

# The Storm King

## Chapter 6: The Hunt II

Leon woke early the next morning to the smell of bread and bacon. Artorias had woken up a little before and thrown together some breakfast.

The two gave each other terse greetings and immediately dug in.

When finished, they quickly packed up and began to make their way out of the glade. As peaceful and serene as it was, it was also not a place to stay for very long.

“Any idea of where to go now?” asked Leon.

“East.”

“*Where* east?”

Artorias looked a bit uncertain but answered without pause. “We need to cross the river, but we should actually go south a bit, to avoid the nymphs.”

“Why avoid them? I just need to kill one and we’re done, no?”

“No. That Gorgon we saw yesterday didn’t leave. Or, at least, I doubt she has. Those nymphs worship her, and so long as she doesn’t return to the mountains, we don’t touch her people.”

“So, then what do you have in mind?”

“If we find a tree sprite, that would be good. A wraith nest might be better, but significantly more dangerous. If all else fails, we could go south to the Banshee Lake, but I’m certain we won’t have to. There are other things in the forest to hunt, so we’ll go further in to check. But first, to cross the river we’re going to have to go south to the Troll’s Bridge to cross, otherwise, we’ll have river nymphs all over us.”

Leon frowned. “I’d rather not have to deal with any of them, especially the troll, but if we must then we must.”

Artorias sighed, looking a bit resigned. “We must. Else, we’d have to go all the way around Banshee Lake and that would take days. Better to just grit our teeth and deal with it.”

With that settled, they went south a ways before turning east, towards the river. Artorias even found the last of the herbs he needed on the way. It didn’t take too long, but the

sun was quite high in the sky by the time they came within sight of the bridge. It was an old thing, but still strong, made entirely of what seemed to be a single piece of stone, it spanned the entire width of the river, all three hundred and fifty feet.

The bridge had been made from earth mages digging up and setting the granite rocks, while fire mages slightly melted it all into one single massive stone. It was then cut and smoothened with more earth magic and carved with intricate patterns.

But that had been many millennia ago. Now, the bridge was cracked and covered in moss and vines, the carved decorations had all but faded away, and had become home to a troll squatter. Still, the first time Artorias had seen it, he was amazed. The bridge itself didn't amaze him so much, as there were similar construction techniques down south, but he recognized what few carvings remained on the stone railings as being from a kingdom that had long faded from all but the most ancient of history books, and even then, the references to it had been frustratingly vague.

This bridge, unremarkable it may be on its own, was proof that that kingdom had extended from the very center of Aeterna to almost as far north as north goes.

But that kingdom had been gone for so long that no one even knew its name, and its works fell into ruin if they still existed at all.

As Artorias and Leon crossed the bridge, they saw on the other side, a large ten-foot tall creature with thick, oily, brown and white fur covering its body, and an immense nose that took up over half of the creature's face emerge from underneath the bridge. As they neared, they could see small, beady black eyes, and a hunched back. It had arms that hung down to its knees, and legs thick as tree trunks.

This was the troll, and it quickly moved to block off the opposite side of the bridge. As the two men approached, it began to beat its fist into the ground, causing the bridge to shake and screamed in a harsh guttural language. Neither could speak this language, but they got the gist of what it was saying:

**"This is *my* bridge! Leave!"**

But they continued to advance. When they had closed to within several dozen feet of the creature, Artorias drew his sword and began to channel his magic through it. The sword lit up with electrical sparks, and arcs of lightning traveled between the ends of the guard and the tip of the blade.

The troll stopped its screaming and restrained itself at the sight. Artorias slowly reached into his coat and took out a large silver coin and tossed it at the troll. The troll caught the coin and brought it closer to its snout to examine it. After a few short seconds, it slowly—almost reluctantly—turned around and left, disappearing back beneath the bridge.

Artorias and Leon finished crossing and continued walking into the forest.

“Dad...”

“Yes, little lion?”

“Why do you always pay that thing when we need to cross? I might not be able to fight it, but I’m sure you could kill it with a single swing of your sword.”

“Why would I do that? Just to save a few coins?” Artorias stopped and looked at Leon. “Yes, I could obliterate that troll with ease, but that doesn’t mean I should. Remember this, boy, strength does not equal righteousness. There are many people who think that being strong means they can do whatever they want, but they are little better than animals. We are not animals. We are civilized men, and we might kill for food, but we don’t kill just to save a small inconvenience. That troll is intelligent. It wouldn’t leave when paid if it weren’t. All it wants is to live in its territory in relative peace, and if it lets us pass for only a few shiny coins than all the better.”

Having said that, Artorias began walking again. Leon had a look of contemplation, but he followed his father.

As they walked through the black and white trees, Artorias kept a lookout with his magic senses. He saw many animals that would otherwise make for good prey if they were simply hunting like normal. He saw pure white foxes living in equally white trees, large hawks flying overhead, rabbits, squirrels, and boars. None escaped his sight, but none had even the slightest trace of magic, making them worthless for their purpose.

Leon was still lost in thought when Artorias suddenly stopped. Leon didn’t notice and ran into his father, being almost knocked to the ground in surprise. Artorias, however, barely noticed it.

“What do you see?” asked Leon.

Artorias was staring off into the distance, with wide eyes and a slightly open mouth. Leon looked in the same direction, but all he saw were trees and leaves of various colors.

It was almost ten seconds of staring before Artorias finally spoke. “I think I just found our goal.”

“What do you see?” Leon repeated.

“A Snow Lion.”

Leon’s eyes widened, his heart beat faster, and his hands began to shake. Snow lions made their home within the caves of the Frozen Mountain range, and very rarely came

down into the vales. They were aloof, solitary beasts, and possessed of great skill with ice magic. Leon had never seen one, but he had occasionally seen what had become of the creatures the lions hunted. Everything from river nymphs to black-iron bears was considered prey by the snow lions.

He took a few deep breathes to calm himself, and his hands stopped shaking, though he was still both terrified and excited. This lion would make for easier prey than an ice wraith, but he would have to be perfect to bring it down.

The two began creeping towards the beast's lair, high up on a nearby mountain. There were a few small mountain clusters within the vale, heavily forested and several hundred feet high. The lion had made this particular group of mountains its home, as there were no other mountains around this deep into the vale.

The forest was dense enough that it took over an hour to approach the foot of the mountain. They didn't start climbing the mountain upon arrival, however, as Artorias had said that the lion was out hunting, and its lair now lay empty.

There was a small path among the mountain boulders leading up, and it was at this path's entrance that they stopped.

Artorias looked around and smiled. "If that lion wants to go home, it will have to come through here. Let's prepare for when it comes back." He then looked at Leon expectantly and didn't move. It was up to Leon to plan and carry out the ambush.

Leon looked around, carefully analyzing the surroundings. The area was filled with trees, but they thinned out considerably as the forest approached the foot of the mountain. The mountain itself was quite thick with trees, but the path leading up was virtually bereft of any plant life.

He saw a large oak fairly close to the start of the mountain path, with plenty of branches to climb and brilliant green leaves to hide behind. Leon quickly scampered up the trunk to the lowest branch, about twenty feet off the ground. He was about to settle in, but decided to climb up a bit more, reaching another branch ten feet higher.

Artorias, meanwhile, climbed up another nearby tree, a white poplar with dark blue leaves and lighter blue marks along the trunk, like blood vessels. He climbed to where he wanted and got comfortable, and if Leon hadn't seen his father climb the tree, he never would have guessed Artorias was there.

There they waited, for several more hours, barely moving. Leon fished out a few pieces of dried bread to snack on but otherwise remained completely still. At Artorias' level of power, he ate food for pleasure, not out of necessity, so he simply allowed his magic to fill his body with energy rather than eat lunch.

Leon started to grow worried about whether or not the snow lion was actually going to come that way when he heard something off in the distance. It was the lion, snapping fallen tree branches and brushing past the bushes without any attempt to hide. As it got closer, Leon saw a few glimpses of moving white in between the trees and plants, but the beast was still well concealed within the forest.

It kept coming closer. Leon slowly drew his bow and one arrow, made a few last-minute adjustments to his quiver so it was easy to access, and began to channel his limited magic into his bow. His mana rushed into his hand, then magic power flowed into the bow, and concentrated in the middle, right where the arrow rested against the weapon. The minor enchantment within activated, and though there was no outward sign, the bow was now ready to fire an arrow at a terrific speed.

By the time Leon was done preparing, he looked up just in time to see the lion emerge from the tree line. It was a massive beast, over six feet tall and nine feet long. It could probably swallow his entire upper body in a single bite. It had a beautiful coat, white as freshly fallen snow. Its mane was thicker and slightly darker than the rest of it, but it only added to the majestic aura the lion gave off. The only parts of the beast that wasn't some shade of white or extremely light grey were its pitch-black eyes and claws. Its snout was covered in the dark red blood of the small fox it had in its mouth.

Leon was awed by the beauty of the lion, but he drew the arrow back anyway. He aimed at the creature's eye, intending to kill it in a single shot.

The lion paused, sensing a sharp killing intent directed towards it, and it began to channel its own magic. It looked around carefully, attempting to find where the killing intent was coming from, but it failed to notice Leon or Artorias. Until Leon released the arrow.

The bow's enchantment was weak but well made, and the arrow flew across the clearing so fast it was nearly impossible to see it. But see it the lion did. In fact, the lion was fast enough to cover the side of its face in ice and the arrow bounced off harmlessly.

The lion dropped the fox, glared at the tree the arrow had come from and gave an earth-shattering roar. Birds half a mile away took flight in terror, and smaller animals rushed for shelter. The lion charged at the tree and had begun to climb before Leon had even drawn his second arrow.

As the lion climbed, it saw Leon and knew it was he who tried to kill it. Leon drew his second arrow and loosed. Again, the lion protected itself with icy armor. It easily climbed the tree to Leon's branch and snapped it off with a single swipe of its claw.

Leon fell, managing to grab the branch below, then dropping to the ground. He drew a third arrow, turned, and fired at the lion in the tree. The arrow flew towards the beast and had about as much effect as the first two.

The lion leaped out of the tree, landing in front of Leon before knocking him down with a headbutt, and roared at him. The beast's own killing intent was slamming down onto Leon, putting pressure on him and making it difficult to breathe. The lion raised its claw and swiped at the vulnerable young man. Leon raised his arm to block it, and the claws slashed the flesh of his left arm to ribbons.

Artorias, watching this, felt his heart almost stop. He cursed himself for bringing Leon here, for targeting the lion, and for allowing it to go this far. But as he drew his sword and tensed up to leap out of the tree at the lion, the beast raised its paw for another strike. Leon moved fast, drawing his hunting knife as the claw came down. He raised it as fast as he could and felt the blade sink into the beast's paw, pushed in by the weight of the lion's own attack. The impact broke his wrist and nearly shattered his arm.

The lion roared in pain and rage, but Leon had avoided the death blow. It staggered backward, unable to put too much weight down on its paw with a six-inch knife stuck in it. Leon took the opportunity to grab his bow and one more arrow, painfully drawing back the bowstring with all the strength he could muster and infusing every drop of magic he had left in his body into the weapon.

The lion ripped the knife out of its paw with its teeth, before turning to glare at Leon and roaring again. Leon immediately released his arrow before dropping his bow with a yell of pain. The arrow crossed the space between the man and the beast before anyone could blink, entering the lion's mouth and sinking deep into its throat. The beast's roar was cut off with a yelp of pain, and it reeled backward.

It seemed confused as blood and mana poured out of its mouth, and its eyes began to dim. It glared at Leon one more time before limping towards him. It could feel itself about to die, but it intended to take this young human with it to the grave.

But as it approached Leon, it felt another killing intent, this one orders of magnitude more powerful than Leon's. It froze in terror, completely unable to move its own magic within its body. It didn't even see Artorias before his blade entered one eye and exited the other.

Seeing the lion collapse, Leon breathed a sigh of relief. The entire encounter took less than twenty seconds, but he had been nearly killed several times before Artorias acted. The lion made a few more ragged breaths, but Artorias ignored it. He rushed over to his son, but Leon had already passed out.