

The Storm King

Chapter 10: Soul Refinement

Artorias slowly ate his food, in contrast with his son. “You know, you had me quite worried for a while.”

“Oh? How so?”

“My ritual wasn’t so dramatic. Yours had quite the storm appear, while mine barely summoned more than a light shower. Not to mention, it took me no more than a few hours to wake up, whereas you took most of the day.”

Leon’s eyes widened in surprise. He’d already passed out from the pain when the storm rolled in, so he had no idea about any of that. “The storm wasn’t too bad, was it?”

“Nothing I couldn’t handle, but the magic array was struck by lightning more than a few times. Nearly gave me a heart attack. Fortunately, you seem fine, so all’s well that ends well, I guess.”

Leon lay back down, gazing up at the darkening sky. “Will you teach me how to perform that ritual? Seems like the kind of thing I ought to know.”

“Sure thing, little lion. When we get back home I’ll show what you need.”

It wasn’t too much longer after that that Leon fell back asleep. Artorias had no intention of waking him, the entire ordeal that was the ritual was unbelievably draining, not to mention being suddenly catapulted into the second-tier.

One thing that truly marks the difference between the first and second-tier is the change that takes place in the heart. Throughout the first-tier, all of a person’s muscles adapt to the magic that flows through them, roughly in the order of what muscles get used the most. With this in mind, it makes sense that physical training would be very important to advancing through this tier. As they adapt, muscles grow stronger and tougher, doubling or even tripling the mage’s strength and speed as they get closer to the second-tier.

This applies to the heart as well, but the real change is that the heart becomes capable of storing magic power. Before this, all of a mage’s power is fused with their blood, kept as mana. Blood can’t store very much magic, however. Leon could barely fire off four arrows from his enchanted bow before running low, and his bow doesn’t even have that robust of an enchantment, just one that increases the speed of the arrow as it leaves the bowstring.

Now that Leon's heart can store magic power, it will be a while before he'll be back up to top shape. Artorias guessed that it would take about three or four weeks for Leon to recover from the ritual and get used to his new power. These things are far more gradual for other mages, and crossing into the second-tier is far less taxing for them. Those with inherited bloodlines have it much tougher in that regard. But, ask anyone from those families and they'll agree, the power bestowed on them by their ancestors is most definitely worth it.

Artorias finished his meal and leaned back, laying his head down on the cool stone. He didn't need any kind of shelter or protection from the elements, not even that far above sea level. Normally, Leon would still need to bundle up a bit, even in the second-tier, but now he needed to absorb as much magic as possible, so Artorias left him uncovered. He simply stoked the fire a bit more, then laid down, joining his son in sleep.

It was not long after dawn that Artorias woke up, but Leon didn't stir until several hours later.

Artorias glanced over at Leon, as the younger man slowly pulled himself up into a sitting position. "How do you feel today?"

"Much better. I think I can even start the walk back home."

"Good. Get some food in you, we'll test your words in thirty-ish minutes."

With that said, Artorias gathered up all of his things. It didn't take long; his satchel and food pack were considerably lighter than it was when they set out. In fact, they only had enough prepared food and water for another two days in the packs, so they would've had to begin the return journey today had the hunt not gone well. Fortunately, their hunt was successful and they were heading home victorious, with a completed ritual under their belt and a large amount of raw lion meat ready to fill their food stores.

Once Leon finished eating, and everything was packed, they set off down the mountain. It was slow going due to Leon's fatigue, but Artorias didn't mind. At the pace they started at, they would reach home before the end of the next day, so he wasn't in any particular hurry.

The first few hours went by in relative silence, but it was finally broken by Leon, who still had questions about the ritual, and what he saw afterward.

"Dad, I have a few questions about the ritual, if you wouldn't mind."

"Sure, I'll answer what I can."

“You said that during the ritual, we see our ancestor, and some of the other bloodlines can even speak to their ancestors. Can you tell me what you saw during your own ritual?”

“Yeah. My ritual went as well as yours did, though significantly less intense, and when it was over I was left as unconscious as you were. But I wasn’t simply asleep, as I’m sure you know full well by now. I was in my soul realm! A world formed from the concentration of magic power within me. I didn’t spend that much time there once the ritual was completed; a matter of seconds, really. I remember hearing a screech that tore at my ears and feeling the rumble of something very large landing very near to where I was laying. I opened my eyes and saw a great bird. It looked down at me, and when our eyes made contact, I was ejected from my soul realm and woke up back at my ritual site.”

Leon was shocked at this. He had been at his ‘soul realm’ for who knows how long, and he had been around the bird for a much longer period of time compared to Artorias.

Artorias glanced at Leon and noticed that the younger man had started to frown and asked, “Why don’t you tell me your experience, I’m sure it must be quite different than mine, given the sheer power exhibited during your ritual.”

Leon carefully explained as much to Artorias as he could, and the older man stopped walking, before turning to face the younger.

“Really? A storm within your soul realm...” Artorias took a long pause before continuing. “My father and his father had a theory about what our ancestor was. It’s not something we can verify, but if it summoned a storm within your soul realm, then it lends some credence to it. They believed that that bird is what was known as a Thunderbird.”

“Thunderbird? I’ve never heard of it.”

“It’s a being that no longer exists—if it ever did in the first place. It’s worshipped in some of the Northern Vales as the ruler of the heavens and can control the weather. According to the legends, the Thunderbird was granted the heavens by the sun itself and sends lightning down to punish those who go against the will of the heavens. Its greatest enemy was the Great Horned Serpent that ruled the sea, but the Thunderbird threw lightning down upon the Serpent, killing it forever.

“These are just legends, but given our own family’s skill with lightning magic, and the visions we receive upon our awakening, it seems likely that the Thunderbird existed at some point. But, ultimately, there’s little concrete proof to be had, and it’s not like our ancestor is in any kind of hurry to speak to us, so I guess we’ll never have the complete truth.”

Artorias grew solemn as he continued to speak. Leon didn’t make a sound, he just stood there, listening in fascination.

“Our ancestors were kings before the Sacred Bull’s descendants conquered or vassalized all of what is now the Bull Kingdom, but the oldest records we had indicated that we had come from somewhere else. We don’t know from where we came, or when we moved, or even if the records are correct. They held no information about our ancestor, only vaguely referencing it as if it were written for people for whom that knowledge was obvious and didn’t need to be repeated.”

Leon began to get even more excited now. It was rare for Artorias to speak so much about the family, though it’s been coming a lot in the past few days what with the ritual. He suppressed the excitement as much as he could, and calmly asked, “How old were these records? And you said ‘had’ when talking about them, do they still exist?”

“... Maybe...” Artorias stopped to think. This subject started to overlap with things he wasn’t quite ready to talk about, so he was silent for a moment. “What I can say is that our oldest record, a letter written by an old Thunder King to one of his sons, was estimated to be almost ten thousand years old. As for whether those records still exist, I don’t know. I never went to the vaults to check.”

With that, Artorias started walking again. Leon followed him, and though he couldn’t see Artorias’ face, he knew that he started to push into things his father didn’t want to speak of. Although he wanted to push a bit more, he decided to stop there.

“What about this ‘soul realm’? Can you tell me anything about that?” asked Leon, deciding to change the subject.

Artorias didn’t stop again, but he answered readily enough. “Sure. Advancing through the tiers of magic is adapting your body to its use. But first, how about you tell me what the third and fourth tiers are?”

“Changing bones and bone marrow is the third, then comes internal organs and the brain.”

“And the fifth?”

“Learning to change mana type.”

“Does the fifth-tier sound like a bodily change to you?”

Leon took a moment to think, before hesitantly answering “No.”

“It sort of is, but it’s the last change that happens to the body for a long time. Advancing to the fourth-tier involves adapting inner organs to use magic. This usually triples human lifespan at the very least, but longevity is not the point of it. The best part comes when the brain adapts, that is when one becomes a fourth-tier mage. This allows for far greater control of magic, and even allows you to control your adaptations, to a

degree. Advancing to the fifth-tier, changing your mana type, would be impossible otherwise.”

“What does changing mana type even mean, though?”

“What kind of magic do I use?”

“Lightning, mostly.”

“Adapting mana type is something that happens in bone marrow. We change the type of mana we produce to better use our own magic. Some people practice fire magic, so they can change the mana they produce into fire mana, to better use fire magic. In my case, I can create a kind of ‘lightning mana’, which greatly increases my strength.”

“But changing mana type isn’t permanent, right? Otherwise, that would mean sacrificing compatibility with more utilitarian magic, like powering runes and certain enchantments.”

“With the control added when our brains adapt, we can more or less change at will. In fact, being able to change back and forth at will is the mark of a true fifth-tier mage. In addition, we can also store small objects within our soul realms; things like personal weapons and the like. It is a very time-consuming thing to store physical objects within our soul realms, but they can be retrieved at a moment’s notice.

“Unfortunately, getting to this point means allowing magic to enter our bone marrow in more... extreme locations. A fire mage would train in a volcano, where the magic in the surroundings has more fire energy in it. Likewise, an earth mage would train underground, a water mage would train underwater, and wind mages might go to a canyon or a beach, where wind speeds pick up. Lightning mages like us have great power, as lightning magic is incredibly potent, but this also means that we have to train primarily during storms and allow lightning to strike our bodies and sink into our bones.”

Artorias looked back at Leon, and seeing the slightly fearful look on his face, gave a light chuckle.

“Don’t worry, little lion, you won’t have to worry about that for a while yet. Now, what’s the sixth-tier?”

“...Soul refinement?” Leon said with uncertainty.

“Even if you think you’re wrong, say it with confidence.”

“Soul Refinement!”

“Good. You’re not wrong in this case. The heart stores magic, but have you ever asked yourself where this magic goes?”

"I haven't, actually. That was something I never really questioned."

"The heart is the very core of our bodies. It is where magic condenses within our body, and this condensed magic will form an entire world within us! Thus, it is through the heart that we access our soul realm, our inner world. The amount of magic we can store in our bodies is directly proportional to the size of our soul realm. As we advance through the tiers, our soul realm naturally grows bigger and we can store more things within, and when we reach the soul refinement stage, we start training to allow our conscious minds to access it.

"But things are a little different for us, being scions of an inherited bloodline. That vision we all have when we undergo the awakening ritual wakes more than just our dormant power. It also awakens our ancestor. I've heard it theorized down south that we all have a shard of our ancestor's soul within us, and that is what we see in our soul realms. Because we have multiple souls within us, our soul realms are slightly bigger than others'."

Leon looked quite intrigued at this, asking "Does this mean that we can store more power than other people since the soul realm is where our stored magic goes?"

"Not really. The differences in our soul realms compared to those of others is negligible in a practical sense. That extra space you have was what, a one-hundred-foot-wide island? A soul realm, by the time of the seventh-tier, is ten miles in every direction and continues to grow. It wasn't hyperbole to say that it is an entire world within us, though not one that we can physically enter.

"With that said, let's get back to soul refinement. This is the process of constructing a magical body and learning to transfer your consciousness into it. These bodies used to be thought of as souls and were even mistaken for ghosts when detached from our physical bodies. Nowadays, they are simply called 'magic bodies'. A magic body is refined within your physical body, but you can also manifest it outside of your physical body at will. Initially, it's unable to affect the world around it, but it can observe things a great distance from you. As it grows and develops, that restriction can even be lifted. The mark of becoming a sixth-tier mage, however, is when your magical body develops to the point that it can manifest within your soul realm.

"But the biggest, and arguably most important thing a magic body is capable of, is saving a person from death. Once a physical body is destroyed, a magic body might live on, if the dying person was strong enough. With the death of the physical body, the mage can transfer their consciousness over to the magic body. Unfortunately, this means that any hope of continuing to grow in power is all but gone, as the soul realm dies with the physical body."

Artorias looked over his shoulder at Leon and slowed his pace a little. He then asked, "Do you think you're ready to learn what makes a seventh-tier mage?"

Leon looked at his father, his golden eyes shining, and positively beaming with excitement. He immediately answered, "Of course!"

"A sixth-tier mage has refined their soul and can thus actively enter their soul realm. There have been a few records of people entering the soul realm while sleeping, and we enter during our rituals, but it takes a refined soul, a magic body, to consciously enter the soul realm. When they first enter, the soul realm looks quite similar to what you saw; an island floating in mist, with little else around. This mist is called the Mists of Chaos and can be used to build something called a mind palace. It is a palace in the very center of the soul realm, and it's where your magic body resides.

"To become a seventh-tier mage, you have to construct your mind palace. Just like your physical body, your magic body will also continue growing as you gain strength and completing your mind palace indicates that you have reached a point that you can even bring physical objects into your soul realm at will! The time needed to store an object becomes negligible, and a mage can store effectively all their possessions within themselves if they wanted to. Never forget, little lion, just because it's called a 'soul' realm, and it's the place where your magical body resides, doesn't mean that it's intangible or imaginary. I meant it when I said it's like a small magical world deep within you."

Leon was blown away by this sudden onslaught of information. To an extent, he expected this once he underwent the ritual, but now he was buzzing with excitement about the future. But he still had questions for his father.

"How would I know when my mind palace is complete?"

"It resonates with your soul realm. To a degree, since it's *your* soul realm, it will be complete once you're satisfied with it. It's a difficult feeling to put into words, but trust me when I say that you'll know it when you're finished."

The two continued on like this for some time, with Leon asking many questions and Artorias doing his best to answer. But Artorias wasn't all knowing, and he wasn't trained as a teacher, so many of the more detailed and nuanced questions Leon asked only left the younger man with more questions, and few answers.

But, they kept walking. They arrived back at the Troll's Bridge, paid the toll, and continued across. The sun went down, and Artorias put up the standard defenses. They woke the next morning after a relatively peaceful night's rest and set off again not much later. They made good time and made it home before dark. Despite the sky still being fairly bright, once Leon made it back to his own bed, he immediately collapsed upon it and passed out.

