

Storm King 481

Chapter 481: Changing Plans

"The Northern Vales?" Elise asked for confirmation.

"Yes," Leon affirmed, his tone grim and irate. *Offended*, even. "The chances of him being anywhere else are... slim, I think. I can't think of anywhere else he and the rest of his people could be other than my childhood home."

"Maybe..." Elise responded as she leaned back in her chair, lost in thought.

It was the morning after they had arrived, and all four of Leon's party had assembled in one of Ajax's sitting rooms to decide what to do during the day. With Rhea—or a woman Valeria guessed was Rhea—in the city, they'd decided that heading to Argent Palace right now was a little too risky, even with all that they could do to mitigate those risks. Leon didn't like it, but it was what it was.

So, with the entire reason for their visit to Teira now off-limits, they had to decide what to do instead, and for Valeria at least, that decision was easy: venture north to the Vales and look for her missing father. For all that she felt betrayed and abandoned by his disappearance, she couldn't just let Leon's guess go uninvestigated.

She couldn't just abandon her father, even if she felt that he had done just that to her.

Leon had already decided to go with her. He doubted that she'd be of any help to him in the archives with this weighing down on her mind, and besides, he didn't think he had it in him to deny her this and see her either leave him or be distracted during their time in Argent Palace. So, he figured that since the palace wasn't going anywhere, it was safe to put it off for just a little while longer. They could take care of their business in the north, then visit the archives on the way back south. All told, he doubted this delay would last longer than a few weeks. Two months at the most.

On a more personal note, it had been years since he'd last seen his former home, and the more he thought about returning, the more his heart demanded that he do so, despite the dangers inherent to the Forest of Black and White. There was also that mysterious location in the east of his home Vale that he had to check out, and he now felt confident that he had the power and gear to do so in relative safety.

Plus, he was *livid* that his home seemed to have been invaded in this way. Well, it wasn't his home anymore, not since he burned it down on his way out, but the idea of allies of those who murdered his father walking around that place was something he found offensive on a deeply personal level.

So, with that decided upon, the only problem lay with Elise and Maia and what they would decide to do.

"We don't know for certain that he's there, it's only a guess," Valeria said. "But I think that if he were still in the Kingdom, then he would've reached out to me by now. He's been gone six months, he has to have run into trouble up there!"

Elise glanced at Leon. He'd told her of the dangers that lived up there, of ice wraiths and banshees, of tree sprites, river nymphs, and trolls, and of all the other things that he could think of. As beautiful as

Leon claimed it to be, she wasn't in a hurry to see it for herself, but from seeing Leon so often leave and his only recent return from war, she was loath to let him go off on his own again.

"It'll be a hard trek north," Leon said, "I'd understand if you didn't want to come with..."

"You think I'd just let you two leave here on your own?!" Elise asked, her tone almost offended and accusatory. "I know that I probably won't be able to follow you into the Forest of Black and White, but I can at least come with you to the Brown Bears Tribe!"

"No, I don't expect you to just let us leave," Leon honestly replied. "But what kind of person would I be if I just expected you to drop everything to come with? It's a long way over some of the coldest and harshest terrain on the plane. I don't want to subject you to that, but I also hate the idea of leaving you here..."

"I get it," Elise said, "It's a long way and the Vales are dangerous. But I won't be left behind again while you gallivant around the edge of the world! I'll get some Heaven's Eye guards to come with us, and I can accompany you at least partway."

Leon smiled. Truth be told, he hated the idea of leaving her behind, too. Their relationship had first started with him leaving for several months, then coming back for only a few days, then leaving again for more than a year. They'd been together for almost four years, and yet they'd only been *together* for less than two. Now that they could be together permanently and without fear of being split up by their responsibilities, he would have to tear out his own heart if he wanted to leave her behind.

Even then, judging by the fire in her eyes, he didn't think that would work.

With a quick glance at Maia, he knew that it would be pointless to try and convince her to stay behind, too, even if he were of a mind to try. All four of them were going to go north and there was little point in discussing that much any longer.

"All right, then," Leon said. "Let's get the specific logistics worked out. If Valeria is right and Rhea is desperate, then there has to be some reason for her desperation. So, I think it would be safe to assume that we're probably working on a time crunch."

"Assuming we're right in our assumptions," Valeria added with a cheeky smile.

"*Assuming* that, yes," Leon conceded, returning the smile. He glanced around at all three ladies. Maia had been rather quiet during the entire conversation, but he knew if she objected to anything, she'd make her mind known. From what he could see, they were all on the same page. "So, why don't we get started on working out what all of this is going to look like?"

It didn't take long for them to work out the logistics. Elise had already figured most of it out before they'd started seriously talking about going north—not that they needed to work much out, they weren't going to be bringing too many people.

Once they were done with that, though, Valeria had one last thing to say.

"Thank you, everyone," she said, her voice quivering with emotion, her eyes starting to glisten with unshed tears. "I know none of you have to do this for me, but it means so much that you're willing to go so far to help me."

“Don’t even think about it,” Leon said with a smile. “We’re friends, this is nothing.”

Valeria smiled as Elise then took her hands. “We’re with you, no questions asked. Even if you don’t share our bed, you’re family as far as I’m concerned.”

The two embraced, Valeria quietly starting to sob as Elise whispered more words of comfort into her ears. After a few moments of watching this, Leon’s eyes wandered over to Maia and saw that Elise’s sentiment was *not* shared in his river nymph lover.

[Got something to say?] Leon asked her, his tone soft and light, not a trace of accusation could be heard in it.

[It disturbs me how quickly this woman has been accepted,] Maia said. [You resisted me quite fiercely when we first met, yet this woman who is connected to your enemies is comforted and embraced, almost to the point of excluding us...]

[Jealous?] Leon playfully asked.

Maia responded with a glare.

Leon smirked back at her before his expression turned more serious. [She’s not just some woman we picked up on the side of the road. Elise has known her since she was little, and I’ve also known her for years. Known her longer than I’ve known you. Do you remember that she was there at the villa when you killed those vampires?]

[Was she? I confess I wasn’t paying those other humans much attention...]

Leon bitterly smiled. [Would probably do you good to change that mindset. I think that where we’re going to be ending up in the near future you won’t be powerful enough to get away with it. Anyway, I understand why Elise is acting like this, but I think that we can talk to her about this when we get back because I do agree somewhat that her need to take care of Valeria is getting a little bit excessive. I hope that, until then, we can all remain civil. And I do mean *everyone*, the two of us most of all.]

Maia shrugged and said nothing more. She pointedly didn’t look at Elise or Valeria for the rest of their conversation.

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“Hey there demon,” Leon said as he hopped off the throne in his soul realm.

“Human,” Xaphan lazily responded from his pavilion. He sounded barely attentive, as if he were in the middle of something and Leon was little more than a fleeting distraction.

“I don’t suppose you noticed that I emptied out my vault?”

Xaphan didn’t immediately respond, so Leon entered the pavilion and lay his eyes on what Xaphan was doing. Thousands of fire runes and other modifier runes had been written in the air and swirled around the fiery demon like a gentle tornado, each of them glowing a hot red-orange. However, even for all his skill in enchanting, Leon couldn’t discern even the barest hint of what the demon was actually *doing* with all those runes.

“What in the hells are you doing?” Leon asked, both amazed and mildly horrified at what he was seeing.

The demon finally turned his eyes toward the human and growled, “*Proper* enchantment. Your recent gains in power have been enough to push me closer to what you might call the ninth-tier, but it’s still proceeding excruciatingly slowly.”

“*Excruciatingly* slowly, huh?” Leon muttered as he took in all of the runes flying around the demon. “You going from third-tier power to the eighth-tier in four years is slow?”

“I’m not gaining that power, I’m *regaining* that power,” Xaphan testily replied. “There’s a world of difference.”

“Uh-huh...” Leon responded as he reluctantly tore his eyes away from the runes and made eye contact with his demonic partner. “Well, the reason I’m *disturbing* you like this is because I emptied out my vault, and so have access to some high-quality gems for enchanting. With my Mind Palace completed, I wanted to make a permanent version of that training platform thing that you used to get back to the eighth-tier...”

Xaphan’s burning yellow eyes flashed brighter and the runes floating in the air around him halted for a moment.

“... It’s about time!” the demon roared, the bright orange fires that covered his body almost exploding in intensity.

“I’m glad you’re happy, but there are a couple of caveats we’re going to have to address first,” Leon said with a predatory smile.

“Name them,” Xaphan said, barely hesitating.

“First, you’re going to have to make good on your promise to teach me your mental communication technique—no more *fucking excuses this time*—and you have to teach me everything I need to know about this enchantment rather than simply giving me the whole thing to copy. I want to know exactly how it works.”

Xaphan didn’t take long to deliberate, though he did spare a few seconds to get in a few jabs at Leon’s expense. “I would’ve figured you’d have researched it on your own, boy. Maybe you’re not as skilled in enchanting as you think you are?”

“I’ve made no claims as to my skills, and I’ve been focused more on brushing up my fundamentals than studying something that advanced,” Leon countered.

Xaphan quickly swept his fiery arm through the air, dispelling the hovering runes. Leon still wasn’t sure what they had been doing, but with the prospect of gaining a new spell that could control the Mists of Chaos to give him more power right in front of him, he controlled his curiosity.

“All right, then, settle in and let old uncle Xaphan tell you all about the powers you *wish* you had,” the demon mockingly said. Leon fought the urge to roll his eyes and held his tongue. “I think you’ve already started on learning a mental communication technique with your fish girl, so let’s go over the basics that she’s taught you...”

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“There, did you get all that?” Xaphan asked, several hours after beginning his lecture on his mental communication technique. “Or do you need me to explain all of that again and... speak... slower... with... smaller... words... so... you... can... understand...?”

“No, you ass, I got it all the first time...” Leon said with a dark expression on his face. He’d thought that since he was making progress with Maia’s communication technique, then he would be able to learn Xaphan’s and maybe combine the two, or at least have both for different situations. However, now that he knew *how* to do it, he understood why Xaphan had repeatedly told him he was too weak to use it—it required extremely fine control over his magic power and a good familiarity with magic senses.

In truth, it shared many similarities with Maia’s technique, in that it was much like magic senses that projected his voice instead of other senses. But that wasn’t even accurate, for magic senses only appeared like sight and hearing because, as Leon understood it, that was how his brain was choosing to interpret the information it received. In the case of Maia and Xaphan’s ability to speak directly into another person’s mind, things were much more complicated.

For one, he had to know someone was there to use the technique. It had to have some kind of target for him to focus on, something with an aura that he could observe, otherwise his voice wouldn’t be projected.

The second and much harder part was actually getting his magic power to pulse in the proper way. To use magic senses, he had to project his magic power and fill his spine with mana, letting his projected power resonate with the power in his spine. To use these finicky techniques, he had to have much finer control over the power in his spine so that he could pass on information rather than passively receiving it.

That in itself highlighted how easy Leon found it to communicate with Maia like this. Their soul realms were connected, and they shared a great deal of their emotions with the other already. Speaking to each other through this connection was child’s play with what they already shared. For everyone else, Leon would have to be able to get his magic power to resonate in a certain way with theirs, effectively spoofing their magic senses so that they could hear his voice.

After several hours of trying, Leon was left frustrated and jealous that river nymphs and demons apparently found this so easy to do. Then again, Maia was more than a hundred and seventy years old and Xaphan was at least half a million, so he took some small comfort in the fact that they’d had much more time to practice communicating in this way.

It also gave him some ideas about spying on other people if he could get his power to resonate with their projected magic senses, or even feeding them false information. He wondered if that was even possible, receiving the information from someone else’s magic senses as if they were his own or making them see or hear things that weren’t there. Or making them *not* see or hear things that *were* there.

‘Or maybe I could just learn some shadow magic, that seems much less complicated than this,’ he sarcastically thought.

But Leon didn’t get much time to think about, for a moment later, Xaphan launched into an explanation of his enchanting array that would accumulate the Mists of Chaos and help them to be absorbed. He didn’t get very far before the Thunderbird finally deigned to show herself, however.

She came tearing out of the Mists as Xaphan conjured light projections of the necessary glyphs, all hovering around him in their proper places. The spots for the gems that would contain and refine the power of the Mists were clearly shown.

“What are you two doing?” the Thunderbird demanded to know as she assumed her human form and strode into the pavilion.

“Teaching,” Xaphan flippantly replied.

“You’re hardly a qualified teacher,” the Thunderbird said as she turned her gaze to the hovering projections. “This is too strong. It must be weakened if you don’t want the gems you have to shatter.”

“It needs to be strong or else it’ll be useless!” Xaphan protested. “Gems are as common as fleas on a dog’s ass! If they break, just replace them!”

“That sounds expensive...” Leon said, shuddering at the thought of having to constantly buy and break the stones.

“Oh for the...” Xaphan exasperatedly began. “Look, I get that you’re now part dragon or whatever, but you have to use what you have! Otherwise, why have it?!”

“In case I want to use that stuff for other things,” Leon said. “If there’s a better way to use these gems without destroying them every time, then I want to know what they are.”

“Don’t listen to this noisy campfire,” the Thunderbird said, turning her attention to Leon. “Use this enchantment instead, it’s much better for your purposes.” She snapped her fingers, conjuring another light projection in the air, showing a similar, though much simpler enchantment than the one that Xaphan was showing off.

“Fine. Fine,” the demon replied, letting his own projection drop. “If you want to use that weak baby shit, I won’t stop you. Just don’t come crying to me when you want some *real* enchantments that’ll put some embers on your chest!”

Ignoring the demon’s grumblings, the Thunderbird said to Leon, “I’d say it’s time to resume your training. It’s been too long, we need to keep you limber and in the best condition that you could possibly be in. What do you say?”

Leon glanced at her, at the blatantly not-looking-at-them Xaphan, and then at the enchantment still floating in the air. He thought about the lies that the Thunderbird had told him, and of the dangers that he still faced.

“Promise me that you’ll never lie to me again,” Leon said, his tone as serious as it could be.

“I will never lie to you again, of that you have my undying word,” the Thunderbird unhesitatingly replied. “I burned that bridge with the Great Black Dragon. It might make your life a little harder if it decides to tell the rest of his Clan about you, but my first responsibility is to you, not to him and his desire to disown you. He was the one thing I ever lied to you about, nothing else will I conceal from you. I also apologize for my earlier deception. You have a right to know about your own heritage and the capabilities you may have inherited from it.”

Leon nodded, his eyes drifting to the edge of his Mind Palace far out in the distance. If the Great Black Dragon was out there... well, it hardly mattered to him right now. It wasn't like he could call upon that power at will, no matter how hard he tried—and he *had* tried, and quite a few times, at that.

There wasn't much reason for him to be bitter, it wasn't like anything was being actively taken away from him since as far as he was concerned, he never had that fire in the first place. Far better to resume his training with the Thunderbird and be that much more prepared for whatever might be to come, especially since his confrontation with Justin and his return to his childhood home was on the horizon.

"All right," Leon said. "I'd like to resume training, if you'd be willing."

The Thunderbird smiled. "Let's get to it, then. Let's start with enchanting, and this enchantment in particular..."

Chapter 482: The Brown Bears

"Last chance for anyone to turn around," Leon said as the doors to Clear Ice Fortress began to open, the great steel slabs moving excruciatingly slowly.

At his side was Elise and Valeria riding Anzu, while Maia stood at his other side. Behind them were half a dozen Heaven's Eye guardsmen of at least fourth-tier power and one negotiator. Elise decided that if she were going all the way to the Northern Vales, then she might as well make use of Leon's connections to secure some trade deals with the Brown Bear Tribe for silkgrass, and so had decided to bring more than just guards.

The negotiator himself was a sixth-tier mage, fairly short and bookish, but serious and humorless. He carried in his soul realm gifts for the Valemen to help ingratiate them and make their negotiations easier and had even briefly consulted Leon on what gifts might be appreciated.

"I don't think anyone's going to turn around now, love," Elise said, smiling at Leon. She was dressed all in white, her clothes thick to keep out the profound chill of the Frozen Mountains and trimmed with white fur.

In fact, everyone was dressed fairly similarly. It was going to be a hard trek north over some of the roughest and coldest terrain on the plane. Only Leon and Maia were going to be somewhat immune to the bitter cold of these mountains.

No one was particularly worried, though. At the very least, Leon's fire magic would prove its worth outside of combat.

"All right, then let's get moving," Leon said, returning Elise's smile as he led their group out through the gates and into the mountain passes of the Frozen Mountain Range.

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It was a hard march over broken ground, through caves, and even up the odd cliff or two. With Anzu and Leon being capable of flight, however, the group never strayed too far from their path, even when the cold bit at their exposed flesh and did its best to rip through their clothes.

But this was a path used by poor Valemen who traveled south to sell silkgrass for silver and other things. Leon's group was properly equipped and supported by Heaven's Eye. It only took a matter of days for

them to emerge on the other side of the mountains, cold, tired, and kind of hating life, but fully intact and none the worse for wear.

Elise even started to regret not turning back on the worst day, when they had to hurriedly find shelter during a terrible snowstorm, but she pushed on regardless. She was the happiest of them all when they finally made it down out of the mountains and into the foothills at the southern edge of the Northern Vale where the Brown Bear Tribe made its home.

Leon wasn't too far behind her in terms of joy. He'd missed the simplicity of Vale life, and just being back in a place where he could see mountains in all directions had him practically swooning. The cool, crisp Vale air, the sound of the wind rustling the leaves of the distant forests, the smell of pine and Vale flowers, even the thinner ambient magic, it all spoke of home and comfort, and he began to relax. A smile was almost omnipresent on his face as they proceeded north, only occasionally stopping to rest.

It took only two more days at their leisurely pace to reach the central plain and see Vale Town in the distance. It had hardly changed in the few years since Leon had been gone. Still a relatively small city, though only by southern standards. It was home to at least twenty-thousand people, and from what Leon could see with his magic senses, it had actually grown a little since he'd last stopped by.

"So, where are we going?" Elise asked they began to draw closer to the city's outskirts.

"We're heading for the longhouse in the center of the city," Leon said, drawing everyone's attention toward the fortified longhouse of Torfinn Ice-Eyes on a gentle hill. In the entire city, it was the only location that had stone works of any kind, with several layers of stone walls protecting the hill. Every other building in the city, including the longhouse, was made of timber.

They got more than a few strange looks as they passed the people on the street—especially Anzu and Leon—but no one stopped them. It probably helped that they weren't obviously armed or armored and that Leon was known in the area, even if he'd been gone a fairly long time.

"Interesting place..." Valeria said as they started making their way through the winding and unplanned streets of the city. "Not as interesting as I'd heard, but... *interesting*..."

"Disappointed there aren't people making blood sacrifices or fuckin' in the streets?" Leon drily asked. Those were the two most common rumors of life in the Northern Vales spread by those in the south who'd never been.

"Maybe a little," Valeria cheekily replied. "Maybe I'm just surprised everyone's leaving us alone."

"Torfinn Ice-eyes runs a tight ship, and we're strong and numerous enough that the Valemén won't go out of their way to antagonize us," Leon replied, not worried at all about the attention they were getting from the locals.

They arrived at the longhouse a little bit after noon without any trouble. Despite Leon being well-known, he and his father had never been particularly friendly with anyone outside of Torfinn and his thanes. At the very least, his lack of caution was vindicated since they weren't once challenged as he led his small group straight to the main doors of the longhouse and pushed them open.

Leon had only managed to take a single step into the longhouse before he was almost violently accosted by a great bear of a man; tremendously tall; long brown hair; a beard of legendary proportions; a

powerful body banded with corded muscle; piercing grey eyes; and the aura of a fifth-tier mage radiating from his flesh.

“Little Lion!” the man roared, his voice so deep that it was a wonder he didn’t shake the foundations of his longhouse with every word. “Welcome back!”

Torfinn—for this man could be none other than he—held Leon close, practically suffocating the younger man in the tribal chief’s bear fur cloak and layered silkgrass shirt. Leon quickly wrapped his arms around Torfinn in turn, embracing the older Valeman like an old friend. Leon wasn’t sure if that label applied to them, but he was certainly happy to see the Valeman chief again.

“It’s good to see you again, Torfinn!” Leon replied, his voice muffled as Torfinn was still holding his face in his great bear fur cloak.

“Ah!” Torfinn said as he relented a little and let Leon pull back, but he kept his hand on Leon’s shoulder like he was a favored nephew. “Come here, let me look at you,” Torfinn said as he stepped back, a smile plastered on his face that was so big that not even his enviable beard could hide it.

And as Leon’s form and aura fell more and more into his eyes, Torfinn’s eyes began to grow wide and his grip on Leon’s shoulder weakened.

“You... are looking pretty good, Little Lion,” the Valeman chief stated appreciatively. “The south must have treated you well! I mean, look at you! You’re a man, now!”

Leon smiled in embarrassment. He was a lot weaker and skinnier the last time he was here, he knew it had to be a shock for him to suddenly show back up covered in muscle and emitting an aura too powerful for Torfinn to see through.

“And you’re looking as strong as ever, I see,” Leon responded.

“HAHA! I’d have to be!” Torfinn boomed. “Our Tribe has grown considerably in the past few years! But where are my manners? Please, come in! Come in!”

The chief waved Leon’s companions inside. Leon saw that Elise was already charmed by the chief’s jovial and outgoing attitude, as was the negotiator from Heaven’s Eye. Maia and Valeria, on the other hand, seemed much less impressed.

‘Whoa...’ Torfinn gasped as Anzu tried to follow everyone inside. “Is this thing with you?” the Valeman chief asked Leon, his tone growing more serious. Leon could sense the fluctuations in his aura that indicated he was about to draw a weapon from his soul realm.

Hurriedly, Leon replied, “Yes! Yes, Anzu is my war beast!”

“Ah, all right, then,” Torfinn muttered, keeping his eye on Anzu for a few seconds longer as Leon tended to the griffin.

A few minutes later, Anzu was resting in a warm corner and everyone else had taken seats at Torfinn’s favorite table. There weren’t many other people in the hall, and Leon happened to notice that none of Torfinn’s thanes were present, either.

“So, Little Lion, please introduce everyone!” Torfinn loudly requested.

Leon smiled and took Elise's hand first. "This is Elise, my fiancée," he said with a huge smile.

"A pleasure to meet you," Elise said with a more distant but dignified smile.

"And you," Torfinn replied with a smile and nod of his own.

Next came Maia sitting on Leon's other side. He took the river nymph's hand with his free hand and said, "This is Naiad, my mate."

Torfinn blinked in surprise at the term, but he didn't question it.

"Good to meet you," he said to Maia, though the river nymph barely spared him a single look. "Lovely woman, too," he said sarcastically, a hint of steel entered his voice. He didn't take too kindly to being so disrespected in his own hall, and Leon was certain if Maia had been weaker than Torfinn or unconnected to him, she'd have been thrown out.

Leon squeezed Maia's hand and gave her a meaningful look. She sighed in exasperation but at least deigned to give Torfinn the briefest of nods, which went far enough to alleviate Torfinn's wounded pride that Leon was comfortable moving on.

"That is Valeria, my knight," Leon stated, "and the others are with a detachment sent by Heaven's Eye, a group of merchants in the south who were looking to set up some formal trade deals with the Brown Bears."

"Sounds... fine," Torfinn replied, his suspicion and reluctance only broken by a warm smile sent Valeria's way.

"And everyone, this is Torfinn Ice-Eyes, the chief of the Brown Bear Tribe and an old friend of my father's."

Torfinn's expression changed into one more suited for a proud and powerful tribal chief for a moment before coming back down to a warmer and more genuine smile and welcoming demeanor.

"If it hasn't been made clear enough, yet," Torfinn said, "please make yourselves at home here. If you're a friend of the Little Lion's, then you're a friend of mine."

Leon cringed a bit at the repeated use of his old nickname, but he didn't mind Torfinn using it. He did, however, catch Elise smirking at him out of the corner of his eye, and when he glanced at her, she had the widest smile on her face. When they made eye contact, she mouthed the words, 'Little Lion' at him.

'Well, looks like I'm never going to hear the end of that,' Leon thought.

Torfinn continued, "I don't have the room for everyone here, so Little Lion and you three ladies can sleep here. The rest of you will have to wait a little while, but I'll find somewhere for you to spend your nights."

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Dinner was a fairly raucous affair. Torfinn made sure that his guests were settled, generously fed, and given all the mead and water they wanted. He also called for a small feast to celebrate Leon's visit, and even those Valemen who didn't know Leon or hadn't known Artorias well found cause to celebrate with

Elise, Valeria, and Maia in their midst. In fact, many of the younger or brasher warriors started trying to compete for the ladies' attention, with more than a few impromptu contests of drinking, insults, or fists breaking out around them.

Fortunately, the ladies were either only mildly amused or just indifferent. Elise engaged with many of the warriors, listening when they told their stories, laughing at their jokes, and generally being a good guest. Valeria was a little more subdued—polite, but she didn't speak much. Maia barely tolerated any of the warriors looking at her, and she mostly tried to pretend that none of them existed.

If any of Torfinn's people were offended, they hid it well. They didn't all like Leon or Artorias, but they at least respected their power and their relationship with Torfinn. They weren't going to cause too much trouble for Torfinn's guests.

Because Torfinn was busy handling the feast and making sure all of his guests had places to sleep, he and Leon didn't have a chance to privately speak until that night after the feast was over and the warriors had returned to their homes. There weren't many places they could speak, though, so their private chat wound up in a corner of the hall while the ladies were getting ready to turn in for the night.

"So," Torfinn began as he and Leon sat down at a small round table, Torfinn with a horn of mead and Leon with water, "what brings you all the way back here, Little Lion? Don't get me wrong, it's good to see you back and doing all right, but it seems like you were living a good life down there. I can't imagine you'd want to return for no reason at all..."

"You don't think I just want to show my lovers where I grew up?" Leon asked with a sarcastic smile.

Torfinn chuckled and said, "I love my home, but from what your father told me about the south, the Vales aren't the kind of place that people come to for fun."

Leon smiled. "They're a real bitch to reach, that's for sure. Without silkgrass, I don't think there'd be many who'd be willing to make the journey, those mountains are just that bad."

"Mm," Torfinn hummed in agreement. He'd made the journey south and back again once before, though he hadn't ever gone further south than Clear Ice Fortress. But he still knew the discomforts and hazards of the route all too well.

Leon continued, "I guess, to make a long story short, we're looking for someone, and I have some reason to believe he went east into the Forest of Black and White."

"Why would anyone want to go into that Mother-forsaken hellhole?" Torfinn's face tightened in distaste. "If they did, they're probably dead by now."

"I know, but I have to check anyway. Might be related to my father's death."

"Made any progress on that front?" Torfinn asked with a dark look. "You know that all you need to do is say the word and I'll be there for you if you need me. Your father was my friend, too."

"I know, and I appreciate the offer." Leon's tone was nothing but genuine. Torfinn couldn't help but start smiling as he noticed all the little oddities in Leon's behavior that weren't there anymore. He was relaxed, confident, and speaking in complete sentences rather than terser fragments.

"This man you're going to find," Torfinn began as he watched Leon closely, "you're going to kill him, right? I mean, I can't imagine you would come all this way otherwise..."

"I... don't know..." Leon replied. His aura began to roil and churn and fill with killing intent, making all of Torfinn's hair stand on end. However, only a moment later, Leon composed himself. "I would *like* to kill this man, for obvious reasons. I might not, depends on how we find each other."

"Why would you not?" Torfinn asked in alarm.

"I've been led to believe he's a good man who's doing what he's doing because he's been forced," Leon explained. "I'm reserving my judgment until I meet him for myself. I would very much *like* to kill him, though. More than I think I can express. So, to tell you the truth, I'm kind of hoping he tries to kill me. Assuming he's still alive, of course, which doesn't look likely given how long he's been missing."

Torfinn nodded along, understanding that he was missing a lot of context, but not feeling like having Leon sit there and explain everything was going to pan out. "Is there anything else I can do to help right now, then?" he asked instead. He decided that it was simply better to make the offer and trust that Leon had everything in hand, even though he dearly wanted vengeance for his murdered friend. But that vengeance wasn't for him to take.

"Just keep an eye out for anyone who might be asking about me or my father," Leon replied. "There hasn't been anyone like that showing up in the past year or so, has there?"

"I couldn't say. If there has been, their questions haven't reached my ears."

"What about your thanes? Speaking of which, where are they? I haven't seen them all day..."

"They haven't been around much, so I doubt they've had to deal with any southerners lately. Asbjorn is in the west watching over the passes to the western Vales. Freyja is helping the farmers of the Greenhand Tribe with harvesting silkgrass, and Harald is keeping the peace among some of the refugees who decided to settle here rather than go home after that nasty business with Hakon Fire-Beard wrapped up."

"Ah, right," Leon replied with a smile. "Speaking of that man, you know I encountered him in the south, right?"

"What?" Torfinn's relaxed demeanor suddenly turned tense as his expression warped in alarm.

"Yeah," Leon confirmed. "I was stationed at the fort blocking his access to the Bull Kingdom. I fought him, though I hate to admit that I didn't fare all that well when we crossed blades. Hakon was eventually defeated by a Bull mage and executed."

"... Huh..." Torfinn murmured as he settled back in his chair. "Interesting... I'd not heard much of the details about his death. Then again, I'm hardly surprised. I'm glad to see that you survived, though."

"Thanks. Do you know when your thanes'll be back?" Leon asked, surprising himself by how willing he was to see them. He'd never gotten along with any of the thanes, but he'd only been back in Torfinn's longhouse for less than half a day and he already felt intoxicated by the nostalgia.

"A few weeks at the earliest, I'd say," Torfinn replied.

“Damn, not sure I’ll be staying that long.”

“Well, anytime you want to come back, don’t hesitate! You’ll always have a place in my hall!”

“Thanks, I appreciate it. Anyway, I’d like to stay here for at least another day and recover from the journey north, if that’s all right with you. I’ll be heading east either tomorrow or the day after, while Elise and the Heaven’s Eye people who came with us will want to stay here and negotiate for silkgrass. I... do hope there won’t be any *untoward* behavior from any of the Valemén towards her during her stay?”

“Ha! As if you even need to ask! If any of those milk-drinkers make any unwanted advances toward your woman, I’ll *discipline* them!”

“Thank you,” Leon said. “I doubt there’ll be any problem with Heaven’s Eye here and you keeping the peace, but I had to make sure it was said. Both Valeria and Naiad will be coming with me, so Elise is going to be left here without any of us...”

Torfinn nodded. “She’ll be fine, I give you my word. Anything you need, Little Lion, you have but to give voice to it and I’ll do what I can to help.”

“Thank you,” Leon repeated. He wasn’t sure how far that offer extended, he doubted that it was an actual blind offer of unconditional, limitless assistance, but he wasn’t going to be testing it too rigorously. He just wanted everything in place so that he could focus on what was coming next and deal with the fact that his enemies had found their way into his old home.

As he thought about the Forest of Black and White, Leon’s heart began to race. There were secrets to be seen in the old Vale, and enemies certainly abounded within. But right then, in that moment, there was nothing he wanted to see more than his old home and the grave of his father.

Chapter 483: Remnants of Home

The morning after Leon’s party arrived at Torfinn’s longhouse, it quickly became apparent to Leon that any notions of his of staying with Torfinn for longer than a night wasn’t going to work out well. They were so close to his home Vale that Valeria was on edge and terribly restless. He could hardly blame her, though, for that only meant they were incredibly close to possibly finding out more concrete information about her father’s whereabouts.

For him, it also meant seeing his childhood home once more, as well as finding whatever the hells lay in the east that was so important it made it onto the map in the Cradle.

Leon eventually decided that he’d have to proceed on to the Forest of Black and White immediately, if only to assuage everyone’s nerves. Elise was disappointed that she wasn’t going to come with, but her first priority was the supervision of the negotiations with Torfinn to trade for silkgrass—plus, the prospect of venturing deep into a wraith-infested Vale wasn’t once that Leon wanted to share with her, at least until she was also powerful enough to not need his or anyone else’s protection in such a place. So, she stayed behind with the Heaven’s Eye representatives, leaving Leon, Maia, and Valeria to continue on without her. Leon even ended up leaving Anzu with her to ensure that no matter what might happen, she’d not have to work too hard to return south, should the worst come to pass and they never came back from the Forest of Black and White.

Maia, for her part, wasn't too thrilled at leaving Elise behind, but she preferred to travel with Leon into the wild and unknown rather than staying behind in Vale Town, while Valeria was quietly ecstatic that she wasn't also being left behind, even though she did feel for her fire-haired friend.

They set out around noon. Leon set a hard pace for them to move at, which the other two were more than willing to match, and they reached the mountain pass that led to his home Vale by nightfall. There, Leon had them stop for the night. Valeria's anxiety had only grown as they drew closer, but the last thing Leon wanted was to enter the Forest and be immediately set upon by ice wraiths and their pet banshees.

When the sun rose the next morning, though, he was quick to get his small party moving again.

—

"Wow," Valeria said, wonder and awe inundating her tone despite her anxious silence of the previous day as she took in her first look at the Forest of Black and White.

Leon felt a small amount of pride as he did likewise, staring out from the hills on the far side of the mountain pass at his old home. That pride was joined by a feeling of gratification at seeing that the forest's name was still as ironic as ever, for the seemingly unnatural vibrancy of the colors of the forest was still strong. Even with most of the Vale covered by the trees, that still meant that what stretched out before them was a carpet of dark greens and pale blues, with the occasional smattering of reds, purples, yellows, and lighter greens showing the forest clearings.

In the distance, they could also see the titanic mountain upon which Leon had awakened his blood, sitting almost in the middle of the Vale with the rest of the Frozen Mountains surrounding it like an icy crown, but most past that mountain either dissolved into the gray haze of distance or was blocked by clouds or the forest canopy.

As they paused to drink in the sight, Leon eventually found his eyes drawn in two different directions. The first was obvious, that of his childhood home. The tree cover was too thick for him to directly see the clearing of purple grass where he and Artorias had once lived—it was even not too far outside the range of his magic senses—but he still knew exactly where to find it. The second direction, however, was toward the far side of the Vale. He'd never been that deep in the Vale before, but the map he'd found in the Cradle had clearly indicated that there was *something* there.

[This place... feels wrong...] Maia said into Leon's mind, pulling him out of his thoughts.

"What do you mean?" he responded, cluing Valeria into their conversation.

[It feels stifling, like it's trying to stuff my aura back into my body,] Maia replied, her face scrunching up in distaste and discomfort.

Valeria glanced at the two of them, hoping either of them would directly bring her into their conversation. Maia wasn't so accommodating, but Leon filled her in on Maia's discomfort.

"Ah, I can feel something similar, though I thought it was just the altitude or something..." Valeria said. "It doesn't seem to be a problem, though, I'm fairly sure that I can still use my magic just fine..."

Leon glanced at Maia, wondering if she felt the same. Maia only shrugged and turned her attention back to the Vale.

"All right, then," Leon said, thoroughly confused, but if Maia was so flippant about it, he figured it couldn't be that big of a deal. He certainly didn't feel the same way, and in fact, felt quite invigorated being back in the Vale. For him, it was a homecoming. He'd had to leave in the first place because he didn't believe he was strong enough to survive without Artorias, but if he had the power he had now back then, then he doubted he'd have ever left. "Keep me apprised. If you start feeling sick, let me know and we can stop for a while, or even turn back."

Valeria lightly frowned and Maia remained indifferent, but Leon didn't think either would stay quiet if whatever was affecting them grew worse. Without another word, he began to lead the two down the hills and into the forest proper. Any discomfort they had was quickly forgotten in light of the beauty of the forest. The route that Leon led them through wound through some of the less dense regions of the forest where the trees had more space between them and more of the colorful flowers and plants could be seen. Part of the reason he went this way was that it was a slightly easier path to take, but he also wanted to show off his old home a bit.

It seemed to have the intended effect, for Valeria's head was on a swivel, taking in every sight and sound that she could. Even Maia looked reasonably impressed, though she remained stoically staring ahead of them and occasionally pulsing her magic senses.

Leon was doing likewise, but other than a pack of nearby wind wolves to their south and a black-iron bear to their north, there wasn't anything around that would brave being anywhere near beings with their auras. Leon did happen to see a few of the gnarled, twisted trees that housed tree sprites, though, and he steered their group clear of those. He quite vividly remembered the last time he saw someone grabbed by one of those monsters and he wasn't keen on seeing it again. Of course, he didn't let his guard down at all, even with his magic senses. Tree sprites could be in just about any tree, they were only twisted after a long period of habitation, and besides, just because Leon knew that just because he couldn't see a threat didn't mean it wasn't there. He couldn't see hide nor hair of the ice wraiths or their banshees even with his powerful magic senses, but he knew they were out there somewhere.

"Ooh," he heard Valeria gasp from just behind him. When he turned, he saw her captivated by a bright blue flower that was slowly unfurling before her eyes. It had more than two dozen vaguely heart-shaped petals that folded in on each other and covered a golden disc petal that glowed like the sun in the sky. Even more interesting, though, was that it glowed with a detectable amount of light magic.

"I'd be careful touching that," Leon warned as Valeria's hand began to reach out for the stem, "it looks pretty and can be used in the production of healing potions, but in its unrefined state it's quite poisonous..."

Valeria grimaced and hurriedly pulled back. "Hmm. I just thought Elise would've liked it," she said.

"I think she would, too," Leon replied. "Think we should try and take it back? It could probably survive a while in one of our soul realms..."

"Is it a problem if it's poisonous?" Valeria asked, her voice dripping with apprehension.

“Not really, with our power, it would be a minor inconvenience at worst. But up here, even a minor inconvenience can get you killed.” Leon waved his hand and pulled the flower into his soul realm, along with about a foot of dirt in every direction of it. He also grabbed a few more of the same flowers that were growing nearby, just in case Elise wanted to breed them.

“This place is beautiful,” Valeria said as they turned their attention back to their journey, her mood quickly souring as she remembered why they were there. “I wish we were here under better circumstances.”

“As do I,” Leon replied, his tone turning grim. “Let’s keep moving. We’ll reach our destination soon...”

Valeria nodded, and the three shot off again deeper into the forest. They didn’t stop again for a while, not even for other gorgeous plants and flowers that Leon knew Elise would’ve killed to get her hands on. It wasn’t until they came within range of the Divine Scar that they again stopped.

The massive crevasse carved into the western regions of the Vale was nearly impossible to miss since it ran for miles and was wide enough that even at the seventh-tier, Leon wasn’t sure he could leap across its wider portions further to the south. It was quite possibly the one thing he was most looking forward to showing off, and not even the search for Justin or the prospect of seeing what had become of his old home was enough to stop him from stopping for at least a few minutes.

Besides, he hadn’t seen or heard any evidence that would support his guess that Valeria’s father had come this far north since leaving Teira. Torfinn hadn’t heard anything about Justin or his people in Vale Town, nor had Leon seen or heard any sign that Justin had passed by this way. So, despite the importance of their task, Leon found himself having to work to maintain his motivation to keep going at a swift pace as every fiber of his being screamed at him to slow down and relish the feeling of being back home, to breathe in the air and feel the trees and maybe hunt for a bit, just like he used to when he and his father were the only two humans who lived up here.

Valeria and Maia’s reactions to the Divine Scar were fairly understated. It was certainly a thing worth admiring, but neither of them paid it too much attention—it was just a canyon, after all, even if it didn’t seem entirely natural. Leon was a little disappointed, but he got them moving again only a few minutes later.

However, as they passed around the thinner northern tip of the Divine Scar, Leon felt the attention of the Thunderbird pass over him for a moment. He slowed a bit, expecting his Ancestor to speak to him, but he heard nothing but silence from his soul realm.

As quickly as it appeared, his Ancestor’s attention pulled back.

Confused, Leon shot one last glance over his shoulder at the Divine Scar as he left it behind, wondering just what in the hells had drawn the Thunderbird’s attention like that.

‘Unless she was just checking in? I suppose the easiest explanation is usually the correct one...’ Leon thought as he put the matter out of his mind and focused back on the task at hand.

They didn’t have much farther to go once past the Divine Scar. They had to turn south-east for a few miles, but even in the dense Forest of Black and White, the three mages made great time, and Leon knew exactly where to go. It wasn’t long before Leon was slowing them down for a final time.

“This is it,” he said as he brought the party to a halt in a small clearing that had a distinctive boulder poking out of the ground in the center. It was the early afternoon, they had plenty of time to give the remains of his compound a fairly in-depth investigation. “About a quarter-mile east is my old home...”

Instantly, Maia projected her magic senses eastward, but she didn’t say anything more. Leon had projected his magic senses in that direction several times to ensure that they weren’t about to walk into a trap, but other than that, he hadn’t taken a good look at his old home. The nearer he drew to it, the more nervous he got about what he might find. All he’d been able to bring himself to do was to give the remnants of the old compound the most cursory of inspections for any magical auras. He’d not been able to sense any, nor had he sensed anything that might tip him off to any measures taken to conceal anything, leading him to believe that the place was as deserted now as it had been when he’d left.

“Let’s take this slow,” he said, “we don’t know what we’ll find. First sign of danger, we’ll fall back into the forest. We’ll use this place as a meeting point if we’re separated.”

Valeria took this deadly seriously, and she gave him a stony nod. Maia, on the other hand, gave him little more than the briefest of smiles, her confidence in her power giving her complete certainty that they’d find nothing they—or at least, *she*—couldn’t handle.

Leon hoped that she was right.

Without another word, they ventured one last time into the forest, taking a much slower pace.

Leon kept his eyes open and his magic senses projected, on the lookout for anything that might signal a threat. But no threats showed themselves, nothing stood out to him, the forest seemed peaceful.

And then, finally, after more than four years, Leon caught sight of his old home with his own eyes through the trees. The grass was the same shade of vibrant purple as he remembered, the air still tasted as sweet, and the walls of the compound he’d grown up in seemed just as safe and sturdy as they’d always been.

He felt tears start to form in his eyes as the three of them pushed forward into the purple grass clearing. It almost felt like his life was flashing before his eyes, for with every step, a new memory of his childhood sprang to the forefront of his mind.

Returning home with Artorias with a fresh kill.

His father’s proud smile the first time Leon saw through a feint during their training sessions.

Artorias teaching him to shoot a bow by making wooden targets and hanging them on the trees that flanked the clearing.

The feeling of elation he had when he first ascended to the first-tier at the age of nine.

The diligence with which Artorias made sure Leon knew how to read, write, and do basic math.

The sight of his father’s corpse, his skin ashen gray, his body motionless. The incision he had to make to put the Heartwood seed into his chest. The grave he’d had to dig.

With that sobering thought, Leon refocused, and almost immediately, all of the things that made this no longer his home stood out.

The most obvious thing was that the wall he could see was the only side of the compound's palisade that was still reasonably intact. One side had been almost cut in half from an attack by one of Artorias' killers, while the other two looked like they had been torn asunder by something trying to break in, and all the inner sides of the palisade were scorched—obviously touched by the fire Leon had set when he left. As a result, Leon's small party didn't have to jump over the walls or take the tunnel to get inside, which was just as well for Leon could see that it had collapsed sometime in the years he'd been away.

Upon entering the compound proper, all romantic thoughts Leon had of returning home vanished. His home was a ruin of burned timber, little more than a few piles of scorched and broken wood and stone. It seemed that the fire enchantments failsafe's that Leon had used when he left had done more than he'd thought, rendering his childhood home little more than a pile of charcoal, even though the walls had remained largely intact.

Leon's heart sank as his mood soured. All elation he had at returning to the Forest of Black and White evaporated, leaving nothing but the cold and cruel reality of what this was. His home was gone, and it would never return. He may have modeled his Mind Palace upon it, but the simplicity and security of his time spent here were gone forever.

But then, as Leon took a few steps forward, his feet carrying him to the pile of stones in the center of the ruined compound, the remnants of the obelisk that had stood at the center and kept the compound safe through its enchantments, the cairn that Leon had built that served as his father's gravestone—which seemed to have been mercifully untouched by anything, whether time, the fire, or anything else that might've wandered through—he saw something that almost managed to release those tears in his eyes.

A sprout about as tall as his knee was sticking out of the rubble, with dark brown bark and a handful of bright golden leaves.

The sapling of a Heartwood tree.

The seed that Leon had planted within Artorias had taken root and now grew out of the earth. Leon fell to his knees, his hands reaching to brush at the leaves. But he caught himself, not letting his fingers come into contact with them. It was surrounded by death and destruction, the ashen remains of his childhood, but the sapling, glowing in the light of the afternoon sun, its leaves radiant and shining with life and vitality, was as sacred to Leon as anything possibly could be. He couldn't touch it.

Valeria and Maia were staring at him, their eyes boring holes in his back. Leon pushed himself back to his feet and stepped back. He was about to address them when he felt the Thunderbird's attention again, and he almost asked her what it was that had captured her interest so.

But then, Valeria's head suddenly turned and her expression transformed into one of horror. In one of the corners of the compound was a mound of ice, hidden by some of the foliage that had given Artorias and Leon's baths some privacy.

"RHEA!" Valeria suddenly shouted, rushing over to the hidden ice.

Leon was suddenly put on edge and his sword appeared at his hip. He hadn't seen any auras around, so he'd thought they were alone. But when Valeria stopped and stared down at the ice, Leon relaxed and recalled his weapon into his soul realm. His magic senses weren't picking up on any threats in the area,

and it was pretty clear that what she was looking at wasn't something that was going to try and attack them.

But this close to it, he was just able to see barely visible through the ice's near-opaque surface a blond woman lying on the ground, a hole in her chest, her eyes opened in terror, an arm partially outstretched as if she'd been frozen in the midst of trying to defend herself and fallen over.

There was no question in Leon's mind that she was dead.

Chapter 484: Justin's Path

Leon, Valeria, and Maia stared down at the dead woman frozen in ice, none of them speaking for what seemed like minutes on end.

"This... is Rhea?" Leon finally asked.

"Yes," Valeria confirmed.

"The Rhea that you told me about back in Teira?" Leon pressed, barely able to hide the anger in his voice. That she was *here* of all places was something that he'd considered, but to see it confirmed before his eyes was something else entirely. He was both barely able to believe it and also furious that she had violated this place with her presence.

"Yes," Valeria repeated.

"The Rhea that works... or *worked* for your father?"

"Yes!" Valeria shouted as she turned and glared at Leon. "It's her, the same woman that served my father as one of his most powerful mages! She was seventh-tier! And now..." She trailed off, unable to finish her thought.

[She hasn't been dead for long...] Maia observed after a moment of silence.

"What do you mean?" Leon asked as Maia approached the block of ice that covered Rhea.

[I can tell that this ice is newly made, though it does feel a little strange...]

Leon frowned and took a closer look at the ice. It covered Rhea from head to toe, and then some. It seemed to devour the heat around it, and even Leon felt the chill as he brushed his hand across its surface.

"This feels... like demonic magic..." he said, his eyes scanning every square inch of the ice. Indeed, there was a certain quality there that felt familiar, an inhuman thing that made the ice colder and more dangerous. A darkness there that had nothing to do with the magical element that was ensuring the ice remained cold and dry despite the lack of magical energy to feed it and the bright warm sun shining in the sky.

"Demonic?" Valeria said in shock as she took a step away.

"Yes, it feels inhuman, unfamiliar," Leon said, unable to find the right words to describe the feeling he got from the ice. "It's like thousands of tiny insects burrowing through the surface, fighting off my

senses. Or maybe like muddy water, mostly opaque and indiscernible... It's not a particularly pleasant feeling..."

'At the very least, it doesn't seem like she was killed by Justin...' Leon thought to himself, though it was hardly definitive proof. For all he knew, Justin had an ice demon on his side, though as he thought about the ice wraiths, he thought that the solution was probably much simpler than that.

[It's unlike any ice I've ever created...] Maia added, her heart-shaped face turning up in disgust as she, too, took a couple of steps away from the icy casket.

Leon turned his attention inward, in Xaphan's direction.

[Hey demon, I could use your help, here...]

He felt Xaphan's attention fall upon him, then turn outside of his body to take in his surroundings.

[Of course you do,] Xaphan drawled, [I'm surprised you don't ask for my help getting dressed in the morning. You sure could use it...]

Leon frowned. He thought he was dressed rather well, all things considered, but that was neither here nor there. [Not going to lie, Xaphan, but I'm surprised you're still being this flippant. I seem to recall you losing your cool a little bit when the Thunderbird told me who I'm descended from...]

[I'll admit that I lost a bit of composure that time,] Xaphan unashamedly replied. [Dragons are mystical beings even to demons. They are the elements given flesh, with the Great Dragons in particular having been brought into this world at the creation of the universe itself. Such beings are worthy of every respect, both for their power and for the institutions they built that have survived into the present day. You, however, are no dragon. You're just a young boy that has made some barely respectable progress on his journey to Apotheosis.]

Leon did the mental equivalent of a shrug, then said, [Let's just... how about you just tell me what in the hells I'm looking at?]

[You're looking at someone stupid and weak enough to get herself killed by some rather weak ice demons,] Xaphan drily replied.

Ignoring the demon's comment about Rhea herself, Leon asked, [And you're certain that this ice was created by ice demons?]

[Wouldn't have said so if I thought otherwise, now would I?]

[I think you would've. You love to stroke your ego, I can see you spinning some tall tale just to make yourself look good.]

[Know me so well, don't you?]

[Well enough, I should think.]

[Hmm. If you need anything else, boy, just ask.]

With that, Leon felt Xaphan's attention fall back into his soul realm, leaving him and the other two alone again.

"This was definitely made by ice demons," Leon said out loud, trusting completely in Xaphan's assessment of the ice. "Maybe... the ice wraiths that infest this place are some kind of demon, then...?"

[There's something in her hand...] Maia said, leaning down to inspect Rhea's off-hand, held a little bit behind her. [Looks like paper.]

"Think we should thaw her out?" Leon asked, dropping down to get a look of his own.

Maia nodded, and Leon glanced at Valeria, silently asking her opinion.

The silver-haired woman was still staring down at the ice like it had threatened to rise up and bite her and hadn't taken another step closer since Leon had said it was demonic in nature.

"Uh... is that even possible?" Valeria asked, her voice tinged with apprehension. "Whatever killed her would have to be powerful..."

"Shouldn't be too difficult," Leon replied. "Whatever froze her isn't nearby feeding more power into this ice. Shouldn't stand up too long against my fire."

"Then do it," Valeria agreed as she took a hesitant step forward.

Leon lightly smiled, but he didn't proceed. Instead, he took a closer look at Valeria in an attempt to puzzle out her thoughts. She didn't seem to be grieving as he would've expected, and actually seemed quite unperturbed at the sight of Rhea dead before her eyes beyond the initial shock and horror.

"Are... you all right?" Leon hesitantly asked, almost not asking at all.

Valeria gave him a searching look and responded, "Yes, why wouldn't I be?"

"Didn't you know Rhea? I mean, I know that you told me you weren't too close with any of your father's agents..." Leon asked.

"I'm fine," Valeria replied with a serious look. "I've seen too much death at this point to be put off by the body of someone I was only passingly familiar with."

"I suppose... that's that, then." Leon set the matter aside for the moment. If he noticed Valeria acting strange, he could always ask again, but at this point, there was no reason not to take her at face value.

Turning his attention back to the block of ice, Leon called upon his fire magic. From what he knew about demonic powers, their effects lasted for a longer time and could spike quite a bit higher in power compared to human magic. However, there was nothing to suggest that he wouldn't be able to melt through this ice with his regular fire, it just might take a little bit longer than if it were human-made ice.

Still, he took the utmost care as a hot flame appeared in his right hand and he brought it close to the ice. It took little more than a shred of willpower for the flame to grow in his hand and began to bend and reach out for the ice. Only a moment later, the fire was large enough to act as a small blast furnace, erupting from Leon's fingers and washing over the ice.

Leon was gratified to see that it was having some effect, as the ice started to noticeably shrink under the heat of his fire. He had to rein himself in once Rhea's body began to be exposed so as to not set it aflame, but it only took a few minutes to break through most of the demonic ice.

As soon as it was exposed, Maia took Rhea's hand and pried open the fingers with a sickening crack that Leon was sure broke several of the dead woman's fingers and sent a shiver running down his spine.

What was revealed in her fingers was a small piece of paper, which exasperated Maia to no end. She rolled her lake-blue eyes and held it out for Leon to take.

Leon received it and took a look. It was immediately apparent that it was nothing more than a simple note that looked like it had been written in a hurry. All it said was, 'Done here. Moving east to find pillar.'

"Huh..." Leon said as he stood up and relayed to the other two what was written. "Any idea what this could mean?"

"None," Valeria said as she glanced back down at Rhea.

[If you don't know, then there's no way I would,] Maia added.

Leon nodded in thought, his eyes closing as he contemplated the problem.

"At the very least," he said as his eyes fell on Valeria, "I think I can say with reasonable certainty that your father was here. Maybe they found this place and Rhea was sent back to Teira with the blood sample for analysis? Or maybe the blood sample was sent back to her?"

"That would make some degree of sense," she said, "but that couldn't have been that long ago. My father's been gone for months, I find it a little hard to imagine that he's been here the entire time."

"That's a good point," Leon agreed. "We can't know where he was or what he was doing in all this time, but I think it's not too far of a stretch to think that he was here relatively recently. Maybe he left this note behind so that when Rhea returned, she knew where he went? Only she was ambushed by an ice wraith or something moments after reaching this place and was swiftly killed? She clearly didn't have enough time to defend herself, let alone bring the note back into her soul realm..."

"That *does* look like my father's handwriting," Valeria conceded. "The note looks kind of old, though..."

Leon gave it another look, and indeed, it seemed fairly worn. The edges of the paper were torn and frayed as if the note had been left out in the elements for a while, though for all he knew, that was just damage from having been frozen and then rapidly thawed.

"So... Maybe Rhea... hells, I have no idea what went on here." Leon threw his arms up into the air in an exaggerated display of exasperation and defeat. "Regardless, I don't doubt for a second that Justin was here and went east. Who knows how long ago that might've been. Could've been yesterday, could've been the day after he disappeared. Who can say but the man himself? So let's go find him and ask him."

That earned him a smile from Valeria. "Do you have any idea what this 'pillar' is?" she asked, keeping things as professional as she could.

"None..." Leon glanced back down at the note in his hand. Whatever this 'pillar' was, it was to the east, and so was whatever had been marked on the Cradle's map. "I know that there's definitely *something* out there, though, something connected with the Thunderbird Clan."

[Maybe it's whatever's responsible for making this place so damned uncomfortable,] Maia suggested.

"That could be a thing," Leon replied. "I have no idea what this discomfort that you're feeling even is, so I can't speak to it. If Justin felt it, though, maybe he knows what it is and went to investigate..."

"If it was made by your Clan, then it could be some kind of defense mechanism, or maybe a way to help your people train," Valeria suggested as she took a few steps away from Rhea's thawing corpse. "My father taught me about such things years ago, great wards that can hamper a mage's ability to project their magic outside of their body, or even interfere with how the magic flows within a mage's body."

"Is that what you're feeling?" Leon asked.

Valeria vaguely nodded. "It's a bit hard to say, I've never experienced being in a ward like that, before. But I imagine that it might feel similar to this."

"All the more reason we should head east," Leon said without hesitation.

[When do we head out?]

Leon sighed and glanced around at his old home. He wanted to spend a bit more time here, but Valeria and Maia were clearly impatient to get moving. He remembered leaving a few things behind buried under his hut, and while he wanted to grab them, he acknowledged that the sooner they got moving, the better. Besides, the sooner they took care of their more pressing business, the sooner he could return and properly visit the place.

With a reluctant frown, he said, "We need to get to a safe place before nightfall. We still have a few hours, but it's better to get there early than late."

"Where to?" Valeria asked.

"There's a large grove of Heartwood Trees to the northeast," Leon said, noticing a brief frown crossing Valeria's face. "There's very little that can make trouble there. Even ice wraiths don't intrude upon the sanctity of that place, and, so long as we don't overstay our welcome, that's where we'll be safest spending the night. In the morning, we'll head east and search for Justin and this pillar that he seems to be seeking."

Leon's eyes went to Valeria, hoping she'd give voice to whatever occurred to her when he mentioned Heartwood Trees, but he wound up being disappointed.

"Everything all right?" he asked her, deciding not to just leave whatever he saw to chance.

"... Yeah," she hesitantly responded. "If it's a grove of Heartwood Trees, though... you know that means it's probably an ancient graveyard, right?"

Leon's eyes slid over to the cairn where the Heartwood sapling was pushing its way through the stones.

"I'm aware," he said.

Valeria, following his gaze, paled when she saw the sapling.

"I'm so—" she began before Leon loudly and blatantly interrupted her.

"—What do you think we should do with Rhea?" he asked. "We probably shouldn't just leave her body behind like this. Wouldn't sit right with me."

Valeria stared at him for a moment before bitterly smiling and turning her eyes to the ground.

“Burn her,” she said. “Don’t leave anything behind. That’s how it’s done in the Nexus.”

Leon nodded and once more called upon his fire magic.

As soon as he was done, he led the other two away from his compound in the direction of the Heartwood grove. He spared only one last glance backward at his old home, and specifically at the Heartwood sapling.

‘Just a few more days, then I can properly pay my respects...’ he thought to himself just before the compound vanished in the trees behind them.

Chapter 485: Heartwood Graves

Leon, Maia, and Valeria reached the Heartwood grove a few hours before nightfall, and as soon as the latter two set foot into the area—protected as it was by steep cliffs and hills on nearly all sides—it was easy for them to see why it was such a safe location. The Heartwood Trees here were ancient and majestic, even the smallest with trunks thicker than the length of a cart. They contained great power, too, and the auras they exerted put a great deal of pressure on the party, dampening their aggression and ensuring peace.

Leon had often wondered in his childhood whether or not these trees were sentient in any way that could be recognized by mankind. Artorias hadn’t been able to give him an answer, and Leon was never able to find out on his own, but he still had an immense amount of respect for this place. The list of places that he would call personally sacred was short, but this grove was one of the few on it.

For him, the auras these trees exuded was less oppressive and more peaceful than it seemed to the others. He felt comforted in the silence of the grove; at peace; serene. If he spent the rest of his life surrounded by these trees, basking in the peace they brought, he knew that he would die a contented man.

Of his small party, however, it seemed he was alone in these thoughts. Valeria seemed strangely on edge as she stared at the trees, her eyes wide with wonder and fear, her shoulders a little hunched over as if she were trying to make herself look smaller in the presence of these titanic trees.

Maia’s response was a little more subdued, though no different in substance. She kept her eyes down on the ground in front of her and her aura was remarkably restrained.

Whether it was his own desires or the influence of the grove, Leon didn’t feel like breaking the silence that fell amongst them. He wordlessly had them set up a small camp in the clearing around the tree in the center of the grove, and once they were done, Valeria and Maia wound up wandering off. Leon wasn’t too worried and he periodically checked in on them with his magic senses, but for the most part, he left them to their own devices while he found himself getting comfortable amongst the roots of the tree in the center of the grove, a giant of a tree even here, hundreds of feet tall and with roots thicker than Leon’s entire body.

For Leon, it was the most comforting place around, one he found himself drawn to in the moment. Otherwise, he would’ve given the tree a wide berth, not daring to disturb it with his presence. But it called to him today, and he lay down at the base of the tree to rest.

There, nestled in the twisting roots, Leon began to quietly meditate. He didn't do so for any practical reason—he wasn't training or practicing his magic—he just found himself unable to resist reveling in the serenity of the grove, taking in the ambiance. The wind rustling the golden leaves and the long grass, the sounds of distant animals hunting or foraging, the buzz of insects. All of it was tremendously calming, and he soon found his eyelids growing heavy.

He was rather gently roused not too long before sunset by a tree branch brushing against his face in time with the wind. In fact, he found that his entire body had been embraced by tiny branches and leaves that sprouted out from the roots.

A strange sense of panic set in where Leon began to mentally freak out, but his body remained calm and at ease. As if sensing his distress, the leaves and branches unfurled and retreated into the roots, leaving Leon as bare and exposed as he was when he laid down.

As if awakening from a nightmare, energy suddenly filled Leon's body again and he almost leaped out of the roots before they could entangle him again.

However, as his feet touched the ground and he turned to look at the tree, Leon felt no hostility from it, no sense that whatever had just happened was meant to harm in any way. If anything, Leon felt a sense of warmth and security coming from the tree, more so even than usual.

[Relax, boy,] came the Thunderbird's voice from his soul realm, soothing and calm. [Heartwood Trees are not things to fear.]

[I just woke up...] Leon began, but he trailed off as he began to process what had just happened. When he woke up from his nap, he was comfortable and at peace, he was as relaxed as he could reasonably expect to be given the circumstances under which he'd come here. It had been quite disconcerting to wake up so covered in the tree, but the leaves had insulated him from the outside, acting almost like a blanket and a bed at the same time.

Leon closed his golden eyes and took a few long, deep breaths, steadying his heart rate and calming himself down.

[There you go, no need to get all flustered over a little bit of provided comfort,] the Thunderbird said.

[What... even was that?] Leon asked as his eyes opened and he continued to stare at the tree, though now he stared at it in a new light, almost as if what had just happened was all the confirmation he needed to know that the trees were sentient.

[Heartwood Trees are revered in the Nexus,] the Thunderbird whispered. [Even the Primal Gods and Devils were respectful around them. Do you remember the burial rite you performed for your father?]

[How could I possibly forget?]

[Back in my day, such rites were performed for all those in the Nexus who achieved Apotheosis, yet who died anyway. Some peacefully took their own lives after breaking under the weight of immortality, others were killed in more violent ways. All were buried with Heartwood seeds implanted in their hearts.]

Leon picked up on a great deal of respect coming from the Thunderbird. He could tell that she was no exception to those who revered the trees.

[It was believed that the spirits of the fallen would live on through the trees. Some even believed that it was possible to revive the dead through the rite, though I can't recall any who actually succeeded in such attempts.]

[Is... there any truth at all to any of those claims?] Leon asked, thinking again of the Heartwood sapling in the ruins of his childhood home. He wondered if Artorias was still in there somewhere, living a new life within the tree.

[I can't say,] the Thunderbird softly replied. [Heartwood trees are sacred to the people of the Nexus and putting them through the required tests is heavily discouraged. Even those who've broken that particular taboo haven't found anything that would conclusively prove those beliefs right or wrong. So remember this, Leon, these trees are not just your average wood and leaf. They have wills of their own, an alien mind that cannot be communicated with or even understood. They are tremendously powerful, with powers wholly impossible to replicate by the elemental magics of the rest of the universe, and if you anger any of these trees, you'll meet a bloody end. Fortunately, it seems *these* trees have taken quite a shine to you...]

[You think?] Leon asked as a smile began to spread across his face.

[I do,] the Thunderbird replied. [I can feel it ever since you arrived in this place. The auras of the trees have grown stronger, and they almost seem to be reaching for you. So long as you are here, I don't think even a Primal God at their peak could harm you.]

[If only these things were portable,] Leon replied. [Is there any way I could... I don't know, thank these trees for their hospitality? If they have wills and minds of their own, then surely I can pay them back a bit for offering us sanctuary?]

[Ask nothing of them and leave in good time,] the Thunderbird replied. [There's little else you need to do.]

[Nothing else?] Leon skeptically asked.

[Nothing else,] the Thunderbird confirmed. [They're trees, what could they possibly ask of you?]

[Couldn't say...]

Leon gazed back at the massive Heartwood tree. It was truly a majestic thing if it brought peace and comfort without asking for anything in return. Leon gave it a respectful nod of the head in lieu of anything else, and he heard the tree creak and groan as if in response. Its leaves sparkled in the light of the setting sun and a cool breeze blew through the grove, giving Leon what he interpreted as a friendly gesture of goodwill.

Whether it was or not wasn't something he could say, but that was how he chose to interpret it, anyway.

[Hey,] he said, [I don't suppose you can sense anything else about the Vale?]

[Are you asking about anything in particular?] the Thunderbird inquired back.

[This aura that's been weighing on my companions, what is it? Is it anything I should worry about?]

[Hmm... No. As far as I can tell, its function is simple: get whoever wanders in here to leave. It's a fairly common way for mages from the Nexus to discourage weaker mages from elsewhere in the universe to trespass on sites they claim since it would make those mages want to leave without knowing exactly why. It's not as blatant as a wall or guardian, but it's often more effective as it will more often than not make a trespasser leave of their own accord.]

[I see...] Leon murmured. [I came across something, a mention about a 'pillar' somewhere in this Vale. Would that have anything to do with this aura?]

[Maybe, but that's too vague to say for certain. I haven't the faintest idea of what this 'pillar' could be.]

[I think it may be the source of this aura,] Leon replied. [Nothing else about the Vale should stick out to people quite like the aura, so it makes sense that anyone from the Nexus who knows what to look for would go looking for whatever the aura is protecting.]

[Makes sense to me, I suppose,] the Thunderbird replied. [Be careful, though, Leon. I sense other things out here.]

[Yeah. I've come across evidence of demons, among other enemies around.]

[Stay on your guard, then, and respond to any threats with overwhelming force. Anything that lives out here will respect nothing else.]

Leon frowned but said nothing more. He turned around from the great tree and began to walk back toward the camp as the Thunderbird's attention sank back deep into his soul realm.

The camp wasn't too far away and as he approached, he noticed that neither Valeria nor Maia had returned. A quick pulse of his magic senses was enough to set his momentary worry at ease, for he saw that Valeria was still wandering around the grove, while Maia had posted up in a pond of crystal-clear water and seemed to be using her magic senses.

Valeria, he wasn't too curious about since she didn't seem to be doing anything other than just walking around, so Leon made his way over to Maia instead, who was staring off into the distance with a trembling aura.

Upon reaching the pond, he took a moment to just admire his river nymph lover. She was standing in the thigh-deep water completely nude, the sun shining through the trees onto her bronze skin, her light brown hair cascading down her back far enough to cover her tight rear from his prying eyes.

[Leon...] she breathed into his mind without moving a muscle. Still, Leon could hear the need and love in her voice as clear as day.

[Maia...] he whispered back, and it was only then that he saw movement within her; she shuddered in pleasure with the use of her true name. [What are you doing?] he asked as he took a few steps forward and pulled his boots into his soul realm. Without hesitation, he stepped into the pond.

[Trying to see what's ahead of us,] Maia replied as she turned to face him, showing off her body as she did. He saw the heat in her eyes, a desire for something that became obvious as her eyes drifted down along his body. However, a moment later, her expression morphed into something more serious and

frustrated. [I haven't been able to see much,] she said. [There's a river not too far to the east, and I can't see a thing beyond it. My sight is completely blocked, my magic senses scattering as they move over the water...]

[Huh...] Leon said as he took her in his arms and pulled her close. [I told you once of the river nymphs that lived here, right?]

[Yes,] Maia replied as she snuggled closer a little bit, pressing her body into Leon and burying her face in his neck. [You told me you once saw a Gorgon here...]

[That I did,] Leon confirmed. [There aren't many rivers here, but I'd be willing to bet that the one that's giving you problems is the same one that's ruled by that Gorgon.]

[That... might be a problem... If she sees me, she might interpret my presence as a threat. Without an Empress nearby to mediate, we could end up fighting...]

Leon tightened his arms around her, noting her use of the word 'mediate'. He thought all Gorgons were wild, unrestrained creatures, and he would've asked for clarification if not for Maia's body shuddering in his arms with fear and anxiety, clearly indicating that this wasn't the right time for that. [We won't get close,] he said. [If we don't approach her grotto, it shouldn't be a problem, right? The bridge we need is far to the south of where that Gorgon is based...]

[I don't... I don't want to see her...] Maia murmured, her words tinged with fear and something else that Leon couldn't identify.

[We won't, we'll steer clear,] Leon said reassuringly, but he could tell through their connection that his words had little effect on Maia.

[She's what I... *could've* become,] she continued. [Had I never found you, had you chosen to reject me after what I almost did to you when we met... had I...]

Leon didn't know quite what to say, so instead of speaking, he snaked one arm out from her back and took hold of her chin, tilting it up so they could look each other in the eye. They'd had this conversation before, but with the Gorgon so close, he could feel the insecurities that she rarely displayed coming back to the surface.

[I'm not going to lie, I hated you for how forceful you were when we met,] Leon honestly stated, and a tremor of hurt and hopelessness ran through Maia. However, before she could do anything more, Leon opened himself up to their connection as much as he could, doing his best to impress upon her the depth of his love for her.

[I'm past that, though,] he continued. [I understand that you were motivated by fear and not malice, and you gave me time. In that time, I've grown to love you. Everything from your power to your carefree attitude. Your talent with water magic, your beauty, even your tendency to sleep all day. The way you look at me, the way you look at Elise, Maia, I can't overstate just how much I love you.]

Tears began forming in Maia's eyes as Leon went on, and she couldn't bring herself to form any words.

[The way you acted when we first met was honestly quite terrible, but once you understood that I didn't like it, you stopped. Stopping when you realized my distress despite whatever you had been taught.

That's the sure sign of a good person with empathy, one who's worthy of love. Anyone's love. I've been told by my father and Trajan in several different forms that even the best of people can do bad things out of ignorance. It's obviously better to not do bad things at all, but I'd say that how a person reacts once they learn what they've done is a bad thing is only a little less important.

[You were scared and acted based on the information of your mother. When it became clear that I wasn't into it, you backed off... in your own way... while also making sure that you didn't let the asset that would help you to stave off your transformation get away. I love and respect the hell out of you for that—even if I was the asset in question and the method you chose to get what you wanted was pretty terrible. I've said this to you and I'll say it however many times you need me to: I love you, and I forgive you for how you came off when we first met. Never doubt that.]

Leon found that he was starting to ramble and repeat himself, but he wasn't sure what else to say. Despite this, a smile slowly broke out over Maia's face as she confirmed his final statement with what she felt from his soul realm. And in turn, Leon felt her fear and anxiety begin to lessen.

[I was so close to falling,] she quietly admitted. [I would've given you more time... but, I had none to spare...]

Leon pressed his forehead into hers, at this point having long since forgiven Maia for being so forceful and demanding of his sexual attentions that she almost raped him. She backed off and had shown remorse, there was nothing left for him to forgive. They'd moved past it, as far as he was concerned.

He felt like she knew that, she just needed to hear it again now that there was a Gorgon nearby, now that they were almost face-to-face with the monster that she could've become. He'd repeat it however much she needed to hear it, though. He knew that she had made a serious mistake and that most people probably wouldn't have so easily forgiven her, and he would never blame them for holding onto that hatred.

But he was different, in this unique case. He loved Maia and he just wanted her to be happy with him.

As they stood there in the pond, Maia pressed up against him, neither moving, both just feeling each other. They stood there until the sun went down, and only decided to get out of the water and return to the camp when the first shrieks of distant banshees began to rend the peaceful atmosphere that they had grown so used to since arriving in the Vale.

Fortunately, Valeria beat them to the camp, so all three, with the faraway banshees killing any desire they had to stay awake for too long, decided to turn in early. Even then, the only reason any of them slept at all was because of the nearby Heartwood trees dampening their instinctual fear of the banshees.

Thanks to the grove, they had a relatively peaceful night.

Chapter 486: Wraiths

It was a peaceful night in the Heartwood grove. The sounds of distant banshees never ceased, but the aura of the trees protected and gave peace to their minds, allowing them to have a restful and uninterrupted night.

The next morning, Leon got them moving again as quickly as he could. He had no idea what the punishments could be for overstaying his welcome in the grove, but he had no intention of pressing his luck. He'd never stayed more than a single night in the grove, so he figured that was a good pattern to stick to since it had worked out well enough so far.

Maia and Valeria were a little nervous, though. Going east meant different things for all of them, but for Maia, it meant an increased chance of running into the gorgon, while for Valeria, it meant potentially getting closer to her father. By what scant evidence they had, it seemed that Justin had gone east and never returned.

Knowing Justin's power, that one hypothesis was enough to have Leon feel like he was walking on broken glass that was only growing sharper with every step he took deeper into the Vale. All of his nostalgia and delight in being home again had mostly faded, leaving little else save for the dread and instinctive fear that came with being back in such a dangerous place.

At the very least, he wasn't sure where they might be able to sleep for the night. He wasn't keen on attracting the attention of any ice wraiths, but if they had to sleep out in the forest, they'd have to rely on his ability to ward the wraiths off. Leon had always trusted Artorias to protect him in his childhood, but that protection was now gone, leaving all of the pressure on Leon to keep the small group safe. He was confident in his skills, but the knowledge of what might be testing those skills was enough to have his heart hammering in his chest all on its own, without even adding the stress of the inevitable confrontation with Justin, finding whatever might've prevented him from coming back west, or of finding out what the Thunderbird Clan had left out there.

And so, the three proceeded out of the grove and back into the forest proper early in the morning and began the trek southeast toward the troll's bridge. If they wanted to get east, they'd have to cross the gorgon's river or go around Banshee Lake far to the south, and the bridge was the only place they could safely cross the river without going so far out of their way.

With their power and their silent focus on just getting where they wanted to go, they reached the bridge in a matter of an hour and a half. There, they paused and waited.

It didn't take long for the troll to show itself. Leon had thought that maybe it might be out hunting or whatever it did to find food, but he was disappointed.

It looked much the same as it had years ago. It was a huge creature, taller than Leon by a good margin, with a hunched back, long arms that hung down far enough to brush against the ground, and a fur-covered body. As soon as it reached its end of the bridge, it began to beat the stone beneath it and roar in a clear show of intimidation as it tried to scare them off.

For just a moment, Leon froze. The last time he'd been here, his father had lectured him on how reasonable people used means other than violence to accomplish their goals. That it was better to avoid violence where possible, that killing everything that inconvenienced them rather than saving such means for their mortal enemies was not the way that thinking, feeling men act.

Leon's face burned in shame as he wished he'd taken those words to heart more than he did. He wanted to think that those he'd killed in his time had all deserved it, that everyone he'd killed and the actions he'd taken had all been necessary.

But he knew that wasn't the case.

Slowly, Leon inched forward and took out three silver coins as he did his best to appear strong and confident, to project power and prevent the troll from thinking it might be able to extort more from him. Fortunately, the troll accepted the toll and allowed the three to proceed.

However, as they crossed the bridge, Maia paused for just a moment as her eyes turned north toward the river's headwaters, the center of power for her people in the Vale. But then the moment passed, and she kept following Leon deeper into the Vale.

An hour later, at about noon, Leon brought them to a halt in a clearing to rest.

[Why are we stopping?] Maia asked. All three were strong enough that rest wasn't strictly needed, nor was there much of a need for any of them to eat.

Valeria didn't say anything, but Leon could see that the question was on her mind, too.

He sighed, knowing that they *should* be moving as quickly as they could. From her obvious impatience, Leon could tell that Valeria definitely wouldn't enjoy taking a longer break.

But he could see ahead that the forest was growing darker. It wasn't really getting much denser, the trees and the underbrush remained about the same as in the western half of the Vale, but the trees seemed older and were certainly much bigger. Their canopies stretched higher and their leaves blocked out enough of the sun that the forest in the east was significantly darker than it was in the west, even at such a sunny time of day.

Besides, as he turned his head southward, he could see a few glimpses of the mountain upon which he'd awakened his blood. It was the clearest sign that this was the furthest east he'd ever been in the Vale.

"After this point... be ready for anything..." Leon said in response. "I have no real idea what awaits us in this half of the Vale. My father never allowed us to venture this deep. I can't sense anything dangerous, but still."

Leon made quick eye contact with Valeria and Maia. Valeria swiftly nodded her agreement, while Maia frowned and projected her magic senses. Then her frown deepened, and she projected her magic senses again, but much stronger this time, strong enough that the forest seemed to pulse around her.

"What is it?" Leon asked in concern.

[My magic senses are being disrupted...] Maia answered. [Out in the northeast corner, there's something that's just swallowing them up. There's a 'hole' there that I can't see past...]

Leon projected his own magic senses out as far as they could go, hoping that he might be able to sense what it was that Maia was talking about. His maximum range was just a little over ten miles, so he wouldn't be able to reach the edges of the Vale, but it was still worth a try.

His magic power washed over the trees and the plants, plumbing the dark depths of the forest and moving on, sending a flood of information back to Leon. Most of this information was immediately discarded as the magic senses-equivalent of white noise. Even with his brain adapted to magic power, there was no way he'd be able to interpret so much information even if he tried.

As his magic power dissipated into the surrounding land, his awareness dimmed until he could neither see nor hear any more. His power wasn't disrupted in the way Maia described, but he believed her nonetheless.

"Let's be careful and move a little slower," he said. Even with Maia's eighth-tier power, they weren't invincible. He'd rather believe that Artorias, even with all of his power and skill with the blade, was right to be apprehensive about this part of the Vale rather than arrogantly continue on and stumble right into the jaws of some powerful beast looking for a snack.

He was mildly relieved, though, that he wasn't able to pick up on any obvious magical auras that would suggest such a possibility was even plausible. A few powerful beasts were roaming around, though; he saw a seventh-tier griffin with gorgeous, sleek black fur and feathers, a pack of fifth-tier wind wolves tearing apart a sixth-tier boar, and even a strange cluster of dead trees that was clearly an unusual grouping of tree sprites, none of which he felt were worthy of too much concern.

'Maybe Dad was only concerned for my sake?' Leon couldn't help but wonder. Regardless, he reiterated his desire for them to continue with the utmost caution and they got moving again.

The eastern half of the forest was fairly different from the western half, if only because of the fact that the trees blocked out so much sunlight. But that wasn't to say there wasn't much light; most of the abundant flowers glowed in brilliant colors, casting their rainbow hues all across the forest floor.

Leon found himself being distracted at the sight of the bright and vibrant forest even though the trees above them were dark. It felt like wandering through a mystical cavern rather than the middle of a forest at midday.

All three found themselves unable to stop themselves from admiring the sight, but the forest's spell was broken when a thread of killing intent wound its way through the air. Their reactions were all the same: coming to a rapid stop, projecting their magic senses, and arming themselves.

Leon, Valeria, and Maia all stood back-to-back, waiting for whatever seemed to have sensed them to make its move, their eyes jumping back and forth through the shadows between the flowers below and the sun shining through thin cracks in the leafy canopy above.

"What the hells was *that*?" Valeria wondered aloud.

"Whatever it was had power," Leon muttered, that single thread of killing intent having sent shivers down his spine.

[I can't see anything,] Maia complained, though none of them moved just yet.

From Leon's soul realm, he felt Xaphan's attention come back to the fore.

[What just happened?] the demon asked.

[We felt something watching us and getting ready to attack,] Leon replied. [Their killing intent was potent...]

[I felt it, too,] Xaphan said. [It felt...] The demon didn't finish his sentence and instead sent a pulse of his magic senses through Leon out into the forest.

A moment later, Leon heard the faint sounds of cracking spreading ice, of the forest ground flash-freezing.

[Something's coming...] Maia whispered.

"I can hear it..." Leon said as his eyes wildly darted from shadow to shadow, looking for the source of that sound. His instincts were screaming at him what he already knew, but he was refusing to accept. It was too early in the day, the sun was still high in the sky, but that didn't seem to matter. His childhood nightmares were about to bear down upon them.

"Over there..." Valeria whispered, her voice shaky, her eyes wide and fearful.

When Leon turned to look at what she saw, he couldn't blame her for that reaction. He felt his legs go weak and his heart rate spike as he saw, for the first time in years, the thin, translucent, malevolent form of an approaching ice wraith. Its eyes glowed bright blue, countless blue veins snaked through its icy body, and its aura was tremendous and oppressive. Leon felt nothing from it other than power and killing intent. There would be no attempt to talk, not that he thought that was ever really an option.

They'd have to run or fight. There were no other alternatives.

And then an ear-splitting shriek ripped through the forest as an inky-black cloud came slowly, almost lazily drifting into view just above the wraith, a skeletal face pushing out of it like the darkness was a veil covering its form.

Then another appeared, and then a third.

[Over there...] Maia whispered into Leon's mind, and he glanced over to see a second ice wraith appearing on their flank, ice slowly spreading from its feet across the forest floor. This one was also accompanied by three banshees floating above its head.

[Xaphan, any insights?] Leon asked as terror began to grip him like a vise. He turned back around and saw a third ice wraith and its banshees approaching from another flank, and a fourth from another. Given what he could sense of their auras now that they had made themselves known, he knew there would be no escaping them. Their chance to run had come and gone. They'd have to fight now.

[They're lesser ice demons...] Xaphan observed, his tone one of absolute seriousness. [I can't imagine how they got here, there's no way they're powerful or smart enough to come here on their own. These things want you, or more specifically, they want your blood and the power within it.]

[My blood?] Leon asked as the ice wraiths slowly walked toward them, their auras slamming down on the three like a mountain; all four wraiths were at least sixth-tier, but their auras were so oppressive that even Maia hadn't yet moved to quell the threat.

[Not *yours*, specifically, but you're a mage. You have power in your blood, and they want it. If I had to guess, these are the servants of a much stronger demon that, for one reason or another, hasn't given them any orders in a while. I can't imagine any other reason why they'd be acting like this... they seem to lack direction.]

Leon glanced around, confirming once again that they had been boxed in. [Given that they slipped past our magic senses, I question how 'directionless' they seem,] Leon replied.

[You're going to have to fight,] Xaphan stated, a hint of worry in his voice. [My power is ready just in case you need it.]

[Thanks,] Leon almost sarcastically replied, the information only a minor balm to his frayed nerves.

Suddenly, the banshees all shrieked in unison, sending pain rippling through Valeria, Leon, and Maia, tearing their magic power out of their blood. All three screamed in pain. Valeria hit the ground, barely catching herself before her face hit the dirt, but it didn't seem to Leon like she was in fighting condition anymore. She stayed there, limply kneeling on the ground as the banshees sped towards them.

He and Maia, on the other hand, managed to remain on their feet. Barely. They circulated their power and called upon more from their soul realms, but they had no time to truly recover before the wraiths were upon them and the fight began in earnest.

Chapter 487: Facing Old Fears I

Valeria was as good as down, having been incapacitated by the simultaneous shrieks of a dozen banshees. Leon and Maia were still on their feet, but their magic power was in turmoil, and now the banshees were bearing down upon them.

[Stay here, defend, don't attack,] Leon was able to mutter to his river nymph lover. He wanted them to stay where they could cover each other and Valeria, who was still barely able to keep herself off the ground. Besides, his entire body was flaring up in pain, he didn't think he had the mental capacity to watch his own back, and from what he could feel through his and Maia's connection, she didn't, either.

There was no more time for words; the banshees were upon them. Black claws spewing inky black darkness like smoke extended from the flying creatures and were aimed at the two, but quick swordplay from Leon and a swiftly-conjured wall of water from Maia staved them off. It bought just enough time for Leon to begin regaining control of his magic power.

It started with a spark in his heart, a tiny blue speck of power that carried the Thunderbird's lightning. In less than a second, arcs of lightning exploded out of that spark and traveled throughout Leon's entire body, practically lighting him up from the inside with silver-blue light. The darkness that Leon hadn't even realized had crept into his body was banished, and his magic power was his again.

He couldn't help but roar in satisfaction as his power flooded through his body, filling him with energy and fighting spirit. After the brief but intense pain of the banshee's shriek, Leon felt so good he almost leaped into the fray without another thought.

But he paused and focused on Maia. More specifically, he focused on their connection, the river of power that flowed between their soul realms. His power would enter her as hers entered him, making neither of them more powerful or granting each other their respective powers, but allowing them to sense each other's thoughts and emotions.

Or so it was supposed to be. Leon wondered if he could possibly exploit that connection to aid Maia in her attempts to stave off the banshee's attacks. Right now, he could sense her struggling to get her magic power under control, though she still had enough at her command to defend herself from the banshees. However, the ice wraiths were taking slow, ominous steps toward them...

Leon sent a spark of power, just a hint of the Thunderbird's lightning into the river of power that connected them and hoped with everything that he had that it would be enough. After that, he conjured a silver-blue lightning bolt in his off-hand and hurled it at the ground near a pair of banshees. The lightning bolt hit the ground almost as soon as it left Leon's hand, exploding on the forest floor and inundating the banshees with the lightning of the Thunderbird.

The darkness was stripped away from the monsters, revealing what appeared to be the desiccated flesh of a long-dead human child, still writhing in pain as lightning began ripping into its form and burning it from the inside out. The two banshees fell to the ground, dead.

In response, Leon noticed the ice wraiths pause in their advance, but another shriek from the remaining banshees captured his attention. Their shriek hit his ears like the horn of a charging bull, but Leon was ready, his power coursing through his veins and preventing any attempt at infiltration by this foreign magic; Leon remained unaffected, and a quick glance back at Maia showed her standing up straighter and back in full fighting condition.

Leon smiled, his racing heartbeat slowing as he began to internalize the fact that he could fight with these monsters, that they couldn't harm him anymore. With two more lightning bolts conjured and hurled at titanic speeds, three more banshees fell to the ground, their corpses smoking as Leon's lightning burned all their darkness away.

With only seven banshees left, Maia was able to hold them off with her powers by conjuring a pair of serpentine water dragons about as large as she was that encircled the three of them and, with large icy fangs as long as daggers, snapped at the banshees when they flew too close. This gave Leon enough room to conjure yet another lightning bolt.

This one, however, he held back on. This was not a bolt for the banshees, but for Valeria, to help her in the same way he helped Maia. Instead of throwing it like a javelin as he would if this were a real attack, Leon thrust the bolt out like a spear, letting it graze against Valeria's shoulder. It was a light touch, but several potent arcs of lightning jumped into her, burnishing her armor and causing her body to seize up.

For just a moment, Leon was worried that he put far too much power into the bolt and that instead of aiding her, he'd caused her real harm. But then Valeria relaxed and jumped back to her feet.

"Thanks!" she shouted as she then conjured her glaive from her soul realm and stood back up, ready to defend herself. Her knees still seemed a bit shaky, but Leon could tell that she was otherwise fine and in fighting shape.

As he was tending to Valeria, Maia had one of her serpentine dragons lunged forward, thinning their defensive circle a bit but catching one of the banshees in its sharp fangs. The water dragon snapped the creature in half, but the darkness that coated the banshee's body flowed into the dragon instead of dissipating. It dyed the dragon pitch black, causing its watery form to wither and writhe. Leon saw Maia immediately cut off her power to the dragon, letting it collapse in on itself before the darkness could spread further.

At this point, with half of the banshees dead, the remaining six pulled back. Leon, Maia, and Valeria were by no means out of the woods yet, though, for the ice wraiths now took their place.

The one closest to Leon was only about thirty or forty feet away, and it extended its ethereal hand toward him. The ice that covered the ground beneath it suddenly exploded up and outward in the shape of a hand, five finger-shaped spikes rocketing toward Leon with nothing short of lethal intent.

Without hesitation, Leon switched from lightning to fire and let loose with an intense gout of orange flame. It splashed across the oncoming ice like a wave on the beach, halting it completely. But the ice wraith just pushed harder, the massive ice spikes flattening into a wall of ice that spread past Leon's wall of fire, trying to go around. Leon just extended his fire wall to compensate, with both pressing against each other with all their power. The surroundings quickly filled with the resulting steam, and many of the flowers and trees around them caught alight.

Leon could hear the crashing and battering of battle behind him, but the ice wraith in front of him held his attention. Spikes tried to bore through his fire, their demonic qualities protecting them from his fire just enough to poke through but not quite reach him. Leon could only crank up the power, letting magical energies flow from his soul realm, into his blood, and then out of his hand.

He spared just a little for his blade, smiling as the blade heated up and began to burn, the Adamant metal resonating with his blood. Leon then swept the blade across his body like he was trying to cut through the ice wall. A wave of fire erupted from his sword and added enough additional pressure to stop his fire wall from being so easily penetrated, but it wasn't enough to push the ice wall back.

Realizing that he wasn't going to be able to just overpower the wraith, Leon grimaced and just pointed his weapon at a single point on the wall and let his power explode out of it. A stream of potent fire was released from the tip of his sword, traveled through his fire wall, and splashed against the ice wall, failing to completely penetrate even with a more focused approach.

But Leon wasn't deterred. He could sense a momentary waver in the aura of the ice wraith on the other side of the rapidly-growing walls, enough to know that it had taken a noticeable amount of power from the demonic creature to patch whatever damage he'd managed to do.

A smile once more spreading across his face, Leon pressed on, twisting his sword like a drill and letting his fire both hold the ice wall and bore into it. He didn't want to try and break through everywhere as the wraith was doing, he wanted to break through in one place and force the wraith back.

It seemed that the wraith thought Leon could do it, for a moment later, an ear-piercing shriek tore through the clearing as the banshees returned.

Leon screamed back, both in pain and in anger as he was forced to cut off his fire and call upon his lightning once again to fight off the banshee's dark powers. This also allowed the wraith's ice to proceed unchallenged as Leon's fire fizzled out. Half a dozen ice spikes bore down on Leon as he fought off the effects of the banshee's shriek.

Roaring in frustration, Leon didn't have the time to switch back to fire even with his lightning-enhanced reflexes. All he had time to do was to let loose with as large a blast of lightning as he could, doing nothing more than directing it toward the ice spikes.

Silver-blue lightning illuminated his body as it poured out of him, arcing and dancing across his form before exploding outward and slamming into the ice spikes below and the banshees above. In one cataclysmic blast of power, nearly draining Leon of everything he had, the ice spikes and the ice wall

behind them shattered under the heat and the power behind his attack, while two of the remaining banshees fell to the ground, dead.

Behind the ice wall, the wraith cocked its head, looking for all the world as if it were shocked at what Leon had just done, or at least that was the impression that Leon got. Whatever the reason for it, the wraith paused for just long enough for Leon to take stock of his situation.

He had Valeria and Maia fighting the other three wraiths right behind him. He couldn't take advantage of his prodigious speed without leaving them vulnerable, so he'd have to fight his wraith head-on. The aura coming from it seemed to be seventh-tier, but it was hard for Leon to tell with such an alien being. Regardless, it had shown enough power to stand against him and not come out the loser even with Leon using all the power he had at his command.

That left one option. He'd have to close the distance, attacking it straight on so that it couldn't attack Valeria or Maia behind him.

Leon pulled every ounce of power he could out of his soul realm to replenish his depleted mana supply and then charged without another moment of hesitation. He wanted to end this as soon as he could.

In a flash of light and tremendous roar of thunder, Leon seemed to vanish and instantly reappear in front of his ice wraith, his sword already raised and coursing with silver-blue lightning. The wraith had only enough time to begin raising an arm before Leon brought his blade down onto the creature's icy form.

It was a powerful monster, there was no doubt about that. Its defenses were formidable, protecting it from almost any attack, especially more mundane slashing or blunt force wounds. However, when Leon's blade slammed into its icy 'flesh', its body seemed to melt away before the fury of Leon's power. Silver-blue lightning tore into it, cracking, ripping, tearing into the monster's body.

In a moment, the wraith shattered into thousands of tiny pieces, while a significant portion of its torso was instantly liquified by the heat of Leon's lightning.

The wraith was dead, but it had cost Leon a great deal of power. He almost fell to a knee after it, and the banshee shriek that followed almost immediately after its fall didn't help. However, it did serve to galvanize Leon's fighting spirit and help to give him the visceral, furious motivation to stay on his feet.

Turning, Leon saw that Valeria was just barely managing to hold her own against her wraith. She was vastly outclassed, with only her armor and one of Maia's water dragons keeping her in the land of the living. Maia herself, on the other hand, was doing much better facing off against the other two wraiths, with three more water dragons keeping them on the defense. However, those four water dragons were weakening with every banshee shriek they endured, creating more and more opportunities for the ice wraiths to successfully strike against the ladies.

Summoning every last scrap of power that he could, emptying his bloodstream of magic power, practically reducing his physical strength to that of a regular human, Leon prepared one last magical attack. He was hoping that Maia and Valeria would be able to finish the job after this because he knew that he'd need quite a bit of rest to recover his strength once this was over.

His sword sparked and crackled with silver-blue lightning as Leon's power flowed into it. He held nothing back, letting the blade glow silver with a halo of blue light from the sheer amount of power he pushed into it.

The Adamant metal held it all and seemed greedy for more. Leon felt like he could push every spark of power he had in his soul realm into this weapon and it still wouldn't reach its limit. So he kept going, far past the point where any other sword, even those well-enchanted to hold lightning magic, would've exploded. Only when his body was left dry did Leon stop and finally swing his blade.

All of the power that Leon had built up in that moment of preparation surged out into the air, sending one large bolt of silver-blue lightning tearing through the tree canopy and incinerating a huge portion of the leafy forest ceiling. More importantly, the blast caught all four of the remaining banshees and tore them to pieces, leaving little behind but a few wisps of smoky darkness.

Most importantly, though, was that the ice wraiths were also caught up in the blast, though not to quite the same extent. A few arcs of lightning reached out from the blast, barely missing Maia and Valeria by Leon's flagging willpower, and embraced their bodies. It seemed almost graceful until the ice wraiths were hurled back, their bodies cracked and leaking dark blue blood, their glowing blue eyes dimming.

Leon fell to his knees, unable to do anything more, feeling weaker than he had in years. Maia, however, wasted not a second as her water dragons pursued the ice wraiths. The weakest one that had been fighting Valeria was enveloped by one of the serpentine dragons before it could recover and squeezed to death, its body collapsing into thousands of ice shards. The remaining two came out a little better, conjuring ice walls that prevented the dragons from immediately wrapping their snake-like bodies around them and keeping their fangs at bay.

However, they didn't try to stay and fight. The dragons ripped down the wall almost as if it were made of plywood, but by then the ice wraiths had vanished. Leon hadn't been able to see how they did it, but after several long, quiet seconds, it became clear that they were gone.

What had once been a dark, peaceful section of forest had been completely changed by the battle. Nearly all of the vegetation around the three of them—especially where Leon had been throwing around fire—had been destroyed, either burned up or torn up by Maia's water dragons. A hole almost dozen feet wide had been created in the leafy ceiling, ringed by fires started by Leon's lightning, that allowed the early afternoon sun to stream in, bathing the battlefield in sunlight. Nearly all the trees around Leon had been blackened by fire and lightning, while a few sheets of ice remained from the wraiths. The remains of twelve banshees were scattered around, emitting a terrible fetid stench that would've turned everyone's stomachs if they hadn't been otherwise distracted.

For Leon, though, all of this destruction wasn't the important takeaway. Rather, he was consumed by the fact that this had only been a relatively small group of wraiths and banshees, and they'd only just passed the halfway point on their way to the northeastern corner of the Vale. If this was what they were encountering here, he didn't want to even think about what they might encounter deeper in the forest.

Chapter 488: Facing Old Fears II

"You two... all right?" Leon asked as he practically gasped for breath. His limbs felt like they were ten times as heavy as usual; his body was utterly devoid of magic power, and he barely managed to push

himself back to his feet. His heart rate was falling and the dregs of his stored magic was slowly being pulled out of his soul realm and back into his body, but he could tell that he was done fighting for a while.

Valeria seemed about in the same position as he was, but Maia was a little more energetic.

[I'm fine,] the river nymph responded, her voice shaking in anger as her lake-blue eyes glared off into the dark forest in the direction that the ice wraiths had apparently fled in.

"Doing... good," Valeria panted as she kept staring off into trees, on the lookout for any other threats that might present themselves. "Whatever is dampening my power in this Vale isn't helping, though..."

Maia scowled. [If I had been fighting at full strength, those vile creatures would've been begging for mercy before they even got close!]

"I suppose, then, that we should find whatever is weighing down your powers and deal with it," Leon replied as he began to stumble back over to them. "Have to admit... I wasn't expecting that kind of a fight... At least, not so soon..."

"I take it those were ice wraiths?" Valeria asked as her breathing steadied. "I'm really glad Elise didn't come with us..."

Leon nodded in response. "I hope *she* sees it that way..." he said, knowing just how difficult it was to get her to stay behind in Vale Town to begin with. He loved Elise with all his heart, but he knew that she didn't take being told she couldn't do something well. "These wraiths seemed a little stronger than what I remember, though... My father always made killing them look so much easier than this. Maybe they're stronger this far east? I mean, I've never even seen them active during the day before..."

'Though they did flee from the sunlight...' he thought to himself as he stared up at the giant hole in the canopy his final attack had made.

[They're gone, that's what matters,] Maia said, though from her tone and body language, Leon felt like she would've preferred it if the surviving ice wraiths had stuck around a little bit longer so that she could kill them, too.

"Let's stay here for a while," Leon suggested. "Rest and recover so that if we're attacked like this again, we can be ready."

Valeria and Maia agreed, and the three relaxed as much as they could in the clearing that the battle had created. Maia even conjured a bit of water to douse the fires that Leon's power had started, which had been starting to spread out of control.

Leon, meanwhile, took to investigating the corpses of the banshees that had been left behind. They were about as he remembered—small, humanoid, possessing the proportions of a child about four or five years old if he had to guess. Without the darkness magic that covered them, they looked like nothing more than shriveled, long dead bodies of human children.

[Xaphan...] Leon whispered into his soul realm. The demon had been watching the battle, but he hadn't said anything that might've distracted Leon while the fight was going on.

[Boy,] Xaphan replied. [Good job not dying. Based on what I sensed from those lesser ice demons, that's not as easy of an accomplishment as it might seem.]

[Thanks,] Leon unsarcastically replied. [Got any insights? I... if there's anything you could tell me about these creatures, then I would be grateful.]

[They're certainly demons of a lesser variety, though I'm unsure how they may have gotten here...]
Xaphan said, his usual arrogance and unserious attitude gone in favor of what seemed to Leon to be an almost academic curiosity. [It's possible that they may have been summoned into this forest by people who wanted more power. It's even possible that your Clan summoned them to help project power. Regardless, they're barely a step above animalistic intelligence, they're good for killing and that's about it. There has to be some kind of controlling will behind them, a more powerful demon that directs them...]

[I've never heard of anything quite like that,] Leon said, speaking to all that Xaphan had just posited. [If there had been a more powerful demon living in this Vale, I can't imagine that my father and I would've been able to live here in relative peace for as long as we did...]

[That's a good point,] Xaphan conceded. [Have you seen or heard about any evidence of construction? Creatures like these prefer the cold and the dark, sunlight can weaken them considerably. If they have been here as long as you say, then at the very least I'd have expected some signs of established demonic civilization.]

[What would that look like?] Leon asked.

[Nothing I've yet seen,] Xaphan replied. [Great spires of crystalline ice, each connected to each other by dozens of bridges of varying size.]

[Seems like the sort of thing that should be seen from a long distance off,] Leon observed. [None of it sounds familiar, though.]

[No, the more I think about it, the less I think these demons have any kind of leadership at all,] Xaphan continued. [This attack seemed random and poorly timed. There's no evidence of any settlement. These demons, for the years you say they've been here, should be a lot *greater* than they are. Something else is going on.]

Leon grimaced, knowing that this was a mystery that likely would never be solved. Someone or something had brought the demons here an unknown length of time ago, but at least long enough for any signs of their habitation in the beautiful and pristine Forest of Black and White to have vanished—save for a single ancient stone bridge—and to have gotten a reputation as a dark and inhospitable place.

He hated that idea. He wanted to know why there were demons here, how long they'd been here, and what their current circumstances were, and it infuriated him to know that that knowledge was likely beyond him, long dead with whoever first summoned them.

[Do you know anything about the banshees?] Leon asked, no trace of hope in his voice.

[They're animated by darkness magic,] Xaphan replied, stating the obvious. [Darkness magic is unparalleled in its ability to manipulate the mind and the body, rivaled only by the powers of light magic, and even then, light is mostly restricted to growth and healing. But because of its nature,

darkness is ripe for abuse, which is why, I suppose, that most of you mortals have such a dim view of it, despite it not being that bad of a magical element on its own.]

[It's a darkness attack that the banshees use to send magic power within the body of their foes out of control,] Leon stated.

[Yes,] Xaphan confirmed.

[And it's darkness magic that animates their bodies... animates these corpses,] Leon further observed, his eyes landing on the curled up form of a dead banshee, the resemblance it had for a dead human child unnerving him more than he'd thought it would. He had been about to give it a light kick just to make sure it was dead, but thought better of it upon closer inspection, its mottled gray skin and thin, emaciated form turning his stomach and filling his head with sad and depressing thoughts about just what the creature had been before turning into a banshee.

[Yes,] Xaphan again confirmed.

[But darkness magic isn't *needed* to do these things?] Leon inquired, thinking of the stone giants and the bronze golems in his family's archives. Both of them were animated by lightning wisps, not darkness magic.

[No,] Xaphan answered. [After achieving Apotheosis, power can be split off to create wisps, facsimiles of life that can animate a suitably enchanted form. As you've seen with your stone giants, they can even evolve into more lifelike creatures if given enough time and magical power. If you were more observant, you'd probably have noticed that your fish girl uses attacks that take the form of serpents.]

Leon cocked his head in confusion. [What does that have to do with anything?] Nearly all of Maia's attacks he'd borne witness to had taken the form of serpentine dragon-shaped blasts of water.

[It just reinforces my point, she likely doesn't even realize what it means,] Xaphan haughtily replied. [The greatest power in all the universe is the ability to create life. That's why we call ascending past the tenth-tier 'Apotheosis', or the process of turning into a god. The ability to form power into wisps is effectively creating some kind of life, so gaining that power—along with immortality—means turning into a godlike form.]

[That's a hell of a claim,] Leon said. [Makes sense, I suppose. You're certainly arrogant enough to claim the mantle of divinity despite being far, *far* from having power worthy of the title.]

[Keep on that track and maybe I'll remember that it was *your* family, *your* Clan that made me this way, boy, and that it's you and *you alone* that stands between me and regaining my power.]

[How do you figure that?] Leon asked, smiling in amusement.

[Because you're ignoring what I need to heal,] Xaphan replied. [Build that enchantment scheme to absorb the Mists of Chaos and I'll *show* you what a Lord of Flame can do!]

[I'm looking forward to it. You'd better blow my damn mind, demon. To pieces. Or I won't be the slightest bit amused.]

[I couldn't possibly care less about your amusement,] Xaphan shot back. [But, to get back to my original point, your fish girl uses attacks that take the form of living creatures because she's approaching the

level of power that is capable of creating life. What she's doing is hardly creating life, though, she's probably just acting on instinct, not realizing *why* forming her power into such forms makes them stronger or more manageable.]

Leon relished learning all of this, but as his gaze turned back toward Valeria and Maia, he was prompted to move on, for Valeria looked about ready to collapse, while Maia only seemed to fare marginally better despite her iron-composure. Leon could feel her fatigue, anger, and frustration through their connection, telling all he needed to know about her current physical state.

And that wasn't even touching on his own physical state. His body was so devoid of magic power that there was nothing he wanted to do more than slip into the peaceful embrace of sleep.

[Is there any other wisdom you can provide regarding the ice wraiths?] Leon asked Xaphan.

[I'd tell you to keep your eyes open, but I doubt your puny human eyes can even perceive the evidence of higher beings that you need to watch out for,] Xaphan dismissively replied. [I suppose, if you *do* encounter something powerful enough to command these lesser demons, do be a good human and make use of my power. I know that you're nervous about everyone else seeing our connection, but when push comes to shove, if you've got nothing better to use, then use demon magic against other demon magic. It'll be your best bet to walk away with your life still your own.]

[You just said a lot of words and I liked very few of them,] Leon replied.

[Great, now my partner is starting to not like words. Splendid,] the fire demon sarcastically replied as his attention sank back into Leon's soul realm, leaving him to his own devices.

"I'll say this," Leon said out loud, drawing Maia and Valeria's attention, "I'm tempted to just call it a day after that fight, but I can't imagine a worse decision we could make than to stay here."

"You'll hear no arguments from me," Valeria exhaustedly replied, the prospect of getting moving again already putting a bit of animation back into her tired body. "I'm ready to get moving again..."

"I doubt we'll get very far," Leon replied, silently noting Valeria's obvious fatigue alongside his own tired muscles. He'd expended so much magic power that even after minutes of absorbing magic power from the air, letting his body create more in its bone marrow, and pulling out what little remained in his soul realm, he felt like it would require at least a good night's rest to recover completely—though it would take *much* longer than that to fill up his empty soul realm again without outside assistance.

So, to find a place to lay low for the night, he quickly projected his magic senses and took a good look at the area they found themselves in.

Leon continued, "Still, we should get moving again. I can see a lake not far from here that looks like as good a place as any to spend the night. It might take a bit of time to get the proper wards set up to stave off ice wraith attention, so let's get moving now while we still have daylight."

"Sounds like a plan," Valeria said with about as much cheer as she could muster, which wasn't all that much.

Maia, meanwhile, gave Leon nothing more than a silent nod before she returned to glowering into the forest. Leon could feel killing intent roiling in her aura, her magic power churning with her anger at letting those ice wraiths escape.

[We'll get them if they come back,] Leon assured her, whispering comfortingly into her mind. [And we won't be taken by surprise again. I promise you that.]

[If we see them again, I'm going to tear them apart,] Maia replied, keeping her vow simple yet losing not a single iota of killing intent with its lack of additional details.

[I'd expect nothing less,] Leon replied, briefly wrapping his arms around her from behind.

A minute later, the three were back to trudging through the forest, but this time, all three were much more alert for any changes to their scenery that they could discern. Leon, in particular, was keeping an eye out for any sign of demonic magic that he might detect that could spell an imminent attack by ice wraiths. Given his connection with Xaphan, he was uniquely qualified to look for such magics.

Their journey, however, remained peaceful as they continued on. If they were being watched by any more ice wraiths that managed to slip past Leon's senses, there was no evidence that Leon could find of it. This comforted Leon none, though, for he was certain that they were being watched from somewhere. He felt no magic senses washing over them, nothing that he could point to as evidence, just a strong suspicion that more ice wraiths—or just *something* in general—was watching them.

But nothing attacked them.

It wasn't long before they arrived at the lake that Leon saw with his magic senses. It was a fairly small thing, barely worthy of being called a lake, but it was an open area of the forest that let in plenty of light from the late afternoon sun. It did strike him as a bit odd that the trees, which were otherwise so dense, were all at least a hundred feet or more from the shore of the lake, but his magic senses couldn't pick up anything strange about the water, so he dismissed it as meaningless paranoia.

"Let's set up close to the bank," Leon said, his golden eyes warily watching the tree line.

"If you say so," Valeria replied, her voice strained and tired. Neither she nor Maia said anything, but Leon could tell that every step was growing harder for them the further northeast they walked. He hated to see them working so hard just to put one foot in front of the other, but he also took it as an encouraging sign that they were apparently drawing closer to the source of whatever seemed to be weighing their magic down. It was likely that whatever the map from the Cradle was pointing to and whatever Justin had gone to investigate were linked to this unknown source.

Leon could understand her hesitation; it would make them a hell of a target and give them very little cover. However, he was willing to risk that rather than having them spend the night among the trees and glowing flora with layers and layers of leaves between them and the open sky.

The only thing that had him feeling a bit more down was the fact that they'd probably need to set up a watch. All three of them sleeping at the same time just felt like serving themselves up to the ice wraiths on a silver platter.

A few minutes later, they found a suitable place to set up their tents not too far from the shore of the lake, but distant enough from the tree line that they'd have a few seconds to get on their feet in case they were attacked during the night.

In a matter of ten minutes, Leon and Valeria had both of their tents ready and set up—Maia would, of course, be sleeping with Leon in his tent when she wasn't on watch. However, barely a minute passed after they finished before a titanic aura suddenly exploded out of the lake, practically knocking all three of them off their feet with its unforeseen intensity.

"What the..." Leon barely got out before his sword was back in his hand and he stood side-by-side with Maia and Valeria staring into the lake.

"What's going on?!" Valeria asked in panic as a few threads of killing intent wound its way through the aura they were sensing.

"We... may have missed something..." Leon replied, his voice wavering as his heartbeat accelerated with fear. This mysterious aura had him silently panicking as he wondered if they had accidentally wandered into the territory of some terribly mannered and terribly powerful creature.

[No...] Maia whispered, her voice barely audible to Leon.

He glanced over at his river nymph lover and saw her shaking, her eyes wide and disbelieving as she stared at the water.

"What is it?" he asked aloud for Valeria's benefit. "Naiad..."

[No, no, no,] the river nymph repeated, apparently not even aware that she was speaking into his mind as her aura rose to match whatever had just made its presence known, though her face was morphing into one of greater and greater fear.

Leon's head whipped around back to the lake, a horrific thought coming to his mind. It was soon proven accurate as, not too far from the lakefront, the water began to rise. This 'bump' on the water grew tall and thin, before almost instantaneously taking on the form of a pale, buxom, *beautiful* young woman. However, any admiration Leon may have felt for her soft, heart-shaped features, and her nude, well-endowed figure vanished as he realized that this woman had no legs—instead, her hips just kept going for a few dozen feet, her pale skin transforming into dark green scales.

This was a Gorgon. *The* Gorgon that he'd known resided in this Vale, he recognized. Unthinkingly, his golden eyes met hers, taking in her reptilian pupils and the cold regard that they stared back at him with.

Knowing that this monster was probably more dangerous than the ice wraiths they'd just fought off a few hours before, Leon could only think one word as his heart sank in despair.

'*Shit.*'

Chapter 489: Facing Old Fears III

Leon stared in shock and horror at the Gorgon, his eyes locked with hers, gold and dark sea green. She had slit pupils like a reptile, which made a degree of sense given her serpentine lower half, and as her

mouth opened in what seemed like surprise, Leon could see a pair of long sharp fangs that rather uncannily resembled the fangs of a vampire, though hers were quite a bit longer.

And then, her demeanor suddenly changed like a switch had been flipped. Any surprise on her face vanished as a predatory gleam entered her eyes. She smiled, baring none of her teeth, and her voice rang in their minds like a lightly resonant bell.

[What have we here...? Three young things have wandered into my domain...]

Her voice was soft and soothing, a voice more suited to a lover in an intimate situation than a deadly monster at the edge of the world. For Leon, it only served to highlight the stark dissonance between her human and serpentine halves.

The Gorgon paused as she stared at the three of them, seeming to revel in the shock that her appearance caused, which gave Leon enough time to compose himself and to examine his companions.

Valeria, despite being the weakest of the three, seemed to be doing the best of them, at least mentally speaking. As a fifth-tier mage, she had little idea just how powerful the Gorgon was.

Maia, on the other hand, stared at her twisted kin with nothing short of terror, her aura chaotic, her legs shaking as she took a couple of steps back.

Speaking into her mind, Leon said in a tone as comforting as he could manage, [I'm still here with you, no matter what.]

Maia froze for a moment, then seemed to straighten up. The terror written all across her face swiftly vanished, replaced a second later with steely determination and the silent threat of violence if anything should happen.

And then the Gorgon's voice whispered into their minds again. [Who are you, and why have you come here?] As she spoke, she slowly began to slither toward them as if the surface of the lake were solid ground.

Leon's heart began to race as he noticed that she didn't seem at all perturbed by Maia's presence—at least, she didn't seem to fear Maia's power. Leon did notice, though, that the Gorgon seemed far more interested in Maia than she did in either him or Valeria, which he thought was a small mercy given the obvious differences in power between them. Still, he was hardly comforted, but he figured that it would probably be best for all of them if whatever this situation was could be solved without violence. He was a far cry from recovered from the fight with the ice wraiths and fighting a Gorgon who was at least of the eighth-tier was high on his list of things he did *not* want to do right now.

He stepped forward and put himself between the Gorgon and Maia and said, "This is your territory? We apologize if we're trespassing, we'll leave if our presence offends..."

The Gorgon's eyes found his once more, and his pulse quickened in response. For all his seventh-tier strength, he felt like a minnow trying to stare down a shark before those eyes.

[An introduction would've served you better,] the Gorgon said, finally reaching dry land and lazily continuing to slither toward them. [Is that not what you humans do when they first meet? Tell each other their names?]

“My name is Leon, if that matters. While it’s true that humans exchange names when meeting, I don’t expect to learn yours.”

[Of course you don’t, you look like you’d know all about my kind,] the Gorgon replied, her tone coming quite close to sarcasm. [I can smell you from here, you and that Naiad reek of each other.]

The Gorgon finally paused not too far away from them, but more than close enough for all three to feel the pressure of her presence, to feel threatened by her proximity. If they were going to run, Leon knew, their chances of surviving such a decision was on the cusp of guaranteed failure, if they hadn’t blown past that point already.

Leon was about to respond, but Maia approached and laid a hand on his shoulder, silencing him immediately. She nodded to him and he stepped back while she stepped forward. Leon also noticed that Valeria had come closer as well, looking more than a little nervous given how Leon and Maia were acting.

A moment later, the Gorgon made a look at Maia that had Leon thinking she spoke into Maia’s mind and didn’t include him or Valeria.

Fortunately for him, Maia cut him in on her end.

[Yes, he’s my mate,] she said, a protective glare entering her eyes as she faced down the Gorgon.

The monster then stared at Leon again, an almost hungry look in her eyes. A second later, Leon felt Maia’s aura spike in intensity and killing intent began to radiate from her without restraint. Even Leon found himself growing a bit weak in the knees under it, while Valeria beside him was barely able to remain on her feet.

[He’s my *mate*,] Maia repeated as droplets of water coalesced around her body in a clear display of intention. If the Gorgon made any moves against Leon, then Maia would stop it.

Leon, of course, had no desire to just watch that happen, so he started to channel his own power and righted himself. He’d move to help his lover in her battle, he just hoped that Maia was powerful enough to not need it that badly.

Turning his attention inward, he asked Xaphan, [Demon... can you tell how strong that one is?]

He felt Xaphan’s attention come back to him, then a pulse of his magic senses leave his soul realm, all while the Gorgon seemed to be speaking with Maia. A moment later, Xaphan responded.

[She’s a powerful eighth-tier being. If I had to guess, your fish girl is the weaker of the two.]

Leon clenched his jaw, unsurprised and not reassured.

[Thanks,] he said as he refocused back on what was happening. It seemed to him that the Gorgon was being quite long-winded with Maia, since his river nymph lover didn’t seem to be responding, but her aura didn’t diminish in the slightest, indicating that at the very least, no accord had been reached. Based on how much the Gorgon was staring at him, too, he figured that he was the subject of at least some of what she was saying. He also felt a few threads of killing intent, giving him the impression that unlike what happened between him and Maia when they met, this Gorgon probably wasn’t going to restrain herself if she wanted to take something from him.

Finally, Maia spoke again—or, at least, let him in on her side of the conversation.

[I've heard about you from my mother,] she said to the Gorgon, eliciting a look of surprise, the first reaction that cut through the Gorgon's attitude since their exchange began. [I am a Naiad born of the Empress of Saron. He is mine and I am his; I will not allow you to take his blood, no matter what you say.]

The Gorgon grimaced at the mention of Maia's mother, or who Leon assumed was her mother, and her aura seemed to dim. Her reptilian eyes swept over Leon and Valeria once more, lingering for a moment on Leon.

In that moment, Leon knew exactly what was going to happen. He saw it in the Gorgon's eyes. He didn't wait for the killing intent to hit him, he just acted, drawing his sword and calling upon what few scraps of power he could command.

He moved not a moment too soon, for an instant later, a stony fist burst through the ground and slammed into him. With his power coursing through his veins, Leon was able to take the hit well enough, and a second later he let loose with a blast of lightning out through his legs, shattering the stone fist to the sound of deafening thunder.

Valeria, who had been next to him, drew her weapon, too, and prepared to face off against the Gorgon. Maia, however, moved first, summoning another of her serpentine water dragons in less than a second and letting it charge the Gorgon. Then, before the first hit the creature, she conjured another from the lake behind the Gorgon and had it charge, too.

The Gorgon derisively smirked and built a pair of stone walls to cover herself, the stone snapping into place just as the water dragons were about to crash into her. Instead, they hit the walls with tremendous force and immediately lost cohesion, collapsing back into formless water. The walls then slid back into the earth to reveal the Gorgon still standing there, her lips turned up in an expression of dismissive mirth as if bragging that the attacks had been so weak that she no longer needed the walls to protect herself.

A moment later, four hands made of stone erupted from the ground at Maia's feet and wrapped their fingers around her calves, anchoring her in place. Or at least, they would've, if Maia hadn't immediately melted her legs down into water and slid out of their grasp, reforming her legs a couple of feet away.

However, Leon's thrill at seeing his lover instantly escape was dampened when bright red magic-rich mana began to spill from small lacerations in her legs. These cuts seemed barely flesh wounds, but he'd never seen Maia injured even that much, before.

His face turning into a deep scowl, Leon channeled his magic power into his weapon, letting it fill with all the silver-blue lightning he could summon. At the same time, Valeria began to summon floating icicles and hurling them at the Gorgon—to little effect, unfortunately, as they shattered upon hitting the monster and left no visible wounds—while Maia summoned a third water dragon and sent it charging at her foe.

The Gorgon smiled, seeming utterly unfazed at the power being brought down upon her. A wall of stone spikes burst from the earth and skewered the water dragon, tearing it apart and sending the water

washing into the lake. Valeria's ice was barely a nuisance, so they were largely ignored even as they hit the Gorgon's body and shattered.

Leon's lightning, on the other hand, drew her attention. He felt her gaze turn from Maia to him like a ton of bricks, her killing intent almost disrupting his attack before he managed to get it off. However, he barely managed to hang on and prevent his power from uselessly crackling out of his sword.

He just kept charging, letting the blade start to glow silver again as it absorbed his lightning. It wasn't going to be much, definitely not a match for the last attack he threw at the ice wraiths, but he wasn't just going to stand there and let his exhausted comrades fight without him.

Fortunately for him, Maia waved her arm and brought into being several more water creatures, having seen her dragons being torn to pieces. A stag, a lion, a tiger, and a bear all appeared before her and charged in separate directions toward the Gorgon, demanding her attention and keeping her from disrupting Leon again.

The stag and the bear charged headlong at the monster, but the Gorgon sneered at the water beasts and their straight-forward attacks. Before the stag could lower its head and bring its antlers to bear, a stony arm exploded out of the earth beneath it with such force that the conjured creature was turned into a cloud of water droplets. The bear fared little better as a stone claw ripped into its flank faster than it could react, causing it to collapse back into a wave of water.

The lion and tiger, however, had gone around the Gorgon on both sides in a flanking maneuver, sacrificing the other two to try and get closer to the monster. The tiger moved quicker, leaping at the Gorgon with its claws and jaws outstretched. With almost dismissive ease, the Gorgon used the tiger's charge to obliterate it, conjuring a stone spike in its path and letting it impale itself upon it.

The lion, in turn, slowed almost to a halt as the tiger collapsed into formless water. The Gorgon didn't even look at it, treating it as if it were nothing she needed to worry about.

A moment later, Maia unleashed a wave of water out of her body, her eyes wide with anger, frustration, and fear. She didn't create any creatures to act with a degree of autonomy, she just let loose with all of her power, letting a frightening torrent of water burst from her like a broken dam and rush down toward her foe.

The Gorgon finally chose this moment to move. Her smile grew wider as she charged to meet the wave head-on. Maia's water hit her with all the force of a fifty-foot tidal wave, more than enough to crush several companies of Bull Kingdom soldiers.

But instead of being crushed, the Gorgon simply melted away into the water. Maia reeled back, her surprise so strong that Leon almost balked at what he could sense through their connection.

A moment later, the Gorgon reformed on the other side of the wave, her serpentine lower half pushing her out back onto the ground where she slithered with horrifying speed right at Maia, her arm outstretched and aiming for the river nymph's throat.

Maia wasn't going to be able to respond in time, that much Leon could see plain as day. She had been thrown too off-kilter by the Gorgon slipping right through her water despite Maia's power saturating it,

and Valeria's continued attacks were so ineffective against the monster that she was being practically ignored.

This was it. There would be no more charging his power. He had to use what he had, even though Leon doubted that it would be enough. By this point, his blade was glowing brightly with silver-blue lightning, and he hoped with everything that he had that it would be enough.

Leon swung the blade, roaring with exertion as he stabbed forward, aiming straight for the Gorgon's heart.

A blinding bolt of lightning was discharged from the weapon, bathing the surroundings in silver light tinged with blue. It was accompanied by a clap of thunder so loud that the nearby trees flexed and leaves were torn from their branches as the shockwave hit them.

This powerful bolt seemed to hit the Gorgon as soon as it left Leon's sword, exploding upon her body and turning her into what looked like a vaguely person-shaped pillar of silver-blue lightning.

Leon's vision went dark for a second or two as he barely managed to keep himself standing after that attack. He estimated it would've been strong enough to vaporize the Earthshaker Paladin in one hit under the right conditions despite his relative lack of magic reserves when the fight began, and he hoped that it would do significant enough damage to the Gorgon that Maia would be able to finish the job.

When he refocused and saw the situation, his heart sank. The Gorgon had been stopped in her tracks, but apart from a few light burns across her hands, she seemed otherwise none the worse for wear. In her hands she held a long black rod that continued to crackle and pop with silver-blue lightning, flashing with arcs of lightning as if it were holding a charge. The Gorgon, though, held it as if it were a mundane thing, completely separate from Leon's power.

[Run!!!] Xaphan suddenly shouted in Leon's mind. [You can't beat this creature, even if you called upon my power! There's no point in staying here to be killed!]

Leon agreed wholeheartedly that they weren't going to do much against this creature and that it was better to retreat now, while they were still relatively uninjured, but he wasn't going to just take off and leave Maia or Valeria, both of whom seemed a little stunned by the light and thunder of Leon's lightning bolt. The only fortunate thing, in fact, that Leon could see was that the Gorgon wasn't moving to take advantage of the situation. She seemed far more interested in the lightning that danced across the black rod than with Leon or the other two for the moment.

Leon stumbled over to Valeria to see how the silver-haired woman was doing after his flashy attack. She seemed fine, and when Leon lightly rested a hand on her shoulder, she jerked up and seemed to recover. A moment later, Leon was at Maia's side, desperately crying into her mind, [Maia! Can you hear me?!]

[Yes...] Maia moaned as she righted herself. [I don't think we can win this...]

[I don't think we can, either,] Leon admitted. For Valeria's sake, he said out loud, "Time to run. We can't stay here and die. We have to run."

Maia didn't argue, and Valeria was completely on board with that plan. However, the Gorgon simply sneered and said, [None of you are going to be leaving quite so easily...]

"GO!!" Leon shouted, and all three of them turned tail and ran into the forest, leaving their tents and the camping equipment they'd already prepared behind without hesitation. The only saving grace that Leon could think of was that the Gorgon seemed to primarily be an earth mage, despite her retention of the ability to transform into water, which he knew would slow her down.

He hoped it would be enough for them, in their own weakness, to escape.

Chapter 490: Desperate Last Moves

Leon, Maia, and Valeria tore off into the forest, leaving the Gorgon and the lake behind. He didn't know exactly why, but it took the Gorgon a few seconds to start her pursuit, which he was immensely grateful for. As a creature of earth magic, her speed wasn't anything to brag about, and that one trait was enough for the three to put some distance between her and them. Even Valeria, who was at least three tiers below her in power, was able to stay ahead.

Unfortunately, when she did get moving, the Gorgon moved quickly enough that the gap between them didn't widen as much as Leon would've liked. However, what was much worse was the fact that he knew that she was powerful enough to easily blanket the entire Vale with her magic senses. There was effectively no way for them to escape her sight by running alone.

Leon's mind raced through the possibilities as he led the other two deeper into the dark forest, over tree roots and past spectacularly glowing flowers. They moved swiftly, but even with Leon leading the way, the Gorgon stayed in hot pursuit, proving Leon correct over the course of about ten minutes that they weren't going to be able to shake the monster from their trail.

As it so happened, they had started running in a roughly northwestern direction. Leon hadn't intended to go that way, it had just worked out that way when they took off into the forest. That gave them a few options to consider.

Their destination was the northeastern corner of the Vale, where Leon felt certain this 'pillar' that Justin was seeking was located. There was the possibility that there might be something there they could use to escape the attention of the Gorgon, but Leon wasn't hopeful enough to risk their lives on such a course of action. He was leaning towards something much more dangerous.

He still had his invisibility ring and his supply of spells had been largely restocked after two weeks in his workshop back in the capital. He felt like maybe he could pull off some kind of hit-and-run tactics with the Gorgon, trusting in his lightning magic to get away so long as he opened up enough of a window for Maia and Valeria to escape without him. He didn't need much of his magic— less even than was required for a lightning bolt—in order to gain a boost to his speed.

There were so many other factors to consider, though, that kept Leon running even when that possible plan entered his mind. They could still keep running, he'd thought. They could probably just turn a little bit more to the west and figure out some way to run straight to the edge of the Vale and leave the Gorgon behind.

In doing so, they'd abandon any hope of seeing just what Justin had gone to investigate, and possibly even any hope of seeing Justin himself. Leon wasn't ready to just let that go, he didn't want to wait until he was ninth or tenth-tier to come back, not when the trail seemed so hot right now after they'd found Rhea.

For Leon, leaving the Vale would be the worst-case option, something to use just in case everything else failed.

So, after running almost three miles away from the lake in less than fifteen minutes, tearing through the forest's underbrush along the way with little regard for caution or safety, Leon made his decision. The Gorgon hadn't called off her pursuit, and it had become clear that whatever she wanted, she wasn't going to stop until she had it. He'd have to directly act if he wanted her off their tail.

[Keep going north!] Leon shouted into Maia's mind, trusting in his eighth-tier river nymph lover to keep herself and Valeria safe if he got himself tied down in a pitched battle. [I need to throw her off! I'll find you later!]

Out loud and without waiting for Maia to respond, Leon shouted to Valeria, "Follow Naiad!"

A moment later, he activated his ring of invisibility. Light bent around him, flashing for a moment before his form seemed to wink out of existence.

[I'm not going to just leave you!] Maia then shouted into his mind, her pace slowing with Leon's disappearance. [If you're going to fight, then so will I!]

Leon grimaced as he turned around to face the Gorgon. He'd already called upon his bow and a few choice spell arrows and had one nocked. He hated this idea, but he couldn't bring himself to tell Maia to leave him behind again. His only real concern was Valeria. She was too weak to survive for long in the Forest of Black and White if she were to attract the attention of more ice wraiths, so he didn't want her to go off on her own.

It seemed he wouldn't have to worry about that, though, as Valeria followed Maia's lead and slowed down. "I'm willing to fight!" Leon heard her say, though her flagging aura spoke volumes about how capable she was of following through.

He wasn't able to hear Maia's mental response to Valeria, but from the way she and Valeria looked at each other and nodded, it seemed that they'd come to a quick agreement about something. A moment later, light began to bend around Maia's body as the emerald ring on her finger flashed with light.

Leon almost laughed at his own stupidity. He'd completely forgotten that Maia had an invisibility ring of her own. He still worried about their chances, but with the both of them preparing to make sneak attacks on the Gorgon, they *might* just be able to open enough of a window to escape, or even to win this fight.

Leon saw as he looked back a brief moment where the Gorgon paused. Clearly, the disappearance of the most powerful people that she was pursuing had caused her to raise her guard and give her a second thought or two. He felt the monster's magic senses pulse out, searching for them, but he was gratified to see that the Gorgon apparently still couldn't find them. The monster's expression grew wrathful, and she made a beeline for Valeria.

Leon was a little frustrated to see that Valeria had stopped, but without him or Maia there to cover her, he couldn't blame her. Moving through even the western half of the forest was dangerous enough alone at her power level, let alone the eastern half. But this also gave him a good opportunity.

[Take the Gorgon's left,] Leon silently whispered to Maia. She didn't respond in words, but he felt the vague notions of her whereabouts that he got from their connection indicate that she was moving in that direction. He then peeled off and got set up to attack the Gorgon's right as the monster moved to reach Valeria about two hundred feet past him.

The Gorgon was moving quickly and didn't seem to be taking any precautions. With Leon and Maia gone, she had only Valeria in her unwavering gaze. Despite her relative lack of speed, her long snake's tail had her moving quite smoothly through the dense forest, and soon enough, she was coming close to Leon.

[Wait for it,] Leon whispered to his river nymph lover as he aimed his bow, a Thunderblast spell tied to the arrow. [Just another second...]

The Gorgon drew near Leon, almost passing him as she sprinted—or slithered quickly—for Valeria. Leon waited until right before she passed him before he drew the bowstring back and loosed his arrow.

There were only about thirty feet between them, and the arrow crossed that distance so quickly it was almost instantaneous. Leon's aim was true enough, and the arrow hit the Gorgon in the side of her neck. The arrowhead didn't penetrate far into the Gorgon's skin, but that was hardly what Leon was counting on; as the arrowhead broke the Gorgon's skin, the Thunderblast spell detonated in a terrific clap of thunder. Half a dozen young trees close to the blast were shattered into sawdust and splinters, while the spell's tremendous lightning bathed the surroundings in light and sparks. Unfortunately, one of the arcs of lightning came close enough to Leon that his ring's power failed, forcing him back into visibility.

Even worse, it had taken what little magic Leon had managed to regenerate to power that spell. But as he staggered back, he saw something that had him feeling more encouraged than dejected: he watched the Gorgon's body go limp and be hurled by the blast roughly in Maia's direction.

The river nymph, who was far enough away to maintain her invisibility, struck quickly, conjuring a water dragon and having it tear past the trees and savagely rip into the Gorgon.

Only a moment later, a stone spike erupted from the ground and 'killed' the dragon, but not before damage had been done. The Gorgon swiftly got back up and glared into the forest, locking eyes with Leon, but she both failed to find Maia and she was bleeding from a dozen wounds scattered all over her body. Most were superficial at best, but the bleeding from her neck and a gash on her abdomen where the water dragon had sunk its teeth indicated that the surprise attack wasn't for naught.

[I am going to devour every bit of flesh on your body...] she furiously growled as she began to slither in Leon's direction.

This, however, gave both Valeria and Maia a good shot at her back. Valeria took as much advantage of this as she could, pulling a bow from her soul realm and firing an arrow with one of Leon's white fire spells attached at the monster's back, while Maia summoned half a dozen water wolves that tore off after the Gorgon.

The Gorgon growled like a wild animal, stopped in her tracks, and conjured a stone wall to block Valeria's arrow, having seemingly grown more cautious of such things after Leon's surprise attack. The arrow hit the wall and exploded in white fire, proving the monster correct in her caution.

Maia's wolves, on the other hand, rushed in from the side, with two of them managing to lock their jaws around parts of her serpentine tail before the Gorgon was able to rip a stone out of the earth and detonate it, killing all of them with stony shrapnel.

By then, Leon had already prepped another of his weakest spell arrows, took a deep breath to get a bit of magic power into his blood as he called upon scrap and spark of power that may have hidden itself in his body, and loosed the arrow at the Gorgon, just barely having a clear shot around her stone wall. The Gorgon shrieked and conjured another stone wall, blocking Leon's arrow. What wasn't blocked, however, was the fiery explosion that rippled out from the impact point and bent over the top of the wall, licking at the Gorgon's head.

It didn't seem like it did much in the way of damage, but it was enough to prove to all four combatants that the Gorgon was now on the defensive.

It seemed this was not a place that she wanted to be in, but she didn't seem aware that her opponents were on their last legs, so after shooting Leon and Valeria one last hateful look as they prepared more arrows, the earth beneath the Gorgon opened up and she disappeared within.

Maia had just finished summoning a pair of water lions, but as the Gorgon vanished, she held them back. Leon and Valeria, too, relaxed their bows and waited, their magic senses projected, watching and waiting for any sign of the Gorgon's reappearance, both barely managing to stay on their feet.

The Gorgon did not reappear, leaving the three to stand there for an entire minute in silence, their guard as raised as it could be.

After what seemed like an eternity, Maia spoke to them both. [I think she's gone. Those injuries we inflicted were probably worse than they appeared.]

"Stay on alert, anyway," Leon said, recalling his bow and arrows into his soul realm and half-walking half-staggering over to the broken section of forest, where the stone walls still stood and the broken trees lay and several fires were starting to burn. "If she can move through the earth like a stone giant, then she could pop up anywhere at any time."

Maia let her invisibility drop as she took a few steps in his direction, though both she and Valeria refrained from getting too close to him. They both understood that it was better to remain a bit distant for a while, so that the Gorgon would have a tougher time attacking all of them at once than she would if they bunched up.

But there was no sign of the Gorgon still around, she'd vanished into the earth. Once Leon had confirmed that with his own eyes, his gaze turned upward. He could get a few tiny glimpses of the sky through the thick leafy canopy—more now that he'd destroyed several of the trees in his initial strike—and he could tell that the sky was growing dark. Night had almost fallen upon the Vale, and with it would come more ice wraiths and banshees.

"We need to move," he said. "I want to keep going deeper. Your thoughts?"

His question was directed at both Maia and Valeria. If they both agreed to turn back, he'd do so, but he'd come so far and he didn't want to turn back around now, despite the dangers they'd faced already since crossing the river and their current state of near-total magic depletion.

"I want to find my father," Valeria firmly stated, her breath sounding thin and raspy. "If he's out here as we think he is, then he's probably in some kind of danger. I can't leave until I know for sure."

Leon nodded and turned his eyes toward Maia.

The river nymph Queen, the only one of them still capable of fighting with any magic at all, was staring at the ground where the Gorgon had disappeared, a look of muted fear and disgust on her face. A moment later, though, she looked up and met Leon's eyes.

[I'll not let that one run me out of this Vale like a beaten dog,] she viciously declared. [We keep moving.]

Leon nodded again as a smile appeared on his face. He expected no other answers from either of them, even though the day's events had proven just how dangerous his old home could be.

"Very well. We need to find somewhere to spend the night, and we don't have much time left to look, so let's move fast."