empty atrium of sorts, that led into two more long passageways on his left and right. The halls still retained their trapezoidal shape but also had numerous other doors on the sides.

There was little indication of where he should go from here, but the magic he sensed was flowing to the right, so that's the way Leon went. Along the way, he poked his head into a few of these other doors, as fortunately they still had functioning runic circles. A few were locked, but those he could enter were largely empty. There were one or two that had grey metal boxes strewn haphazardly around, but they

held nothing within. Most of these rooms had a bathroom as well, and Leon found the water enchantments in the toilets and baths still functional after a little experimentation.

Leon frowned. This 'prison' didn't seem particularly prisonlike, with homelike amenities that still worked.

*'Why is this place so abandoned? Could it have to do with the giant hole in that door? If this was a prison, did whatever the builders were guarding escape?'*

But speculation wasn't going to get him very far. There weren't any books or other writings that could give a clue, so he simply pressed on.

After about five hundred feet, the passageway forked again, this time giving him three options to choose from. Again, Leon calmed himself and felt the way the magic in the place was flowing. It was going down the left passage, so that was the way he went.

This hallway ended in another door, this one locked up tight. There was a runic circle to open it, but it didn't respond to Leon's attempts to activate it. He spent another half an hour there, trying to open the door. All the magic he could sense was being funneled through it, so he knew that there was something important behind the door.

He sighed. He was very tired now. It was probably around midnight, but being so far underground, he could only guess at the time.

Leon turned around and walked away from the door. He needed rest, and he began searching through the multitude of other halls and doors, looking for someplace decent to catch a few hours of sleep.

He quickly found that this place wasn't laid out in any way that made sense. The halls and rooms kept looping back into one another, creating a maze that he very quickly got lost in. There were even a few times where he intended to walk in a circle, taking five rights or lefts, and finding himself far away from where he intended. Needless to say, he quickly became lost. The only thing he could sense that anchored himself was the flow of magic, constantly surging through the walls and back towards that locked door.

Finally, after perhaps an hour or so of wandering through the empty halls, Leon found a large ornate door, covered in a golden mural with a golden bird set in the very middle. The runic circle to open the door was placed directly below the bird as if clutched in its talons as it spread its wings to take flight.

Leon opened this door and found a vastly different hallway. Where he had previously only found empty and unadorned rooms, likely living quarters, meeting rooms, and lounges before they were cleared out, he now found someplace that wasn't empty. A purple carpet covered the floor, so thick Leon almost bounced off. The bottom corners of the hallway burned with a bright white flame, illuminating the entire place, and nearly blinding Leon until he hurriedly stopped channeling magic into his eyes. This white light from the flame hit the enchanted angled walls in such a way as to form pictures of light, hovering just off the walls. These pictures depicted valiant warriors, triumphant kings, great cities, and radiant gods, all so real Leon almost thought they weren't just enchanted projections.

Leon took a minute to marvel at the scene before him, but eventually, he noticed the only other door in the hall, down at the other end. He quickly came over and opened it, revealing a splendidly decorated

room, with the same light decorations as the hall, and with the furniture still present. Immaculate couches, chairs, tables, a desk, several display cases, and in the very center of the room, a luxurious bed that Leon wanted nothing more than to collapse into.

The only thing that stopped him from doing so was the chair directly behind the desk over in the corner of the room, and the skeleton that still sat on it. The skeleton was slumped down far enough that Leon didn't notice it at first, but once he did, he froze for a second, then walked over to it.

Given the state of the room, Leon guessed that this was the skeleton of the person in charge of this 'prison'. He had to admit, though, that he was starting to doubt his translation of the rune, as he hadn't found anything that resembled prison cells, so far.

He gently moved the chair, inspecting the skeleton and desk for any clues as to what happened here. And find something he did, in the form of a small rolled-up scroll in the bony hand of the skeleton. After carefully extracting it, Leon unfurled the scroll.

*The Kingdom has suffered a great catastrophe. The exalted Storm King has fallen, or so the reports indicate, and so all the warriors we brought with us to this plane have been recalled by the Princes, to seek vengeance. We have also been specifically ordered to end the experiment, but our guests cannot be released and expected to accept a simple apology. My warriors will go to our Princes, but I will stay, to maintain the wards. We can ill afford to add to our list of enemies in this moment of crisis.*

There was nothing more. Leon frowned, most of what was written he didn't understand, but he knew that he guessed right, and this person was the one in charge. The rest he would mull over in the morning after he had gotten some sleep and searched the rest of the room.

But, he had no idea that something was stirring, in the deepest levels of this place.

[Someone... has found this place...] it said.

#### **Chapter 40: The Prison in the Mountains III**

The being in the deepest reaches of the prison had been there for a great many centuries, since long before the prison had been abandoned. In fact, the prison had been built for the specific purpose of containing it and some of its brethren. The men who captured it had wanted something from it, they had wanted it so badly that they had imprisoned it in this remote place, but it had been so long that the being couldn't quite recall what they had asked it for.

Perhaps its memory would return when it had shaken off the last bits of sleep. But what had awoken it in the first place?

The being looked around in confusion. Its surroundings were no different from when it had last opened its eyes over ten thousand years ago. But it had definitely woken up for a reason, it was at least certain of that.

Several more groggy minutes passed while the thing analyzed its current situation until it finally found what had disturbed its sleep.

There was a faint clanging sound resounding throughout the room, that of a very distant sword striking against a wall, to the best of its knowledge. The sound was nearly imperceptible, so much so that almost anyone else wouldn't have heard a thing.

But this being's senses were sharp indeed, and the millennia of silence and isolation had made it very sensitive to strange noises in the complex above.

It summoned all the power it still possessed and tried to peer through the wards holding it in place. It didn't have much power left, most of it had been sapped away by its restraints, but the wards were incredibly ancient and had long since begun to fail, so its magic senses slipped past with little difficulty.

Despite this, the being couldn't help but sigh in dejection. It had truly fallen far, as everything holding it down had decayed to the point that it would have been able to easily rip and tear it all apart if it were still in its prime.

Its magic senses shot through this lowest level and began rising up, permeating the entire prison complex. It took some time, especially since the being was still so weak from its long slumber, but it eventually caught sight of Leon, following the flow of magic towards the first of the doors sealing off this level.

It didn't believe its own magic senses, at first. It had been down here so long that it no longer quite trusted itself to see the truth. Hallucinations are rarely so obvious, after all.

It watched Leon try to open the door several times, to no avail, and turn around to search the rest of the prison's living quarters. Leon poked around the meeting halls, the cleaned-out library, the still and silent living spaces. Leon was fairly thorough, stopping to check out every unlocked door he passed, but not exactly going through every deserted room with a fine-tooth comb, either.

Eventually, Leon arrived at the entrance to the prison lord's chambers. The opening of that door with the golden mural slightly altered the flow of magic within the prison. It wasn't enough for Leon to notice, but the being watching most certainly did. It was left shocked, as it finally began to entertain the possibility that Leon wasn't just a figment of its imagination.

It watched Leon closer, examining each and every wisp of magic that was emitted by the young man. It was left exhausted from the exertion, but it considered it completely worth it, as it gave it a chance to finally escape from this accursed place.

[Someone... has found this place...] it said to itself. Leon was real. It doubted its senses no longer. The strain of using its magic senses for so long and from such a distance had left it unable to communicate with Leon, but the last thing it saw before it needed to rest was Leon settling into the prison lord's bed, so it knew it had some time. It withdrew its magic senses and began to consciously build up its magic reserves, getting ready to speak with someone for the first time in dozens of millennia.

—

Leon slept wonderfully that night. The prison lord had a taste for the finer things, and his bed was something he had particularly obsessed over. It was so big that Leon almost lost himself in it and so soft that he sank down quite deep.

He had never been so comfortable in his entire life. The soft sheets, the warm covers, and especially the fluffy pillows were all things he had never once thought about. Artorias had told him so many things about the luxuries enjoyed by the rich south, but beds were never something he had spoken of, and consequently, were never something Leon had considered. After a lifetime of sleeping in forests, or on hard wooden beds with naught but a few layers of fur, this bed felt almost life-changing.

Leon slept for a long time. He badly needed the rest and despite how tense he had been the previous day, he now woke with a huge smile on his face. He really needed to get a bed like this for himself as soon as he could. That smile grew wider as he anticipated what new things he would find when he reached Teira.

His smile faltered a little when he remembered the maze he was currently trapped in, but he was confident he could find a way out.

Leon enjoyed laying there for a few more minutes, then pulled himself out of bed. There was a bath in the corner, but he was very disappointed to find the enchantments powering it were too decayed to use. He couldn't see anything he could use to cook with, either, though he figured someone important enough to have a room like this would have had servants bring him food from a separate kitchen. Thus, he could only snack on some bread and dried meat for breakfast.

Just as he finished eating and was about to continue going through the room, looking for a map of the prison or anything else useful, he froze. He felt a shiver run down his spine and it felt like something was staring through him. For a moment he hoped he was just being paranoid, but that moment passed when he heard a voice in his head.

[Hello...]

This voice was very peculiar. Far too deep to be human, and slightly resonant, like there were one or two more people who were saying the same words very quietly at the same time. One of these quieter voices sounded feminine, but the 'main' voice was quite masculine, so Leon assumed it to be male.

Leon spun around when he heard, his eyes darting around trying to find anything that might look like the thing speaking to him. Of course, he saw nothing, and the voice continued.

[It seems... you can hear me... You needn't... be afraid...] The voice seemed oddly breathless as well as if speaking wasn't something that came naturally, and it had to exert itself to form the words.

[I believe... that we can help... each other... We are both... trapped...]

Leon relaxed a little, but still kept one hand on the sword at his waist and decided to try responding.

"Who are you? Can you hear me?"

[Yes... I can... hear you... My name... is Xaphan...]

"Xaphan... ok. You said we could help each other, what did you mean?" Leon knew that this 'Xaphan' was undoubtedly much stronger than he was if he could speak directly into his mind. He didn't think he could be of much help to someone strong enough to do that, but it would still be wise to step lightly.

[We are... trapped here... together... I can't move... but I know this place... You could free me... and yourself at... the same time... with my guidance...]



“Could you... be more specific when you say ‘trapped’?” Leon still remembered that the rune used to describe this place was ‘prison’, and the skeleton in the corner had given his life to stay and maintain the enchantments in this place.

Of course, Xaphan knew this wasn’t going to be so easy. But, he also wasn’t averse to telling the truth. Or at least, he felt that lying wouldn’t do him much good in the long run.

[I am... imprisoned... here... in the lowest cells...] Leon frowned slightly when he heard this. Xaphan seemed to notice, though, and continued, [I understand... your hesitation... I would hesitate... too... in your place... So... I will offer... a token... of sincerity...]

Leon felt a slight pressure between his eyes and a very brief twinge of pain. He almost shouted in anger, but then he felt like he could see the all the rooms and hallways in the prison. This only lasted a moment, but the layout of this place stayed lodged in his mind.

[I have... given you... the map of this... place... In the very center... of the third floor... is the control room... That is where... you will want... to go...]

Again, Leon frowned. In that map given to him, he now knew where the exit was, assuming the map was correct. It seemed to be accurate, from what little he could remember of how he had gotten here, and he could presumably just leave now if that were the case. Of course, that would put him in a very awkward situation with Xaphan. But, his frown didn’t escape Xaphan’s notice this time, either.

[You can’t leave... You can see... the way out... but you can’t leave... yet... See for... yourself... I can wait... I have waited... for so long... what’s a few... more hours?]

That certainly made Leon feel guilty, but he was absolutely going to check on this exit before doing anything else. He grabbed all of his things, and very cautiously exited the room, casting one last look back at the bed as the door closed behind him.

Xaphan didn’t continue to speak as Leon made his way through the halls. Leon felt that talking was very difficult for this guy, and he was more comfortable traveling in silence, so he didn’t press it. Besides, if things turned out like Xaphan had said, they would have plenty of time to talk later.

It took a bit longer than the ‘few hours’ that Xaphan had predicted, as Leon was moving slowly and was constantly on the lookout for any potential traps, but he eventually arrived at the exit. In the process, he decided to place at least some trust in the map Xaphan had given him. It had led him to the door, after all.

Along the way, he had even learned why the halls were so confusing and seemed to loop back into each other without overlapping. This complex used spatial gateway enchantments, essentially teleportation magic, in lieu of stairs or magic lifts, and they were set into the walls so subtly that Leon hadn’t noticed when he’d walked through them. Unfortunately, with the state the complex was in, many of these gateways had ceased to function, leaving the hallways leading into them dead ends.

When Leon had concluded to the best of his ability that there were no traps waiting for him, he crept forward to examine the exit hallway. He knew that this was indeed the exit, as it was incredibly similar to the way he had used to enter the prison. The air was getting colder, returning to a more normal temperature, but Leon had adapted to the higher temperature inside the prison and shivered a little.

There was another door blocking the tunnel out and just like back at the other exit, it seemed like something had forced its way through in an effort to escape. The difference here was that there was a clean hole like something had cut a perfect circle through the doorway rather than torn through like an animal. Climbing through this hole, Leon found the piece that had been cut out still lying on the floor on the other side.

A quick jaunt down the long tunnel had Leon at an identical metal plate blocking him from leaving as the other exit. Just like the day before, Leon searched high and low for a runic circle to open the door, but again, couldn't find anything. He gave the plate a few noncommittal pushes, but it was enough for him to know that he wasn't going to get anywhere trying to force it open.

He sighed and turned around to head back inside.

"Hey Xaphan, can you hear me?" he called out.

[Yes...]

Perhaps he could find a way out on his own, but Leon decided to at least hear out what Xaphan had in mind when he'd said they could help each other.

"What's your plan?"