

Volume 2 shadow and magic

FeralHeart Chapter 13 - Chapter 1

Chapter 13: Chapter 1

Spring had ended and Summer had come calling upon the plains of Tyr in the south eastern province of the Regiis empire. It was a time of harvest and celebration as the peasants bustled about gathering the grains from the golden fields.

A month of back-breaking toil lay in store for them, yet none complained as after that, a month of festivities beckoned. The labour would just make the revelry that much sweeter.

As they worked, singing their rustic songs to alleviate their weariness, gossip could be heard, interspersed among the sonorous cadence, about which young warrior would win the martial competition this year.

The mainland, even after long years of empirical rule was still primarily based upon respect for martial prowess and so it was no surprise that the most anticipated event in the month-long harvest festival was the public martial arts competition.

Divided into many brackets by age and specialization, it was a channel right to the top of the social hierarchy for the warm-blooded youths that wanted more from their lives than tilling fields and herding cattle.

Although, the upper echelon was dominated by the members of the nobility, in this particular case, the Felidae clan, due to the disparity in resources, every year, heroes would inevitably emerge from the masses who shattered the glass ceiling by dint of their talent.

They would then be invited to enter the ranks of nobility as an auxiliary member of the clan. Prime material for a rags-to-riches story.

The anticipation for this year's competition was especially intense as it was the quadrennial version of the martial competition, held jointly among the four Marquises that governed the south eastern province.

It was rumoured that the Duke himself would come to audit the competition and there was a small chance that he would recruit a few talented youths for his personal Knight company. It was this rumour that had caused an unprecedented enthusiasm towards martial practice and incurable idlers had turned into training maniacs, all for the faint chance of changing their destiny.

While the aspiring participants busied themselves, the more logistics focused portion of the populace, which was most of them, indulged in discussion about the winners of past

competitions and their chances against the competing champions from the territories of the other Marquises.

For them, the competition was but a sport and the participants, especially the members of the nobility were celebrities to support.

It wasn't infrequent for fans of different martial warriors and mages to become red in the face from arguing vocally about the merits and demerits of their chosen champions.

One such discussion was ongoing in a training yard in the Felidae estates. What was special about this particular conversation was its participants. Not only were they martial warriors and mages themselves, they were firm favourites to take a spot in the top fifty of the contest.

Steven, a lanky, raven haired boy with dark shadows around his black eyes, marking him as a possessor of the panther bloodline, sat in the crook of a sturdy branch upon a tree that grew at the edge of the training field. He was leaning against the trunk with his interlaced fingers supporting the back of his head while he chewed leisurely upon a blade of grass. One of his legs was bent upon the branch with the sole flat upon it while the other hung freely in the air, swinging in time with the gentle summer breeze that blew upon the tree.

He spat out the blade of grass, watching it spin rapidly as it fluttered down to the ground, blown leaning by the breeze and yelled at a red-haired boy who was currently bending a longbow at an archery target placed at the far end of the field, "Yo, Gerard. Did you hear what happened yesterday?"

Gerard grunted noncommittally without letting up his focus on the target.

Inhaling deeply, he ripple-fired three arrows, nocking, drawing, twisting and releasing in one organic movement.

The three arrows shot out from the bow, catching fire as his mana ignited them, leaving fiery trails behind in the dry summer air. Spinning rapidly, the tips and tails twisted in opposing directions, taking the arrows in a slight curve that balanced out into a straight line.

The differential strengths on the three arrows caused them to simultaneously hit the target, embedding themselves into the hard wood at the three vertexes of an equilateral triangle.

The fiery mana exploded out on impact in a spiral, carving a burnt furrow into the wood before the three spirals met exactly in the centroid of the triangle, causing a large explosion that shattered the target into burning pieces of charcoal.

"Yes!" Gerard exclaimed jubilantly, throwing up his hands into the air, still holding his bow. "I finally managed to pull off the triple burst-shot."

He turned around to walk towards the tree Steven was on to take shelter from the harsh noon sun under its shade.

Laying down his quiver and bow at the base of the trunk, he greedily gulped down the chilled sugar water placed in a bucket of ice there. Using a towel to dry his sweat, he sank down against the trunk with a comfortable sigh.

Steven curled his lip in disdain as he sat up, dangling his second leg down from the branch and supporting his chin on his palms and resting his two elbows on his thighs as he looked down at the archer with the hot leopard bloodline. "I don't get why you waste your time on these trick shots. Even if they have strong destructive powers, you won't hit any moving target with how slow they are."

Gerard shrugged as he rubbed an ice cube on his face to cool down, his green eyes contrasting with his curly red hair that lay plastered over his forehead with sweat, nearly covering up the spotted markings representative of his bloodline.

"I plan to join the army after my coming-of-age ceremony next month. My pops says that anti-fort skills are in demand right now, what with the recent invasions of our borders from the Tokugawa Shogunate. The higher ups plan to counter-attack by occupying a few of their garrisons as a warning. They'll need to demolish their defensive walls if they don't want to siege them. That's where I come in with my destructive skill. Compared to the newbies with the anti-personnel skill sets who'll be advanced as cannon fodder, we get to be protected by the main force as we just bombard them from the back lines. A cushy job if ever there was one in the army."

Steven shrugged as he leant back, swinging down as he used his knees to hang upside-down from the branch with his arms crossed on his chest and said, "To each his own... anyway, did you hear the rumour about the first Princess awakening as a Feral and mauling the Prince, that too on his eighteenth name-day, delaying his coming of age ceremony."

Gerard nodded as he took another swig from the canteen of sugar-water. "It's unbelievable... how lucky can the guy get? An awakening at seventeen? That level of talent is similar to the women from the imperial clan. Not only that, the timing is so convenient too, happening just before the yearly contest."

Steven let his hands flop down as he nodded his head in a disbelieving manner. "Yeah, man. Last year he defeated Boss by the skin of his teeth because Boss' magic was still too preliminary to play a role in the fight, so he got by with his pure martial arts. Well, considering the amount of resources his parents pour into strengthening his body and seeing how he has private lessons from his father in the highest martial art in the clan;

the fact that he had such a hard time against Boss who is a year younger shows how unworthy he is of his position as the heir."

He turned to look at the figure who was brandishing a war-hammer in the corner of the field.

The hammer howled in the air as it blurred in Bruno's hands, causing his form to twist in Steven's sight as the currents of air wrapped around him, carving furrows into the sun hardened ground.

The hammer head glowed blue as his icy mana poured into it, lowering the temperature of his surroundings and coating the furrows with a layer of frost. The sweat on Bruno's shirtless figure coagulated into crystals of ice that shattered into icy powder under his vigorous movement and got sucked into the swirling air currents, wrapping him in a sparkling corona.

With a primal grunt, he gathered all the momentum of the hammer and slammed it down onto the ground in a two-handed overhead smash. A large section of the ground subsided as frost rapidly spread out from the point of impact, riming the newly formed crater in a layer of ice.

Reclaiming his vision Steven turned back to Gerard who had been watching too.

"This year, there was no suspense about who would win since Boss had perfected his grasp of Tier 1 variation water magic. But now, with the addition of the contract's body strengthening and its ability to share some of the partner's magical prowess, things just got a lot more uncertain."

Gerard nodded then shook his head. "Young Master Bruno will still win. The amplification of magic to any martial art is too strong for the meagre portion Prince Mars will get from his contract to help... Or, that's what I would have said, if Young Master Bruno's weakness in terms of speed wasn't exactly Prince Mars' strong point. With Princess Deimos' gift of wind approaching Tier 2, he will get even faster. Things can swing either way now."

A leaf fell off from the tree and floated down from Steven's side. Two daggers suddenly appeared out of the shadows in the palms of Steven's hands and he expertly twirled them around, his hands blurring, before making them vanish again. The leaf continued to float down until it suddenly dispersed into tiny pieces half-way to the ground.

Gerard's eyes brightened, "Did you touch the threshold of Tier 2?"

Steven complained, "Where? How can it be that easy? I just managed to modify the Tier 2 Shadow Walk skill by limiting its area of effect to only my palms and using it to summon my daggers. The resources needed to break through are tremendous if I don't

want to spend time doing it manually. I'm not the second Princess with the backing of the Third Elder, the clan Head and the Prime Healer behind me."

Gerard shrugged and asked, "Speaking of Princess Phobos, aren't you from the same branch of the clan as her? Won't your father tan your hide for hanging out with us 'divisive elements' like he did the last time he found out?"

"My father is my father... I am me. I choose who I associate with and his rants aren't going to change my mind. Besides, when did you ever see the Prince give us the time of the day? He's either training martial arts with his father, studying calligraphy with his tutor or rutting like a cat in heat with the Princesses in his bedroom. What am I supposed to do? Pine away for him like a lovelorn maiden, waiting for him to graciously bestow a glance upon me? Nah. I'm better off with you guys."

Gerard cracked into a smile as he reached up to ruffle his hair as he still hung upside-down. "Good to hear, partner."

Steven flipped down from the branch, landing on his feet and raising a dust cloud on the dry ground that caused Gerard to sputter and cough. "Heh. Gotcha."

Shooting him a resentful glare, Gerard turned towards the final two occupants of the field.