

FeralHeart Chapter 14 - Chapter 2

Chapter 14: Chapter 2

In the field, two boys were facing off against each other, cautiously probing their opponent's weakness by circling slowly.

Lionel was a tall, muscular boy with dark brown skin and black hair, indicative of his lineage as a Puma bloodline holder. He had a small, circular bronze shield strapped onto one arm while in his other hand, he held a bronze short-sword.

The only piece of clothing on him was a leather gladiatorial skirt and metal studded boots, revealing his capable body under the glare of the summer sun. A multitude of scars covered him, the healed flesh, stark against his dark skin. They were mementoes from his days as a pit slave in the gladiatorial ring in the barbarian country of Sparta.

Lionel had been rescued from his slavery by the First Elder, Deimos' grandfather, when he had gone there on a diplomatic mission. He had brought back the savage boy and ordered him to be the protector of the waif of a boy now facing off against him on the training field.

Messi, Deimos' cousin and the grandson of the First Elder was a petite boy. Standing at five feet four inches tall, he was a dwarf compared to Lionel and with his golden hair and cerulean eyes ringed by the tear shaped markings common to all with the bloodlines of the cheetah, his looks would inspire the maternal instincts of most women. Even those too young for motherhood.

Next to Mars, he was the most sought-after male in the clan by the ladies.

He might have been small, but that didn't make him any less dangerous. His speed among the juniors was only second to Deimos. Combined with the insane grin that plastered itself upon his face whenever he fought, he had been nicknamed Speed Demon.

Although, several of his detractors had tried to link that to premature ejaculation, glowing recommendations from his extremely vocal fiancé, Fifa, had soon put a stop to that.

Growing impatient, Messi was the first to break the deadlock. Grinning widely, he skipped lightly on the tips of his toes, using his control over the wind to almost cancel his weight and reduce air resistance.

Falling into a pugilistic stance, his hands blurred as he punched out at Lionel in a rapid barrage. The air at the ends of his fists warped into air bullets and shot forward at blinding speeds. Tier 1 wind magic: Air Bullets.

With a low roar, a yellow brilliance erupted from Lionel's body and a layer of stone formed on him, wrapping him a sturdy, yet flexible armour. Tier 1 earth magic: Stoneskin.

Tanking the barrage of blows with his shield and his body, he charged towards Messi. Each of his steps seemed to sew him to the earth giving one a misconception that a mountain was bearing down on them. His walking positions were ingenious, taking into account the faster boy's speed and slowly driving him into a corner.

Using his short sword, he deflected the bullets that curved past his shield, aimed at his vital points.

Messi grew increasingly irritable as the more experienced warrior drew unceasingly closer to him through his maelstrom of magic. His mana was finite and he was burning through it a lot faster than Lionel and if the status quo was maintained, he would soon be eliminated.

Clenching his teeth, his blue eyes blazed with an internal light as his mana grew agitated within him. Streams of air circled around him with increasing intensity until it looked like he was clad in a hurricane.

Steven and Gerard, who were looking on grew open-mouthed in surprise. Tier 2 wind magic: Blade Edge Hurricane.

Realizing the danger, Lionel immediately abandoned his attrition tactics. If that hit him, his Tier 1 defences would collapse like a thin sheet of paper in a gale.

He stamped hard on the ground and with a yellow glow, a blunt spike shot out of the ground, propelling him forward at blinding speeds. Each footstep gave birth to a new spike, accelerating him further.

Steven and Gerard were rendered speechless. Tier 2 earth magic: Stone spike. Lionel had modified it so that instead of attacking his enemies he could use it for movement boosts. Not only did this ingenious usage reduce the cast time, it also relaxed the consumption, allowing him to use it even though, strictly speaking he was still in Tier 1. It was similar to Steven's modification of Shadow Walk and Gerard's triple burst-shot in that it allowed them to display a might commensurate to Tier 2 mages ahead of time. This much was to be expected. After all, they were the cream of the crop.

Steven shook his head. "Messi's going to get his ass handed to him. I don't know how he broke through to Tier 2 but he's too unfamiliar with the magic. He won't have time to cast it."

Gerard narrowed his eyes, "He hasn't broken through to Tier 2."

Steven turned to him in surprise, "Huh?"

A sudden burst of sound and a shrill screech of metal distorting caused him to whip his head around. What he saw made him dumbfounded. Lionel was lying a few metres away from a panting Messi, having drawn a deep furrow in the ground.

His shield and sword lay scattered beside him, distorted beyond recognition while his Stoneskin was slowly flaking away, revealing a few light wounds from the wind blades that had hit him.

"Messi was manipulating the wind around him to resemble Blade Edge Hurricane. It was a bluff. Finally, like us, he too has developed an attenuated version of the Tier 2 spell and it was this move which caught Lionel off guard, eliminating him," analysed Gerard as he stood up, patting the dust off his pants as he walked towards the two boys.

Steven hurriedly caught up to him and asked, "Wait! How did you see through him beforehand? His performance put theatre actors to shame."

Gerard shrugged, "He's good but he stopped smiling like a maniac when he started preparing the sham. To everyone else, it might seem that he was getting serious... but to those who know him well..."

Steven was suddenly enlightened and he patted a fist into his palm. "Aha! Old Lio was too negligent. He should have known that the lunatic wouldn't stop grinning even if someone were to stick a blade into his gut."

When they reached the duo, Messi had already helped the large boy up and was supporting him by his arm around his shoulder.

Although, it made them look comical as Lionel had to be hunched over. After a few staggering steps, the sturdy warrior's gait grew steadier and soon, he could walk without support.

Gerard handed the sugar water to the both of them while Steven brought the dented shield and sword along. Thankfully, they were practice weapons and all that repair involved was melting and recasting them.

The four of them returned to the shade of the tree and Lionel and Messi collapsed against the tree trunk, exhausted. Chugging the chilled sugar water, they got back a bit of their energy.

"I heard some of what you were talking about," said Messi as he cupped some ice in his hands and generated a cool breeze with the last of his mana, blowing it over all four of them.

Gerard looked up from where he was inspecting Lionel's wounds and gave him a thumbs-up before commenting, "You've reached the pinnacle of Tier 1 with your perfect control. You managed to channel the violent wind from your last attack entirely towards

the weapons, leaving Old Lio mostly unharmed. Will you try breaking through to Tier 2 before the competitions?"

Messi nodded. "Yeah. Grandpa is looking for an Aeolian Crystal for me. You know how scarce they are in these parts. If I have it, I can directly consolidate my realm before the competition. I can break through without it but that'll do more harm than good as I won't be able to control the Tier 2 mana as well as I could with it."

Steven chimed in, "I'm jealous of the girls. All they need to do is awaken as a Feral and *bam* their breakthrough becomes so much more stable and simple."

Messi narrowed his eyes. "Yeah. My dearest cousin will mostly break through in a few days. That is, if she manages to keep herself out of her injured Prince's bed for long enough to meditate. She always was eccentric, what with having no parents to monitor her. First, her same-sex relationship with Phobos and now," he shook his head incredulously, "She's getting more and more ridiculous after she broke ties with grandfather. Can you believe what she did yesterday? She carried the pimp to the cells and spent the night accompanying Phobos who had locked herself up there."

He clenched his teeth, "No respect for tradition in her. She's a stain on our Cheetah lineage. Even Fifa, who's normally tolerant, complained to me about it today morning."

Steven burst out laughing causing Messi to frown and Gerard to raise his eyes while the ever-stoic Lionel ignored him.

"What's so funny?" asked Gerard.

Restraining himself with great difficulty, Steven chuckled as he said, "Man, I feel sorry for Fifa. You're so clueless. I was 'practicing' my Shadow Stealth near the female baths this morning when I heard her gushing in that overly loud voice of hers about how great the love between the Prince and the Princesses was."

He looked at Messi in a taunting manner, "If I remember correctly, her exact words were, 'He trusts her even when she doesn't trust herself.' The rest of the girls looked like they wanted to tie themselves up with a ribbon and present themselves to him as his eighteenth name-day present. Rather than 'complaining' Fifa was trying to give you a hint to follow his example. And you took her at face-value. Ha-ha. Blockhead."

Messi's face turned liver coloured as he tried to suppress his awkwardness. Suddenly, he thought of something and he narrowed his eyes dangerously at Steven.

Sensing the bloodlust, Steven stiffened as he realized that he had said too much. With a nervous chuckle, he started backing away.

"I found something strange in your story. Tell me if I'm wrong but you were peeking on the female baths while Fifa was still in there despite promising me you wouldn't do that again." Messi said as he cracked his knuckles as he advanced upon the him.

"Ha-ha. Misunderstanding, misunderstanding... I'm a gentleman of my word. Ha-ha." said Steven nervously.

Suddenly, his tone enforced, "I might be a bit horny cause unlike you lucky guys, my father decided to defer my engagement till after this year's tournament so I could marry someone from a different clan by impressing them with my performance in the competition."

He grew more indignant and animated as he spoke. He pointed at Lionel as he said, "Hell, even mister tall, dark and silent has a fiancé." Lionel shot him a glance through his lids at the mention of his name before continuing to ignore him.

"You guys might not be like the Prince, staying together even before the awakening, but you guys at least get to have sex regularly. Me? I'm still pure because my father feels it'll raise my sale price more in the eyes of the potential suitors." He pointed at his left buttock. "See this, it's larger than the other one and has been since my father caught me trying to sneak into the brothel. Boss is the only other person in this group who is like me. That too, not by choice." He was nearly in tears. "Brother, have mercy on this unfortunate soul."

Messi's face was unemotional as he asked yet again as he advanced, "So did you or did you not see my beloved naked?"

Steven's eyes shifted around before he clenched his teeth and took to his heels. Messi grinned madly and gave chase.

Steven's gait was strange and treacherous. Each time he moved, he left several afterimages, each seeming to move towards a different direction. Using Shadow Stealth, he confused falsehood with reality and any one of the images could be his true body. The afterimage with the strongest presence wasn't necessarily him while the one with the weakest presence might be his true self.

High-ranking shadow style step martial arts: Ghost Step.

Even his rhythm and centre of mass migration was strange, almost hypnotic as it caused Messi to nearly stumble due to dizziness.

If he had his mana, Messi would have snagged him instantaneously without giving him an opportunity to play his tricks but without mana, even though he was faster, he didn't exceed Steven by too much.

Gerard spectated with great interest and Lionel simply shook his head at their tomfoolery. Suddenly, a deep voice rang out in the yard.

"Come, let's end training here for today and wash up."

Steven and Messi stopped their chase as Bruno walked towards them, shouldering his war-hammer, each step leaving shallow footprints on the hardened ground from the incredible weight of the weapon.

He turned to Steven, "I heard your words about me just now."

Steven scratched the back of his head awkwardly. "He-he. Don't mind it, Boss."

Bruno raised his hand to stop his words as he shook his head. His eyes were tranquil as he spoke.

"Don't worry. My heart isn't made of glass. I am not so weak that I won't be able to recover from this setback. It was my father who arranged the marriage and I hadn't even spoken more than a few words with Deimos, so it's not like I had any emotional attachment to her."

His icy blue eyes narrowed dangerously.

"But, Mars laid his hands on what was mine... just as his father once took what should have been my father's."

He laid his palm upon the tree and with cracking noises, its bark splintered as the sap in it froze. Soon the entire tree, including its leaves stiffened, crackling in the gentle summer breeze.

Fisting his hand, he dug his claws into the trunk and the entire tree shattered in a cloud of fragmented ice and splinters.

He stalked away from the training field towards the baths.

"This year, I'll be taking it all back."

The four boys in the field swallowed their saliva as they looked into each other's eyes, finding their shock mirrored there. Snapping out of their reverie, they hastily collected their equipment and ran to follow behind Bruno.

They had an extra spring in their step and their backs were straighter, happy that they had made the correct choice in whom to follow.