

The Storm King

Chapter 7: Ritual I

As the snow lion breathed its last, Artorias sheathed his sword and ran over to his son. Leon had passed out from his wounds, and Artorias immediately began administering first aid. He wasn't a doctor by any stretch of the imagination, but he had been raised as a soldier, and that had included first-aid training.

He frantically began searching in his satchel for a few emergency spells, and once he found the papers they were written on, he wrapped three of them around Leon's bleeding arm. With a little bit of magic from him, the runes written on the paper lit up with a golden light. After a few seconds, the light died down, but Leon's arm had stopped bleeding.

Artorias sighed in relief. The bleeding had been very bad, and though the injuries on the arm remained, at least Leon had been saved from bleeding to death.

Artorias carefully removed the spell paper and took out some bandages. He wrapped the arm up in the bandages and began to look for a couple of sticks that could serve as a splint. The forest was thick, so finding what he needed was quite easy. He wrapped up Leon's other arm and splinted it, making sure not to jostle the broken wrist too much, then checked the rest of Leon's body for injuries. From what he could tell, when Leon had jumped from the tree he had sprained both ankles, but not too terribly, and the rest of him was relatively fine, so Artorias finally turned his attention back to the lion.

He walked over, drawing an empty water skin, and used his hunting knife to cut open the lion's chest. Only a few minutes had passed since it had died, so not too much blood or mana had leaked out of the carcass. He cut all the way to the heart, where the crimson blood being pumped in was replaced with red mana, so bright it almost glowed.

He examined the mana after collecting it. "This should be good enough, but I might as well butcher the rest before the ants get to it."

He sliced open the rest of the lion, and with practiced ease removed the hide, dumped the entrails to the side, and deboned the beast. He placed the heart to the side, then wrapped up the meat in the hide, using it as a makeshift sack.

After he finished, Leon began to stir, so Artorias quickly made a fire. He impaled the lion heart upon a stick and started cooking it.

Within his hazy waking up head, Leon smelled the cooking meat and opened his eyes. With greater clarity, he saw the cooking heart and Artorias smiling down at

him. He tried to quickly sit up, but the pain in his arms was still there, so with a grimace, he lay back down.

“Careful there, little lion,” Artorias said with a smile.

“What happened?” asked Leon.

“You did damned good, that’s what’s happened. You took a few hits, will probably have a few scars to remember this old cat by, but you killed it.”

“/ killed it? It was still moving after I shot my last arrow.”

“It was a mortal wound, so all I did was to help it on its way.”

Artorias kept up his usual smile, beaming with pride, but inside he was still berating himself for the decision to come after the lion. The only consolation he had was that he hadn’t insisted on hunting down an ice wraith. If Leon had this much trouble with the lion, then an ice wraith would’ve torn him apart.

“Rest now, little lion. Firing those arrows out of your enchanted bow took most of your magic, so just rest and recover. We’ll stay here for the night.”

Leon closed his eyes and took a deep breath, letting the magic in the air be absorbed by his lungs. The magic density was far greater back home thanks to the obelisk, but he still figured he would be strong enough to move again by the morning.

Artorias, meanwhile, was still cooking up the lion heart. He pulled it away from the fire and sniffed at it a few times. Then he offered it to Leon. “This was your kill, so you should eat the heart. It’ll be good for getting some more magic into your body. Might even help you crack into the second-tier tomorrow, when we perform the ritual.”

Leon immediately opened his eyes in excitement. “We’ll do the ritual tomorrow? What all do we have to do for it? Will it take long? Where will we go for it? Do you have any tips? What do-“

But Artorias cut him off before Leon could continue. “Slow down, boy. Rest, get your magic back. I’ll try to answer what I can, but your current priority should be to eat that lion heart and perform your breathing exercises.”

Leon smiled and laughed with some embarrassment. He slowly regulated his breathing, while carefully using his non-splinted arm to bring the heart to his lips. It smelled delicious, and he eagerly took a bite. The meat was tough and very chewy, but Leon savored every bite. He could feel a warmth spreading out from his stomach and felt small amounts of magic entering his blood. It didn’t take long to finish the heart, despite its size, and by then Artorias had made himself some food. Leon relaxed, and started his breathing exercises, looking at his father expectantly the whole time.

Artorias pretended not to notice Leon's gaze and ate deliberately slowly. The lion meat was cooked to perfection and filled with mana. Artorias wouldn't see too much gain from eating it, but he loved his food.

Finally, he turned to Leon and began to speak. "There is a tall mountain further to the east, that is our destination for tomorrow. The peak of this mountain is a large flat space, and we'll be digging a large magic array onto it. I wrote a few spells before we left, and we'll set them up at the focal points of the array. There will be two larger focal points near the middle. You will sit in one, and the ice wraith core will be placed in the other. The core will provide most of the raw magic, the spells will change the nature of that magic, and the array will direct the magic into you.

"Meanwhile, you will take off your shirt, and I will paint a few runes onto your body with a salve. You will also be drinking an herbal tea, to prepare yourself for drinking the lion's mana. I need to add a few things to the mana I've collected, and then it will be ready for you to drink, after the tea.

"There are a few more things I need to prepare before the ritual begins, but I suppose the easiest way to describe it would be to say that I need to make sure that the magic in the area is dense enough. A few runes similar to what I carved into our obelisk ought to do it."

Artorias smiled at Leon, waiting for his response. Leon, for his part, looked beyond excited, and Artorias guessed that were he not as injured as he is now, he would've insisted that they go to the mountain immediately.

Artorias glanced up and noticed the sky starting to redden. "It's getting late, I'd better set up a few wards to keep us safe."

He went to several trees around them and carved a simple runic circle into their trunks. Then, he placed his hand in the middle of each circle and channeled his magic into it to activate it. He grabbed a few large stones from the mountain path, carved a few runes into them as well, and scattered them around in a small magic array. There would be no banshees disturbing their sleep this night, though a determined ice wraith would still be able to force its way through. But then, it would be faced with Artorias and his enchanted blade, and that would be the last thing it would ever see.

Leon, meanwhile, began to meditate, to regain his lost mana. He relaxed, allowing his body to synch with the movements of the world. The wind picked up, and he inhaled. The wind died down, and he exhaled. His heart beat slower, but each beat began infusing magic into his blood. The resulting mana surged through his body, relieving his pain and fatigue.

Artorias looked at his son. Mana greatly accelerates the healing process, and Leon would be well enough to walk by morning. He sat down across the fire from the young

man and lay down. He stared up at the sky, watching it grow darker until the sun finally set.

The wards did their job, their sleep went undisturbed. They both awoke feeling hale and hearty and set off early the next morning. Artorias easily carried the lion meat in the lion's own skin, while Leon followed.

The slashes on his left arm had scabbed over and even looked slightly smaller than they had the night before. His right wrist was still very broken, however, so there wasn't much he could do to help his father carry the lion's remains.

It didn't take long to reach the ritual mountain, it wasn't even midday when they arrived. It was very tall, over fifteen thousand feet high. Leon paled a bit when he looked at the distant peak.

"We really have to climb *that*?"

"Yes and no, little lion. We need to get to the top, but there is an easy path we can use."

Artorias guided them towards a small path, hidden behind a number of huge boulders, and they began their ascent.

Leon was slightly confused. This path was just a little too convenient. "How did you find this path?"

"I made it," Artorias answered simply.

"You *made* it?"

"Yup. This is the mountain where I come to train. Every time I sense a storm coming, I leave for the top of this mountain. I carved a path for myself to make the climb easier. In fact, it's no longer even a climb, we simply need to walk to the top."

Leon didn't find this too awfully strange, he knew his father would always disappear when it started to rain. He also knew that the slow pace they'd been walking at these past few days were for his own benefit, as Artorias could travel from their compound to this mountain in less than an hour at his usual pace.

They remained silent the rest of the climb up, with Artorias mentally going through all of his preparations to make sure he didn't leave anything out, and Leon doing all he could to remain calm and suppress his excitement.

They arrived near the mountain peak by the time the sun started to fall. The very tip of the mountain continued upward another hundred feet or so, but Artorias had carved out a flat surface about fifty feet in diameter years before, and that was where they stopped.

Leon was shivering, due to both anticipation and the cold mountain air. Artorias set down the lion meat and began rummaging in his satchel for a large chisel.

“Leon, sit down and eat something. I’ll get started on the magic array.”

And with that, he began carving in the rock of the mountaintop. Leon had his food, and Artorias worked. It only took an hour for Artorias to be done, and when he finally stood up, Leon walked over to see.

The magic array was twenty feet long, and about fifteen feet wide. There were four small circles near the top, connected by lines that made it look like a storm cloud. A carved lightning bolt was emanating from the bottom of the cloud, and it intersected two larger circles in the center before landing on the ‘ground’, where there were three more smaller circles. The two circles in the middle were connected by a pair of lines that formed an oval, and the ground was connected to the cloud by two more lines, all of which formed a pair of concentric ovals. Lastly, Artorias had carved straight lines connecting the seven smaller circles with the very center of the formation.

Artorias explained all this to Leon, but the younger man didn’t quite see the pattern. Artorias was certainly no artist, but he was confident that what he carved would do the job.

Next, the elder man pulled out seven lightning spells, written on spell paper, and placed them in the seven smaller circles, weighing them down with small stones. He then carved a few more runic circles all around the formation, and the magic in the surroundings began to gather around them. The density of the magic in the air nearly doubled over the next few hours, while Artorias finished his preparations.

During those next few hours, Artorias pulled out a small pestle and mortar from his satchel and ground down a few of the plants he had brought with him and mixed them into a ceramic bowl. He then poured all the lion’s mana into the bowl and thoroughly mixed the mana with the herbs. Then, he looked to Leon.

“Take off your shirt and put down your things.” Leon complied, removing his bow and quiver, then his small pack of supplies, then his shirt, leaving his upper body bare. He sat down in front of his father, facing away, and Artorias retrieved his grey paste from the satchel. He dipped his finger in it, then began to paint runic circles and patterns onto Leon’s body.

Fifteen minutes later, Artorias had finished and had Leon kneel down in one of the center circles. Relax, and perform some breathing exercises, he told his son. He then took two more things out of the satchel, before tossing it away. One was a waterskin, and he gave that to his son to drink in between breaths. The other looked like a diamond, or a thick piece of glass, about the size of an orange. It gave off a dull blue light and an unnerving chill. Leon could feel it pierce directly to his bones, even from

ten feet away. Artorias placed the core in the other central circle, and Leon finished off the potion he'd been given.

Leon's vision began to blur, and his stomach felt like it was doing somersaults. He saw little flashes of light in the distance, and motion blurs in the corners of his eye.

"Dad, what the hell was in that potion?"

"A few things, some to dull pain, some to prepare your body for the lion's mana. A little queasiness is fine. Now then, are you ready? This is your last chance to prepare yourself."

Leon took a deep breath, then nodded towards his father. Artorias passed him the bowl of lion mana, then put some distance between himself and the array, and settled in to watch. After he had woken up from his own ritual twenty years before, the surroundings had been severely damaged, so he wanted to give Leon some space.

Leon looked down at the bowl and the slightly glowing red mana within. He closed his eyes, steeled himself, then brought the bowl to his lips, tipped it back, and began to drink. The air was cold that high up, and the ice wraith core wasn't helping, but the mana was oddly warm as if it had just been extracted. Leon didn't stop until the bowl was empty, and he felt the last drop of mana slide into his stomach.

Artorias let his smile fall as he watched and waited for the change to start. He remembered his own ritual and was both eager and very nervous about seeing it happen to his son. So, he simply watched and waited.