

The Storm King

Chapter 3: Inherited Blood

“What sort of things?” asked Leon.

“Where you come from, and the power within you,” answered Artorias.

Artorias had never said anything like this to Leon before, and the young man was understandably confused.

“All right, I’m all ears.”

“First, tell me something. What does it mean to be a mage?”

“It means that a person can use and control magic,” Leon answered with no hesitation.

“A good answer, but not quite the one I’m looking for.” Artorias continued to smile at his son.

“It means they have achieved strength through their hard work.”

“You’re not wrong, but again, not right either.”

“It means they are smart, wise, and have achieved an understanding of the world around them.”

“You were closest with your first answer. A person who can use and control magic is most definitely a mage, but that is more of a symptom—a byproduct of what using magic means. As for the other two, a strong, smart, and wise person isn’t necessarily a mage, are they?”

Leon frowned in thought. He didn’t quite get what his father was talking about.

“Perhaps I haven’t asked the question right. How does a mage come to be? A mage has magic, but before that they are just a weak mortal. How do they go from mortal to mage?”

“They change their body. They allow magic to permeate everything within them until their body adapts to it. Then that person can use magic and is thus, a mage.”

“Exactly! Their body must adapt. A mortal is someone who hasn’t started this process, a first-tier mage has adapted their lungs, a second-tier mage has adapted their muscles, and so on. This is a process that allows one to walk the path of magic. We are born

mortal, weak and powerless, and must adapt to our surroundings to fight and survive against the monsters that see us as nothing more than prey.”

Artorias began to get a bit worked up, gesturing with his hands for more a dramatic effect.

“Listen to me, little lion, we are at the edge of the world, living away from the safety of civilization so that we grow strong through adversity. Up here, we can focus on our own training and we can hone our killing intent. This is the way my father taught me and the way his father taught him. Though, admittedly, they didn’t go this far out into the wilds, hehehe...”

Artorias seemed to stare at something far into the distance. His smile changed a little into one that was prouder and perhaps a little more smug.

“What is the point you’re trying to make, Dad? I think you might be getting a bit off track.”

“Ah! Right! Well, we are born weak and must gain strength and power through our own efforts. Every scrap of magic we possess is something we had to work to achieve.”

“Yes, this the way of things. An iron-clad law.”

After hearing his son’s words, Artorias’ smile faltered for a second, and he grew more serious. He lowered his hands and took a few small steps closer to Leon.

“Is it?” he asked quietly. “There are exceptions. You’ve even seen them, they’re all around us.”

Leon was shocked to hear this and looked at Artorias with more seriousness.

“Humans are weak when they are born, but what about an ice wraith? Have you ever seen a powerless banshee? How about the wind wolves that can kill a man from over a hundred meters away? Or the black-iron bears, with hide stronger than steel? These are creatures born with great strength and power, though they are unable to raise it much in their lives. Only a select few individuals can become truly great, but all are born strong.”

Leon calmed a bit after hearing this, thinking that such ‘exceptions’ don’t really count, but he let his father continue without interruption, wanting to see where he was taking this.

“A monster that has the potential for a large amount of growth is rare and dangerous beyond measure. They can gain true intelligence and even human forms at higher tiers! Some even take humans as wives or husbands and have children with them.”

Leon's eyes grew wide at hearing this.

"What kind of beings would these children be? Are they the exceptions? Are they strong from birth?" Leon had many more questions than that, but Artorias cut him off.

"Hang on a bit, little lion, let me finish. I'm getting to it."

Artorias was glad at his son's interest, as these were things that pertained to him as well.

"It would make sense that these children would have both traits of their parents. Strength from their inhuman parent and growth potential from their human parent. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Most of these children were born with both weaknesses rather than both strengths. An innate weakness and limited growth potential."

Leon frowned again with much disappointment.

"Well, it was that way for a while. The beasts and monsters that could grow that far were powerful indeed and managed to find a way around this; a way for their children to grow at least as fast as their human counterparts and with some of their monstrous power as well!"

Artorias had gotten his fire back again, speaking in dramatic tones as if he were telling a story to hype people up rather than speaking to his son alone.

Leon was looking more interested now, but he was getting a bit tired of Artorias' dramatic pauses.

"Come on, Dad, no need to be so over-the-top. There's only me around to witness your performance. So what sort of process was this that allowed these children to grow in power?"

Artorias' smile quickly disappeared, being replaced with an aggrieved expression.

"How did I raise such an unfun and humorless son? How about you get into the story a little, huh boy?"

Leon's face began to turn into a smile not unlike Artorias, and he said, "How about you tell the story a little, rather than chastise me for my seriousness."

Artorias' aggrieved look vanished quickly seeing his son's own smile. These two had been living together for 16 years and no one knew them like they knew each other. These little play fights where they poke fun at the other were one of their favorite pastimes. At this point, they knew exactly how far they could push things and how far

not to go. Some things are always off-limits, after all, no matter who someone may be talking with.

“Damned killjoy. All right, where was I before you so rudely interrupted?”

“Inter-species parents learning how to make less-shit hybrids.”

“Right! Well the process they learned to do this was more than a little gruesome in that they needed to find a suitable enemy to sacrifice in order to ‘awaken’ the dormant power within these hybrids. These children were made to drink the blood of their enemies! For normal mages, doing such a thing would be repugnant, but little more than that. For most of these half-breed children, however, this proved to be fatal. But a few survived, and this ritual allowed their inner power to awaken! They grew much stronger as a result, stronger than any other such hybrid had ever managed to become.”

“This ritual was to drink *blood*?” Leon had a rather disgusted expression on his face. He had seen quite a bit of blood and had spilled more than a bit, as he and Artorias’ main source of food was hunting. He thought nothing about this, but he couldn’t stand the taste of blood. Artorias had some trouble teaching Leon how to cook properly without overdoing it as Leon would typically overcook his meat to get the taste of the blood out as much as he could.

“Well, technically, they had to drink mana, but blood sounds better, no?”

Leon looked a little less queasy after Artorias clarified. Mana had a far different taste than blood even though it was basically the same stuff, just more magical.

“Well, eventually this ritual was refined to be significantly less dangerous. With the right materials and preparations, the bloodlines of these kids would awaken, and they could rid themselves of their limitations. They would gain their monstrous parent’s power and their human parent’s adaptability. An impressive combination.

“These kids would eventually go on to have children of their own, starting dynasties and passing down their own power as well as the knowledge to unlock it. This passed-down power is usually referred to as an Inherited Bloodline. The Bull Kingdom in the south is ruled by a dynasty with just such an Inherited Bloodline. Their ancestor was a powerful bull. Through its power they have built a kingdom that has lasted over five thousand years.”

“And we’re from the Bull Kingdom, aren’t we, Dad? I remember you telling me that you were in the service of the king once, did he tell you all about this?” Leon was asking the question, but the look on his face was anything but casually quizzical. In fact, he was looking at Artorias with great expectation, expecting something else.

"Why even ask me that, it's not what you want to know. Just ask me what's on your mind, and don't play at being humble with me." Artorias knew exactly what Leon was doing. The boy wanted to appear like he wasn't too interested, but he had likely begun to piece things together from his own troubles with magic and what Artorias had just told him.

"Do we have an Inherited Bloodline? You've taught me so many things, from how to read to how to handle a sword. You've taught me how to hunt, how to carve runes, and how to build shelter when in the wild. You've even taught me military strategy, despite it only being the two of us here. Past few years I've been feeling like you've been preparing me not to survive up here in the Northern Vales, but how to live in the Southern Kingdom with their knights and wars and nobles.

"But for all your work in training and educating me, you have never once taught me anything but the very basics of magic. I've asked you about this so many times, but you've always been so frustratingly vague and deliberately mysterious about it, saying 'don't worry about it'. So, is this why? Have we inherited some kind of power from our ancestors? Is this why my own progress in the adaptation process has been so slow?"

Artorias' smile widened. His son had picked up on so much but hadn't let on any of his suspicions until now. And he was right on the mark with a lot of his points.

"Yes, little lion. We have an Inherited Bloodline."

With Artorias' words, Leon felt a great feeling of joy welling up from within him and almost jumped in excitement. He managed to restrain himself; he wanted his father to finish, first.

"We don't just have an Inherited Bloodline, either. Our family was one of the highest among the nobility down south. We were even kings once, when the Bull Kingdom was nothing but petty kingdoms and independent duchies fighting for what little territory they could acquire."

"We were *kings*? But then how were we also nobles of the Bull Kingdom?" Leon was a little confused now. They were descendants of royalty and even had an Inherited Bloodline, so how was it that they had been subordinated to the Bull Kings?

"Our power is not without a certain degree of cost. All those with Inherited Bloodlines have significantly lower birthrates and there is always some danger when awakening their dormant power, but our family has it worse than most. This can lead to problems if we don't have a genius in our younger generation. Far as I know, our family was strong, but the last Thunder King knew his own children wouldn't be strong enough to repel the first Bull King and all his armies after he was gone.

"Not to mention, one of the last times we went south, I overheard that the Bull King had his sixth child at the age of one hundred and twenty. Barely middle-aged at his power,

but he has a royal harem with dozens of concubines and has been sitting the throne for over eight decades, yet he only has *six* children!

“My own father, your grandfather, died at age two hundred and forty-five, yet he only had two children: me and my older brother, your uncle.” When Artorias mentioned his father and brother, his smile faded a bit, to be replaced with an odd look. His eyes seemed to glaze over, as if he were seeing something far away.

Leon knew not to continue this line of conversation. He had seen that look on his father several times before, usually when the topic of their family came up. Whenever Leon asked about their family, Artorias would get weirdly serious and even almost angry.

“What about the dangers of awakening our bloodline? You said that we have more trouble than others.” Leon decided to try and move past the talk of his father’s family, and simply continue the conversation. There are always some things that are best left unsaid, even to the closest of family.

The question seemed to pull Artorias back from wherever his mind had went and the smile returned to his face, though maybe a little too wide and forced this time. Leon knew it would take his father a few minutes to return to normal, so the odd-looking smile went by unremarked.

“Ah, yes. Ours is damned difficult, but in ways that are hard to describe to someone who hasn’t experienced it. During all awakenings, we see an apparition of our ancestor. I spoke with several relatives of the Bull King and they all said that they were able to speak with their ancestor, but I barely even caught a glimpse of ours before I woke up within the ritual circle.”

“Our ancestor doesn’t speak to us? Why the hell not?”

“I’m not too sure. Maybe it can’t, maybe it doesn’t want to, maybe it simply doesn’t care. Whatever the reason, our ancestor is quite aloof compared to the Sacred Bull.”

Leon frowned, clearly somewhat insulted. “Well then, can you tell me what our ancestor is?”

Artorias glanced at Leon with wide grin. “No. Wouldn’t want to ruin the surprise, now would I?”

‘This evil man. He just wants to seem mysterious and cool. Probably also wants to see me sweat a little.’ Leon decided to drop it, to Artorias’ secret disappointment.

“All right, so why are you telling all this to me now? We’ve had years training, and you’ve never mentioned this even once, so what changed?”

"I saw you channel power into your bow's enchantment. You're getting close to the second-tier, so I've decided you're ready to know these things. I've also finished acquiring just about everything I need for your ritual."

"Wait, what? What did you need to get and where did you get it?" What was Artorias talking about? He'd barely left Leon unguarded in this forest for the past decade, so what then was needed for this ritual?

"When I killed that ice wraith last night, I managed to take its core intact. In the past few years, I've stockpiled a couple magical cores from some of the beasts in the forest, and now I have one that's suitable for the ritual. There is little else we need, apart from the mana for you to drink, and some... special herbs."

"*Special herbs*, you say? Not the kind the tribesmen use, right? I've heard that crap can burn the insides, thoroughly set back magical adaptation, and turn the user into an idiot."

"No, not those kinds of herbs. These are more medicinal, and uh... poisonous, than even what you're talking about. Besides, even when our bloodline is dormant, it's nigh-impossible to get intoxicated. Most of what the tribes use would just pass harmlessly out of our system. There are a few things that can knock us out, though, and it is some of those herbs we need."

Leon sighed in relief. He'd seen some of the tribesmen who had gotten addicted to some of the wilder herbs of the north and he wanted nothing to do with those. Some of the tribesmen had also tried on a few occasions to offer him some safer and gentler herbs, but he always declined. Leon wasn't a particularly friendly person with strangers, either, so he'd typically decline quite... emphatically.

"And now that you've mentioned it, I can't believe I haven't noticed you stockpiling magic cores, you've never sold any when we go to the tribes to sell furs."

"Don't worry, son, we can't notice everything. Besides, it's not like you were ever paying much attention when we went to the tribal markets, always looking everywhere but where our deal was being made. Now then, you know what your goal is, right?"

"Get ready for the ritual!"

"Good! I did say that we need both the materials for the ritual as well as adequate preparation. With that in mind, we'll start with a little training."