

# The Storm King

## Chapter 8: Ritual II

Artorias didn't need to wait long. Leon's vision continued to worsen, blurring more and more until finally, all he could see was a blank white void. He felt woozy, and could barely manage to continue kneeling, and felt like he would collapse at any second.

His stomach churned and roiled as if it were a living thing struggling to escape his body. His blood felt like it was boiling, and the magic within the lion mana flooded his body. His muscles seized up, and if he were capable, he would have screamed bloody murder. Leon had never felt so much pain in his entire life, but after a few more minutes, he began to compose himself.

But that was before the real process began. His body felt like it was on fire, and it radiated heat and magic power. The lion's aura had been icy cold, but when its power entered Leon, he felt like he had fallen into an erupting volcano. What he didn't realize, is that this was his body's way of trying to fight against the lion mana that he had drunk. The magic he radiated increased in intensity, and finally, the array he was in started activating.

The array was powered by the ice wraith core, and its dull blue glow grew brighter until it lit up the entire mountaintop. The array lines gave off light as the array activated, glowing a bright blue just like the core. It took a few more minutes for the power to reach the lightning spells, and when the spells activated, the lines changed color into a brilliant gold, a light so bright that Artorias had to start covering his eyes. After the color change, the magic power changed direction and flowed into Leon's body.

Leon grit his teeth as the power entered his body and began to clash with the lion's power. He felt his muscles begin to tear, his bones crack, and his mind crumble. In minutes, all coherent thought had left his mind, and he fell unconscious.

This continued for some time. The array continued channeling the ice wraith's power into Leon, destroying his body from the outside. The lion's mana continued emitting power from within Leon, destroying his body from the inside. Artorias watched, with a look of utter seriousness on his face, alert for any and all changes in the surroundings, waiting for Leon's body to begin fighting back.

The sun went down, and the sky turned to darkness. The ritual had been going on for several hours, and Leon was just about at his breaking point. He'd collapsed onto the ground, with not a single unbroken bone in his body. He bled from the eyes, ears, mouth, and the injuries the lion had left him with. His breaths were ragged and uneven.

Artorias wasn't too familiar with this part of the ritual. He had experienced his own just as unconscious as Leon was now, so he only had his father's word about what happened. Artorias was told that his bloodline didn't awaken until his body had almost completely fallen apart. His father had almost intervened to make sure he didn't die.

Artorias continued to watch for signs of Leon's awakening. Small amounts of lightning magic should start getting absorbed, rather than passing through his son's body ripping apart everything it comes into contact with. This influx of power should then allow Leon to fight against the lion's mana and absorb it as well. The power in the mana would then be used to heal Leon's shattered body, and he would probably enter the ranks of second-tier mages at the end.

Artorias didn't let a single detail escape his notice. Watching his son's body break so thoroughly was a struggle, to put it lightly. He was confident that he could heal Leon should he stop the ritual soon, but it would take months and he wasn't going to stop this unless he was sure the ritual had failed.

Artorias frowned and continued to wait. The glowing array pumped vast amounts of lightning into Leon, but the young man didn't even twitch in response. His body had almost become too damaged to breathe, let alone react to the magic entering it.

Artorias was so fixated on watching his son, that he didn't notice something very important. When the sun had gone down, the sky was perfectly clear. If he had looked up, he would've seen all the stars orbiting distant planes, and the moon as it rose. Now, the sky had become filled with dark storm clouds, and all the creatures of the forest had taken shelter, for they felt the tension in the air. They knew that something was coming, and they wanted no part of it. Even the banshees were quiet this night.

It wasn't until it started to rain that Artorias finally noticed the oncoming storm. It was a gentle drizzle at first, but then it turned into a light shower, building up to a thick downpour.

Artorias swore and started channeling his magic to protect the magic array, but before he could, lightning fell from the clouds and struck the mountain. Artorias froze on the spot. He felt his heart beat so hard that he thought it might burst from his chest, and his body felt like it was being pressed down into the ground by some unseen force. What terrified him the most, though, was that this pressure was coming from Leon.

Artorias barely managed to keep from falling to the ground. It was all he could do to keep standing there.

The wind picked up, escalating from the gentle breeze of fifteen minutes ago to a howling gale. Rain fell in great sheets that threatened to wash away the entire mountain, and lightning struck the peak more times than Artorias cared to count. Before long, however, lightning stopped striking the mountaintop and began to fall upon the magic array.

Artorias' heart almost stopped at the sight, but he noticed something that served to calm him down, somewhat. Leon had begun to absorb the storm's lightning, filling his body with lightning magic, and the wind swirled around him in a large cyclone visible for miles. The rain washed Leon's body clean of blood, and his numerous wounds began to stitch themselves together. The cracks in his bones closed, and when Leon had finished healing, the storm left as quickly as it had come.

Artorias felt strength return to him, as the pressure coming from Leon disappeared. He immediately ran towards his son, to check him for signs of any lasting damage. The magic array he had set up had been completely destroyed, with the ice wraith core shattered and the lightning spells shredded and scattered to the wind. The ground was charred and blackened from the lightning, and the lines of the array were dark and broken.

Artorias' nervousness only abated when he probed Leon's condition with his magic. He gave a sigh of relief, as Leon's body was in perfect condition. Even the injuries from the battle with the lion had completely healed. The only thing left to do now was to wait for Leon to wake up and run him through a few tests to gauge his gains.

But, if Artorias knew what kind of attention Leon had attracted, he would be left speechless in terror.

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Far to the south, past the Bull Kingdom, and past ten thousand miles of squabbling kingdoms and independent duchies, lay an enormous sea. This sea was in the very center of Aeterna, and here, magic was at its strongest. The magic density was greater around the sea by several orders of magnitude than in the Northern Vales.

Four great empires had claimed the lands around the sea as their own. They generally stayed out of the affairs of the kingdoms, believing themselves above the petty disputes of lesser monarchs. For the most part, they were right. Destroying the Bull Kingdom wouldn't be particularly difficult for them, but such a remote and comparatively desolate land held no interest to their rulers, so they barely even acknowledged its existence.

In the capital of the western empire, a young emperor was holding court. He heard the appeals of his vassals, administered justice to the common people, and did his best to rule the empire in a just and fair manner. He was overseen by an old man with silver hair, dressed in all white save for a large purple sash, and sporting a thick silver beard. This old man watched with pride as the emperor handled the business of ruling such a large and prosperous nation, but he suddenly froze, and his eyes widened in surprise. He slowly turned north, and his gaze seems to penetrate the myriad enchantments of the palace, the thousands of miles of plains, rivers, deserts, mountains, and all between him and the ritual mountain.

The sight of the raging storm and the young man within made him recall old memories of his youth, over a thousand years past. He had spent those years buried in the old books of the palace library. There was one book there that he had been forbidden to read, a very old book from an age long past. He had snuck into the library late at night to read it anyway, and the stories therein had left him nearly petrified in awe and fear.

He had read about a cruel and tyrannical king in those pages, one who commanded the power of storms, who could summon wind, rain, and lightning. This king had used that power to conquer the entire plane, leaving hundreds of millions of people dead in his wake.

This was the legend he thought of when he noticed this ritual take place, the legend of the Storm King. *'We need to send spies north. We need to find out who this boy is.'* he thought.

This old man was not the only person who noticed these events, however. In the northern empire, within an opulent palace not far from the royal keep, an old woman was with a very young girl. It was the girl's twelfth birthday party tomorrow and the old woman was helping her pick out an outfit. The old woman had aged very gracefully, with a body as fit and strong as when she was six hundred years younger, though with a few more wrinkles. Her long hair was still the shining gold of her family, and she was more than capable of defending her empire from any who dare threaten it.

But suddenly, this titan of a woman who could look down upon all the world stiffened in shock. She, too, looked north and saw the storm. *'We must be the first to get to him! If he comes south, it should be under our banner!'*, she thought.

In the east, a simply dressed bald man who appeared to be in his mid-forties sat on the floor of an equally simple room. There were no decorations, no trappings of power, and no creature comforts. The only piece of furniture in the room was a stone bed.

This serious man adjusted his plain brown robe and prepared to leave the room when he noticed the storm and looked to the north. His reaction was slightly more subdued than the others, but his fists clenched, and his aura became murderous. His killing intent dropped the temperature in the room to below freezing, and frost appeared on the floor and walls.

In the south, a seemingly young man was in bed, enjoying a group of gorgeous women. Most of them had already been left panting and gasping from pleasure, and the last mounted him, intending to join the others in ecstasy. The man suddenly threw her off him and sat up, staring at the ritual mountain and the storm that raged around it. He smiled and fought the urge to burst into laughter.

All four of these people stood at the pinnacle of magic in Aeterna. There were those who, not without justification, worshipped them as gods. They were the ultimate weapon of their empires and their ultimate deterrent. Their existence elevated their

empires above all the rest of the nations in the plane and made them unassailable to the rest of the world. And now, all of them noticed Leon's ritual.

Before any of them could act, however, they all heard the same voice in their minds.

[Don't worry, I've already seen it. There is no need to concern yourselves about this any longer.] It was the voice of a man who lived in the center of the sea, in an immense circular stone tower, two miles tall and more than half a mile thick. With him involved, any thoughts they had of going north were immediately quashed.

But none of them would ever forget that sight of Leon within the storm, no matter how much—or how little—effort they put into trying.

The young emperor in the west saw the old man acting strangely, and asked, "Are you alright, father?"

The old man turned back to the emperor and nodded, struggling to put the storm and the boy who conjured it out of his mind.

The young girl looked at the old woman quizzically. They had been discussing her birthday party when her grandmother had gone quiet. A few silent seconds passed before the old woman forced a smile back onto her face and turned back to her granddaughter and the party preparations.

The simply dressed man unclenched his fists, but his killing intent didn't abate. It took him a few more minutes to compose himself before he returned to his sacred duties.

"Are you alright, Your Majesty?" The young woman who had been about to couple with her emperor asked in a nervous voice. She had heard stories of those who displeased their monarch and had no wish to experience it firsthand.

The young man turned and smiled at the woman. He didn't say a word, he just grabbed her hips and pulled her closer. Fairly soon, she too was left in the same state as the other women.

The young man leaned back in bed with an enormous smile on his face when he was finished, but it wasn't because of these beautiful women. Instead, his thoughts were filled with the storm he had witnessed and the young boy within.

However, for all the interest these four mages of immense power had in Leon and the storm that had surrounded him, none of them made any plans to investigate this matter. Despite his relatively passive tone, the man who had spoken directly into their minds had made it clear that there was no need for their intervention. All of them were well aware of who this man was, and none were willing to cross him.

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There was an island at the center of the sea that these four empires had been built around. Upon this island, there was an immense cylindrical stone tower, more than two miles in height and at least half a mile in diameter. The very top of this stone tower was flat and mirror smooth. There was no visible way to enter the tower, and it was perpetually surrounded by fluffy white clouds. If a mortal were to find themselves at the top of the tower, they wouldn't be able to see a thing.

There were, in fact, two people there, though neither were mortal. They were mages of incredible power. The master was sitting at the very edge, gazing north. He was the one who had communicated with the gods of the four empires. The apprentice was standing at a respectful distance, waiting for his master to speak.

"Hmmm." A smile broke out on the face of the master. "I had thought that bloodline had vanished from this plane. Things would probably be better if it had."

"Does Master want this apprentice to go there and extinguish it for good?"

"No. He's just a boy, and the one with him is no threat. I'll continue to watch, and if the need arises, I'll deal with it personally." After the master said this, the two immediately disappeared, returning back inside the stone tower.