

Storm King 101

Chapter 101: The Following Weeks

The weeks passed by quickly for the Snow Lions. The other nine units had started fighting for each other's banners in earnest, but their conflicts meant little in the secluded gorge. The Snow Lions simply got into the habit of continuing their Light Infantry training, which meant running many more patrols and sitting through more lessons from their Instructors.

The other units did the same training, but they stopped after lunch; the Snow Lions continued well into the evening, with only Leon and several others keeping up with their extra classes. Since the extra classes weren't necessary for graduation, almost all of the Snow Lions were perfectly comfortable skipping them, even after the Senior Instructor stopped forcing them to stay in the gorge and train.

But the gorge wasn't that large, all things considered, so their training patrols were gradually moved out into the forest. This gave the Snow Lions an unparalleled understanding of the Academy's geography, with even the dullest of the first-tier commoners in the unit confident in their abilities to navigate around the forest and mountains.

The other units expanded their training areas out into the forest as well, but they rarely ventured out more than a thousand feet from their towers. And, since they barely ever saw them, they had long since started to forget about the Snow Lions. As far as most of the trainees in the cycle were concerned, there were effectively only nine units in the Academy rather than ten. Of course, they weren't exactly wrong, given that the Snow Lions weren't participating in the inter-unit battles.

Two units that were quite enthusiastically taking part in said battles were the Steel Century and Crimson Tigresses. The Steel Century, led by the strategically gifted Marcus, had managed to seize two other banners, leaving them with a total of three. The first banner to be seized was taken in a night-time raid on one of the other units' tower, while the second was taken in an ambush as the opposing unit was returning home after dinner.

As for the Crimson Tigresses, they had taken theirs in a significantly stealthier manner, infiltrating the enemy tower and stealing it in the night. Their tactics were quite similar to the Snow Lions, with them eliminating the first-tier trainees on the first floor in their sleep then taking the banner from the undefended shrine. Unlike the Snow Lions, however, Asiya fared much better at removing the banner from the shrine than Castor and took it without triggering the alarm.

In every training cycle, the other nine units would always be extremely hesitant to attack the Crimson Tigresses. That was the unit that all the ladies who joined the Knight Academy were sent to, after all, so the vaguely chivalric notions of the third-tier nobles would always leave the Crimson Tigresses safe from attack until they began their own attempts to steal banners. But that also gave them the initiative, letting them take their time and only move when they were ready. They could focus on their training and create a good plan, which meant that the ladies would invariably make the other units pay for not attacking them first.

Under Valeria and Asiya, the Crimson Tigresses truly lived up to their name, attacking four different units in the span of a week and causing far more casualties than they received—though they only managed to take the first banner they went after. They only had about half the numbers of the other

units, and that was a hard difference to overcome no matter who was involved. That being said, after these attacks announced to the rest of the training battalion that the ladies were ready for battle, they repulsed three assaults on their own tower without ever being in danger of losing their two banners.

Tiberias' Black Vipers participated in a couple battles as well but didn't do much to distinguish themselves. This was, oddly enough, by Tiberias' own design. He was saving himself for the ending competition, so he led the Black Vipers to attack only two other units. He didn't even target their banners; he would simply retreat after a few token casualties were inflicted.

But that wasn't to say Tiberias and the Black Vipers were sitting on their thumbs all day. They had actually filled much of their time with additional training, in the same vein as the Snow Lions and the Deathbringers—though not as intense. Tiberias and his fellow third-tier Black Vipers weren't helping to train their lower-tiered trainees, only making them practice what they had learned during that day's morning training.

All of this meant little to the Snow Lions, who continued to train hard in the secluded western mountains, gradually becoming something that—to their instructors at least—started to resemble a proper company of Royal Legion soldiers.

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Valeria continued sitting next to Leon during their enchantment classes. Gaius had stopped bothering her—and had even seemed to stop talking to most people—but that didn't mean that she was going to change seats. She and Leon had gotten quite used to sitting next to each other, exchanging short greetings when the class started and they had managed to start relaxing in each other's presence. They still refrained from actually conversing with each other for more than a few sentences, though.

When the class was over, they'd say goodbye or something to that effect and proceed to their next class. Valeria would occasionally catch Leon looking at her in weird ways and she could sense a faint aura of killing intent radiating from him whenever he saw her, but she couldn't for the life of her figure out why. She considered just asking him if he had a problem with her, but the aura was faint and undirected enough for her to not be sure if it was for her, so she was always too embarrassed to clear the air. And since Leon was in no hurry to explain himself, the two would always sit in silence despite their respect for each other's fighting abilities.

Their respect for each other was profound enough that both greatly desired to train together, but since neither could start a proper conversation with the other, that desire had to go unfulfilled. But then, one day a little over two months after the Snow Lions regained their banner, Valeria was approached with an offer that could potentially result in the two fighting again.

It was during the second afternoon class of the day. Most of the classes offered to the trainees were various arts or cultural classes, to give them some of the depth expected of a noble knight, but Valeria wasn't particularly keen on any of them apart from a slight interest in enchanting. The other classes were all subjects like horseback riding or medicine that she was already proficient enough in, though, so she was forced to choose one that she didn't find particularly engaging.

She wound up choosing music as her second class. She wasn't very good and quite hated playing instruments like the piano, but absent-mindedly plucking at a harp while quietly meditating was a tolerable way to pass the time for her.

Marcus Aeneas had taken the same class, delighting in getting to learn about various instruments and throwing himself wholeheartedly into the musical arts. However, on that day, he put aside his lyre, flute, and drum, and approached Valeria with an offer concerning the Snow Lions. She had been meditating and didn't appreciate the interruption, but she heard him out anyway.

And when he was done, she agreed to his proposition.

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The day after Marcus made his offer to Valeria, she was absent from the enchanting class. Leon found it quite odd, but the trainees weren't required to attend the classes for graduation, so absences weren't uncommon if the trainee in question felt their time would be better used for training. Still, neither Leon nor Valeria had missed a single day the entire cycle, and Leon felt a little unsettled by the sight of her empty seat.

[Who cares where that girl is. If your suspicions are actually correct and she's related to your enemy, the more distance you can put between yourself and her, the better,] muttered Xaphan after sensing Leon's unease.

[If my suspicions are correct,] Leon whispered back, perfectly willing to give Valeria the benefit of the doubt.

[Mmm... Sounds to me like you're thinking with the wrong head...]

[My thoughts are quite clear, demon. Valeria isn't necessarily involved with that 'Adrianos Isynos'...] Leon had repeated that to himself multiple times over the past few months, trying to quiet the suspicious voice in the back of his mind that prevented him from trying to get closer to Valeria. Leon wanted to challenge her to sparring sessions again, and it was that voice that kept him from speaking up.

Their back-and-forth ended there as the enchanting instructor arrived and the class began. Afterward, Leon made for the Snow Lion tower, as had become routine. As he leisurely jogged down the forest roads, though, he suddenly realized that he was being followed. This wasn't too unusual, he had fought off spies sent by other units before, but he had a bad feeling that this time was different. His pursuer was staying off the road so Leon couldn't see him and moved so silently that if the wind hadn't carried the sound just so, Leon might've missed it.

Leon frowned but kept moving. There wouldn't be much point in confronting the enemy right there in the middle of the road as Leon didn't know their numbers or identities, though he guessed that it couldn't be more than one or two.

The other returning trainees didn't take such a slow pace and arrived at the tower before he did, so once he entered their sight, he motioned for them to head inside. This group of Snow Lions, half a dozen strong, had had to fend off enough spies to create a protocol for it, which essentially boiled down to heading inside to strategize in a place where they wouldn't be overheard. If anyone did try to take the

opportunity to attack while they're inside, they could leave out of a window while the attacker was busy with the locked door.

When Leon made it to the door, he took one last look over his shoulder before making his way inside. He didn't see anyone, but he could still feel their eyes on him from the forest. That he couldn't locate this mysterious enemy in the terrain he was most comfortable in unnerved him.

"What's going on?" asked one of the other Snow Lions.

"We're being followed. Don't know how many, but they're out there." Leon's attitude caught the others off-guard. They were used to him being unmatched in the forest, but his uncertainty made them all extremely nervous.

"What... what should we do?" asked another of the second-tier trainees.

"Hmmm..." Leon muttered, having been mulling that very problem over since he first noticed the uninvited guest. "We don't have enough people to fight off a coordinated attack from another unit... For now, we'll head north instead of west and try to lose them in the forest. If we're lucky, our pursuer will get bored and leave or I'll locate them somehow. If we're not lucky, then... we scatter. If everyone runs in a separate direction, at least one of us should escape. Our mystery pursuer will probably go after me, seeing as they should be third-tier as well if they're hiding from me so well..."

"Define 'not lucky'..." asked the first trainee who spoke up.

"If they attack us. Let me know if you see anyone, and if we're attacked, then do as I said and bail."

The other trainees frowned but accepted his plan. They were in a terrible position, but there wouldn't be much they could do other than hope for the best if even Leon was so obviously expecting the worst. The six men trusted Leon, though. His defense of the tower when the Deathbringers attacked and his actions afterward had won over most of the second-tier nobles, helped greatly by Castor's friendly attitude towards him. They weren't Leon's followers, but since Castor wasn't there they accepted his authority without much reservation.

"Well, we're not going to get anywhere if we just hide in here," said Leon as he turned back to the entrance. He paused before opening the door to listen, but after not hearing anything he pushed it open and confidently led the others back outside.

The group nervously walked across the open area surrounding the tower to enter the forest, expecting arrows to rain down on them any second.

They made it to the tree line without coming under fire, though, and sped off into the forest, with Leon setting a pace brisk enough to make it nearly impossible for anyone to follow them silently. But follow them silently the spy must have because Leon couldn't hear or see anything. In fact, after about five minutes of running through the quiet forest, the thought that Leon was mistaken had started to creep into the minds of the other Snow Lions.

And then an arrow sped through the trees, narrowly missing both Leon and one of the second-tier nobles.

Chapter 102: Ambush

The arrow came out of nowhere and blazed right past Leon's leg, barely missing him and another Snow Lion by a hair. The strategy Leon had decided on was to run away if attacked, but one arrow hardly qualified as something they needed to run away from. That being said, as none of the Snow Lions had any ranged weapons of their own, they all immediately sought cover behind trees while trying to see who was shooting at them.

Once the initial panic from being attacked wore off, Leon poked his head out from around the tree he had ducked behind. He knew the arrow had come from roughly ahead of him and to his right, so that's where he focused his gaze. Yet, even with his finely tuned senses, he didn't see a thing.

Slowly, Leon stepped out from around the tree, ready to dart back behind it at any moment. He waited for over a minute for another arrow, but when none came he motioned for the others to stay put and watch while he gripped his sword a little tighter and ventured out into the forest. He didn't go far, staying well within sight of the others, but far enough for him to investigate the surroundings.

And he found nothing.

'Whoever just attacked us is very good,' Leon thought as he examined the seemingly undisturbed underbrush. *'Even if I were to try something like this, I would be quite hard pressed to leave so silently...'*

He was confident that had he more time to investigate he'd surely find the trail of the mysterious attacker, but returning to camp was the higher priority.

"Let's go," he said to the other Snow Lions after running back to them.

"Is that archer gone?" one of them asked.

"... Let's go," Leon repeated, the long pause he took beforehand telling the others all they needed to know.

Leon led the group off into the forest, keeping an ear open for anyone who might be following. He didn't hear anything, but he didn't dare let down his guard.

"What happens if we can't shake whoever's screwing with us?" asked a Snow Lion named Janus. He hadn't spoken throughout this whole event, which surprised Leon that he was choosing to speak up now.

"We'll head back to the tower, then wait for night to fall and sneak back to the camp," answered Leon. It wasn't an ideal solution—they would miss out on hours of training, and the rest of the unit likely wouldn't get dinner on time if they actually had to wait that long for the group to return—but keeping the location of their camp secret was far more important.

Janus frowned at Leon's answer. "The others will surely send reinforcements if we don't show up..."

"Castor won't be in any hurry to do so. We thought something like this might happen, so we decided on only sending someone out to check up on any missing party if they hadn't returned by nightfall, then play it by ear from there."

"So if they head to the tower at the same time we leave, then won't they miss us?"

Leon smiled at Janus' slightly panicked question, but he didn't answer. He only nodded off into the forest, indicating that he wasn't going to get into too many specifics while they were being stalked. But seeing the confident smile on Leon's normally stoic face did relieve some of the tension the other Snow Lions were feeling. On the inside, though, Leon did regret not telling them about that particular protocol before this happened.

And then another arrow hurtled past Leon's face, with only an inch or two to spare.

Leon threw himself back while the others turned in the direction the arrow came from to face the enemy archer. Unfortunately, just like last time, they didn't see hide nor hair from the unknown archer.

"Shit," Leon muttered as he got to his feet and moved behind a large tree. "They don't have that many people. They can't, otherwise I'm sure I'd hear them at least. So here's a change of plan, I'll find whoever's attacking us while you all scatter and escape. We'll meet up at the place we trained at five days ago, got it?"

The other Snow Lions paled a little but nodded to Leon in acknowledgment. Janus was the only one to protest.

"But you don't know how many you might face! Or even if they'll even bother coming out of hiding to fight you!"

"They'll fight," Leon said, "They wouldn't have tracked us this far if they didn't want something. Just me on my own? They'll come out to at least talk..."

"And if they don't?" Janus looked at Leon with a hint of worry on his face.

"Then they don't," Leon answered, shrugging noncommittally. "And I'll meet up with you at the aforementioned point."

The others nodded at Leon, then took off into the forest. Janus hesitated, but then did as Leon told him to in the end.

Leon smiled as the others vanished into the forest. Having everyone split up wasn't the best plan if he really thought about it, but he wanted to take care of the mystery archer without having to worry about the rest of the group.

'They'll be fine, I'm sure,' Leon told himself, suppressing his misgivings.

He pushed himself to his feet and rushed in the rough direction the last arrow had come from. As before, he didn't see the archer, but that didn't stop him from looking around. He dug deep and used every tracking trick he knew about, and after several minutes, he managed to find a promising trail.

Leon smiled in anticipation of a good fight, then took off in pursuit of the archer. The trail wound around and doubled back several times, but Leon kept following, determined as he was not to let the archer escape. The longer he followed, though, the more unease he started to feel; the archer could clearly move worryingly fast without making enough noise for him to notice.

In fact, the trail was long enough that Leon slowed down and moved with significantly more caution. He had begun to suspect that the trail was leading him into a trap.

He stopped completely when the trail led down into a sparsely vegetated valley surrounded on three sides by large forested hills. Leon and the Snow Lions had trained in that very same cul-de-sac only a week prior, so he knew well enough that once he went in he'd be at the mercy of anyone on those hills. The slopes of the hills near the entrance were relatively gradual, so had he not been there before he probably would've walked straight into a terrible position without realizing until it was too late.

Leon's smile faded away, to be replaced with a deep frown. He peeled off the trail, moving in a wide circle around the hills surrounding the cul-de-sac. The tallest of the hills surrounding it was on the opposite side, and that's where he wanted to be.

It had been over an hour since Leon's group had left the Snow Lions' tower, and Leon had only just started getting back into the groove of hunting his prey. He'd managed to do some hunting before the Snow Lions had moved into the western gorge, but since then he hadn't done much to keep sharp. But following that trail had been like flipping a switch; Leon fell back into old habits and moved through the forest like a ghost, making no noise and leaving no trail anyone else in the Academy could follow.

It wasn't long before he had circled around the entire hill cluster and began ascending the target hill. The short journey had given him some time to think about who might be interested in ambushing him. His first thought had been the most obvious, the Deathbringers. Gaius had no shortage of reasons to seek his revenge on Leon, but such an indirect plan didn't strike Leon as being his style.

Leon's second thought was Tiberias. He definitely got the idea that Tiberias hated him, and that it was probably due to his relationship with Elise. Leon didn't know enough about Tiberias to confidently say it was him, though.

After those two came the Steel Century. There wasn't much to back Leon up on that possibility, but he knew Alcander wanted to duel him and the tower closest to the hill cluster belonged to his unit.

Leon looked forward to confronting who had prepared this for him, assuming he wasn't simply being paranoid. That thought had occurred to him as well, that maybe the archer had only passed through the valley and that he'd made the detour for nothing. Leon truly hoped that wasn't what was happening, as he'd have undoubtedly lost too much time going around the hills to catch the archer if it was.

It was because of that final possibility that Leon felt relief when the top of the hill came within view and he saw a young man hiding behind a boulder, watching the clearing at the center of the hill cluster like a hawk.

Leon smiled and silently crept up on the man from behind. The man was too engrossed in his vigil to notice Leon until he had pounced like a lion on its prey. It was over in less than a heartbeat; the man lay stunned at Leon's feet and there had hardly been a sound. Taking the opportunity to get a good look at the man, Leon pushed him over onto his back. He immediately recognized the guy as being one of the third-tier nobles who led the Steel Century!

Leon rolled the unconscious noble out of sight with a frown. He'd watched both Marcus and Alcander fight multiple times during the first month of the training cycle and knew they were both extremely capable warriors. Leon's frown grew deeper when he took the noble's place behind the boulder and cast his gaze down into the valley. Marcus was waiting there, sitting on a wooden stool out in the open with

a bow slung over his shoulder. He was alone, but from Leon's vantage point he could see at least two other people, though they were hiding as well and he couldn't get a good look at their faces.

He guessed one of them would be Alcander—he saw one of them had a long pole on their back, not unlike the haft of Alcander's greatax—and the other was the last third-tier noble leading their unit. What gave him pause, though was that both of them were on the same hill, which would leave one hill undefended had Leon not already made a move. He figured there might be others on that last hill that he couldn't see.

Despite the horrible position it would put him in, Leon made the decision to head down there and see what Marcus wanted.

'They've gone to so much trouble to invite me here that not speaking with Marcus would be rude!' he thought, holding his training sword in a vice-grip and smiling at the thought of the fight he was sure would come, despite his enormous disadvantage. If things went poorly, he could always retreat back into the forest where he was confident he could escape with little trouble.

Leon's smile grew wider and he started moving.

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As he approached, Leon saw Marcus proudly grin. Leon had fallen back off the hill and circled back around the hill cluster, so Marcus thought that Leon had completely fallen for the trap.

'Hmm, he's a little later than I expected...' he thought.

"Leon!" Marcus said, pointedly not calling Leon a barbarian. "I didn't expect you to appear alone. Having more of your unit with you would have been much safer, no? Or are you just that confident in your abilities?"

"Had the others retreat," Leon muttered.

"Really? That's certainly... unorthodox..."

Leon didn't answer, instead choosing to slowly walk in a circle around the still sitting Marcus. He allowed his eyes to wander around the hills, though he made sure not to let them linger on where he knew Alcander and the other noble were waiting to not show them that he knew where they were.

"Cautious, aren't you?" said Marcus with a light laugh. "Don't worry, I only invited you here to talk, I mean you no harm."

"Odd way to invite a man if you don't want violence..." muttered Leon as he glanced at Marcus' bow.

Marcus put on a bashful face and went a little red from embarrassment. "Ah, well... I've been told that I have something of a flair for the dramatic..."

A moment of silence followed, during which Leon stopped circling Marcus and stood to face the noble with his back to the largest hill. If anything happened that he couldn't handle, he'd immediately sprint up the hill and through the hole he'd punched in Marcus' perimeter.

"I'm here. What do you want?" Leon bluntly asked.

"There are actually a couple things I had hoped to bring up with you if you would indulge me," answered Marcus, his smile growing wider when he thought that Leon had unwittingly placed himself directly in the center of the danger zone. "I'm quite curious as to where the Snow Lions have been these past few months, as I'm sure many others are. Perhaps you could enlighten me as to where you all have been?"

Leon's answer was swift and came without hesitation. "No."

"Really? Why not?" asked Marcus as he put on a hurt expression.

"Why would I?"

"... To make a friend?" responded Marcus. Leon rolled his eyes at the weak justification, but Marcus just laughed it off. "It doesn't matter what you think, you'll tell us the location eventually. Which brings me to my second point! My friend has witnessed your skills from afar and has consequently been inspired to test himself against you! I would *appreciate* it if you could indulge him..."

Marcus continued to jovially smile at Leon, but he raised his fist into the air in a signal to those waiting in the trees to show themselves. As Leon expected, Alcander emerged with a smile of great anticipation, as did the last third-tier mage of the Steel Century.

What he didn't expect was for Valeria to appear from the trees on the opposite hill, her cold blue eyes staring down at him and her glaive at the ready. And he was surprised again when Asiya also popped out from the trees, guarding the path that Leon had taken into the valley.

Asiya happily jumped into the air, giving Leon an exaggerated wave while shouting, "Hi there!" Leon waved back, though not nearly in such a bubbly manner, then nodded to Valeria to acknowledge her as well. She nodded back and faintly smiled, to try and make it clear that she wasn't there out of malice.

"So is it Alcander or Valeria who wanted to fight?" Leon asked, despite being fairly sure he already knew the answer.

"... It was Alcander," responded Marcus, who was getting concerned that his last third-tier noble wasn't showing himself.

'I'm going to kick his ass later if he fell asleep waiting for the ambush again.'

"And if I lose, then I have to tell you where my unit is hiding?" Leon guessed.

"That's right," said Marcus, who turned his attention back to Leon, though his eyes kept glancing back to the hill behind the Snow Lion.

"Well," began Leon, "I'm not going to tell you, no matter what happens. And I won't agree to anything that could possibly end with me telling you what you want to know."

"Are you sure? You haven't even heard what we're willing to wager--"

"I don't care what you offer, it's not happening."

"So you won't fight him?"

"I'm perfectly willing to fight him; in fact, I'd quite like to, but I'm not going to put the Snow Lions or their banners at *any* risk."

Marcus frowned at Leon, then gestured again to the other four third-tier mages. "I guess we'll have to think of something else to entice you with. For the time being, I'm going to have to ask you to come with me back to my tower--"

"Fuck you, not happening," interrupted Leon, causing Marcus' frown to deepen.

"Well that was extremely rude..." Marcus said in response. "You're outnumbered, you don't really have much of a choice. I don't want things to get out of hand, so why don't--"

"Aren't you curious as to why your last guy hasn't emerged yet?" Leon interrupted again. Marcus looked at him blankly for a split second, before Leon's slight smile clued him into what had happened. But, before he could move, Leon was already lunging forward and drawing his sword.

Marcus barely managed to raise his arm to block, but he was knocked flat on his back and his right arm was stunned into paralysis. He hadn't expected Leon to attack him with so many other third-tier mages around and had been caught completely off-guard.

Leon didn't waste any more time and immediately turned around and sprinted for the largest hill. Alcander, Valeria, and Asiya all moved to engage him, but they were caught just as off-guard as Marcus and Leon managed to make it up and over the hill before anyone could stop him. Alcander and Valeria pursued Leon into the forest while Asiya stopped to examine the noble Leon had knocked out earlier. The last third-tier trainee from the Steel Century had gone to check up on the flabbergasted Marcus.

"Why would he *do* that? He was supposed to surrender or fight here!" Marcus shouted indignantly, angered more at Leon not doing what he predicted than his temporarily paralyzed arm. But the anger soon passed, and the thrill of the hunt set in as he and Asiya took off after Alcander and Valeria, leaving the last third-tier noble behind to take care of his stunned comrade.

Chapter 103: The Chase

Leon sprinted through the forest with Alcander and Valeria hot on his heels.

"HAHA! THIS IS GREAT! NO GOOD MEAL COMES WITHOUT AN APPETIZER AND NO GOOD FIGHT COMES WITHOUT SOME BUILD UP!" bellowed Alcander. He'd been yelling himself hoarse ever since he realized that Marcus and Asiya weren't behind him and Valeria, so he had taken it upon himself to almost let the entire Academy know where they were. He didn't even pay that much attention to what he said, the point was to make sure Marcus could follow even if they had left his sight.

But, even though Alcander made it easy for Marcus to follow him, his own pursuit was hardly going well.

Out in the forest, Leon was nearly unmatched. Almost his entire life had been spent in the Forest of Black and White, a place with far more dangers and significantly rougher terrain than in the Knight Academy. The lead he had in the beginning had only grown wider in the minutes since the chase had started.

'How is this guy so fast?' Alcander asked himself, noticing how easily Leon navigated the broken ground. He avoided every tree root, weed, and errant stone in his path as if he had run along this route a hundred times before.

Looking to his right, he saw that Valeria clearly didn't share in his mounting frustration. A rare smile had graced her lips as she relished the chase. She had never ever done something like chasing someone down through a forest after failing to ambush them before, and she was having a lot of fun.

'That girl's a damn monster...' Alcander thought appreciatively as she pulled ahead of him. He had trained himself and built his body for pure, raw strength, but that had left him comparatively slow in long distance running. He was able to keep up for a few minutes, but as fatigue set in and his mana reserves ran low, he found himself falling back.

Valeria had no such problem, though. Her training had been far more balanced, so she didn't have the same speed disadvantage as Alcander. Even as she fell behind and lost sight of their quarry, she kept on him. Leon didn't once leave her line of sight.

"Don't lose him!" shouted Alcander to Valeria in between roars for Marcus' benefit.

"I won't," replied Valeria, "though it seems you won't be getting the first bout."

"Grrrah! Fine! Just keep him in sight!"

With those words, Alcander slowed down to meet up with Marcus and Asiya, letting Valeria handle the chase.

However, even though Valeria was much faster than Alcander, she couldn't close that growing distance between her and Leon. The actual distance wasn't that great—if it were a fixed distance, then Valeria could cover it in less than a second at full tilt—but Leon's ability to move in a dense forest was better than hers.

After another few minutes, Leon started running up a steep hill. This made him lose speed, which allowed Valeria to close in on him a little. But, as Leon made it to the top of the hill, he spared the time to flash a cheeky grin back at her before he vanished behind the crest of the hill.

It only took Valeria a moment to reach that same point, but when she saw the other side of the hill, she froze; Leon had completely vanished! Her eyes took in every detail in front of her, not missing a single thing. She didn't see a single sign of Leon passing through. She started moving down the hill, hoping to catch a glimpse of his fleeing form, or at least the beginning of a trail, but there was nothing to see.

She was absolutely dumbfounded—which was mixed with a little anger and frustration—as to what had happened, as were the others when they caught up a minute or two later.

"Aargh! You said you wouldn't lose him!" complained Alcander. His tone was light enough to make it clear that he was more frustrated with Leon than Valeria, but he was still incredibly disappointed. And yet, also quietly impressed.

"How could that guy just disappear like that?" Asiya wondered aloud. "Ooooh! Maybe he had some kind of invisibility spell or enchantment or something like that?! That would be sooo cool!"

"It's possible, but I doubt that," said Marcus, massaging his right arm as it regained feeling. He had been wearing his gambeson under his clothes, which meant his arm had only been paralyzed for a few minutes. "Such spells or enchanted items would sell for tens of millions of silver, so far outside of the

price range of a Valeman that it would be ludicrous to assume he would have one... However, I think I might have something.”

The other three quickly moved closer to Marcus, who was busy examining the ground near the top of the hill.

“He didn’t vanish, he just changed directions. In the split second that Lady Valeria lost sight of him, he darted to the right.”

Valeria’s eyes widened in realization; she had concentrated her investigation to her front, rather than widening it to include the space to her immediate right and left!

“Did he leave a trail that you can follow?” she asked anxiously.

“He did,” answered Marcus, bringing a smile to the faces of the entire party.

He led them in pursuit of Leon at a fast pace—though it was quite a bit slower than when they were directly chasing him earlier. Every now and then he’d have to stop and examine the ground or a bush, but still confidently led them onward.

“This trail is going west, towards the mountains,” said Asiya. She had stellar navigational skills and had noticed that the forest ahead of them had started to thin out. “Perhaps the Snow Lions’ camp is in the west, rather than somewhere in the forest as we had assumed?”

“Maybe...” muttered Marcus with a furrowed brow.

“Something wrong?” asked Alcander, noticing the unease that had started to creep into Marcus’ voice.

“It’s... probably nothing, but the trail seems odd...”

“... Could you be a little more specific as to it’s oddity?” asked Valeria after a long pause from Marcus.

“Well, every time I see a sign of Leon’s passage, it leads us in a certain direction. But, there’s only ever that one sign, and when we go far enough that I would need another clue, bam! There’s another one just waiting for me. Maybe I’m reading too much into this, but it just seems oddly convenient.”

“Not getting cold feet, are you” asked Alcander in a teasing tone.

“Hardly. I just don’t want to lead us into a trap.”

“He’s *one* guy! How much of a trap could he spring on such short notice?”

“Let’s hope we don’t have to find out...”

The group followed the trail right up to one of the doorsteps of the western mountains, a small footpath on the northern edge of the Academy’s training grounds.

“Well, shit...” muttered Alcander as he looked up at the two imposing mountains that flanked the mouth of the footpath. His doubts about what Leon could do to them started to evaporate in that moment; the greatest danger to Leon fighting all of them at once was that one person could tie him down while the other three would attack his exposed flanks. The footpath, however, was far too narrow for such flanking action.

They would have to be fools to not acknowledge Leon's fighting skill. They all knew that he was an equal at the very least to any of them, so combat against him in such a confined space would be far from easy, especially if he were to spring an ambush of his own.

However, little did they know that they were far behind Leon, who had run off back into the forest as soon as he finished making the trail. Leon was far too skilled in forest hunting tactics to unknowingly leave such an obvious trail. Once he reached the footpath, he doubled back and ran as fast as he could to the rendezvous point where the other few Snow Lions from his group had met up at after leaving him.

"Leon!" shouted Janus as soon as he saw the other man approach. "What happened with that archer?"

"The archer was bait to lure me into an ambush by the Steel Century and Crimson Tigresses," Leon answered. "But I got away, so let's get back to camp as soon as we can."

"Right! I'm sure Castor will want to know what happened!"

The group took off back to the gorge, led by Leon who was extraordinarily alert for anyone who might be following them.

When they arrived and after Leon made a few final checks behind them to ensure they weren't followed, they were greeted by the sight of both Castor and Alphonsus preparing the rest of the Snow Lions for battle.

"There you guys are!" Castor exclaimed once they appeared outside of the wooden fortifications the Snow Lions had started to build. Since Leon and Castor had both decided to stay in the gorge—and Alphonsus didn't object—plans had been drawn up for a number of walls and small towers to protect the caves. The fortifications were only half-built by the time Leon and his group had returned and weren't expected to be finished for another month or two.

Leon and the half-dozen second-tier trainees hurried over to explain the situation to Castor and Alphonsus.

"Ancestors damn them! What reason could they possibly have to ally against us!" shouted Alphonsus indignantly.

"They have two reasons, and they're both hanging in the caves," Leon responded. "More importantly, there are four third-tier mages about to enter the maze up north..."

Castor smiled at Leon's insinuation, and immediately called for four of his best archers while Alphonsus called for four of his own. Leon didn't have such a wealth of followers, but he called up Henry, Obellius, and Hostilius. Henry was still only a first-tier mage, but all three were the best archers he had gotten to know since enrolling in the Academy.

"Let's do this! Those bastards provoked us, what's coming is their own fault!" shouted an eager Henry.

"Indeed. This is a just and righteous action we must take, to defend our comrades and repel these cowardly invaders!" said Obellius.

Hostilius didn't say a word, merely glaring at Obellius for a moment after the other man had said his piece.

“We’re wasting time standing around, they won’t stay in the maze forever!” said an impatient Leon.

“You’re right! Let’s get a move on!” ordered Castor, spurring the ad hoc archer unit onward.

—

“This damned place,” muttered Alcander as the group of four reached another intersection. They had followed Leon’s trail into the footpaths and had walked deeper into the western mountains, but they quickly found that it led into a maze-like web of deep and narrow crevices and small valleys. If it wasn’t for Marcus—who had learned how to navigate in such terrain in his family’s holdings in the hilly and mountainous Eastern Territories—they would’ve gotten lost as soon as they made their first few turns.

Marcus had lost Leon’s trail, but the four nobles refused to give up without at least trying to find it again, and so had dove right in. All four regretted that decision, as there didn’t seem to be an end to the rocky crags and cliffs that surrounded and almost seemed to press down onto them.

‘Did he want to bring us here? Was it his intention to lose us in this place?’ Marcus wondered. If it was Leon’s plan for them to get lost in the maze, then he had to admit he was both impressed and disappointed. Impressed at Leon’s simple but effective plan, but disappointed in being unable to actually fight him.

“We should leave...” Valeria said quietly. Her gut told her that something was wrong, and that continuing to wander around in the maze would be a terrible idea.

“But this place is so coooool!” protested Asiya, her face beaming in joy at finding such an exotic place to explore.

“This place is also probably where the Snow Lions have been hiding for these past few months. I’m sure they would know the layout far better than we do. Continuing onward would be asking to walk into an ambush,” responded Valeria, causing Asiya to briefly put on a cute frown before her naturally sunny disposition shone back through.

“Let’s press on,” said Marcus. “I have a feeling we’re about to find what we’re looking for...”

“You’re not wrong,” came a voice from above them, “but you really should have listened to the lady!”

The four immediately looked up, searching for the source of that voice, and saw Castor, Alphonsus, Leon, and eleven other Snow Lions staring back at them from the top of the crevice they were walking through. The cliff walls were low enough for third-tier mages like them to jump to the top of, only about fifteen feet high, but the Snow Lions didn’t give them the opportunity. As soon as they made eye contact, the Snow Lions loosed their prepared arrows.

Alcander shouted as he raised his axe to try and defend, but he was a large man and the four arrows aimed at him all found their mark, knocking him out.

Marcus tried to dodge, but both of his legs and one of his arms were hit and disabled, which his gambeson armor couldn’t prevent.

Asiya and Valeria dodged as well, but an arrow grazed Asiya’s arm and paralyzed it. Valeria was the only one of the group who wasn’t hit. After taking a moment to take in her situation, she made the decision to take the fight to the Snow Lions. She leaped into the air and landed nimbly on the top of the cliff.

And there she was faced with Leon, Alphonsus, and Castor. Leon stood in front of her grinning in triumph, while Alphonsus raised his sword and glared from behind her.

“Draw!” shouted Castor from the other side of the crevice, ordering the rest of the Snow Lions to prepare more arrows to fire down on Marcus and Asiya. Then, he turned to Valeria. “If you fight, you won’t win. However, if you leave, we won’t follow you...”

Valeria looked at how badly she was outnumbered and surrounded, glanced back down at the other three, then reluctantly lowered her glaive.

“... We’ll go...” she reluctantly murmured, acknowledging that they had lost. Neither Marcus nor Asiya argued with her decision. Marcus actually thought the Snow Lions were being incredibly merciful for not simply knocking them all out and dropping them at the doors of their respective towers.

Valeria made to rejoin her group, but just as she was about to jump back down, she turned to Leon and said, “I’m looking forward to our next proper duel.” Then, she gave him a minute smile and jumped.

“I’m looking forward to it as well,” responded Leon with a much bigger smile.

The four promptly retreated, with Valeria carrying Alcander and Asiya carrying Marcus. They cut amusing figures as the two young ladies carried two much bigger men with seemingly little effort. Marcus was still conscious, so he was able to direct them back to the exit.

‘Next time, we won’t lose,’ he thought. ‘Next time, we will seize those banners. When this cycle comes to an end, it will be the Steel Century who stands on top!’

Chapter 104: Brotherly Concern

At the same time Marcus and his group were chasing after Leon after their trap failed to catch him, Gaius was nervously pacing in his room. He had been summoned by his brother Nicomedes again, and given how poorly their last meeting had gone, he was understandably anxious.

About half an hour after the Deathbringers’ Senior Instructor dismissed them for the evening, a runner arrived at the tower from Administration to escort Gaius to his brother. If the runner hadn’t been sent, then it was quite likely for Gaius to be attacked by another unit while he was on the road, and that wouldn’t do for someone who had been ordered to appear before a Tribune.

Gaius arrived at his brother’s office in no time. While he was waiting, Nicomedes had been attending to some paperwork, but he set that aside as soon as Gaius arrived.

“Little brother! Come in, take a seat!” Nicomedes’ office wasn’t that large, but it had several comfortable chairs that Nicomedes and Gaius took advantage of.

Gaius sat perfectly straight and didn’t let a single emotion show on his face. Nicomedes, on the other hand, allowed himself to relax and lean back into his chair. The two brothers sat in silence for several moments, stoically staring at each other.

And then, Nicomedes broke that silence with a light-hearted laugh and said, “You can relax, Gaius. No need to be so formal right now.”

Gaius breathed a sigh of relief and leaned back into his chair. He didn't let his guard down, but it at least seemed that he hadn't done anything to make his brother angry.

"I understand your apprehension, but I haven't called you here to castigate you for anything. In fact, there is something I should've said a while ago but work got in the way." Nicomedes' easy-going smile vanished, leaving a deadly serious look. Gaius tensed up again, expecting Nicomedes to start shouting, despite what he had just said.

"I must apologize to you for my actions the last time we spoke. I was angry, and I let my anger speak. I scolded you for losing your noble bearing, but I lost mine as well." As Nicomedes continued, Gaius' eyes nearly popped out of his skull in surprise. In his seventeen years of life, he had never once heard Nicomedes apologize for anything!

"I scolded you for tarnishing our family's name, but I hardly acted familial," Nicomedes continued, leaving Gaius far too surprised to stop him. "I even scolded you for... events, for which that barbarian deserves the blame. For all this, I'm sorry."

Gaius sat in stunned silence for a moment after Nicomedes finished, and when he realized that his older brother was waiting for his response, he hurriedly said, "That's fine! I wasn't exactly as I should've..."

"Your self-awareness does you credit. You sound a little more grown-up than the boy that left Lentia half a year ago. A little more like a man," Nicomedes said with a smile. He then leaned forward and clapped Gaius on the shoulder.

"So, what brought this on?" asked Gaius.

"What? Can't I simply admit when I was wrong and take responsibility for it?" Nicomedes countered with, a frown appearing on his face.

"You can, but I've never seen you so unambiguously apologize before. Usually, you would apologize through actions, not words."

Nicomedes' frown disappeared, replaced with an appreciative smile. "You certainly know me well, don't you? You're not wrong, I probably wouldn't have said those things if I hadn't received two letters a couple weeks ago. One was from His Highness Octavius, and the other was from a friend of mine who works in the Royal Palace who informed me of some actions His Highness August has taken."

Nicomedes paused to retrieve the letters from a locked cabinet behind his desk.

"Here, read these and tell me what you make of them," he said, handing the letters to Gaius.

Gaius quickly scanned through both letters. His face lit up in joy and he read through the letter from Prince Octavius again to make sure he hadn't misread.

"Well?" asked Nicomedes.

"His Highness Octavius wants me as his personal squire!" Gaius responded, almost jumping out of his chair in joy. Nicomedes held out his hand to ask for the letters back, and Gaius passed them back to him with his own hands trembling in excitement.

"Does he?" Nicomedes wondered aloud.

“That’s what the letter said, His Highness was asking for me by name!”

“Gaius, settle down for a moment and think about it. There’s a vast difference between a noble family offering one of their own to squire for a Prince, and a Prince specifically asking for one.” Nicomedes’ words cooled Gaius’ head quite a bit, and he leaned back in his chair to think.

“Note that he didn’t ask for my recommendations, or for any specific information about you,” Nicomedes added.

“Then... does he want me as...” Gaius began, but his sentence trailed off as his suspicion sank in.

“He might want you as a hostage,” Nicomedes said, finishing Gaius’ thought. “Father did profess his support for His Highness when His Highness attended Gratian’s wedding, and this might be part of the Prince’s plan to ensure our support for whatever plans he might have.”

“What should I do?” Gaius asked, his voice cracking in panic.

“You’re going to be his squire. We can’t really stop it, so we need resign ourselves to it.”

Gaius stared at the wall with hollow eyes, now dreading the time when his squireship would begin. The rules of the Knight Academy stipulated that in order to graduate, a trainee had to complete a year-long training cycle in the Academy itself, complete a squireship under an anointed knight, and ascend to the third-tier of magic. Since there were trainees already at the third-tier, as well as second-tier mages who would quickly ascend during or not long after the training cycle, the Academy also required that the squireship had to last at least two years.

That meant that Gaius would be directly under the thumb of Prince Octavius for at least two years, and then likely be transferred into his service as one of his retainers. Of course, that was an appointment that Gaius would’ve normally ecstatically celebrated, but if Nicomedes was correct and Prince Octavius only wanted him as a hostage, his knightly career would be closer to a grueling nightmare than a dream come true. He wouldn’t learn much and would more likely than not be assigned menial tasks rather than treated with honor and dignity.

In the worst case, Gaius could expect to be more a prisoner than a squire.

“Don’t worry about it so much, little brother,” Nicomedes said as he saw the dread on Gaius’ face. “Our family is powerful enough that you won’t be treated as poorly as you might think. And besides, it’s not like my speculation is confirmed. For all I know, His Highness truly does just want you as a squire. I barely spoke to him during Gratian’s wedding, so I don’t have a strong enough impression of him to guess for certain what he wants. I can only tell you what I think, to better prepare you for what may come.”

Gaius looked a little better, but that still wasn’t great. “Thanks, Nico. That helps. So... what was the other bit of news?”

“Ah, right! Last month, Prince August censured Marquis Grandison for attacking the Brown Bear Tribe in the Northern Vales. He even levied an immense fine on the Marquis for supposedly ‘attacking an ally of the Bull Kingdom’. The Marquis would’ve been ruined by the fine if Prince Octavius hadn’t stepped in, relaying a pardon to the Marquis via the Earthshaker Paladin.

“The Prince-Regents who rule the Bull Kingdom while His Majesty secludes himself are starting to lock horns, little brother, and if you’re going to be Prince Octavius’ personal squire, then you’re going to be right at his side should anything happen.”

Gaius’ face paled slightly at Nicomedes’ words. The Second and Fourth Princes had never gotten along, as their many public disputes could attest. His situation would be dire indeed if they were to escalate their conflicts now that they had real power over the Kingdom.

“Do you think there will be war between them?” Gaius asked with a quivering voice.

“... Maybe, so you must be vigilant and watch over yourself, little brother.”

Gaius sat in his chair trying to regain his noble stoicism, but his face had been drained of blood and he wrung his hands together, showcasing his anxiety. Nicomedes gave him a few moments to process everything they had discussed before changing the subject to help Gaius regain his composure.

“So, tell me about the Snow Lions who have been giving you so much trouble, especially this barbarian.”

Gaius froze at Nicomedes’ mention of the Snow Lions. His unit had lost their banner to them, which was hardly something a noble should be proud of.

“Don’t worry, I’m a little disappointed your unit lost its banner, but I’m not angry with you,” Nicomedes said with a laugh. “From what I’ve gathered, you’ve cleaned up your act and have behaved in a manner more befitting a noble of your status. Everything beyond that is on your entire unit, not you personally.”

“I lead them, their failures are my failures,” Gaius answered, causing his older brother to smile.

“Well, there’s something I didn’t think you’d say. That’s actually quite encouraging, little brother. It means you’re taking responsibility, something every good noble ought to do. I think Father would be proud of you despite the defeat you suffered.”

After that, Gaius loosened up a little as he filled his brother in on everything that had transpired between him and Leon from his perspective.

“I see,” whispered Nicomedes once Gaius was finished. “You weren’t wrong that the barbarian shouldn’t have undergone the combat test with the rest of the nobles, but there aren’t any rules saying he *couldn’t*. Still, you were more than a little arrogant in trying to remove him yourself, you should have waited for the Legate and the rest of his retinue to decide what to do with him.”

“But House Aeneas supports the Crown, and the Bull King has made it clear that he wants the lesser stock of common men leading his Legions. The Legate wouldn’t have—and didn’t—do a thing about the barbarian’s presence,” Gaius said, his face regaining some of its color with his rising anger and indignation.

“Hmmm,” Nicomedes murmured. “Ah, well. No use dwelling on something long done, we should be concentrating on what you’re going to do from now on.”

“You’re a Tribune, you’re not supposed to show favoritism, even to me...” Gaius responded hesitantly.

“But I can give you some encouragement. Listen, I don’t care that your unit has lost its banner. As I said, that’s something your entire unit has to take the blame for. However, our family has its pride to

maintain, so I want to make sure that you don't end this training cycle without at least one banner, regardless of whether it's yours or not."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Even I don't know where the Snow Lions are, so you're going to have to concentrate on another unit. The Crimson Tigresses and Steel Century have both proven themselves formidable rivals, and three of the other six units no longer have their own banners. It's the remaining three that you'll have to focus on."

"The Black Vipers are a no-go. Tiberias keeps a low profile, but I know him. He's undoubtedly fortified his tower so well that attacking his unit would be suicide."

Nicomedes nodded in acknowledgement of Gaius' insight.

"Then that leaves the Silver Legionaries and the Obsidian Cataphracts. They have both managed to keep their banners despite attacks from all the other units. Your Deathbringers are going to have to succeed where the other units have failed and seize one of their banners or take a much riskier chance and challenge the Crimson Tigresses or the Steel Century. Why don't you fill me in on your training?"

Gaius informed his brother on the extra training he had instated for his unit. His main focus was on archery, the importance of which he had realized quite painfully during the Snow Lions' assault on his tower.

After listening for a while, Nicomedes gave him a few more tips on what to teach his unit. His older brother couldn't give him any specific tactics or strategies, given his position, but he could chat about what he would focus on if he were in Gaius' place.

When they were done discussing training, Gaius rose to leave. The two had talked well past the time when Gaius should've gone back to the tower, and he was eager to return to his unit. The Deathbringers only had three third-tier mages including him, after all, and leaving them short-handed for long periods of time wasn't something he was comfortable with.

"Once again, little brother, I'm sorry for my outburst last time. Family should support each other, and I wasn't that supportive."

"Don't worry about it, Nico. I deserved it, but I won't disappoint you anymore."

"Good."

With that, the brothers hugged and Gaius returned to the Deathbringers, intent on implementing Nicomedes' suggestions as soon as he could.

Chapter 105: An Unexpected Request

After Marcus' ambush, the Snow Lions changed their policies a little. They had made it through the event without suffering any casualties, but Castor thought that it would be better to be safe than sorry and stopped allowing those few second-tier mages who were still going to class to continue. They'd stay at camp in the gorge and train.

Leon was another story, though. Castor had absolute faith in his abilities in the forest, so he didn't attempt to restrict Leon's freedom. And, perhaps it was also because Castor realized that Leon probably wouldn't listen to him anyway if he did try to stop him from going to his enchantment classes.

Regardless, no other unit would be able to repeat what Marcus had attempted, to catch a small group of Snow Lions out in the open far away from any reinforcements and try to force the location of the rest of the unit out of them. In fact, it was fortunate that Marcus had made his ambush attempt so needlessly complicated; if he and the other five third-tier mages had simply attacked the group in the forest rather than trying to lure Leon into an ambush, they probably would have succeeded in capturing most of them.

Leon was happy with the new policy, as it freed him from having to worry about the group on the way back to the camp. Plus, both Castor and Alphonsus started accompanying him to fetch the daily supplies from where the Academy staff left them in their tower, just in case anyone tried to ambush them in the mornings or evenings.

So, Leon went to class the very next day after the ambush. When he walked through the door of the enchantment classroom, Valeria was sitting at their table in the back and looked a little surprised at his appearance. She thought that, given the way the Snow Lions had behaved over the previous few months, Leon would be cautious and skip classes for a while.

Instead, Leon walked right over to his seat and sat down, a subtle smile tugging at the corners of his lips. The two sat in silence about a minute before Valeria's curiosity got the best of her stoicism.

"So, how did you pull off that counter-attack?" she asked.

"That trail I left was deliberate. I doubled back and got reinforcements while you all were following it," Leon responded. As he did, his struggling half-smile instantly grew wider as he was just as eager to talk with Valeria about the previous day's events as she was.

"But how did you find us in that maze? Did you plan that as well?"

"Didn't have to. I figured you four wouldn't stop in the face of some mountains after chasing me so far, so I doubled back at the entrance to the maze."

"But what about finding us? We didn't see that much, yet I got the impression that the maze was quite extensive..."

"It very much is, but my unit was able to find a way to the top. Running along the top of the cliff made locating your party a piece of cake."

"Hmm," Valeria said, amusedly grinning at Leon. "Well, you no longer have to worry about me or Asiya. We won't be participating in something like that again. Or at least, not until the FTX..."

"Oh? That certainly sounds ominous," Leon said, returning her smile.

[Hey! Don't forget that she might be an enemy!] shouted Xaphan.

Leon had been looking directly at Valeria—as had Valeria at him—but Xaphan's comment made him avert his gaze.

[... I know that,] he responded quietly.

[Really? Because it seemed like you needed a reminder. I get that you're only sixteen-]

[Seventeen, now.]

[Right, because that makes *such* a difference. Just, think with the proper head. My continued existence relies on you not getting killed, so don't do something stupid and get killed.]

[Hmm. Wise words, a true mantra to live by,] Leon said sarcastically.

[Don't be so dismissive, boy. All it takes is one mistake and you'll wind up six feet under. Best not to make mistakes.]

[Yeah, yeah, I get it.]

[Do you? Do you really?]

[Ancestors damnit, yes!]

"Is everything alright?" Valeria asked, seeing Leon look away and his smile fade.

"Things are fine," Leon replied.

Despite Xaphan's warnings, Leon ended up chatting with Valeria until the enchantment instructor arrived and began class. The demon was left a little exasperated, but Leon couldn't help himself. He genuinely liked Valeria, from her fighting skill to her quiet and reserved nature that was so similar to his own. By the time the instructor gave them some free time to practice a few simple light enchantments that would act like brief candles, Leon had completely forgotten about Valeria's last name and the implication it held if his suspicions about it proved true.

"Hey," Valeria began as the class drew to a close, "I'd like to ask you something."

"Go for it," Leon said, turning his attention to her while he finished cleaning up his used spell paper.

"I..." she said, her cheeks slightly reddening from embarrassment. "Would it be alright if I called you a friend?"

Leon was completely taken aback. They had fought more than a dozen times, so they knew each other well enough from a certain perspective, but they had barely spoken more than a few sentences at a time otherwise.

"... Sure," Leon hesitantly replied. Valeria's face, normally so impassive that it could've been carved from marble, immediately lit up with a breathtaking smile. She even had to hold herself back from throwing her arms around Leon in a tight hug, as they were still in a relatively public place and she had her own dignity to maintain.

"Yes!" she whispered, allowing herself that one celebratory indulgence.

Leon, too, started grinning like an idiot once it sunk what he had just said. There weren't many people he would consider friends, and he felt good saying that Valeria was one of them.

"So then, as friends, how about we spar again?" Valeria asked with shining eyes.

Leon had enjoyed their duels during Basic Combat immensely, so he immediately said, "Sure!"

[Come on, kid!] said Xaphan exasperatedly, but Leon ignored the demon.

"Then how about this weekend, Asiya and I were going to her family's estate in the city where they have a private training arena. How about we meet up on the training field and head over there in the morning?"

For the briefest of moments, Valeria's last name crept back into Leon's mind, but her enthusiasm to spar with him again made her so uncharacteristically happy that Leon was incapable of saying no. The two made a few more plans about when and where to meet on Saturday morning, then went their separate ways, Valeria to her next class and Leon back to the Snow Lions' camp.

After they had left, Gaius was still in his seat, silently suppressing his own frustration. Their entire last conversation had been loud enough that he could hear even when not paying attention.

"What's wrong, Gaius?" asked one of his second-tier friends after the man had seen that Gaius was still in his seat even though class was over.

Gaius sighed before answering, calming himself down and ensuring a stable voice. "Nothing. Let's go."

'I don't like how close they're getting, but in hindsight it's hard to blame Valeria for not really liking me. If I were less of an arrogant asshole, maybe it would've been me who received that invitation...'

Ever since the Snow Lions had seized the Deathbringers' banner, Gaius had been reflecting on his past behavior and what it meant to be noble. Before enrolling in the Knight Academy, he would've answered the question of nobility as being able to do whatever he wanted by right of lineage, that his noble blood made him better.

But, after eating loss and humiliation after loss and humiliation at the hands of a barbarian that he literally looked down on at one point, he found himself ruminating on many things. His conclusion up to that point had been that the best way to appear noble was to act with nobility. To earn respect through noble action rather than demand it. His lineage made that easy by placing him in the spotlight from birth, but he had squandered that advantage to the point that his reputation was about as far from respectable as a young sixteen-year-olds could be.

But, even after coming to that conclusion after months of thought, his muted anger and frustration at seeing Leon growing even closer to the lady he had a crush on showed him that he still had a long way to go before he could call himself noble without shame.

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When Leon returned to the Snow Lions' camp, he was greeted by Castor and a large group of Snow Lions ready to venture out and fight if anyone tried another ambush.

But there wasn't another ambush; Leon made it back without incident. Castor and Leon spoke a few words of greeting and went back inside the caves for a meeting. They had to decide where to hold the next morning's training, to continue their campaign to learn everything they could about the terrain of the Knight Academy.

Everyone else was split off for individual training. The first-tier trainees meditated and the second-tier trainees practiced their archery or sparred amongst each other. However, there was one man who wasn't training: Alphonsus.

Alphonsus had barely filled his role as one of the men in charge of the Snow Lions since the training cycle began. It had gotten to the point that there wasn't a single trainee that wasn't already loyal to his family that took him even the slightest bit seriously. Most of the time, he was ignored except for the few unlucky individuals who were assigned to his squad for morning training.

When Leon came back to the camp and met up with Castor, Alphonsus was in his room wishing he could swap the stone slab he had to sleep on for a real bed. His back ached and the humid chill made his skin crawl. For the more than three months they had been there, Alphonsus had barely been able to sleep. Try as he might, finding any comfort in the caves was impossible for the young nobleman.

But Castor, his long-time friend, had repeatedly told him that there were no plans to return to the tower. After a while, Alphonsus had stopped asking and secluded himself where he didn't have to pretend to be happy with the living arrangements. However, even this wasn't enough for Alphonsus. At the same time as Leon and Castor were debating where next to train, Alphonsus walked out of his room into the adjacent cavern, which had been used as the third-tier trainee's meeting room.

"Al!" said a surprised yet happy Castor, a smile appearing on his face due to his friend finally showing himself. "I didn't expect to see you!"

Alphonsus took a seat on one of the three stone stools around their stone table, though he tried to touch as little of the slightly damp stone as he could.

"What's up, my friend?" Castor asked.

"... I was thinking," Alphonsus began, "we should return to our tower."

Castor's smile flickered, but he managed to keep it up. He decided to hold his tongue until Alphonsus finished. And Leon, of course, didn't say a word either.

"I think it would not only boost morale to sleep in proper beds again, but we'd be able to participate in the inter-unit battles. Such participation is expected of us, but instead we hide out here in the mountains like rats. I want us to return to the tower, as a challenge to any who might wish to fight. I want us to be *proper* trainees of the Academy, rather than a unit that isolates itself from the troubles of its world."

"You... make some fair points," Castor said once he was sure that Alphonsus was finished. "Indeed, the inter-unit battles are a large part of the training we receive in the Academy, and I agree that we can't truly be a part of them if we are this far removed."

"Not like we can't have this place as a secret refuge if need be," added Leon, to Alphonsus' shock and quiet appreciation.

"Then it's agreed? We can return to the tower?" Alphonsus asked, hardly believing his brief venting of frustrations actually achieved his goal.

"Yes, I think it's about time. I was actually considering it, myself," said Castor.

"I'm fine with it. Would be nice to sleep in a good bed again," Leon softly muttered just loud enough for the other two to hear.

"Then it's unanimous! We'll return to the tower!" Castor nearly shouted. Alphonsus couldn't believe his ears, but his mouth curved into an enormous smile anyway.

"But first," Castor continued, dampening Alphonsus' joy a little, "we should have a conversation about how and *exactly* when we should move. Probably not tomorrow, but maybe Saturday or Sunday..."

Chapter 106: An End to Denial

Before Leon knew it, Saturday had come. He woke up early and eagerly got ready to meet Valeria when the Snow Lions were dismissed. Every so often, though, he would pause for a moment. A few memories would repeatedly come back to him. The first was Artorias' death and burial, the second was Ajax telling him the name of the man who had led the assassins to his home—Adrianos Isynos—and the third was his learning of Valeria's last name when checking the scores of the enrollment test.

He had many times tried to justify to himself why he wasn't digging deeper into something that seemed far too coincidental, but he was finding that he had to repeat these justifications to himself more and more. He couldn't say with absolute certainty that her family was involved, and even if they were, no family worth their salt would ever entangle a sixteen or seventeen-year-old girl in their conspiracies.

But his inner conflict couldn't be sustained. Had he been alone, he might've been able to continue on for several more months, but there was another being keeping him constant company. And the voice of this being had been growing louder in his mind for the previous few days.

[I know I can't really stop you from going to see that girl,] said Xaphan, with blatant caution and apprehension in his tone, [but I will remind you not to show any signs of who you really are in front of her. Repeat your made-up backstory in your mind a few dozen times if you have to, but don't fuck this up.]

[You're not going to let up on this, are you?] Leon asked, feeling a little tired from the demon's constant commenting on this issue. [You've been talking about this almost nonstop for the past few days. I won't slip up in front of her. I'm Leon Ursus, a tribesman from the Northern Vales, not Leon of House Raime.]

[... I would feel a lot more comfortable if you would cancel this little date of yours. For both our sakes, cancel. You're far too weak to combat someone who possesses the resources to eliminate a family of mages as strong as yours used to be.]

[That discomfort stems from something I told you, nothing more. Valeria has shown me no ill will. Had I never let you in on my suspicions, you'd probably be telling me to try and get closer to her like you do with Elise.]

[Well, call me paranoid then. I just don't want to die like a stray dog, alone in this gutter of a plane at the hands of those who by all rights ought to be far beneath me.]

[Don't worry, demon.] Leon took on a far more conciliatory tone, one with a little confidence to allay the fears of his partner. [I've been thinking on this very issue for a while now. I've been trying to convince myself that Valeria isn't a threat to me, that she wasn't involved in my father's death in any way. In all likelihood, that's true.]

[But-]

[But her family may well be connected, or even directly responsible. Today, I'm going to remove my doubts.]

[... Very well, Leon. I'll trust you, for now.]

With their conversation complete, Leon finished his morning rituals. He was clean and wore fresh clothes, and after he, Castor, and Alphonsus made their way to the tower and back, his stomach was full of a hearty breakfast.

As soon as the Senior Instructor dismissed them, Leon started jogging through the mountains and forest to meet up with Valeria and Asiya. Charles, Henry, Alain, and the others had all made plans, so they went their own way, though not without offering a few last invitations to Leon to join them.

Leon hadn't told them who he was going to meet, which was why they were persistent in their attempts to get Leon to hang out with them. Had he told them he was meeting with a pair of gorgeous women, they would've undoubtedly stopped—though not without a bit of jealous teasing.

Speaking of the women in question, they were already waiting for Leon where Valeria said they were going to be, at the training field where the road that led to their tower began.

"Hey there! Good to see ya!" shouted Asiya in her usual chipper attitude, accompanied by an energetic wave. Valeria didn't greet Leon out loud, but she faintly smiled and nodded to him.

Leon silently responded with a wave and nod of his own, and they were off to the city. However, Leon and Valeria hardly glanced at each other for several minutes after they had met up.

"Ooooh this is going to be sooo much fun! I'm happy you're coming with us!" Asiya said happily, her bright and sunny expression doing a great deal to alleviate the awkwardness between her two companions.

"Uh... Thanks for inviting me. I'm looking forward to some friendly training, myself," Leon said, responding with as much politeness as he could muster.

"Drop that formality! We're all friends here, right?" Asiya said with a bubbly giggle.

"Sure..." muttered Leon as his cheeks started to turn red.

"Good! Now, since we're friends, maybe you could answer a question of mine?" Asiya asked, her eyes narrowing mischievously.

"... Go for it." Leon hesitantly said.

Asiya's expression turned sly and her eyes darted to Valeria before continuing with her question. "I think you know a friend of ours, Elise, the daughter of the Heaven's Eye Tower Lord here in the capital. I was wondering what your relationship is with her?"

Valeria instinctively turned to look at Leon, but she just as quickly looked away. Her heart rate nearly doubled while Leon froze in the middle of the training field, desperately trying to restart his brain after the shock of such an unexpected question.

"I... We... Um..." was all he was able to get out for a few seconds. After Asiya continued to stare at him he realized that there was no getting out of offering at least some kind of answer, so he took a deep breath both to steady his own elevated heart rate and to find his tongue.

When he was ready to speak, he looked Asiya dead in the eyes and said completely honestly, "I don't really know what we are. We haven't met that many times, and neither have we really spoke to clarify. However, I like her. And I'm... *reasonably* certain that she likes me as well."

[Only 'reasonably'?] Xaphan asked rhetorically.

Asiya remained silent for a moment after Leon said his piece, the sly look not leaving her face.

"I see, you and Elise like each other but aren't actually going out yet..." she finally said. "Well, that's good to know!"

After all that was said, she changed the subject to the classes they were all taking. She had chosen horseback riding and dancing as her electives. The former was to fill in a void in her martial abilities, so she would be ready in the off-chance she was placed into a cavalry unit after the training cycle. The latter was because she simply enjoyed dancing.

Leon and Valeria were largely silent while she talked, but after some frustration, she was able to get them to loosen up and talk a bit by bringing up how Leon managed to escape from Marcus' ambush.

About half an hour after leaving the Knight Academy, they arrived at the estate of the Samarid family in the central districts of the capital. Out of the myriad palaces in the capital, the one built by Asiya's parents was by far the most eye-catching, if only due to its radically different architectural style and building materials.

Most of the Samar Kingdom was covered by a harsh sandy desert. It lacked the stone quarries and vast forests of many of their neighbors, which meant they had to build with the only material they had in abundance: sand. The common people lived in and occupied buildings of tan sandstone, but the rich and noble lived in sprawling palaces made of shimmering black glass, made by melting the sand into huge blocks. The glass imported by Asiya's parents was of the highest quality, with an uneven surface designed to appear like rippling liquid in the light.

Leon didn't get that good of a look at the inside of the estate as the group immediately made for a separate building which Asiya told him was their dedicated training gym. Within were a wide variety of weights and training weapons arranged around the walls, with a large open space in the center for sparring. Additionally, Leon was able to sense that the magic density in the air increased by roughly half thanks to enchantments in the walls and floor.

"This is where you two will spar," Asiya said.

Leon frowned a little at her phrasing. "Are you not going to join us?" he asked.

"Oh! No I won't. I prefer to watch..." she responded, giving him an odd smile.

Valeria wasted little time with words and immediately pulled her glaive off her back while walking to the center of the room. After glancing once more at Asiya, Leon followed, a smile blooming on his face as he

drew his training sword. As he took a position about five steps from Valeria, Asiya took a seat a few steps from the edge of the sparring ring to eagerly watch.

Without warning, Valeria lunged forward, bringing her glaive down in a powerful overhead strike. But, Leon nimbly dodged with a quick side-step and answered her with a horizontal slash at the side of her ribs. Almost faster than he could see, the end of her glaive appeared just in time to block his longsword, the clang from the collision of the two weapons echoing throughout the gym.

Neither took a single moment for breath. Valeria pulled the end of her glaive inward, slashing the blade of her weapon out at one of Leon's legs. Leon just barely managed to lift the leg in time to avoid falling on his ass and used it to take a step forward, increasing the pressure he was putting on Valeria's glaive. But, Valeria took a step back and spun on her back foot, deflecting Leon's blade into the air and gaining some distance.

However Leon had no intention of letting her keep that distance, so he lunged forward, stabbing at one of her shoulders. Valeria responded by stabbing towards him in kind, trusting that her longer weapon would reach him first. Leon seemed to agree, as he changed the direction of his lunge as best he could to deflect her counter.

Their duel proceeded like this for about ten more minutes, with each constantly trading blows and neither achieving any sort of advantage for more than the space of a single attack. Their duel ended in yet another draw, with each landing hits that paralyzed the other's primary arms at the same time, bringing the fight to an inconclusive ending.

Still, Leon and Valeria both left the ring with big smiles on their faces.

"That was amazing!" admired Asiya, who had made sure that no movement either of them made during the fight escaped her notice. "Where did you learn to fight like that, Leon?"

"My father taught me," Leon answered.

"Ohhh, he must be an incredible warrior if he raised you to be so strong!"

"He... was."

Leon's short answer, averted gaze, and pointed use of 'was' told Asiya all she needed to know, and she tactfully changed the subject, raising the question of lunch and summoning a servant from a door Leon hadn't noticed to take their orders.

As they moved to Asiya's personal residence, a private building with only half a dozen rooms just off the main palace, Leon's heart started beating faster as he tried to push himself to say what he needed. He had promised Xaphan that he would remove his doubts, and he had no intention of going back on that promise.

"Sooo," he began, "I hope neither of you laugh at me for this, but we've never been properly introduced..."

Asiya sharply gasped, then sarcastically said, "You're right! We have been remiss in our duties as nobles, oh honored guest! Please don't hold this slight upon your honor against us! That would be ever so dreadful!"

This drove all three of them to chuckle a little as they entered Asiya's residence. It was lavishly decorated, with the black glass walls enchanted to only reflect light in certain colors creating beautiful wall art without the use of paint, and thick carpets that were woven with gold thread in geometric patterns.

"You joke, but I'm not entirely certain of either of your full names. I just wanted to clear the air so I wouldn't make a fool of myself later," Leon responded as his eyes drank in the colorful spectacle that was Asiya's living room.

"That makes sense, but wouldn't it make more sense if you started things off by introducing yourself?" Valeria said quietly while Asiya led them into her dining room.

"I guess," Leon said before straightening up before the two women and saying, "I am Leon Ursus of the Brown Bear Tribe in the Northern Vales. It's a pleasure to properly make your acquaintances." Fortunately, Artorias had found some time to teach him some of the noble manners Leon would've learned had Artorias and Serana's villa never been attacked.

"Well, Leon Ursus, I am Asiya Samarid."

"Samarid, huh? As in the Samar Kingdom, right?" Leon asked. His father had taught him that etiquette demanded the one requesting the introduction to ask a question or two about the person's name before they moved on, and as Asiya was the host she went first.

"Close! Samarid means 'From Samar', but it doesn't refer to the entire Samar Kingdom. Instead, it's the capital city that it refers to, also named Samar. That's the city where my great-grandfather founded our noble House, so that was the name he decided on for us." Asiya's face lit up in a smile as she spoke of her family's history; it was clearly a point of pride not only for her but for her parents as well, judging by how expensive and time-consuming Leon guessed it had to be to import so much black glass for their estate.

"And I," Valeria began once Asiya had finished her explanation, "am Valeria Isynos."

Leon's heart immediately sank. Valeria had finally told him her name, and it was exactly the same as Adrianos Isynos, the only man of the assassination team whose name was known to Leon, and thus his only lead to find those who ordered his father's death and could potentially be responsible for the downfall of his entire family.

"I-Isynos, is there a story behind that name?" Leon asked, his voice quivering a little from holding back his sudden surge of killing intent. Fortunately, neither of the women seemed to notice as Valeria launched into her own explanation with a strange look of eagerness.

"Oh it's nothing special, it just means 'From Isynia'. Just like Asiya, my family is foreign to the Bull Kingdom, and we proudly wear the name of the city that gave birth to us despite the distance that now separates us."

"I see," was all that Leon was able to say.

"This is great!" said Asiya, almost jumping out of her chair. "Valeria and I first became friends thanks to both of us not being native to this land! And now you're here, another stranger in a strange land just like us! We were destined to be friends!"

Asiya's eyes glittered as she stared at Leon with a smile so wide it almost split her face in half. The prospect of gaining a new friend was just that exciting for her.

"Yeah, we were truly destined to meet," Leon said with some embarrassment.

"But," he continued, looking over to Valeria, "Isynos is a name familiar to me. If I recall correctly, one of the men who accompanied the Paladin Roland to the Northern Vales about six months ago was also named Isynos."

Valeria's eyes instantly refocused on Leon, surprise evident on her face. "You know him?"

"Not really," Leon answered, stepping very carefully around his answer. "All I know is that one of the knights called him by that name; we never actually spoke. It was only by coincidence that I learned it. The Paladin's group helped my tribe eliminate some bandits, and during the fight, Isynos and I happened to end up fighting close by each other. When he appeared to be injured during the battle, one of the Paladin's knights called out to him."

"I see," Valeria said with a thoughtful look. "You're talking about Adrianos, one of the men who accompanied my family to this country. He ended up leaving my father's service, though, and joined up with the Royal Legions..."

"Ah, so he's from the same place as you and thus has the same name... unless I'm mistaken?" Leon asked.

"His family served mine with enough distinction to earn official adoption," Valeria answered. "They're not actually from Isynia."

Leon fought to maintain an easy-going smile. Valeria's family was placed at the very top of his list of suspects as most of those on it—such as Roland, the Royal Family, and the rest of the nobility of the Great Plateau—he didn't think were likely to have sent the assassins.

But this also came as less of a shock to him than he might've guessed only ten minutes before. Deep down, he knew that Valeria's family undoubtedly had something to do with those assassins ever since he saw her name posted after the enrollment test. He wouldn't have needed to delude himself with frequent justifications as to why it might not be the case if he didn't already know.

Valeria herself might not be his enemy—at least for now, while she still thought of him as a mere Valeman—but her family certainly was.

Chapter 107: Return of the Snow Lions

After having lunch with Valeria and Asiya, Leon made an excuse and left. Asiya tried to get him to stay for a while longer, and even the stoic Valeria seemed disappointed, but Leon truly had to leave. After hearing Valeria's name and learning of her connection to Adrianos, he was finding his killing intent to be extremely difficult to restrain.

As Leon walked down the streets of the capital on his way back to the Snow Lions' camp in the gorge, Xaphan asked him, [So, what are you going to do? You won't continue to weakly justify getting closer to that girl, will you?]

[Don't know what I'm going to do. Nothing I *can* do, really. But I won't spend much more time with Valeria than I must. I would've liked to have her as a friend, but chances are her family is responsible for my father's death, my mother's disappearance, and the destruction of the rest of my family.]

After Leon finished speaking, there was a short silence. Xaphan could feel the killing intent within Leon threatening to boil over, so he decided to try and lighten the mood a little.

[Well, at least you're thinking with a little more logic now, rather than with what's between your legs. You already have one young beautiful woman trying to get into your pants, for some reason, best not to press your luck. Your astronomically good luck.]

Of course, the demon's comments drew some of Leon's ire, but he had succeeded in shifting the young mage's attention away from the events of his father's death and the strong possibility that a girl Leon wanted to befriend could be involved.

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When Leon returned to the gorge, he found that both Castor and Alphonsus had stayed behind, as did about two dozen Snow Lions. They had taken the day to pack up much of what they needed to bring back to the tower, while also making sure to lock up the caves as tightly as they could so they could be used again if the need arose.

Leon helped them out, mostly by using what he had learned in the enchantment classes to seal up the other entrances to the cave system. First, rocks and wood boards were used to block the entrances, then Leon carved enchantments into the boards that were similar to those used to fortify Legion camps and bases. When he was done, it would take any other unit several hours to open one of the cave entrances, but the Snow Lions would be able to do it in minutes.

Later that evening, the entire unit started to ferry some of their things back to the tower after returning from the city, with all one hundred and four Snow Lions heading back to their tower for dinner, rather than Leon leading a group to pick up the delivered food and bring it back to camp. They were accompanied by their Instructors, who spoke a little about what they ought to expect during the following weeks.

After all, Small Unit Tactics was over, and it was time to move on to one of if not the single most important class on the Knight Academy's schedule: Heavy Infantry Training. This class was longer than the three-month Small Unit Tactics, coming in at just over four months. For the first week, the trainees would receive classes that taught basic unit formations, the flag signals and whistles used in battle, as well as get issued their final piece of gear: their shields.

After that, most of the rest of the four months would be spent out on the training field, practicing forming up and moving as an entire unit in a layered shield wall. There would also be other classes that would teach the trainees exactly what they would have to do if they were in larger units than a one-hundred-man company, but the time on the training field would take up the lion's share of the time allotted to Heavy Infantry Training.

Following Heavy Infantry Training, there would be another month of classes dealing with the myriad creatures and monsters they might be deployed to hunt and fight. There were three monsters in particular that the Knight Academy focused on as they were the creatures that were responsible for the

most damage to the rural towns and villages in the Bull Kingdom. They were vampires, stone giants, and werewolves.

There were other monsters in the Kingdom that they would have to hunt down if ordered to, such as gorgons and cockatrices, but most other dangerous creatures had been hunted to near-extinction in the Bull Kingdom. Vampires and werewolves, however, were monsters born of men and as such couldn't be wholly eliminated, and the stone giants lived in the eastern Border Mountains, a region that was impossible to enter with the kind of large army that would be needed to bring a permanent end to their raids.

After the Senior Instructor finished laying out a road map that covered the majority of their remaining time in the Knight Academy, he left the Snow Lions to their business. That business being to finish the move back into their tower.

First, Castor ensured that both of their banners went into the ground floor shrine and were properly secured. It took him, Aemilius, and Janus almost an hour to figure out the various mechanisms that locked the banners in place.

Second, Alphonsus made sure the front door was as secured as it could be. It was boring work, simply testing the various locks that would buy the Snow Lions the time they needed to get armed and armored in the event of an attack, but Alphonsus took to this duty with an enormous smile on his face. It didn't matter to him what his job was, he was just happy to be back in the tower and out of the dark dank cave he had been forced to sleep in for the past three months.

Lastly, Leon took charge of the nightly combat training that the rest of the unit had to take part in. He had them focus on simple motions repeated ad nauseum to build up the first-tier trainees' combat muscles. This would not only help them become stronger fighters but also aid them in their ascension to the second-tier, something which five more Snow Lions had accomplished since their first trainee had ascended several months before.

On Sunday morning, the Snow Lions woke up after having one the best nights of sleep in their entire lives. Their happiness at coming back to soft, warm beds after resting their heads in a cave for months was truly profound. They were so motivated from the night's rest that they finished moving the last of their things out of the cave by lunch, none of them having gone into the capital for the day.

The following week was spent being taught in the first-tier common room by the Senior Instructor. He drew crude diagrams on large sheets of paper for the entire unit to see showing exactly where they had to be and what they had to do when in formation.

The most basic formation that the Senior Instructor focused on was a layered shield wall, with five rows of two squads—twenty men—each. In the center of the first row was the Centurion who commanded the company and one of their Prefects; in the Snow Lions' case, this was Castor as Centurion and Leon as the accompanying Prefect. The rest of the first row was made up of their personal squads, with the second-tier members posted on the flanks of the formation.

The other eight squads of the company made up the next four rows, with the squad commanders taking the flanks and their other second-tier mages directly behind the Centurion and leading Prefect. The second Prefect—Alphonsus for the Snow Lions—was in the last row, keeping an eye on the formation

and making sure no one ran away during battle while the other Prefect and the Centurion were leading the company into battle. As most other units had four third-tier trainees, they would have their extra man in the last row as well.

In a normal company, the Centurion would be of the fourth-tier, but that wasn't much of an option for the ten training units in the Knight Academy, which was why it was up to the third-tier trainees to decide amongst themselves who would lead their respective units.

For the entire week after moving back into their tower, the Snow Lions' Instructors almost literally drilled this information into their skulls, while Leon, Castor, and Alphonsus arranged where each individual squad would be in the formation. By the next weekend, every Snow Lion knew exactly where they had to be when in their company formation.

While these classes were being taught, the Snow Lions continued to have their food delivered to their tower instead of going to the dining hall. Consequently, none of the other units had any idea that they had returned, given that they had long since stopped watching the Snow Lions' tower.

And so, when the other nine units gathered on the training field the following Monday to begin practical training, nearly all of them were frozen in shock when the Snow Lions came running out from the forest, Aemilius proudly waving both of their banners in front of the unit as they arrived on the field. After a few seconds, the others recovered enough to not simply stand slack-jawed at the unexpected development, but none had a stronger reaction than the Deathbringers. Many of the more hot-blooded first-tier trainees struggled to stay with the unit and not charge the Snow Lions. Fortunately, the second-tier trainees had far more self-control and kept them in line.

"They're back?" Linus asked rhetorically.

"We can get our banner back! Let's go!" started Actaeon, but he was silenced by a burst of killing intent from Gaius.

"Not here," he said. "Save it for later."

"But we still lack a banner! If we can seize ours again..." Actaeon tried to argue, but when Gaius glanced over at him, he stopped talking and left his argument unfinished. It was apparent from Gaius' look that he was angry, but he kept himself in check despite the surprising return of the training battalion's prodigal unit.

"Not like we can do anything now," added Linus as the Snow Lions placed their banners on the wooden platform that held the other eight banners. The units weren't allowed to seize banners if they were on that platform. This was a strictly enforced rule, as the instructors wanted everyone's minds focused on training rather than on stealing banners when they were on the training field.

"Later then..." muttered Actaeon as he stole another glance at the Deathbringers' banner, waving just below the Snow Lions' own.

The other units weren't so in need of restraint as they didn't have the same recent history with the Snow Lions as the Deathbringers did. The most 'antagonistic' unit apart from Gaius' was Marcus', and that was simply due to the ambush he had tried to spring on Leon. Given that it didn't work and they

hadn't tried again, the relationship between the units remained largely unchanged, with none of the leaders of either unit harboring bad feelings about the other.

As a matter of fact, the opposite was true. Marcus had had absolute confidence in his ambush plan, and when Leon not only escaped but managed to turn the tables on him, he felt an enormous amount of respect blossom for the other man. So when the Snow Lions appeared out of the trees, Marcus smiled wide, greatly anticipating testing himself again against an opponent who had beaten him once before.

His reaction was mirrored in slightly different ways in both Alcander and Valeria, with both smiling but the former reaching for his weapon while the latter merely reverted back to her normal cold and emotionless exterior barely a second after the smile appeared.

"Hey, he's baaack," Asiya said, nudging her silver-haired friend with her elbow, being not satisfied seeing only a tiny smile on Valeria's face.

"I-I can see that!" Valeria said, her slight stutter the only sign that her haughty and unconcerned tone wasn't nearly as honest as it seemed.

But, for all the shock their return brought, the Snow Lions were remarkably calm, only taking a spot slightly apart from the others to wait for their morning training to begin. Though to say they were calm would be to remark solely on their outer appearance; many Snow Lions were relishing being the center of attention, though Castor, Leon, and Alphonsus had all given them incredibly strict orders to maintain their composure. They wanted to make a good impression, after all.

Chapter 108: Heavy Infantry Training

The Snow Lions made one hell of an impression upon their unexpected appearance, but not even five minutes after they placed their banners upon the banner platform, perhaps the only thing that could distract the rest of the trainees from the new arrivals happened: their issued shields had arrived.

From the Administration Building came forty horse-drawn carts on air plates—wooden tablets with robust, high-quality air enchantments that lifted the carts about three or four feet into the air, making them trivial for the horses to pull. These air plates were a similar concept to the air rune that Artorias had carved into his fur sled, but far more refined.

Within the carts were the shields the trainees were waiting for, the final piece of standard equipment that every person in the Royal Legions was issued. Unlike the defective enchantment-less armor they had received earlier in the cycle that wouldn't stop a battle-ready weapon and barely did the job blocking their training weapons, these shields were the real deal. The shields were rectangular and long enough to cover an average man from shoulder to knee and wide enough to slightly curve around the body. They were primarily made of thick wood planks, but their front was a quarter inch layer of steel and painted a deep crimson.

On the inside of every shield was an enchantment carved with an ingenious fractal pattern that made the shield both sturdy and reliable. The shield's true strength, however, was shown when used in conjunction with other shields. The fractal enchantments carved into them would connect with and amplify each other, turning even the smallest Legion unit into a mobile fortress once they had gotten into a shield wall.

The issued armor for the Royal Legions was strong but not of unusual quality for a nation as powerful as the Bull Kingdom. Similarly, their weapons and even cavalry weren't anything special. But with these shields, no man in the Legion would ever stand alone, linked as they were through their shield's enchantments. It would not be hyperbole to say that the Bull Kingdom had been built upon the strength of these shields.

When Leon was passed his shield, he found himself captivated by the enchantment, to the point of completely ignoring everything else around him. It took a nudge from Castor to bring Leon back to reality and follow the rest of the unit to their practice area.

"Take this. You reviewed the calls for each formation, right?" asked the Senior Instructor to Castor after handing him a whistle.

"Yes, Sir," Castor answered.

"Good. Then let's get started. Form everyone up into a standard battle line."

Castor immediately whistled three times in quick succession, causing the Snow Lions to spring into action. There was a little confusion as the trainees weren't used to handling their brand-new shields, but they got into their lines in short order. Castor and Leon were in their place at the front and Alphonsus watched the back. None of them had to say anything to the trainees as they had done some informal practice the week before to make sure the unit could form up at a moment's notice.

"Keep going!" shouted the Senior Instructor once the Snow Lions had gotten into place.

Castor whistled again, this time two short blasts and one long blast.

"Shields up!" shouted Leon and Alphonsus in response. The entire unit raised their shields forming a long shield wall. With their enchantments helping to stabilize them, even the weaker first-tier mages appeared formidable despite the weight of their shields.

But appearances can be deceiving. The Senior Instructor made a subtle hand gesture behind him and the two other Instructors sprinted forward and threw themselves against the points where the shield wall was weakest, in the middle of the first-tier trainees on the front line. They grabbed, kicked, and shoved at the shield wall, even ripping the shield away from a few overwhelmed first-tier trainees, utterly shattering the formation.

"That was a miserable showing!" shouted the Senior Instructor. "Get yourselves back into formation!"

Castor immediately blew his whistle three times again, with both Leon and Alphonsus shouting at the Snow Lions to get back into their shield wall.

"Brace yourselves this time!" Leon added.

"Make sure to channel your magic into your shields! Let the enchantments connect and overlap with the shields to your right and left!" Alphonsus shouted further.

It took the Snow Lions a few seconds to get back into formation, but the Instructors didn't give them the time they needed to solidify their position. They charged again at the shield wall before every shield enchantment had been activated, causing the formation to crumble again.

"These are only *two* men! They may be fourth-tier mages, but your shields should be able to resist their charge with ease if you form up properly!" The Senior Instructor made a great show of scowling at the Snow Lions picking themselves up off the ground as he said this. He didn't actually expect them to be able to form up perfectly on their first and second tries, but he wasn't going to give them any room to slack off.

"Again!" he shouted as the other two Instructors pulled back.

"Get back on your feet!" Leon shouted. Alphonsus and Castor added their voices to his, which along with a few whistles from Castor, galvanized the Snow Lions into getting back to their feet and into their formation.

And they just barely got back into line when the Instructors charged again, throwing themselves against the shield wall and knocking back the Snow Lions who tried to hold firm. It didn't matter that the line was five men deep, it still broke apart with almost a dozen Snow Lions on each side falling to the ground like dominos.

This pattern repeated itself another half dozen times, with the Snow Lions failing to hold their shield wall. That being said, they managed to reform quicker every time. The Senior Instructor considered that a good start, but the ability to reform wasn't nearly as important as holding their lines together in the face of a strong enemy.

So, having had their fun with the inexperienced Snow Lions, the Instructors stopped gleefully tearing apart their formation and started to instruct their trainees in the proper stances for those in the back to support those at the front, and to allow their shield enchantments to connect with each other.

When the time for morning training was over, the Snow Lions joined the other units in the dining hall for lunch. Afterward, though, they returned to the training field to continue practicing forming and moving in the shield wall. Leon was the only exception, as he refused to miss a single enchantment class even though it left the Snow Lions down a third-tier trainee. They were able to compensate by having Leon's spot taken by Obellius, one of the unit's more promising second-tier trainees and de facto second in command for Leon's squad.

A few hours later, Leon returned from his enchantment class and took his position again, which was also the same time that the Instructors took to shattering the Snow Lions' formation again after having given them some time to fix their problems. Of course, that one day of practice wasn't enough and the Instructors had little trouble getting through the shield wall, but there had been some noticeable improvement.

By the end of the week, the Instructors found that it was much harder to break through the Snow Lions' formation than it had been. Those five days of hard training had clearly not been wasted on the Lions, as they had become proficient enough to maintain their formation even in the face of the fourth-tier Instructors. This stood in stark contrast to the rest of the units, as without the same amount of time spent training, they struggled to do the same.

In the following weeks, the Instructors had them incorporate their fighting techniques into this training as well, mostly consisting of shield bashes and stabbing with their arming swords. Leon had a small

amount of trouble with this given that his longsword wasn't particularly suited for fighting in as confined a space as the shield wall, but he was able to make it work.

By the third week, the Instructors were having them shift their lines. Essentially, the front line would only fight for about five minutes, at which point they would turn around and squeeze past the second line all the way to the back of the formation, and the second line would take over as the new first line. Five minutes later, they too would fall back and the third line would take over. This pattern of brief bursts of fighting, punctuated by much longer stretches of rest, would help the unit pace itself and keep the trainees in the front lines always at the top of their game.

It was because of this tactic of shifting their front lines that the heavy infantry units were seen as the safest units in all the Royal Legions, with only the archers competing for the spot. The heavy cavalry units weren't seen as particularly dangerous either, but with no outstanding equipment to speak of they faced greater risk and were hardly as untouchable. The light infantry and light cavalry units were something else, though. In any given large-scale battle, it would invariably be those two groups that would suffer the highest casualty ratio in any given Legion.

A month of hard training flew by, and the Instructors began to entertain the notion of teaching the trainees other formations they would need. However, before they got around to doing that, there was another piece of business they wanted to get around to: a demonstration that the Instructors of all the units would put on not only for themselves but also for the Legate who would come to see the progress of the trainees.

On Monday morning of the fifth week of Heavy Infantry Training, rather than split up into their units to go and train separately, as usual, the Instructors had all ten units gather around the banner platform where the Legate was waiting.

"Every one of you has performed magnificently!" the Legate started off with, beaming down at the crowd of almost one thousand trainees. "I know that you will all be a credit to the Royal Legions, serving your King and Kingdom with honor and distinction!"

"But, the weight of the Royal Legion is heavy, and there's no need to place that upon your shoulders right this moment! So in the spirit of friendly competition and getting to know your fellow trainees better, we're going to have a little game!"

With that said, the Legate took a seat and let one of his Tribunes step forward.

"Here's what's going to happen! We're going to separate your units into five groups of two by drawing names out of a box! You will fight whoever you're grouped up with in the standard heavy infantry formation!"

The Tribune paused for a moment to let his words sink in for the trainees, and as soon as they had, the Snow Lions felt the attention and killing intent of just about all the other units. They all wanted a piece of the prodigal unit, with the Deathbringers, Crimson Tigresses, and Steel Century chief among them. In fact, the obvious anticipation mixed with slight killing intent coming from Valeria, Asiya, Marcus, and Alcander dwarfed that of everyone else.

Gaius wanted to fight against the Snow Lions just as much as those four did, but he was far more subtle about it. His reflection of the past few months had left him a little lost about who or what he wanted to

be, and he felt like he would have a clearer picture of his future once he beat Leon's unit. However, as his will to fight wasn't rooted in blind vengeful rage so much anymore, he was able to control his emotions like a seasoned noble and maintain an impassive expression.

The one unit that didn't react to this competition—not even to momentarily glare at the Snow Lions—was the Black Vipers. Led by the eerily quiet Tiberias, the Black Vipers kept a quiet dignity that didn't have the slightest of cracks.

All this attention made the Snow Lions feel more than a little awkward, but they were more than ready to face whoever they would be matched against. And judging by the way most of the Snow Lions glared back at the Deathbringers, it was clear that they were already certain about who they would be fighting. They had fought the Deathbringers too much to even consider that they'd fight another unit.

After several moments, the Tribune on the banner platform produced a box out of his soul realm and started to pull slips of paper out of it with dramatic flourishes.

"The Silver Legionaries versus... the Steel Century!"

With the first pairing announced, the tension surrounding the Snow Lions increased. Marcus and Alcander were a little disappointed, but the strength of the Silver Legionaries was apparent simply because they still held their own banner. They turned their attention away from the Snow Lions and prepared themselves for their battle.

"Next will be... The Obsidian Cataphracts versus... The Blood Eagles!"

It had never been so apparent to Leon how ridiculous the names of some of the units were.

'Blood Eagles, Deathbringers, Black Vipers, whatever asshole came up with these names was clearly trying too hard,' he thought to himself.

With the possibilities for who they would fight decreasing, the killing intent in the air only grew more intense. The aura coming from the Deathbringers was strong enough that Gaius didn't even bother trying to stop it; they clearly thought the same as the Snow Lions, that they would end up squaring off with the other unit again.

"And we have the Snow Lions!" called out the Tribune, deliberately taking much longer to proceed than he had for the others. He showcased his flair for the dramatic by glancing to the Deathbringers, then to the Crimson Tigresses, and then to each of the other units in turn. Only then did he reach back into the box to decide who would battle the Snow Lions.

When he pulled out the slip of paper and read it to himself, he smiled and paused again, pushing the tension in the air almost to the breaking point.

"The Snow Lions will face... the Crimson Tigresses!"

Chapter 109: Lions and Tigresses

All ten units couldn't face off against each other at once as everyone watching wouldn't be able to focus on one single battle for very long. Thus, they would battle each other one pair of units at a time.

The Tribune who had decided who would face who also had control over the order in which they would fight. He wasn't particularly interested in complicating matters, so he simply had them do battle in the same order as they had been picked.

Starting things off were the Silver Legionaries against the Steel Century. Normally, the Silver Legionaries would be loath to pit themselves against the unit led by Marcus Aeneas, but as they were fighting face to face on even ground, they didn't hesitate to form up. There wasn't any time or room for Marcus to think of any clever tactics making this as good a chance as any that the Silver Legionaries would win.

They still lost, though not by much. Both units' shield walls were quite well formed, which meant that the fighting basically boiled down to shoving and pushing as each side tried to break through the other's front lines. The only time this stopped was when the front lines moved to the back. When that happened, their shield walls would dissolve and it would take their second lines several seconds to reform the wall after the front lines moved past. Unfortunately for the Silver Legionaries, they were slightly slower in reforming than the Steel Century, leaving a moment where the Steel Century was fully formed up and the Legionaries weren't. Marcus' men didn't hesitate to move and take advantage of this brief advantage, though they ended up being just a little overzealous, with their own lines breaking apart during their charge.

The battle was stopped when the winner was made clear, when only twenty Silver Legionaries still stood, with about half again as many remaining trainees from the Steel Century. But that also meant that there were about one hundred and fifty young men lying either unconscious or immobile on the training field. To fix this, the presiding Tribune had organized fifteen knights who were skilled in healing magic to wake the fallen trainees. After the victor was announced and the fight stopped, these knights swarmed over the casualties and pressed sheets of spell paper to their chests, waking up each trainee or returning feeling to their paralyzed limbs in seconds.

"Well done! Well done indeed!" shouted the Legate. He was referring to the performance of both units but he was also clearly happy that his nephew's unit had won.

Next came the battle between the Obsidian Cataphracts and the Blood Eagles, which lasted quite a bit longer than the previous battle. Unlike the Steel Century—which had practiced quite a bit in their off time, so they could switch their front lines quickly—neither of these units had done much practicing outside of their morning training. This made them fairly evenly matched, so their battle lasted for almost an entire half hour until finally, one of the Blood Eagles in the front line stumbled on a small stone in the ground and fell down, creating a momentary gap in the unit's lines that was quickly exploited by the Obsidian Cataphracts. The latter won, but by a much narrower margin than the Steel Century had, with only twelve of their men left against eight Blood Eagles.

Even though they had broken their opponent's shield wall, it wasn't until the very end that they had achieved a large enough numerical advantage for the presiding Tribune to end the fight and announce their victory.

After they were done and the medic knights tended to the casualties, it was time for the Crimson Tigresses and the Snow Lions to take the spotlight. As there weren't nearly so many women who enrolled in the Knight Academy—or the Royal Legions in general—the Crimson Tigresses only had fifty-

four trainees as opposed to the one hundred and four in the Snow Lions. This led to Castor approaching Leon before the battle began to tell him how he had decided on solving the number disparity.

“Leon, your and four other squads will be sitting this one out,” he said.

Leon glared at him in alarm—the Crimson Tigresses were strong, and he had been eager to cross blades with them despite his resolution to distance himself from Valeria.

“I understand leaving out five squads to make the fight even, but why am I included in this?” Leon asked, doing his best to keep his voice calm and even.

“Relax, this isn’t an indictment of your skills, or the skills of anyone else not participating,” Castor said. “The Crimson Tigresses only have two third-tier mages, so I needed to have one of ours not join the formation. As for why it’s you, well, think of this as kind of a peace offering to Alphonsus.”

Leon clenched his jaw, but when he turned his eyes to Alphonsus and saw the other man’s barely contained excitement, he reluctantly agreed with Castor’s decision.

“Well, this sucks,” whispered Henry as he and the rest of Leon’s squad enviously watched the chosen Snow Lions form up.

“It is what it is,” responded Alain, seemingly content with merely watching but the way his hands kept balling up into fists painted a different picture.

“Best not to worry about it,” said Charles as he leisurely stretched his arms. “This basically means that we get the entire morning off! When was the last time that happened?”

“I guess...” Henry said, though he still wasn’t happy at being left out.

Their attitudes were mirrored in the Crimson Tigresses. Valeria and Asiya had been excited at the prospect of battling the Snow Lions, but they couldn’t care less about Castor or Alphonsus. Their excitement stemmed from testing their unit against Leon’s, and with him sidelined, their interest in the battle dimmed considerably. But that wasn’t to say they weren’t going to take the battle seriously—in fact, at being denied what they had wanted in the first place only enflamed their desire to crush the Snow Lions.

The two units formed their shield wall twenty-five feet from each other. The Snow Lions had to adapt their formation a little, with only ten men in the front line rather than twenty but keeping their five normal ranks. This meant that Castor had to shift some people around again, with himself as close to the center as he could get and the two second-tier mages in his squad on the flanks.

Facing him, the Crimson Tigresses had a nearly identical formation, with Valeria in the front and Asiya in the back. Asiya still carried her scimitar, but Valeria had swapped her glaive out for an arming sword, a weapon much better suited to fighting in the confined spaces of the shield wall.

“Begin!” called out the Tribune when he judged the two units ready.

As soon as the word passed his lips, Castor shouted “Forward!”

The Snow Lions surged forward in perfect unison, catching the Crimson Tigresses off-guard and immediately putting them on the defense. Castor was acutely aware of just how dangerous Valeria was,

so he was not about to give her unit a single inch. He seized the initiative and attacked first, slamming his own shield into Valeria's and putting as much of his strength and body weight behind it as he could.

He wasn't surprised in the least to see Valeria standing easily firm, but he wasn't seeking to defeat her specifically, he only needed to keep her occupied while the rest of the Snow Lions broke through the Crimson Tigresses' formation. Once that happened, victory would be all but assured.

But it wouldn't be so easy. Valeria flashed him a slightly patronizing smile and retaliated far faster than Castor expected. He had only gotten in a single shield bash and had been about to follow it up with another as fast as he could when Valeria suddenly pushed against him. Her attack wasn't a shield bash, she had instead charged into him in the split second he had taken to pull his shield back, bracing herself against the ground.

Castor barely managed to keep his footing, but he had been pushed back enough to leave a small hole in the Snow Lions' shield wall. This gave Valeria just enough room to slash at the man to Castor's left.

"GRRAGH!" Castor roared as he regained his balance and pushed back against Valeria. Fortunately for the Snow Lions, her attack didn't connect with its intended target, but it didn't have to. The other Crimson Tigresses in the front line had performed similar moves, knocking almost half of the Snow Lions' front line slightly off balance. They got enough support from the second line that they remained standing, but their shield wall was in tatters. They barely had enough time to reform their lines before the Crimson Tigresses charged again.

Unlike the previous time, though, the Snow Lions were ready and the front line had all the weight of the four ranks behind them for support. They braced themselves and took the Tigresses hit head-on, barely maintaining their shield wall.

"AGAIN!" shouted Castor.

The Lions surged forward, but the Tigresses were ready for their counter-attack. As soon as the Lions committed to their push, the Tigresses nimbly took a couple steps back and braced. This extra space drew the Lions' front lines a step ahead of the ranks at their back and two Lions even slipped at the unexpected lack of resistance.

The Tigresses stabbed out with their blades, giving most of the Lions in the front line a good hit and the two who had stumbled an even harder time. One of these Lions was knocked unconscious and the other thrown to the ground.

"Shit..." muttered Leon.

"It's only two guys, we can still recover!" said Charles hopefully.

As if to spite his optimism, the Tigresses pushed back against the Lions, taking full advantage of the two holes they had just punched in the Lions' line. The Lions made a valiant effort, but they couldn't reverse the situation after their lines had been breached. It took another five to ten minutes, but eventually, the Snow Lions were reduced to only fourteen men including Alphonsus and Castor, whereas the Crimson Tigresses had almost thirty, including Valeria and Asiya.

"Damn it..." Castor muttered as the Snow Lions rejoined their fellows. "I think leaving half our unit behind really threw us off..."

"A loss is a loss, but..." Leon began. While he spoke, Leon saw Valeria smile at him in a way that was both cocky and challenging. She was bragging at his unit's loss at the hands of her unit and inviting a response at the same time.

"... we'll have other chances," he finished.

"Indeed we will," Castor said. "And we'll win next time!"

"Next time probably means during the FTX," added Alphonsus. "We can bring our entire unit to bear at that time. Even if they use clever tactics again, they won't be able to beat our numbers!"

"It's not a good thing to rely on numbers, though. We ought to think of some clever tactics, too," Leon responded.

"Wasn't saying we shouldn't, just that we'll have a distinct advantage next time," said Alphonsus.

"I wonder about that..." Leon said.

"And what does *that* mean?!" Alphonsus demanded.

"We... shouldn't let them choose where we fight. It'll undoubtedly be a place that'll mitigate our numerical advantage, like a canyon or something. We should stack the deck in our favor by choosing a place where we can bring all our strength against them and hold nothing back. I doubt we'll win otherwise..."

"I agree," Castor said. "Ladies Valeria and Asiya are smart, we shouldn't underestimate them in the slightest, and we absolutely can't give them an inch."

"You had a better view than either of us," Alphonsus said to Leon, "did you see any weaknesses in their formation? Anything at all that we might be able to exploit?"

Leon responded by solemnly shaking his head.

The three Snow Lions would've continued to strategize in depth, but the next pair of units had gotten ready while they were talking. Seeing that the next battle was going to start, Leon, Castor, and Alphonsus re-directed their attention there. They could talk about the Crimson Tigresses later, but missing even a single detail from the other battles could put them at a disadvantage if they were to ever face them in the future.

Fueled by their loss, when the matches were over, the Snow Lions threw themselves wholeheartedly back into training. They took what they had learned from the morning's battles and decided to focus on unit cohesion, syncing up their movements so that the first line wouldn't advance alone again.

Chapter 110: The Arena

A month passed after the exhibition put on for the Legate. It was hardly eventful, with all the other units falling back into the old routine. The other units continued their battles, but the Snow Lions remained in their tower not bothering anyone else. And no one came to bother them, either. The Crimson Tigresses had beaten them during the exhibition, but everyone was waiting for someone else to test them at their full strength.

Consequently, no one ended up attacking them.

This was all well and good for the Snow Lions, as this meant they could focus on their training, even if they were left a little bored. Although, because of this extra time to focus and their admirable drive to improve, three more first-tier trainees ascended to the second-tier.

There was also another lightning storm during this time. There had been a little rain, but nothing that compelled Leon to head out into the mountains again until he felt the familiar itch in the back of his skull one late afternoon. Fortunately, classes were over and he was only helping Castor and Alphonsus supervise the individual training of the other trainees, so he was able to head out into the forest with only a little bit of excuse-making with Castor.

Leon hardly went back into the capital during the couple of months that Heavy Infantry Training had been going on, but whenever he did it was exclusively to go to the Heaven's Eye Tower to meet up with Elise. They wouldn't do much, mostly just chat over lunch about what happened since the last time they had seen each other. Every time he saw her, Leon would always try to strike up a conversation to clear up their relationship, to figure exactly what they were to each other, but he could never quite get the words out. He'd always leave with his teeth clenched in frustration at his own inability to talk to the girl he liked, much to the amusement of Xaphan who gave him no small amount of grief over it.

But, the last time he had seen Elise, she had told him that she, Valeria, and Asiya had wanted to go see an upcoming gladiator competition. Managing to pick up on her hint, Leon had bought tickets for the four of them to see the show. They weren't particularly expensive—he could easily afford them merely by relying on the weekly stipend that he rarely spent—but he was still a little conflicted over how to treat Valeria. They had barely spoken since he confirmed her connection with Adrianos Isynos.

When the time came for him to go and meet the ladies at the Heaven's Eye Tower, the only conclusion he'd reached was to simply treat her the same as he had been—if only to not arouse her suspicion as to why he suddenly started shunning her after learning her full name.

When he arrived at the Heaven's Eye Tower, he found that he was the last to arrive; Asiya and Valeria had evidently hurried over as soon as they were dismissed, whereas he took his time getting ready.

Asiya saw him first. She sprang out of their private booth and hurried over to him waving enthusiastically.

"You're finally here!" she said happily.

Valeria's greeting consisted of only a single nod, but it was obvious that she was happy to see him from the smile on her lips.

Elise, too, didn't say anything, choosing to instead wrap her arms around Leon's neck in a loose hug. And she refused to let go until he returned the hug, smiling at him impishly until he did so.

"Well, we should get going," Elise said turned back to the other two ladies, "thanks to *someone* we might be late."

Leon smiled awkwardly at his own slightly late arrival and the group left the Tower. Their destination was the arena in the northern part of the city. It was a monstrously large construct, easily seating over one hundred thousand people. The stands were held aloft by colossal marble arches, beneath which

were hundreds of shops selling everything from cheap food and souvenirs to high-end clothing and expensive jewelry. People from every class of society would attend the games showcased in the arena, thus there were shops that catered to those with means as well as to those without.

“So where are we going?” Asiya asked, looking at Leon for direction as he had the tickets.

“Section two, seats twenty-one through twenty-four.”

“Oooh, *section two*? Those are nice seats! Thank you!” Asiya said happily. She would’ve been perfectly happy sitting with the crowds, but Leon had reserved seats in a part of the arena where they could watch the games from a private room.

“Yes, thank you...” whispered Valeria, looking a little awkward. “How much was mine? I’d like to reimburse you for it.”

Leon only waved her words off and said, “Don’t worry about it. Just something I can do for my friends, right?”

Valeria’s face remained as stoic as Leon’s, but a hint of red appeared in her cheeks and she said, “Thank you...” again.

Elise hardly said a word; she had gone with Leon to buy the tickets and had tried to insist on purchasing her own, but Leon had insisted just as firmly as she did that she didn’t have to. In fact, for him it had almost turned into a battle of wills with neither backing down, until after several moments of silence they both burst out laughing, though Leon’s was more of a smile and silent chuckle. In the end, Elise had happily accepted Leon’s offer to pay.

The tickets really weren’t that expensive for him, anyway, only about one thousand silver coins apiece. The last time he spent more than a handful of physical silver coins at one time had been when he bought his bow six months before, so he had amassed almost fifty thousand silver coins from his weekly stipend that were now sitting in his room that he didn’t really know what to do with. About the only thing he could think to do would be to carry them over to the Heaven’s Eye Tower and deposit them in his account, but even half of the coins were too much for him to carry all in one go, so his silver hoard had just sat in his room growing ever larger while he procrastinated taking care of it.

Their private room was very nice, shielding them from both the sun and prying eyes with stone walls and secluded access hallways, while giving them a commanding view of the arena. The armchairs prepared for them were large, well-cushioned, and very comfortable. To top things off, there was a young attendant waiting just outside of their room ready to fetch them anything they might want from the shops below.

“Wooow, I’ve never been in these box seats before, they’re even better than I thought!” admired Asiya as she kicked off her sandals and dug her toes into the thick carpet.

The group took their seats to watch the opening games which had already started, but while there were enough seats for all of them to have one of their own, Elise decided to sit with Leon, squeezing herself in beside him. The chairs were just large enough for the two of them to sit comfortably, if intimately, and Elise got even more intimate by giving Leon a radiant smile and leaning in closer to him.

“You don’t object to this, do you?” she asked, gazing into his bashful eyes.

"N-No..." he responded after taking a few breaths to calm his racing heart, causing both Elise and the watching Asiya to giggle. Valeria tried not to watch, but her eyes clearly flickered over every now and then, while a ghost of a frown could be seen on her lips.

The opening games were a series of chariot races between the four professional teams in the capital, the Whites, Reds, Blues, and Greens. Elise favored the Reds and ecstatically hugged Leon when they won the first race. The Reds essentially stopped participating afterward, though, leisurely riding around the outside of the track with the Whites just ahead of them. It seemed to Leon that the Reds and Whites had only shown up for the race in the most token way, almost as if they thought themselves above these races. These two teams left the rest of the day's races to be decided between the Blues and Greens.

"What's up with these teams?" Leon asked Elise. "Why aren't they trying anymore?"

"The Reds and Whites are favored amongst the nobility. The Blues and Greens are the common teams. This event was organized by a merchant for the common people, so the noble teams don't care about it after winning the first race," she answered.

Leon frowned at their attitude, while Elise turned to Asiya and struck up a conversation about what she and Valeria had been doing during the past few weeks.

While the ladies were chatting, Leon found himself becoming fascinated with the races, despite the Reds and Whites barely participating. The Blue and Green charioteers didn't conduct themselves with anything resembling sportsmanship, loudly insulting and swearing at their rivals. They would even try to ram into and destroy the other chariots if it seemed like they were going to be passed.

"I wonder if your whore mother fucked a turtle to make you!" shouted a Blue as he passed a Green. "That might explain both your lacking speed and your degrading color!"

"Well you'd certainly know about whores! I heard you've sold yourself so many times that you have to plug your asshole to keep from leaking!" the Green shouted back. He pulled on the reins of his horses, moving his chariot a little to the right. As the Blue started passing him, the Green turned back left hard, crashing into the back of the Blue's chariot and knocked one of his wheels loose, tossing the Blue off his chariot and high into the air.

"VICTORY! VICTORY! VICTORY!" chanted the Green fans as the Green passed the finish line in first place. The Blue fans were none too happy to see their guy injured and his chariot destroyed, and there was some pushback against the celebrating Greens to the point of several small fights breaking out in the more densely packed sections of the arena.

"This place is certainly... lively..." Leon muttered as he saw several of the fighting Greens and Blues still struggle to continue their fight even as the arena's security guards swarmed over them and dragged them away.

"It's like this at every game," Elise said, her conversation with Asiya pausing after hearing Leon speak. "The chariot teams are serious business here. Insulting another person's favorite team is a sure way to start a fight."

"I guess I won't say anything about the Reds, then," Leon said with a faint smile.

“You’d better not, hehe,” Elise said back with a sinister chuckle and an ominous look in her eyes.

When the races were over, the real games began. An announcer took to a small stage at one end of the arena, though his job wasn’t to comment on the fight; rather, he was merely there to introduce the gladiators and to extoll the virtues of the wealthy merchant who had sponsored the games.

The first few fights were never particularly important, so the ladies filled their time by calling the attendant and ordering some food and drinks, then began chatting amongst themselves again. They had all seen many of these games, so the inconsequential early fights didn’t interest them in the slightest.

Leon, however, was utterly fascinated. The first two gladiators were very lightly armored, with only a helmet and weapon apiece. They didn’t even have shirts, letting the entire arena drink in their perfectly built pecs and abs. One of them was shorter, leaner, and faster, while the other was an enormous hulk of a man. Neither was of the fifth-tier or higher, so they weren’t able to show off any elemental magic, but they made up for the lack of spectacle by expertly playing to the crowd. The hurled insults at each other, and many of the moves in the first half of their fight boiled down to knocking the other man down then raising their arms to call the roar of the watching masses.

After several minutes, Leon noticed something odd. At first, the crowd seemed to favor both men. However, the smaller gladiator had managed to endear himself to the crowd better than the other gladiator, with flashier moves and a sharper tongue. The people made more noise when it seemed like he was winning, and when it became clear that they wanted him to win, that’s when the fight turned in his favor. The bigger man seemed to slow down and allow the smaller man to knock him to the ground. He left more openings for the smaller gladiator to exploit and seemed, in Leon’s eyes at least, to throw the fight.

“These fights,” Leon asked, turning to Elise, “are they rigged?”

Elise smiled at him and helpfully explained, “There’s no need to pay attention to these first matches, whoever the crowd wants to win will win. All except maybe the last two or three fights are done solely to please the masses.”

Leon frowned. He’d heard a few things about gladiators from Artorias, but he’d never heard about that. Then again, he figured that his father probably wouldn’t really remember the opening fights as he’d have been too busy talking with his friends just as Elise, Asiya, and Valeria were doing.

So, Leon turned away from the arena profoundly disappointed. The ladies had moved on from talking about the Knight Academy to talking about a play they had seen the week before that Leon couldn’t be less interested in, so he ended up zoning out for a while.

But, two hours after they had arrived, the preliminary fights were over and it was time for the first of the two main events.

Leon only returned to reality after noticing that the ladies had stopped talking and were staring down into the arena with such expectant looks that Leon couldn’t help but stare as well.

“And now,” shouted the announcer, “here after more than thirty consecutive wins, we have the Golden Man returning from his latest victory in Teira! The Adonis of the Arena himself! Antonius Agrippa!”

With these words, the single most beautiful man Leon had ever seen entered the arena. He walked with so much grace that he almost seemed to glide across the arena's sand. His hair and eyes were a brilliant shining gold, as was his spear and plate armor. Upon reaching the center of the arena, he slowly turned to survey the crowd, taking several heroic poses and enjoying every deafening cheer he received—and he received many, from every corner of the stands.

Antonius was so beautiful that even Leon felt himself slightly captivated and felt the urge to join everyone else and cheer for the Golden Man's victory, despite knowing nothing about his opponent. It wasn't until he felt Elise next to him inching forward in their chair to get a clearer look at Antonius with a dreamy look on her face that Leon snapped out of the trance. In that instant, any good feeling he had for the gladiator disappeared like light into a black hole. His sword arm instinctively twitched toward the blade at his hip, which Elise noticed as it was the arm she'd taken hold of and was unconsciously gripping even tighter after Antonius' entrance.

"Oh my," she said with a smile, "are you getting jealous, Leon?"

Her words drew the attention of Asiya and Valeria, who turned to look at Leon. Valeria was as stoic as usual, but Asiya burst into a fit of giggles.

Elise, meanwhile, pressed herself against Leon's arm and whispered into his ear, "You don't have to worry about that pretty boy. He has a nice face, but I prefer the man I'm with right now..."

Her words, whispered so close to his ear that he could feel her breath, caused Leon to freeze with one of the stupidest looks that his face had ever worn. It seemed like it was meant to be an embarrassed smile, but it was heavily distorted from Leon's attempt to suppress it. This, of course, only made Asiya laugh harder which made Leon even more embarrassed.

"Um... right," he said, then clearing his throat and trying to move on. After a moment, though, he snuck a glance at Elise and saw that she was still staring at him and smiling. Her smile grew wider when she noticed him looking, and when he hurriedly looked away she contentedly rested her head on his shoulder to watch the fight.

But, as she did, she noticed Valeria staring at them out of the corner of her eye. Her silver-haired friend's face seemed just as impassive as it always was, but Elise detected something else there as well, a suspicious glint in Valeria's eyes. The announcer was moving on, though, so she pushed it out of her mind until she could talk with Valeria alone.

"Facing our reigning champion is a man who many of you know! He fought and lost to Antonius five years ago and is now here for his revenge! Ladies and Gentlemen, I present one of our brightest rising stars, Themistocles Aurelianos!"

From the other side of the arena came a man who seemed like Antonius' polar opposite. He was clad in spiky black armor and wielded a shield and short sword. The crowd's reaction to him was far more mixed compared to the near-rapturous response given to Antonius, though still positive on the whole.

The two bantered back and forth for a while, but Leon didn't hear a word of what was said. Instead, his mind was filled only with the sound of Elise's voice telling him that she preferred him to Antonius. However, this had only inspired more doubt in Leon's mind about whether it was true or not, since it

seemed to him that she had only done that to make a show out of it for the benefit of Asiya and Valeria than for any real desire to reassure him of her affections.

Needless to say, he both looked forward to and dreaded the moment it came time for them to leave, as it would mean that he could be alone with her and finally ask her, with no uncertain terms, exactly what she thought of him.