

The Storm King

Chapter 5: The Hunt I

The next morning, Leon had everything he would need packed up and ready. His bow was slung over his shoulder, arrows on his back, knife at his belt. He had a bag with him full of food and a waterskin at his belt.

Artorias was dressed similarly, just with his sword and satchel as well.

Seeing Leon, Artorias asked "Ready to go?"

Leon nodded in response.

"Alright, go open the door, I'll lock things up here."

Leon walked down the ramp leading out, while Artorias went to the central obelisk. There were three small formations on the side facing the exit, runes carved into a circle, and he placed his hand in one of them. The obelisk briefly shook and the runes on its surface lit up. A nigh-imperceptible barrier had been raised around the compound, its highest level of defense.

With this done, Artorias followed Leon out.

As the two men locked the door behind them, the compound became like a mighty fortress, all but impenetrable.

"So, what should we be on the lookout for?" asked Leon.

"Keep an eye out for any beast with significant amounts of magic power. I suppose we could settle for a black-iron bear if we absolutely have to, but I'd rather find something with a higher degree of power."

"Yesterday, you said a river nymph or a tree sprite might do, but they're weaker than a black-iron bear."

"Make no mistake little lion, a black-iron bear is stronger and will kill you faster and bloodier, but nymphs and sprites have more magic, and magic is what we need."

And with that, the two made their way into the forest. The morning was uneventful, with the two trudging through the outer-forest and seeing nothing bigger than a few large hares, so they rested a while for lunch.

Leon hardly touched his meal of dried meat and bread and couldn't seem to sit still. He was still a first-tier mage after spending five years training, and the knowledge of having hidden powers he had to awaken filled him with excitement every time he thought about it. But the one thing that really gave him pause was the ritual itself. He knew next to nothing about it, save that he needed to drink mana.

"Father, there's something I'd like to ask."

"Go for it," Artorias responded between mouthfuls of bread.

"What did you kill to awaken your bloodline?"

Artorias stopped chewing and got an odd look on his face. He was a man who enjoyed his food, and Leon had somewhat of a difficult time seeing what kind of expression he made around the swollen cheeks.

"Sorry, is that a question I shouldn't ask? You didn't explain the etiquette for this ritual. If there even is etiquette for it." Leon asked worriedly.

Artorias finally swallowed his food and smiled. "No, it's fine." He faced Leon and had a big smile on his face. "When I was your age, my father brought me out to hunt down a certain flying beast. We had been getting reports of this thing swooping down into farms and stealing an entire pig in each claw and flying away before the farmer could defend his livestock."

"What kind of beast was it? A light-winged eagle? A griffin?" Leon asked excitedly, but quieted down before asking "Was it a drake?"

Artorias was slightly taken aback by Leon's sudden passionate questioning and looked a little embarrassed as he answered. "No... it was actually a Cartallian Hawk..."

Leon's look of excitement quickly vanished. "A Cartallian Hawk? *Really?* How did one of those things carry off two pigs at once?! They're maybe twice the size of a crow, no way they could steal even one pig, let alone two!" He stared at Artorias, waiting for an answer.

"Ok, well maybe it was only a single pig." Leon kept staring at Artorias, clearly not believing his father. "A baby pig is still a pig." Leon could only roll his eyes at that. "Well, we went out to the areas it had been seen most frequently, and we waited. For three days, we slept in a tree, watching the sky. But our patience bore fruit, for we saw that hawk flying around on the fourth day. So, I did what I had to, drew my bow and put an arrow through the thing's eye on my first shot!"

"Really? First shot?" Leon asked incredulously.

"When did you get so damned cynical? You used to believe my stories."

"Yeah, but then I learned you exaggerate more than you don't." Something quickly occurred to Leon, though. "If you only needed a hawk, why did you say I needed an ice wraith?"

"A hunch. I can sense our bloodline's aura coming from you, but it seems off. Familiar, yet strange and foreign. That you have yet to awaken may be the problem, but I just get the feeling that your awakening may be a little harder than most. A better, higher quality mana catalyst than mine would go far in soothing my worries."

"*Maybe* the problem... Is there anything else that may explain it?" asked Leon, looking rather troubled now.

Artorias was silent for a while before answering. "All I am comfortable saying is that your mother had her secrets, secrets probably passed down to you. Secrets she didn't even tell me, though I probably wouldn't have believed her if she had."

'I'd believe her now, though' he thought.

Leon watched his father, hoping he would continue, but his hopes were dashed. Artorias simply put away his half-finished meal, and sat there, leaning against a tree and staring off into the distance.

Leon didn't try to talk to Artorias now. There would be little point. He'd tried to talk about his family before, but simply mentioning these things would more often than not make Artorias so depressed that he wouldn't say a word and would even stay silent for the rest of the day.

The next few hours were spent in silence. Artorias got them moving again about fifteen minutes after Leon finished his food, and they continued walking through the forest. The forest was quite large, and much of the terrain was very rough, with a thick underbrush and more than a few small hills and cliffs, so Artorias had no expectations that they would find what they were looking for in a single day. But there were still a few hotspots he knew of that he wanted to check.

They first arrived at a small shallow tributary of a larger nearby river, filled with extraordinarily clear water. But this small river had no fish, no obvious living things within. Even the trees and grass stopped growing several dozen feet before the water's edge.

They didn't stray too close to the water. The safest place was well within the tree line, and that was where they were. They simply followed the river upstream, but at a safe distance. It didn't take long before they found something.

This 'something' looked like a bathing goddess, splashing water onto herself in the middle of the river. Most men would immediately lose themselves in her otherworldly

beauty, but Artorias knew better. Leon was a little taken in, but he quickly regained control over himself before doing anything stupid.

She had the kind of pale and unblemished skin of a rich noblewoman that spent all her days indoors and out of the sun, and slender body that all but cried out to be embraced. She had long blonde hair that fell halfway down her back, and a face with soft features and an innocent, carefree look. Her eyes were closed, enjoying the feeling of the water on her body, but if she opened them Leon and Artorias would see her yellow reptilian eyes.

But they didn't need to see her eyes to know what she was. They only had to look down, as her body below the waist merged with the river water, completely disappearing just below the hips. This was a river nymph, laying out a trap to catch anything that came close. If Leon hadn't been able to control himself, was captivated by her beauty and ran over to her, she would've wrapped her arms around him and dragged him under the water. She would then use her magic to transform into water to enter his body and eat him from the inside out.

Despite their beautiful appearance and rare intelligence, river nymphs were cruel and uncaring beasts, and those that crossed their paths would rarely be heard from again.

Leon, quiet as he could, went to draw his bow and an arrow, but was stopped by Artorias.

"Wait, she's got friends."

Leon froze and continued to watch. Sure enough, three more nymphs rose up out of the crystal-clear water, their bodies appearing only after leaving the river. All four then immediately began rapidly swimming upriver.

Leon frowned and asked "They're probably going to meet up with more of their kind. Should we follow?"

"We can, for a ways. We might catch one on its own. Might not, too, but taking a quick look at where they're going won't hurt."

They pursued the river nymphs for a while upriver, going steadily north, always staying out of sight of the water. Artorias could make this rather easy, as he and Leon could stay well into the forest and he wouldn't lose sight of the nymphs, but this was Leon's hunt, so Leon would have to rely on himself for most of the work.

Suddenly, contrary to that policy, Artorias grabbed Leon's arm and told him to hold back. He could see where the nymphs were going now, and it was not a place they should follow.

The river went far enough north to start getting close to the edge of the mountains that surround all the Northern Vales, and it is from the melting snow on the mountains that the river is formed. The nymphs were making their way towards the bottom of a waterfall, where several dozen other nymphs had gathered. They were all gazing up in reverence at the top of the waterfall. A monster had come down from the mountains and was looking down at all of them, a monster with the upper half of a beautiful woman, and the lower half of a dark-green snake.

A Gorgon, a terrifying monster that has a great control of both earth and water magic, eats stone and possesses the unique ability to petrify someone simply with eye contact.

Artorias could fight ice wraiths, but a Gorgon would not be so easy, so he had them turn around and leave quick as can be. He knew that if he could see the Gorgon with his own magical senses, then she could see them as well, so he and Leon abandoned stealth and tore off back into the depths of the forest where the creature wouldn't follow.

There wasn't much time left in the day, but enough to go to one more place.

The one closest was a large glade, a section of the forest surrounded by immense boulders, that almost sealed off a portion of the forest. Within this glade were a number of heartwood trees, with dark brown bark and bright golden leaves.

There was always some creature of the forest that desires to call this glade home, but heartwood trees are not so welcoming. They are extraordinarily beautiful when viewed from afar, and even when walked among, but lingering too long will see them start to emit a powerful magical aura so strong that not even the most terrifying beast of the forest would dare stick around.

But there are still a few creatures drawn by the immense amount of magic power that gathers around the trees, and Artorias thought they might be able to catch one of sufficient strength around the glade.

But in truth, going there was also just a way to avoid sleeping out in the open during the night.

When they finished the uneventful trek over, the sun was already setting, and they could feel the darker things in the woods beginning to rise. They quickly entered the glade and were spared having to set up a defensive magic circle.

"This place is always quite the sight to behold," Leon whispered. Artorias simply nodded in agreement. Neither man spoke anymore, and they grew solemn. There were old legends about the trees, that they were brought to the plane by fallen gods and contained little hints of divinity. They didn't really believe these stories, but they still kept the peace within the glade.

The night passed peacefully, but they could still hear the shrieking of banshees and the screaming of dying animals out in the distant dark. They kept their distance from the heartwood trees, sleeping in a clearing in the center of the glade.

Artorias had a hard time sleeping that night. The day's conversations had brought things up that were hard to put out of his mind.

It had been more than fifteen years since he had to leave the capital, with nothing but his sword, the clothes on his back, and his son in his arms. He remembered having to find a skilled healer to treat his burns, for his first aid skills were inadequate. He was at least able to stitch up the cuts and lacerations from wind magic on his own, though.

He'd considered stopping at his family's palace, though he hadn't parted on good terms with his father last time they'd met. His noble father didn't want Artorias marrying some girl he'd never heard of before, but Artorias had married her anyway.

It was a good thing Artorias didn't stop there. He'd brought Leon south when he was twelve, figuring it was safe to come out of hiding. He found his family home in ruins, and the locals told him his father and brother had been dead for almost a decade. Artorias immediately took Leon back north and didn't even entertain the thought of going back south until a couple years later.

Leon believed that Artorias had been preparing him for life in the south, in the kingdom, and that may have been true when he was younger, but now Artorias taught him different things. Where once, Leon's days had been spent learning to read and write, learning strategy and the history of the kingdom, Artorias now made him hone his killing intent and his fighting skills. He doubled down on teaching Leon everything he knew about magical engineering, enchantments, and the runic arts.

But the thing Artorias hoped for now, was that Leon could successfully awaken his bloodline, then he could grow strong enough to no longer need Artorias to look out for him in the forest.

Artorias always regretted never reconciling with his father and not going back to him when his home in the capital was attacked, but his biggest regret was the loss of his wife. He loved her with all his heart and wished she could see how Leon had grown. He wanted to hold her in his arms again, hear her voice, feel her presence.

Thinking of these things made him anxious. When he got anxious, he could never sit still. Leon was fast asleep not too far away, so Artorias quietly got up, and went for a walk in the glade.

He breathed in the cool night air and released a small bit of his magic. The wind blew in response, and the clouds overhead split apart revealing the night sky, filled with the stars of distant planes, like tiny silver coins. Every so often, one of these planes would vanish into the darkness, and another would appear somewhere else in the heavens.

He released more of his magic, and the wind blew stronger, rustling the leaves of the trees and drowning out the distant sound of banshees. If Leon could see him now, he would be struck speechless at the ease with which Artorias was using such powerful magic.

He kept walking like that for half an hour, lost in his memories when he noticed something in the dirt in front of him. Upon closer look, he realized it was a pair of heartwood seeds, each about the size of a fingernail. One was gently glowing a dull gold, and the other was black as night.

The sight brought a frown to his face. Heartwood seeds are not so easily obtained, but the legends and myths about the trees used to say that the seeds would only fall for the gods, to be used in their funeral rites.

Seeing the trees in person, Artorias found it hard to say he disbelieved the stories. There was an aura to the trees, a majesty that radiated from the bark.

Down south, most heartwood trees were grown in copses, to be cut down and made into weapons and ships. But here, they still thrived, and Artorias could feel their heavenly aura.

He decided to slip the seeds into his pocket and began to make his way back to the camp. He'd cleared his head and calmed down. It was time to sleep, for there would be plenty of work to do the next day.