

Storm King 141

Chapter 141: The Third Watchtower

Leon and the rest of Samuel's squad finished up work on the first watchtower before night fell, which let them venture back out into the forest in the morning. Most of the squad didn't appreciate how long they had taken just for the first watchtower—these supply runs rarely ran more than a single day—and didn't bother talking amongst themselves. Instead, they focused on hurrying to the next two watchtowers, so they could then hurry back to the fort.

They reached the second watchtower before noon. The men there had no work they needed the squad's help with, so they delivered their supplies and moved on.

About an hour after leaving the second watchtower, Leon got a strange look on his face, and he slowed down.

"Keep moving, asshole," said the man behind him. As they were walking in single-file, Leon slowing down was holding up everyone behind him.

"What's wrong back there?" demanded Sam from the front of the line.

"Do you smell that?" asked Leon.

The rest of the squad couldn't help but sniff at the air despite their own mistrust and dislike for Leon.

"I don't smell anything unusual for the forest," said Sam. None of the others seemed able to, either.

"Smells like something's burning," Leon said.

"There's nothing out there, jackass, so get moving!" the man behind him said impatiently.

Instead, Leon ignored him and started moving out into the forest.

"Hey! Don't separate from the group!" shouted Alix with some concern. She had managed to relax a little over the day but being out in the forest still clearly made her nervous.

"Where are you going?" shouted Sam. "Get back to the group!"

Leon ignored them and kept walking out into the trees.

"If he's not going to stop, then we make him," said one of the men.

"Yeah, he's probably trying to rejoin his fellow savages. Best to stop him now, before he can manage to link up with them," said another with a vicious smile. Several of the men in the squad gripped their spears a little tighter and took a few steps in Leon's direction.

"Hold your fucking positions!" Sam ordered in a sharp tone accompanied with a hint of killing intent. The men glanced back at him and saw his hand on his sword, and they immediately did as he commanded.

"Good," Sam continued, "I'd hate to have to punish any of you again for not following my orders."

With that, he went after Leon alone. Alix hesitantly made to follow him, but he cautiously held up his hand, silently ordering her to stay put.

Fortunately, Leon hadn't moved out of visual range, and had even come to a stop about two hundred feet away at the top of a small densely wooded hill. When Sam caught up to him, he found what made Leon stop in the first place: a clearing on top of the hill, with several still-smoldering campfires and obvious signs that a few dozen people had stayed there quite recently—probably over the previous night.

"Shit..." muttered Sam. "Leon, we have to get back to the rest of the squad. This was a Valeman campsite, and those who built it are probably not far away."

Leon understood, and nodded back to Sam. The two quickly made their way back to the waiting squad.

"We've got enemies in the area, probably thirty or forty," Sam said as soon as they got back. The rest of the squad paled a little and started scanning their surroundings. Alix almost freaked out, but Sam moved forward and comforted her with a pat on her shoulder and a nod of solidarity.

"We've got to get to the third watchtower and deliver these supplies, then make a break for the wall," Sam said. "Since there haven't been any warning flares, this group probably managed to slip past the watchtower, so we should hurry."

"Thirty or forty Valemen is a lot of people, especially since they haven't come close to the fort in months," one of the men said.

"I wouldn't be surprised if they've been planning something," said Sam.

"Hakon Fire-Beard just finished conquering the vales neighboring the Bull Kingdom a year and a half ago, didn't he?" asked Leon.

"He did," answered Sam.

"With Torfinn Ice-Eyes holding down the east, I wouldn't be surprised if he's turning his attention further south instead," Leon said. "With all the manpower of most of the inhabited vales behind him, he could probably amass a force of thousands to come south."

"But would he come *here*?" one of the men wondered aloud.

"With only Fort 127 and three watchtowers, this pass is the most lightly defended pathway for him to come south," Sam said with some frustration. "The other three passages between the Northern Vales and the Bull Kingdom have huge Legion strongholds watching over them. If Hakon wants to come south, then trying to break through our fort would be the easiest way for him to do so."

"We should keep moving," said Leon.

"We should," agreed Sam. "We still have a job to do, and we have to do it. Keep your eyes peeled, everyone. And if you notice anything else Leon, don't hold back, let us know."

The entire squad nodded, though Alix needed to take a deep breath first. Then, they continued onwards.

Along the way, the squad discovered at least three other Valeman camps of similar size to the first, and Sam began to get nervous.

'This makes at least one hundred Valemén in the pass who've gotten past the third watchtower. That shouldn't happen! Something is wrong with the watchtower...'

"We need to hurry up," Sam said, spurring his squad forward.

However, they didn't get far before he called them to a stop again.

"Why'd we sto—" began one of the men.

"Quiet!" Sam interrupted. Then, he began to give orders via hand signals. He ordered the men to get into a horizontal line, then silently move forward. He also kept both Leon and Alix at his side. He and Leon exchanged knowing looks; they could both hear what was ahead.

"This weak coward! Look at him, he's practically pissin' himself!" came a shout from ahead of the squad, followed by the laughter of at least five other people.

"S-stay back!" said someone with a shaky and terrified voice.

"Hmmm, no! I think I want to get closer, otherwise how would I split your skull in half?" came another, far more vicious sounding voice.

After about a hundred feet, Sam's squad came within sight of a clearing where the voices were coming from. There, they saw a force of twenty rough-looking men—Valemén, they guessed—and another man on the ground and covered in blood in the center of their group. The Valemén were laughing and kicking at their terrified victim, who ended up curling himself into a ball to try and shield himself from their blows.

"That's one of the men at the third watchtower!" Sam said in recognition.

"He looks like he's about to be killed," Leon whispered. He quietly put the supply pack he was carrying on the ground, then reached for his bow. He only brought twelve arrows as he wanted to pack light and didn't think he'd really need them. Plus, so preoccupied was he with planning his armor enchantments that he hadn't gotten around to enchanting his bow yet. But, he still figured the weapon was good enough for the unarmored Valemén in front of him; only one of them was of the second-tier, with all the rest being first-tier warriors.

Seeing Leon's actions, Sam whispered, "You stay here and shoot on my mark, we'll move forward and engage in close-quarters combat."

Leon nodded, then Sam ordered the rest of the squad to silently move forward. The Valemén continued to play with their prey, kicking him and making jokes about his obvious fear, all the while not paying enough attention to realize that they themselves were about to be attacked.

In preparation for Sam's signal, Leon pulled out four arrows from his quiver. He kept three in his hand for easy access, while the last was nocked on the bowstring. He only had to wait a few more seconds before he saw Sam look back at him and wave. Leon smiled, drew the bowstring back, then loosed the arrow at the sole second-tier Valemén.

His aim was true and the Valemén was caught completely unaware; the arrow sank into his back, slipped between his ribs, and pierced his heart. The Valemén fell dead, leaving the rest of his friends staring in stunned surprise.

Leon didn't give them a chance to recover and fired his other three prepared arrows in less than five seconds, each one striking his target and instantly killing a Valeman.

"Let's go!" shouted Sam as he charged out of the trees and into the clearing. The clearing was tiny, small enough that Sam's squad was on the Valemen in seconds. In the face of the third-tier Samuel, his two second-tier companions, and five highly experienced first-tier soldiers, the Valemen took heavy losses in those first ten seconds of battle.

The battle itself lasted no more than a minute. All but two of the Valemen were killed, while the squad only suffered a few light wounds, the worst of which was a long cut along the arm of one of the first-tier soldiers. When Leon caught up to the rest of the squad, the first thing he did was to take out enough healing spells that he'd made to fix those wounds.

The rest of the squad didn't quite know how to take his actions, with only a couple subdued and awkward thank you's. Which isn't to say that any of the healing spells were refused, of course, only that the injured men were at least self-aware enough to feel some shame and awkwardness that after insulting Leon repeatedly, he was still willing to give them his healing spells.

"Hey, hey, you're alright, we're not going to hurt you," Sam said to the still shaking man they'd rescued. The man had stayed curled up while the battle was fought, and only when Sam approached him did he finally look around and see the dead Valemen.

"They're... dead?" the man asked.

Sam gave him a few seconds to process, then crouched down and laid his hand on the man's shoulder. "They're dead," he said comfortingly.

The man looked up, then asked disbelievingly, "Sir Samuel?"

"Yes, it's me. Can you tell me what happened? What's going on at the third watchtower that led to you being chased by Valemen? If that is too much for now, then how about your name?"

"I'm... Jack... The others at the tower are dead," the man said, clearly trying to hold back the tears. "I was out gathering firewood, and when I came back, I found the other four dead and the watchtower on fire!"

"Shit..." muttered one of Sam's men.

"I-I tried to help, to see if anyone was still alive, but then the Valemen came back to the watchtower and found me! I've been running ever since, trying to get to the second watchtower!" Jack continued.

"Sir, we need to get back to the wall, as soon as we can!" another man shouted in panic.

"Quiet!" Sam responded. "We need to check on the third watchtower. We need to verify what happened!"

"No! We need to get back to the fort! There are more Valemen out there! Hundreds, at least!" cried Jack.

"Hundreds?" Sam asked in disbelief.

“Yes! They were the ones that found me, but they only sent these ones when I ran...”

“All the more reason to check things out,” said Sam.

“No! No! I’m not going back there! We’ll die if we go!” Jack shouted hysterically.

“We have to see for ourselves what happened,” Sam repeated. There was a hard edge in his voice that would brook no argument, but Jack was too scared to notice.

“I’m not going!” Jack said as he struggled to his feet.

Sam glared at him. His eyes promised nothing but pain and punishment if Jack didn’t fall in line, but Jack stubbornly stood his ground. Sam was about to repeat himself for the last time, but as his hand went to his sword to emphasize his words, Leon spoke up.

“All of us don’t have to go to the watchtower, do we?” Leon asked.

Everyone else in the clearing turned to look at him. It seemed, for the moment at least, that any further conflict would be avoided.

“I’m just saying, two or three of us could check out what’s going on—assuming we actually have to see for ourselves. Personally, I’d recommend falling back to the second watchtower and making sure the alarm is raised. We could then check out the third watchtower after getting some reinforcements from the fort. But, if the only knight here says we should scout the watchtower out now, then we should. But, we don’t need that many to do it.”

“Yeah, and I’m sure you’re just waiting to volunteer for that job, aren’t you, savage?” said one of the men in the squad with a hostile tone, the healing spells all but forgotten in light of Jack’s news. “I’ll bet you’re just chomping at the bit to desert the Legion and rejoin your barbarian brethren!”

“Not another word!” roared Sam. “I’m fuckin’ sick and tired of that shit! If I hear the words ‘savage’, ‘barbarian’, or any other word with similar intent directed at one of our comrades again, I will personally force the person who said the words to eat their teeth!”

With that, everyone fell into silence, especially the man Sam yelled at. Sam took that silence to think, to try and figure out what to do. Everyone waited for his decision; if he ordered that they were to scout the third watchtower, then whoever was sent would probably never return. They’d be almost guaranteed to be killed by Valemén—assuming Jack was right in saying there were hundreds in the area. Despite their personal feelings toward him, everyone wanted to do what Leon suggested, to fall back and wait for reinforcements.

Everyone’s attention was on Sam, not even Leon was keeping an eye on their surroundings. And that was their mistake. Before anyone could react, an arrow came flying through the trees and pierced Sam right in the throat.

Chapter 142: Remnants of the Squad

Sam’s face contorted in shock as he raised his hand to touch the arrow sticking out of his neck. He barely brushed his fingers against the arrow’s feathers when he lost strength in his legs and collapsed.

The rest of the squad stared in horror for a split second before more arrows came hurtling out from the trees.

“GET DOWN!” Leon shouted as he threw himself to the ground.

Unfortunately, not everyone in the squad had sharp enough reflexes to get out of the way, and four more men were peppered with arrows. The barrage was over as soon as it had started, but the danger wasn’t over; about thirty more Valemens charged out into the clearing.

Leon drew his sword as he stood up, slashing across the chest of the closest Valemans to him with the same motion. Then, he raised his sword to block an ax strike from another Valemans and raised his left arm to block an attack from a third. His armor held, and the ax bounced off his gauntlet. However, it also seemed that his armor gave the Valemens the impression that he was someone important, as it seemed almost half of the attackers were gathering around him.

But Leon didn’t have the time to contemplate how the Valemens chose their targets. He thrust out at the Valemans on his right, skewering him through the chest, then pivoting on the ball of his foot to dodge a spear thrust from another Valemans. Leon continued that motion to gain some distance from the spearman, while drawing closer to another Valemans who had an ax. Leon struck out with an overhead slash. The Valemans tried to block, but he was only a first-tier mage, so the ax was ripped from his hands, dislocating some of his fingers, and Leon’s sword bit into his shoulder.

Only ten seconds after the fight started, Leon had already killed or incapacitated three Valemens, a good start. The rest of the squad wasn’t so good, but a few other Valemens had been impaled on the spears of the squad. But, two more of the squad members fell in that same time. Those who were left amounted to Leon, Alix, Jack, and two other men.

Alix was terrified, but she still rose from the ground just after Leon did, and managed to dodge an ax strike, sweep the legs out from under that Valemans who attacked her, and stabbed him while he was on the ground.

Jack tried to draw Sam’s sword, but the way Sam had fallen made it difficult. He was still struggling to arm himself when a Valemans appeared from behind and brought his ax down on Jack’s head, nearly splitting his skull in half.

The two other squad members hardly fared much better, but they were still lightly injured by the attacking Valemens. They were forced back by increased attacks, but they still managed to kill two more Valemens as they fell back.

Leon, meanwhile, was like a lion among sheep. Every one of his attacks either injured a Valemans or outright killed one, while all of the attacks sent his way were either dodged or failed to penetrate his armor when they did hit their mark.

The Valemens weren’t particularly disciplined; they bunched up and attacked only two or three at a time. With their numbers, they could easily have surrounded the remains of the squad and killed them by attacking their exposed flanks, but instead they allowed the four remaining squad members to gradually fall back into a group.

"We've got this," Leon said, encouraging the other three. They didn't really agree with him, but the pressure the Valemén put them under precluded any response.

"HRRAGH!" shouted an enormous man with an equally enormous battleax as he swung it down toward Leon. His effort was wasted, though, as Leon nimbly dodged the attack and countered with a stab to the man's stomach. The Valemén were about as armored as the rest of the squad, which is to say barely at all, so even this one strike was enough to put the Valemén down for good.

But, another came to fill his place, this one with a pair of short spears, each barely three feet long. He lunged forward with one of the spears, and as Leon dodged, he stabbed forward with the other, hoping to catch Leon off-balance. He didn't, as Leon only had to block with his off-hand gauntlet, and it was the Valemén who was knocked off-balance. Leon finished him off by first cutting off one of his arms, then slashing the Valemén's throat.

The other three were faring fairly well once their backs were almost against each other and they no longer had to fear being flanked—especially since the Valemén only came one or two at a time. Alix was still shaking with fear, but she kept the Valemén at bay with her spear, as did the other two. The three of them together killed another four Valemén, bringing the remaining attackers down to about twenty, as far as Leon could tell.

Then, the Valemén fell back, giving the four some slight breathing room. They were still surrounded, but they now had the opportunity to catch their breath. For a few seconds, catch their breath was exactly what they did; they didn't attack to try and escape, and they didn't talk to each other.

"Isn't *this* impressive?" came a mocking voice from the trees. The Valemén closest to the voice respectfully parted to allow the source of the voice to come forward and stand about ten feet in front of Leon. It was a man slightly taller than Leon, with a lithe build and loose clothing. His hair and beard were pitch black and he had light brown eyes.

"Tell me your name, Dark Warrior, that I might properly offer your bones to the Mountain Father," the man said.

Leon glared at the man, though with his helmet on, the man didn't notice. When Leon unleashed all of his killing intent, however, the man certainly took notice.

"What an *adorable* aura!" the man said, not disturbed in the slightest by Leon's killing intent. He then showed off his own killing intent, and for the first time in a very long time, Leon felt the fear of being overpowered. His skin crawled and he felt a chill run down his spine.

'This man is stronger than I am. He's killed more, a lot more...' Leon thought to himself as he restrained his aura to defend himself.

"I am Eirik, thane to Hakon Fire-Beard!" the man said proudly.

"... Leon," Leon responded.

Noticing his young voice, Eirik remarked, "You sound quite young, Leon! To live a short life is such a shame, but to die at my hands is an honor you may relay to your ancestors!" Then, he drew a dagger in one hand and a hatchet in the other, and attacked.

Leon lunged forward and met the attack, blocking the hatchet with his sword and deflecting the dagger with his gauntlet. He tried to attack fast enough to seize the initiative and put Eirik on the defense, but Eirik smiled and pressed forward; Leon couldn't get in a single attack.

[Leon, this guy is a fourth-tier mage!] shouted Xaphan.

[I noticed!] Leon responded.

Eirik caught Leon's sword in the gap between the head of his hatchet and the wooden shaft, then stabbed forward with his dagger. Leon couldn't dodge with his sword stuck in the hatchet, so he made the quick decision to catch the dagger. Fortunately, the dagger wasn't sharp to cut through his leather gloves, but Eirik only smiled and pushed forward. Leon tried to hold fast, but Eirik was much stronger, and Leon was forced back one step, then another, and another. Eirik just kept pushing, forcing Leon to give more and more ground. He'd already been pushed to within a few steps of the other three surviving squad members, who watched in dejection as Eirik got closer.

"This is a nice sword you got," said Eirik in a mocking tone, "Shame it's wasted on you. Once I kill you and take it, the first thing I'm going to do is kill your two boyfriends over there. Maybe I'll even use it to kill that fine woman there, once I'm done with her..."

Alix gripped her spear a little tighter once Eirik's lustful gaze swept over her. If it came down to it, she'd kill herself before letting Eirik have his way with her, though that isn't to say it was something she particularly wanted to do.

"Kill that fucking pig!" she shouted at Leon.

"Oooh, I like your attitude," Eirik said, "I'm going to enjoy breaking you!"

Alix's anger instantly grew so great that she forgot all about her fear. Her terrified shaking stopped, and she glared at the surrounding Valemén, who were watching and waiting for Eirik to stop playing around.

[You're going to have to use my power,] said Xaphan worriedly, [this bastard will kill you, otherwise.]

[I know!] Leon replied in frustration. He located the 'thread' in his chest, the connection between himself and Xaphan, and pulled. He felt the familiar heat rushing out from his chest, and he concentrated his mana to direct it into his left arm, which still held the dagger.

"You know, it's cute the way you're resisting, but you're only..." Eirik began, but he was cut off when Leon's left hand burst into flame. Eirik reeled back in instinctive panic, dropping the rapidly-melting dagger as he did so, but his own right hand was already on fire.

"AAHHGH!" he screamed in pain. He so distracted that he allowed Leon to twist himself closer and raise his left close to his face. Eirik's eyes widened when he looked up from his burning hand and saw Leon's fingers inches away from his face. "No," he whispered, as crimson fire erupted from Leon's hand and engulfed his head.

Eirik was dead before he hit the ground, his head and most of his neck and shoulders charred beyond recognition.

Everyone stared at Leon in stunned silence.

"What the fuck..." muttered one of the Valemen.

"He... He must be at least of the fifth-tier!" cried another as he turned around and fled back into the trees. One by one, all the rest of the Valemen retreated. They were so frightened by Leon's show of power that they didn't notice the pain with which he cradled his left arm, or the fact that he hadn't moved a single muscle since killing Eirik.

In seconds, the four survivors stood alone in the clearing, surrounded by almost fifty bodies. Alix hurried over to check on Sam once it was clear that the Valemen were gone, but Sam had bled out during the fight. The other two men quickly checked the rest of the squad, but they were all dead as well.

"We... should retreat. Fall back... to the second watchtower," Leon said, almost choking out the words.

"Are... you alright?" Alix asked.

"Just fine," Leon answered, "or at least, I will be."

"What in the hell was *that*?" demanded one of the men. "How are you able to use elemental magic?! Aren't you only a third-tier mage!"

"This isn't the time for that," Leon responded. The other man protested, but Leon ignored him as he pulled out a healing spell and pressed it against his arm, relieving the pain he felt from using Xaphan's fire. Then, he started walking back south.

"Hold up!" Alix called. She ran back to Samuel and took his sword, stopping only to give him and their other fallen comrades one last sad look before hurrying over to follow Leon.

The other two men grit their teeth, but as Leon was the strongest among them and had trained at the Knight Academy, he was easily the most qualified out of the four to take charge. But his qualifications hardly made them any happier at having to follow a Valeman, especially after losing most of their squad to a Valeman attack.

Regardless, they fell in behind Alix and Leon. They desperately wanted to get back home to safety, and their chances would be better with someone of Leon's power than if they moved on their own.

Sam and the rest were left there on the ground. It was distasteful, but they couldn't bring the bodies with them with large amounts of Valemen in the area.

Chapter 143: Leon and Alix

Leon, Alix, and the two other men made their way back south, hoping to reach the second watchtower before the Valemen did. It wasn't too far, relatively speaking, only about four miles, but those were four miles of rough, hilly, and forested terrain. They had left the second watchtower not long before noon that day and encountered Jack and the Valemen chasing him around two or three in the afternoon, so Leon was confident that they could reach the second watchtower before it grew too dark in the pass.

The small group moved at a quick pace; not quite running, as apart from Leon, the entire squad was made up of first-tier mages, but still going at as fast a clip as could be reasonably maintained. Leon kept his eyes wide open and his ears tuned to the sounds of the forest, so that he would be able to hear if any more Valemen tried to ambush them. He intended to make it back to the fort, and he was

determined to make sure the other three did as well. He was, after all, the strongest mage left in the squad, so the burden of command and the responsibility to keep the other three alive fell to him.

That being said, if the two men were killed along the way, Leon honestly couldn't say that he'd care that much. They and the rest of the squad had been exceedingly rude to him since he arrived, so it was only Sam's death that left him feeling any regret. Even then, he'd barely known Sam for more than a week, so he doubted he'd lose any sleep over the knight's death.

Alix, on the other hand, was a different story. Leon kept them moving fast enough that there wasn't much time to think, but every now and then he heard a snuffle from behind him. He snuck a glance back to see what was up, and saw Alix struggling to hold back her tears.

Leon sighed, then fell back a little to walk at Alix's side.

"How are you doing?" he asked as gently as he could, which was not particularly gentle at all.

"... Fine," Alix said tersely.

Leon's eyes narrowed at the obvious lie, but he didn't challenge it for the moment. Instead, he took a good look at Alix, as he realized in that moment that he hadn't done so prior to now. Alix was a tall woman, almost as tall as he was, with full and lustrous brown hair, warm and welcoming hazel eyes, and—before Sam's death, anyway—a playful smile always on her lips. She was thin and athletic, as almost all mages are, with a charming demeanor that could make even someone as cagey and guarded as Leon feel a little more at ease.

Leon had to admit that he thought she was cute, though he held no romantic notions toward her at all.

"It's never an easy thing, losing someone close to you in battle," Leon said after a few moments of silence. After a few more moments of thought, he said quietly, "I lost my father last year. I didn't cry, but I don't think I was really capable of doing anything for a couple days."

Alix looked at Leon in shock, she hadn't expected him to come back and check up on her in the first place, let alone start talking about something so personal!

"Do you mind if I ask what Sam was to you?" Leon asked.

"... Why did you tell me that?" Alix asked, side-stepping Leon's question.

"What do you mean?" Leon replied.

"Why did you tell me something so personal? You've barely spoken to anyone, and you don't know me..." Alix said, her voice trailing off when she grew self-conscious from pointing this out.

[Yeah, why did you say that?!] Xaphan asked in shock. [Wait a moment, do you *like* this girl? Is that gorgeous red-head back in the capital not enough? Looking to sow some wild oats? Hmmm?]

Leon was silent for a long moment, and pointedly ignored Xaphan. Then, he sighed and said, "True, I don't know you. But that actually helps a little—we might never speak to each other again, so what does it matter? I don't talk much anyway, especially around rude assholes..." Leon briefly glanced back at the two other men, who were following at a long enough distance that they couldn't hear what Leon and Alix were talking about, "... but I want to get better at it. We're in the same squad; we're going to be

watching each other's backs, at least until we get back to the fort. It would help if we talked a little, no matter what happens after..."

Leon's emotions were a tumultuous combination of grief at remembering his father, a hint of buried anger at those who took him, and embarrassment in saying so much to Alix. He didn't know why, but he just felt good talking to her, so he didn't stop.

"Come on, it helps to talk after a battle," Leon continued, "at least in my, admittedly limited, experience. Lets you vent some of the pent up frustration and anger and brings you down from the high of surviving mortal danger."

"Have you been in many battles?" Alix asked curiously.

"Hmmm... if we're talking solely battles where my life was threatened... this was my fifth?" Leon hesitantly guessed. "There were a good many where I suppose I was *technically* involved, but where I didn't do much more than stand around while my father or others did all the work."

In this regard, Leon only counted the fight with the snow lion, the raid on the bandit camp with the Brown Bears, the fight at his home that ended with Artorias' death, and the fight with the assassins onboard the galley. As he told Alix, he'd been in a number of other fights, but none that he both took an active role in and where he truly felt his life to be at risk.

"Well, that's four more than me," Alix said. "I got here a few weeks before you did, by Sir Samuel's recommendation. He was my uncle, my father's brother. We're from the same town and I've known him all my life. I wanted to join the Legion, but my father would only let me go if I went with Sam."

"... I'm sorry," Leon said. He was getting better at talking to people, especially given where he was only a year before, but he still wasn't that good at comforting people.

Alix went quiet and a frown appeared on her face. After a moment of silence, Leon asked another question to get her talking again.

"Why did you want to join the Legion?"

Alix sighed, then said, "I guess, because it sounded good at the time? I'm starting to think it was a bad idea..."

Leon smiled and morbidly chuckled. "I guess I'm not too different," he admitted, "I joined the Legion because my father told me all these stories about the knights to the south. I've always wanted to be one."

"What stories would he tell?" Alix asked.

"I think the Epic of Antares was his favorite, but he also told me Serpent's Extinction, and Courting of the Four Kingdoms fairly regularly. Personally, I was always partial to Lord of the Nine Rivers."

"I like your choice. The other three are good stories, but they have terrible endings," Alix said, "Lord of the Nine Rivers at least lets its hero get his much deserved happy ending."

"I wouldn't quite so far as to say the endings to Antares and Serpent's Extinction are terrible—bittersweet, maybe, but not terrible," Leon argued. "Although, Four Kingdoms does have an awful end,

I'll admit that much at least. *Some* of the cast of a story ought to survive to the epilogue, otherwise what's the point?!"

"Exactly!" Alix agreed.

The two launched into a heated discussion of their favorite books, while the two men behind them scowled and rolled their eyes. Leon, despite participating in the discussion, was still keeping an eye on their surroundings, and he noticed their obvious derision.

'Not going to talk to them anytime soon,' he thought to himself. He doubted he'd get far if he tried; they'd probably just call him a savage again, and he'd probably knock their teeth in. *'Best to leave them be. No good will come from talking to them.'*

—

Hakon Fire-Beard's bright blue eyes blazed with fury as he stared down at Eirik's partially charred corpse. His thane was almost unrecognizable.

"Who... did this?" he asked quietly. Containing his rage was a titanic feat, and he was barely able to keep from bellowing his question at the other Valemén who led him back to the site of the battle.

"Some knight, I think," said one of the Valemén who ran away when Leon killed Eirik. "He was wearing black armor with dark grey clothing. He looked fully grown, but his voice sounded strangely young."

"So a *child* dressed in black armor killed one of MY THANES?!" Hakon roared, grabbing the Valemén by the neck.

"... Nnnnooo..." the Valemén squeaked, "... a young... knight... fifth-tier-"

"BULLSHIT!" Hakon thundered. He opened his mouth to shout again, but instead he took a deep breath and collected himself. Then, he opened his mouth again, with a much calmer tone that didn't quite fit the fact that he was still holding the Valemén off the ground by his neck. "If a fifth-tier mage were present here, none of you worthless maggots would've escaped alive. No, this was something else..."

Another of Hakon's thanes stepped forward, a tall man with a wiry build and hair as white as fresh snow. His clear silver eyes sparkled with intelligence and his remarkably shaven face curved into a frown.

"What are you thinking?" the thane asked.

"Do you remember that lunatic we burned four years ago?" Hakon asked, still holding the Valemén, who had almost been choked into unconsciousness. "The one we caught in the process of freezing a field of silkgrass?"

"Ah, yes! That nutcase who ranted and raved about the 'Monster of the East' that he would summon and send us all into an icy hell. Instead, he got a fiery one, or should I say, a *pyre-y* one, hehehe..."

Hakon rolled his eyes at the pun and decided to ignore it. "Right, that guy. He was only of the fourth-tier, but he could use elemental magic."

"You think whoever did this to Eirik is like that lunatic?"

"Yes. I mean, he could simply have a piece of gear with a powerful mage's Mana Glyph inscribed on it, but I doubt any mage would be so foolish as to make themselves vulnerable to a madman. No, I think it's much more likely that this 'Dark Warrior' these cowardly worms were so afraid of is a demon-worshipper." As Hakon spoke, the Valeman in his hand stopped moving. He'd slipped into unconsciousness, and as soon as Hakon noticed, he dropped the Valeman with a disgusted look.

"Hrorekr, my friend," Hakon began.

"Yes, my brother!" the white-haired thane answered.

"You will lead our war party on my behalf. I must hunt down this demon-worshipper who murdered Eirik!"

"I understand," Hrorekr responded solemnly. "I've known Eirik as long as you have. Make sure that Dark Warrior suffers."

"Oh, he'll suffer all right. He'll wish he was dead! I'll flay the flesh from his bones, and burn what's left, to appease Eirik's spirit and carry him to the Sky Mother!" Hakon shouted. He clenched his fists and the wind blew around him in a small cyclone, knocking back the Valemens within fifteen feet of him.

'This was supposed to be our time to seize glory! To raid the south and bring back riches to last our people for generations!' Hakon thought bitterly. Of his six thanes, Eirik was the youngest and weakest. He was the baby of his circle of friends, the men who aided him in his conquests of the Northern Vales.

Hakon had expected his seven best friends-turned-thanes would accompany him through the rest of his life, but now one had been killed, and the army they'd so painstakingly assembled hadn't even arrived at the wall at the end of the pass, yet. Hakon was furious, to put it mildly. To put it slightly more accurately, his eyes burned with unquenchable fury, and after one more glance at Eirik's body, Hakon turned and stormed into the forest. He was accompanied by only two other people, two more of his thanes. They moved south at a terrifying speed. Their fury demanded the death of Leon, who killed their friend.

—

"We're almost back at the tower, aren't we?" Leon asked the other three. They'd all been on supply runs before, so they knew the pass far better than he did.

"Yes," one of the men affirmed exasperatedly. He didn't say anything more, so Leon let his tone slide.

However, he started to smell something burning again, and he thought he saw smoke filling the forest.

"Something's wrong," he said. He resisted the urge to run forward, and instead he stuck with the group. "Move slowly," he continued, "the second watchtower may have already been attacked."

Alix nodded with a serious look, while the other two men paled slightly. They could hate Leon for being a Valeman, but they couldn't deny his skills; they believed him when he said something was wrong.

The group advanced slowly and kept their eyes constantly scanning the trees around them.

Suddenly, Leon stopped them and said, "I can hear someone talking. I can't quite make out what they're saying, but they sound quite happy..."

After a few more dozen feet, the other three started to pick up on what Leon was talking about. Another few hundred feet, and there was no longer any doubt: they could all hear the crackling of flames and the hooting and hollering of dozens of men.

When they drew close enough to see what was happening, they jumped behind a small cluster of trees and bushes. They saw several dozen Valemens surrounding the second watchtower, watching the fire they started slowly climb up the walls. The five men who had been stationed there had been hanged from the balconies, with a multitude of mutilations that Leon could see from his hiding place.

One of the men was missing both of his arms, while another had almost his entire face ripped off. Another had lost his legs, while the fourth had an enormous hole in his torso that his lungs were spilling out of. These four were all dead, but the fifth had been untouched. He was left to hang from the balcony by his arms, rather than his neck like the others. He had been gagged, preventing him from screaming, but the terror was obvious in his face. The flames kept getting higher, licking at his feet, while the Valemens below him shouted and laughed at him. A few even threw rocks.

Leon and the other three could do nothing but watch; they couldn't take on all of the Valemens present, even with all of Leon's third-tier strength and Xaphan's demon fire. All they could do was watch, and stew in their anger and frustration at what the Valemens were doing, and pity for the hanging men, both dead and alive.

Chapter 144: The First Watchtower

"We have to leave," Leon whispered to the other three, "if we stay here, we'll eventually be caught."

"That man is still alive!" one of the men responded. "If we can get to him—"

"And how would we get to him?" Leon demanded. "There are more Valemens arriving every second!" Leon nodded at the crowd of Valemens, gleefully watching the last man assigned to the second watchtower begin to burn. Their numbers had swollen to almost one hundred, and as Leon stated, more kept trickling with each passing moment. Leon could even sense a number of third-tier mages, as well as one man who he couldn't see through—a fourth-tier mage, another thane of Hakon Fire-Beard's, he presumed.

"We... we..." the man sputtered.

"We can't do anything. We can only save ourselves," Leon said. "Our destination now is the first watchtower. Let's get moving!"

The other three were reluctant to leave, but once Leon got Alix moving, the other two men fell in line quickly enough. As they left, Leon took one last look at the last living man of the second watchtower. His feet had started to catch fire and his face twisted in agony. Leon could only sigh and move on. He could only spare his attention to those that he was trying to take responsibility for.

The four snuck around the second watchtower, then moved on.

Once they had traveled almost half a mile, Alix wondered aloud, "Why didn't the second watchtower fire off their flare?"

"Hmm? Didn't they?" asked one of the men.

"No, they didn't. The sky was clear, if the signal flare had been activated, it would've been still burning hundreds of feet in the air. The fort would've been alerted!" Alix responded.

"Maybe they were caught unaware," suggested the other man.

"The third watchtower didn't launch their own signal flare, either," added Leon. "Plus, I think I saw one of Hakon's thanes in that crowd of Valemén. If a fourth-tier mage were involved, it's conceivable that the men in the watchtowers could be taken in a surprise assault before the flare enchantment were to be activated. It's not like the men were particularly attentive, either."

"We need to get to the first watchtower!" Alix said worriedly.

"Indeed, it's likely they're already under attack, but we're also deep in the pass. We need to move with caution," Leon said.

With that, the four ceased their talking and concentrated on getting back to the fort. The terrain in the pass was just as rough on the way to the first watchtower as it was going south to the second. The need to move silently slowed the group down even further.

Suddenly, after barely going more than a single mile from the second watchtower, Leon quietly said, "Stop! Get down!"

The other three didn't question him—although the two men did give him strange looks—and came to a halt. Leon got a few more odd looks when he dropped down onto his stomach and hid himself in the roots of a tree, but he hurriedly waved the other three down to join him.

"What the fuck are you doing, we have to keep moving!" demanded one of the men.

Leon almost cringed at how loud the man spoke, then whispered, "Valemén are close by!"

The man scowled, as he didn't hear or see anything, but once Alix crouched down and hid, the other two got down as well. As soon as they did, they heard rustling in the trees. Mere seconds later, five Valemén appeared, stopping less than twenty feet in front of Leon's group.

"I definitely heard someone speaking," said one of them.

"You're just hearing things!" said another. "See? There ain't anybody out here. Well, nobody who ain't us..."

Leon glared at the man who had questioned him, but the man couldn't see it, due to Leon's helmet.

"I know what I heard!" the first Valemén said. "I'm going to check things out."

"Well, I'm going too, better to be safe than sorry," said the second. The other three agreed as well.

As the Valemén started walking forward, the two men in Leon's group looked at each other, then, with no word of warning to Alix or Leon, sprang out of hiding and rushed at the enemy. Leon's eyes widened in alarm, but he couldn't stop them in time—even if he tried, there would've probably been enough of a scuffle to alert the Valemén anyway.

"Shit..." he muttered. Then, he jumped up and charged, with Alix close behind.

“VALEMAN BASTARDS!” shouted one of the men as he stabbed forward with his spear.

The Valemen dodged with suspicious ease, then smiled and said, “You just made a huge mistake, Southerner...” With a downward swish of his ax, the Valeman ripped the spear from the man’s hands, then smashed the butt of his ax into the man’s chin in an almost derisive follow-up attack. The man’s neck broke and his head was almost ripped clean from his shoulders.

He was only a first-tier mage, but he chose to attack a third-tier Valeman.

“NOOO!” shouted the other man in fear and rage. He’d stabbed one of the other Valemen—though not fatally—and charged at the third-tier Valeman.

The Valeman side-stepped and disarmed the man by breaking both of his hands with the backside of his ax head. But, just as he raised his ax and was about to bring it down on the man’s head, he was forced to lunge back. He brought his ax around and used the haft to deflect a sword that appeared from behind the Legion man.

Leon’s blow sent the Valeman reeling backward, and he didn’t let up. The Valeman barely managed to block the flurry of strikes Leon sent his way, and every time, he was forced back several steps. Leon’s killing intent soared, which kept the Valeman under pressure and unable to counterattack.

The other four Valemen were so caught off-guard at Leon’s sudden appearance that Alix was able to skewer one of them on her spear before they could react. The three remaining Valemen started to panic, with one of them choosing to engage Alix, a second moving to finish off the last surviving man in Sam’s squad, and the third scanning the trees for any more attackers.

If all three ganged up on Alix, she might have been in trouble. However, she could easily handle one lone Valeman. He attacked with his ax as she was pulling her spear out from his dead comrade. She leaned to the side, dodging his strike and putting her in a perfect position to slam the end of her spear into his stomach, knocking him down and leaving him vulnerable. Alix finished him off by stabbing him in the throat.

She then turned her attention to the other two first-tier Valemen. It took her long enough to kill the second Valeman that the third Valeman already slit the throat of the last man in her squad. He turned his attention to her while the fourth Valeman turned to face her as well, confident that no other Legion soldiers were going to spring out from the shadows of the forest. They attacked almost in unison. Alix was able to block, but she was forced to concentrate on her defense; she didn’t have enough breathing room to go on the attack again.

Meanwhile, the third-tier Valeman had his hands full simply trying to survive Leon’s onslaught. Every thrust and slash were dodged or blocked by the skin of his teeth, and Leon didn’t let up. With every blocked strike, the Valeman struggled to hang on to his weapon, and eventually, he found it impossible; blocking one of Leon’s slashes ripped the ax from the Valeman’s hands, and Leon lunged forward to stab the Valeman through the heart. The Valeman tried to dodge, but Leon was too fast.

The third-tier Valeman was killed, and Leon didn’t linger, he immediately moved to assist Alix, who was still being pressured by the last two Valemen. Alix’s opponents weren’t expecting Leon to finish off their leader so quickly, and certainly weren’t prepared for his assault, not that there was going to be much

they could do to stop him anyway; with a single slash, one of the Valemen was decapitated, while the other was so distracted and terrified at the sight that Alix was able to easily finish him off.

With the fight over, Leon and Alix stood there, surrounded by seven bodies.

“Damn fools,” Leon muttered while looking at the bodies of the two fallen members of the squad.

Alix was quiet, but she slowly turned to look at him with fury in her eyes. “Couldn’t you have warned them about that strong Valeman?!” she demanded.

“I was trying to be silent,” Leon answered, “and I didn’t think they’d be stupid enough to attack *five* Valemen!”

Alix was about to say something else, but she shut her mouth. The fight wasn’t necessary, and if her last two squad mates hadn’t attacked—or at least waited for Leon rather than rushing out by themselves—then they wouldn’t have died. Valeman mages were hardly a match for Legion soldiers of a comparable tier; they lack proper training techniques, so their magical powers are typically much weaker and their bodies unable to handle the same level of mana.

There was a moment of silence between Leon and Alix as they checked the two fallen squad members. They confirmed that the two men were as dead as they suspected.

“Come on,” Leon said, “we have to get to the first watchtower. Valemen are probably still crawling all over this forest, so we’re not even close to being safe, yet.”

Alix took a deep breath, then nodded. The two set off again, leaving the bodies behind. They moved as quickly as they could while keeping their eyes open for any more Valemen. Fortunately for them, the rest of the way to the first watchtower was uneventful.

“Look, in the sky,” Leon whispered to Alix as they neared the watchtower. When she turned her eyes upward, Alix saw a red ball of fire a thousand feet in the air, burning bright enough to be seen for over a hundred miles.

“They got the signal out,” she said happily.

“I wouldn’t celebrate quite yet,” Leon said, “this probably means that Valemen are at the first watchtower. If they got the signal out, though, then they’ve probably successfully evacuated. Even if they haven’t, though, we’re still likely on our own.”

Alix frowned, and the two continued. After several hundred more feet, they started to climb the hill the watchtower was built atop of, and Leon had them stop. He strained his ears and eyes, trying to see anything that might tell them the situation at the watchtower. He couldn’t see anything that would indicate the watchtower was burning, but he could hear some shouting. What he heard didn’t seem to be cries of pain, though, so he nodded to Alix and they started moving up the relatively clear hill to the watchtower at the top.

Once they saw who was at the watchtower, the two halted in their tracks and Leon pulled them both to the ground into the shadows of the long grass. Forty or fifty Valemen had surrounded the watchtower, and Leon counted at least two among them whose power he couldn’t see through. They were at least of the fourth-tier.

Suddenly, the door of the watchtower burst open, and an immense man stomped out. He was almost impossibly huge, with arms thick as tree trunks, and a long dark red beard. Leon paled slightly when he saw him; his aura was astounding and the killing intent within turned Leon's legs to jelly.

"Was there anyone within?" asked one of the fourth-tier Valemén.

"It was empty," the huge Valeman replied with a hateful expression.

"Damn, we were too late then," the fourth-tier Valeman said.

"It's fine. We weren't going to take all of the watchtowers by surprise," the huge Valeman said. He glanced up at the sky; the sun had set an hour before, leaving the flare to be a poor substitute. "We press on to that flimsy wall the Southerners think will keep us out, and if we're lucky, we'll find that piece of shit that killed Eirik along the way. I think burning him alive would be quite cathartic right now."

Leon instinctively pressed himself further into the dirt when he heard that. He had his suspicions about who that huge Valeman was, and now he knew the Valeman wanted him dead.

The Valemén left the watchtower, moving south. Fortunately, none saw Leon or Alix.

"Who... who was *that*..." Alix wondered out loud.

"That... was Hakon Fire-Beard," Leon answered. "And it seems he's coming for me..."

Chapter 145: Retreat to the Fort

"*That* was Hakon Fire-Beard?!" Alix asked in a fearful tone.

"... I think so..." Leon said, his own voice slightly trembling from Hakon's tremendous aura—for of course, that was Hakon Fire-Beard himself.

Leon and Alix quietly fell back to the tree line and hid there for about ten minutes, giving Hakon's party plenty of time to gain distance, then they set back out.

"Should we check the watchtower?" Alix asked as Leon led her around to the south side of the hill.

"I doubt anyone could've hid from that guy," Leon responded.

"But what if they did?" Alix asked again, with more insistence in her voice.

Leon frowned; he wanted to get back to the fort and put this failed resupply mission behind him, but Alix had a look in her eyes that told him she wasn't about to let this matter drop.

"... Fine," Leon said with some hesitation. The two approached the watchtower again, with Leon constantly scanning the trees around the hill for any signs of more Valemén, while Alix kept her eyes on the watchtower. As they approached the door, Leon stopped Alix from just opening the door and walking right on in and pulled her to the side.

"Quiet, for a moment," he whispered. Then, he strained his ears, listening for anything that might be alive within the tower, such as Valemén left behind by Hakon. He heard nothing, so he nodded at Alix and the two entered the watchtower with sword and spear drawn.

The first floor was devoid of any human life. The supplies Sam's squad had delivered remained where they had been stored, and nothing else seemed to have been taken.

"Looks like that Valeman party didn't loot the place," Leon observed.

"No blood or bodies, either," Alix said. "The men stationed here probably escaped."

'We don't know that for sure, though,' Leon thought, but he decided to keep that to himself.

The two moved up to the second floor at the top of the watchtower. Again, there wasn't any blood or bodies. Leon and Alix didn't stick around and left the watchtower as soon as it became clear it was empty.

"We need to get back to the wall as soon as we can," Leon whispered on their way out. "Every minute that passes, there will probably be more Valemens between us and the wall."

Alix nodded, and they took off into the trees. They took a circuitous route, swinging a long way to the east almost as far as the edge of the pass before turning completely south. Leon figured that since the Valemens were coming from the northwest, they would have the best chance of reaching the wall if they went southeast.

Leon and Alix stealthily moved through the forest, remaining completely undetected until they finally came within a mile of the wall. It had been a stressful few hours as they moved on from the first watchtower, with the two almost running into large groups of Valemens twice and being forced to stop and hide another four times to let more groups move past them.

"How many are moving south?" Alix wondered aloud.

"Thousands, probably," Leon answered. "He's undoubtedly got the numbers."

"That wouldn't be enough to defeat a single Legion!" Alix said.

"Probably not, but it's certainly enough to get past the wall, killing everyone in the fort, and ravaging the surrounding countryside," Leon grimly replied. "There aren't any full-strength Legions in the area, and I doubt Count Whitefield would be able to field a large enough army to do much more than defend his own demesne. Hakon Fire-Beard can still do a ton of damage, even if he lacks the power to truly threaten the Bull Kingdom."

The two kept moving south, over small hills and past small seasonal streams. They had gotten lucky, as none of the Valemens who had come close to them on the journey noticed them after the last battle. They were being cautious and moving relatively slowly compared to their complete lack of caution on the re-supply mission that took them north in the first place.

But, their luck couldn't hold out forever. As they were moving around a clearing less than half a mile from the open ground in front of the wall, they nearly ran into a group of dozens of Valemens for the third time. They froze, then dropped to the ground, obscuring themselves behind a large bush and cluster of ferns.

The Valemen party was only about fifty feet in front of them, sitting and laying down in a slight depression. Neither Leon nor Alix had seen the party until now because they were waiting in complete silence, and were mostly concealed by the dark trees and other foliage.

“Who’s out there?” shouted one of the Valemén, having heard Leon and Alix drop to the ground.

“Shit...” Leon muttered. There was no way the two of them were going to pass as Valemén, not dressed as they were, and lying was risky. Before he could try to lie, however, the rest of the Valemén started to get up and reach for their weapons.

“I think we’ve got some Legion soldiers out there,” one of them said. “They would’ve come forward if they were our guys...”

Leon glanced at Alix and whispered, “Run to the left!”

The two then jumped to their feet and Alix took off sprinting to the east. Leon lagged behind a little, to intercept any Valemén who might be fast enough to catch up.

“There!” shouted a Valemán. “They’re running!” The small war party ran after Leon and Alix. With all of them up and out of the depression, Leon was able to start counting; there were about thirty Valemén, far more than he was confident of taking alone, even though they were all second-tier or below. It was fortunate, then, that they didn’t pursue Leon and Alix with any kind of coordination. They just ran after them, with the faster Valemén leaving the slower behind.

“You’re dead!” the lead Valemán shouted. He was a second-tier mage, armed with a spear, and he just caught up to Leon. He lunged forward just as Leon stopped in place and ducked. The spear passed over Leon’s head, and the Valemán ran straight into Leon, who knocked him to the ground and drove all the air from his lungs. Leon drew his sword and took the Valemán’s life in one smooth motion, but it still took enough time for three more Valemén to catch up.

One of the Valemén narrowed his eyes when he saw Leon. He turned to his two comrades and said, “I think I heard the Great Chief looking for someone in black armor. This should be the guy...”

The other two Valemén took a closer look at Leon, but Leon heard what the first Valemán said and lunged forward, impaling the Valemán on his sword. The other two panicked and jerked backward, leaving them open for Leon to kill one with a quick slash across the chest and to run the other through with a follow-up thrust.

But, more Valemén kept arriving; four more caught up once Leon had finished off those three. Instead of continuing to fight, though, Leon turned and ran off into the trees. Some of the Valemén stopped to examine their fallen comrades, but most ran right past in pursuit of Leon and Alix.

The land grew rougher as Leon, Alix, and their pursuers started to enter the mountains. This slowed down the former two and allowed the latter to catch up easier. Along the way, more Valemén recalled Hakon moving through the area shouting about someone in black armor, so a couple peeled off from the chase to find their Great Chief after getting a glimpse of Leon.

Unfortunately for the Valemén, they couldn’t stop Leon or Alix. Leon was acting as an effective rearguard, allowing Alix to gain more and more distance, while the Valemén seemed to refuse to coordinate—at least that’s the way it seemed to Leon, as they only came at him one, two, or three at a time. They had the numbers to pose a real threat to him, but they didn’t use them. Plus, whenever it seemed like they might start to gather together, Leon would unleash his killing intent and kill one or two in the resulting moment of weakness.

After ten minutes, Leon had whittled down the pursuing Valemén to about half of their original number, and the rest were keeping their distance; they no longer tried to run him down, rather they only tried to keep him in sight, as they had long since lost sight of Alix.

Leon couldn't see her, but he hadn't lost Alix. She was far ahead of him, and he was trying to follow her trail as best as he could. She had run east, then turned south again after going roughly a quarter mile. Leon was about to sprint after her when he heard an odd sound, the jingling of bells. He was so startled by how out of place it was that he unconsciously paused for a moment.

This was a grave mistake, as the bells came from one of Hakon's thanes, a short but muscular man with a sash decorated with dozens of small bells that jingled with every step. This man saw Leon and his black armor, smiled, and sprinted toward him.

Leon's eyes widened in alarm and he turned to flee; he could sense that this man was at least of the fourth-tier, and he didn't particularly want to resort to Xaphan's demon fire again. Fortunately, it seemed like he was faster than the thane, as he gained ground fairly quickly despite the thane's dogged pursuit.

Leon could tell that he was catching up to Alix, and he picked up the pace. As the thane behind him started losing sight of him among the trees and foothills of the mountains, he pulled out a horn and gave a long blast loud enough for the entire pass to hear.

Leon clenched his teeth and kept going, even as a second and third horn blast sounded from behind him. As he ran, he finally caught sight of Alix again, but he also saw something else that sent a chill down his spine: more Valemén ahead of them, easily counting one hundred or more. Additional groups started materializing to their right, as well.

Alix started to slow down with so many Valemén ahead of them, which prompted Leon to shout, "Keep moving!" Alix hesitated for a moment but then kept moving. That moment was enough for Leon to finally catch up to her, and he quickly matched her pace.

"There's going to be a single moment for us to get past them, don't waste it!" Leon told her as they continued to charge at the Valemén to their front. "The wall is behind them, and safety beyond that! So keep moving!"

"Right!" Alix responded with determination. Leon had gotten her through every disaster throughout the day, so she placed her trust in him again.

Seeing the two of them charging at them, the Valemén spread out a little, forming a half-circle. Under normal circumstances, sprinting into the center of that circle would be suicidal, but Leon and Alix were desperate. Leon, especially, as he knew there was a thane not too far behind. That desperation made his killing intent all the more potent when it erupted from him, and even the hardest Valemén among the group felt the harsh bite of paralyzing fear.

The Valemén directly in front of Leon and Alix when Leon's killing intent was unleashed felt another harsh bite: that of Leon's sword slicing them open. Three Valemén fell to Leon's blade, and he and Alix ran right past the rest, who were still shaking off the effects of Leon's killing intent. A minute or two later, Leon and Alix burst out from the trees and into the open land between the trees of the pass and the wall.

They ran forward and turned toward the gate; they were perhaps a mile away from it, so close were they to the mountains. It would take a few more minutes of running to get there, but fortunately, the Valemen didn't pursue the two of them past the tree line. If they had, that would've put them in range of the Legion archers on the wall.

As they ran, Leon and Alix drew the attention of said archers. Luckily, the two of them weren't a big enough group that the archers opened fire on sight, but most of the men who manned the wall were watching them like hawks. Consequently, Leon and Alix maintained as much distance between them and wall as they were comfortable with, and once they realized the Valemen weren't pursuing them, they slowed down to appear less threatening.

Once the doors of the wall came into view, a voice came from the wall that shouted, "Stop! Identify yourselves!"

"We're Legion soldiers!" Leon responded.

"We're survivors of those who left yesterday morning on the supply run!" Alix added.

There was a brief silence, during which Leon presumed those on the wall were conferring with a knight or two. They must have decided to believe them, because much to Leon and Alix's relief, the doors opened.

"We made it..." Leon said with a sigh. The two hurried back into the fort, and only started relaxing once the doors slammed shut behind them.

—

Hakon Fire-Beard watched Leon and Alix return to the relative safety of the fort from the trees. He'd heard the sound of his thane's horn, but he and rest of his thanes had been too far away to help.

"I will kill that man," Hakon said, glaring at Leon in his black armor. Even once the doors closed and he lost sight of Leon, Hakon continued to stare at the doors with such hatred that the other thanes remained silent until he turned his attention back to them.

"Let's go," he said to them, "we need to rest and wait for the rest of the war party to arrive. Then, we can knock down that wall, burn everyone on the other side, and get on with our raid!"

Hakon and his thanes walked back to their camp while the Valemen who heard Hakon's statement shouted and celebrated; they didn't care if the soldiers on the wall heard them, as they already knew the Valemen had arrived in staggeringly large numbers.

Back at the Valeman camp, Hakon noticed some of the third-tier warriors building a funeral pyre.

Walking over to them, Hakon asked, "Who's the pyre for?" The Valemen had certainly taken quite a few casualties during the day, but none that called for building a pyre in the center of Hakon's own camp.

One of the third-tier warriors looked at Hakon in slight confusion. "For Eirik, my chief," he said.

"No!" Hakon said forcefully. The warriors working on the pyre immediately froze, then slowly backed away from the pyre. Hakon frowned at the looks of fear on their faces, as if they had done something heinous and wrong. Hakon took a deep breath, clapped the two closest third-tier warriors on the

shoulder, and said, "You all have done nothing wrong; however, I want Eirik to see the south before we send him to the Sky Mother! To that end, I can think of no greater pyre to build for my fallen thane than out of the ruined fragments of that damned fort!"

At Hakon's mention of destroying the fort, the surrounding Valemen raised a battle cry, then continued to get ready for the upcoming assault, leaving Hakon and his other five thanes alone with Eirik's body. Silence fell as the third-tier warriors left for their own camps, and Hakon let his fierce chiefly demeanor slip as he sat down next to Eirik.

'I'm sorry, Haukr,' he thought. 'I promised to lead your son out of the Northern Vales and show him the south, but instead I've brought him to his own death. But, if you can hear me where you are in the Sky Mother's embrace, please forgive me for stalling your reunion with Eirik, for I would fulfill my promise even though his eyes have been closed for good. I will show him the south, and then I will send him to you atop the corpse of that black-armored bastard!'

Chapter 146: Rest

The doors in the wall slammed shut behind Leon and Alix, with half a dozen soldiers hurriedly locking it, just in case the Valemen in the pass decided to attack while the door was still unsecure. Leon and Alix breathed a sigh of relief; it had been a long and bloody day, and they were both quite tired.

But, their rest would have to wait, as Sir Jean, the Tribune in charge of the fort, had been informed of their arrival and met them at the doors.

"Ursus," Jean said to Leon, "what in the hell happened out there?! Where's Sam?"

Alix's face fell with that reminder, and she didn't speak a word as Leon answered simply, "He's dead. So is the rest of the squad. Killed by Valemen."

"He's dead..." muttered Jean. "Come with me. I want a report of what happened." Jean then turned around and started walking back to his small cabin, which was both his quarters and his office. Leon and Alix followed, along with about twenty other third and a few fourth-tier knights.

Within the cabin was a large wooden table and just enough chairs to seat everyone. Most of Jean's personal furniture was behind a linen curtain that divided the cabin in half, leaving the front half of the cabin with nothing but the table, accompanying chairs, and Jean's small desk tucked away in the corner.

Upon entering, all of the knights took a seat, while Leon and Alix awkwardly stood off to the side and Jean moved to close the windows.

"Please, take a seat," Jean said to Leon and Alix, waving his hand at a few empty chairs. Once everyone was seated, Jean turned to Leon and said, "Now, explain everything that happened, in detail."

Leon launched into his explanation, briefly touching on the mission and how uneventful it was until he found the Valeman camp. He kept the details light until he reached the point where the squad found Jack and the Valeman war party chasing him. He paused for a moment when he reached the part about how he killed Eirik, and when he started again, he said that he merely exploited the Valeman's lack of training and overconfidence to win. Alix gave him a strange look, but she didn't speak up to refute him; in fact, she didn't say a single word. As a first-tier mage, the knights didn't really expect her to say anything, either.

Leon described the journey back to the fort, including the deaths of the two survivors from Sam's squad who attacked a group of five Valemén, the grisly fate of those at the second watchtower, and the tense journey back south.

When Leon was finished, Jean leaned back in his chair and said, "That's a hell of a story, boy, but I don't see any reason not to believe you. Good job killing that thane. Should make our job defending the wall just a little bit easier.

"But, that still leaves us with an unknown number of Valemén against us, and a barely half-strength battalion," Jean continued. "We need more information, and we need more men to defend the wall. I don't think we're going to get very many of the latter, but Dion, I want you to go to see the local barons. I doubt they want to see Valemén rampaging through their lands, so I'm sure they'll cough up a few hundred men to help us out." Dion, the knight Jean spoke to, nodded, and left immediately. Time was tight, and no one was playing around.

"We also need a more accurate picture of what we're up against," Jean said. "To that end, we need every able body up on the wall. That means you Ursus. We have too few third-tier mages as it is."

Leon frowned, but nodded.

"You can get in a few hours of rest and shut-eye, but make no mistake, you're not out of the woods just because you're literally out of the woods," Jean stated. "Those Valemén are still coming, so we need to be ready. All right, you all know what you need to do. Ursus, stay here for a moment so we can discuss your specific role in the defense. Everyone else, get to it."

With that, the meeting was over, and all the other knights got up and left, leaving only Leon, Jean, and Alix sitting at the table. Alix was about to leave as well, but Jean said, "You can stay, too. I meant it when I said we need every able body, and you're absolutely no exception."

"What, then, do you need us to do?" Leon asked.

"Your squad has been obliterated, along with one of my best knights. You're not a knight, Ursus, but you're a third-tier mage from the Knight Academy. I need you up on the wall, leading your fellow men of the Legion."

Leon paled a little; stepping up to lead the last three members of a shattered squad was one thing, but actually leading soldiers in battle was another.

"I get your hesitation," Jean said, seeing Leon's apprehension, "but there are only four fourth-tier knights here, including myself, and only twenty-one third-tier men, including you. And, when I say, 'lead your fellow men of the Legion', I don't mean I'm actually going to put you in command. I just want you on the wall, ready to lead the defense wherever an anointed knight isn't."

"... I'll do it," Leon eventually said. He didn't like it, but he didn't have much choice—and besides, gaining this kind of authority was one of the main reasons he joined the Knight Academy in the first place. It was just a little sudden for him, even if it wasn't permanent or official.

"Good. I'll let— 'Alix', was it? —act as your informal squire. You'll be a knight in all but name!"

Alix hardly responded, but Leon nodded.

“Good,” Jean said. “Now, get some rest, you two. I think we’re going to have a long few weeks ahead of us, until the rest of the Legions in the Northern Territories arrive to back us up.”

Jean and Leon hammered out a few more specific details, and then Leon and Alix left Jean’s cabin. They returned to their tent, which suddenly seemed to be quite a bit bigger. It was almost midnight, so the two didn’t even bother getting out of their clothes and immediately dragged out a pair of cots and collapsed.

Lying there in the dark, neither of them were able to sleep, despite their extreme fatigue. There had just been too much that happened that day, and—for Alix especially—it was all starting to crash back in without something else happening to distract them.

Leon heard Alix begin to sob. She was trying to be quiet about it, but he heard her anyway. He could understand why, she had lost a family member less than half a day ago. The journey back to the fort had kept her mind off it, but now she couldn’t take her mind off her grief.

But, just because Leon could understand her tears, that didn’t mean he knew what to do about it, or even if he should do anything at all. They had spoken a little on the way back, but they still didn’t know each other that well, certainly not enough for either be willing to speak words of comfort to each other. So, Leon didn’t do anything except lay there in the dark, listening to Alix cry and trying to think of what to do.

In the end, Leon didn’t say anything. Nothing suitable came to mind, so he did nothing more than stay awake long enough to make sure Alix fell asleep first, before nodding off himself.

—

By the time the sun rose, Alix had steeled herself and didn’t shed another tear, but that also wasn’t to say that she didn’t express any nervousness about the current situation. In fact, she was clearly anxious and scared about the Valemén just north of the wall, as her clumsiness in cleaning up the tent displayed.

Leon, who had been helping her clean up and organize the personal items of the rest of the squad, noticed and took a deep breath. The situation he was in put him in a position of authority, and that came with responsibilities. If Alix was to be his informal squire, then he had to do something to try and cheer her up.

With that in mind, Leon quickly finished up his own work, then went to help Alix out with hers.

“Thanks...” she whispered when he appeared at her side.

“So, listen,” Leon began, deciding to try and take her mind off the previous day rather than bring up something sensitive right that moment, “we have about an hour before we meet up with Sir Jean. I’d like to take that time to see how well you fight with that sword.”

Alix glanced at the sword she had taken from Sam. She hadn’t used it at all on the way back south, which both of them felt answered Leon’s curiosity, but she got the meaning behind Leon’s request to spar.

The two quickly finished up their cleaning and readied themselves in the center of the of the tent. There was plenty of room to practice with only the two of them there, and Alix certainly didn’t want to put her lackluster sword skills on display for the entire fort. Over the next hour, Leon tested Alix’s fighting skills,

while offering her some critique and suggestions. He didn't do the same with her skills with the spear, as she was undoubtedly much more skilled with the spear than he was, as Artorias had only ever given him some cursory lessons with spears.

Suffice it to say, Alix wasn't going to be using Sam's sword in battle anytime soon, if ever. Still, when the sparring session was over and it was time to get back to work, she muttered a "Thank you," to Leon. The exercise helped her get her mind off her mourning, and her fear.

But, that fear came back when they left the tent and it was time to come back to reality. Legion soldiers were running around everywhere near the wall, carrying supplies to various sections, such as arrows to the towers and barricades to build another wall around the doors. The latter was technically illegal, as Count Whitefield unambiguously stated that the Legion wasn't allowed any other defensive wall apart from the one that blocked the pass, but with thousands of Valemens still gathering, Jean didn't much care for legality.

"Do you think that will help?" Alix asked Leon. She didn't expect him to answer, as she was just expressing her own cynicism over the situation now that she had gotten some rest and had time to process, but answer her Leon did.

"Every little bit helps," he said. "Who knows how many Valemens are out there right now, so every second that they haven't managed to break through these defenses is another second we get to keep breathing. The more fortifications that can be built to stave off our deaths, the better."

"The Valemens have hundreds of third-tier mages. We're still going to lose this," Alix responded.

"A third-tier mage will die as quickly as any man under arrow fire from second or even first-tier mages," Leon replied. "Don't put so much stock in magical tiers. Even the strongest of mage can be killed by the weakest of mortals if they're not careful. Plus, we should be able to keep them at range, if the archers are worth their salt..."

Alix took a deep breath and tried to internalize what Leon was saying.

"Look," Leon said, bringing them to a halt, "We're going to need everyone on point if we're going to survive this. We can hardly just run away in this situation—we'll just get executed as deserters—so try to keep it together. Don't go saying such things like 'we're still going to lose this' around anyone else. Have to keep morale up, and all."

Leon's words weren't particularly eloquent, but he got his point across. Alix nodded, and Leon said, "We're going to make it through this, no doubt in my mind. We just need to stay, if not positive, then at least motivated. Once a Legion or two arrives, this Valemens army will break and recede like the waves of the Endless Ocean upon the shore."

"Right!" Alix said, putting some of the energy she had only a few days ago back into her voice.

"Good. Now, let's get to work."

Chapter 147: A Clearer Picture

The motivation Alix worked up after speaking with Leon didn't last long. The two were assigned to a tower that lacked a third-tier mage, and the resulting guard duty that lasted for hours without doing anything else instilled a boredom that killed just about all excitement and motivation.

When they had arrived, the squad that had been in the tower to begin with didn't seem particularly thrilled about having them around—or at least, the squad leader didn't appreciate Leon's presence. He seemed to think that Leon wanted to take over his unit and deprive him of command. Things only became less tense when, after a few barbed comments, Leon assured the squad leader that he wasn't intending to usurp authority. He was only there to guard against higher tiered Valemens who might try to attack the tower.

But, even though tensions were lowered, Leon and Alix still weren't quite welcome in the tower. The other ten soldiers barely even looked at them, leaving them to their own devices. On the one hand, this led to the aforementioned boredom, but on the other hand, Leon quite enjoyed the treatment. Alix, however, wasn't used to being treated so coldly.

Noticing her discomfort with the situation, Leon suggested, "Why don't we pass the time with some training?" Most of the floors of the tower weren't being used, as there just weren't enough soldiers manning the wall. This would give the two plenty of space and privacy for training.

"Sure!" Alix said. With nothing else to do, she jumped at the chance to do anything that would take her mind off the previous day's events, which were creeping back into her mind.

They spent an hour or so doing some more light sparring, then Leon taught Alix the same breathing techniques that he taught Charles on the way to the Knight Academy over a year before.

Through a combination of meditation and sparring, the day passed quickly; before they knew it, the sun was beginning to set. Leon was starting to think that he liked teaching, as he'd barely noticed the passing of time. Alix, too, didn't keep track of the time as she was far too ecstatic at how full of magic power she felt from meditation. In fact, it wasn't until Alix's stomach growled that they glanced out of the nearest window and noticed the reddening sky.

"Time to get some food?" Leon suggested. He, being a third-tier mage, was a little more resistant to hunger than the first-tier Alix, but he was a man who enjoyed his food. He hated missing meals.

"Absolutely," Alix replied.

The food for the tower guards is brought to the ground floor every day. There weren't enough people in the fort to allow the guards to leave for long. Most of the tower guards slept in tents right next to their towers, in fact.

Leon and Alix walked down the stairs to the ground floor to get something to eat, but just as Leon was about to grab a piece of bread, one of the fourth-tier soldiers stuck his head through the door of the tower, looked around, then said, "Ursus! There's a meeting in the commander's cabin! All third-tier mages are to attend!"

Leon automatically nodded before looking back at the food with a look of dejection. He wasn't missing much, just some bread and dried meat, but he still wanted a few minutes to eat. The fourth-tier soldier wasn't leaving, though, so Leon could only grab a piece of bread and leave.

“Hopefully, this shouldn’t take too long,” Leon said to Alix on the way out of the door. She couldn’t help but frown as she was left in the tower.

“What’s this about?” Leon asked the fourth-tier soldier on the way to Jean’s cabin.

“Don’t know,” the soldier responded. “I’d guess something about scouting the Valeman position. They seem to still be assembling their forces, so we have some time to get a good idea of how many of them are out there, and maybe plan some kind of delaying action.”

“Hmm,” Leon hummed in acknowledgement. He had a few more questions, but he held his tongue for after the meeting.

All thirty officers of Fort 127—including Leon—crammed themselves into Jean’s cabin just as they had the night before. Leon and the fourth-tier soldier with him were actually the last to arrive, so the meeting began as soon as they took a seat.

“Well,” Jean began, “I think we all know what our current situation is, so let’s try and make this quick. We have an unknown number of Valemens outside of our wall, though we know that number is likely over ten thousand.” Several of the knights around the table grimaced at that number, especially considering that their own battalion was only five hundred strong. Five hundred, to man two miles of wall.

Jean continued, “Fortunately, Dion returned just half an hour ago with good news: he visited the castles of the five barons within twenty miles, and we should be getting two or three hundred men early tomorrow morning. Any more reinforcements, though, will depend on when Count Whitefield or the Consul of the North arrive, which may be a week or two. That’s how long we’re going to have to hold this wall, to keep these Valemens from sacking half the Northern Territories.

“Which brings us to what we’re going to need to do tonight. I want eight volunteers to scout the Valemens positions. We need to know what we’re up against.” Jean paused, waiting for volunteers. The other three fourth-tier mages apart from him immediately raised their hands, and Jean nodded in appreciation. Four third-tier mages then raised their hands in rapid succession, but no more.

After waiting a moment, Jean said, “I want at least one more,” and cast his gaze around the table.

During that second pause, Leon noticed several of the other knights surreptitiously glare at him.

[Hmm, seems like you have some enemies,] Xaphan remarked.

[Maybe not enemies,] Leon responded, [but certainly not friends. I guess they think that a Valeman should be the one to go out into the pass, but they’re all anointed knights, so they can’t just rudely demand that I volunteer.]

“I’ll go,” Leon said out loud.

“Then we have our eight,” Jean said. “Assemble at the doors at sundown. I’ll want you all back in less than three hours, as the Valemens might try to attack us tonight. If they do, they’ll probably do so at midnight, so everyone else, get some rest and make sure your units are ready for battle then!”

Jean rose from his chair, signaling the end of the meeting, and the knights around the table began to get up and make their way to the door of the cabin.

[Why did you volunteer?] Xaphan asked. [I mean, it's noble and all, but I'd rather you didn't get yourself, and me by extension, killed by doing something foolish and reckless.]

[I'm sure I would've been volunteered if I'd waited any longer. Best to get it over with,] Leon replied. [Besides, might win me some goodwill.]

[With the way those asshats were staring at you, you could probably save their children from a burning building and they'd still hate you,] Xaphan said.

Leon couldn't deny what the demon said, so he remained quiet as he walked back to his assigned tower.

—

Soon enough, the appointed time came for the scouts to assemble at the doors of the wall. Jean met the eight of them there, and he said, "Don't take undue risk! We need every one of you to make it back! So focus on returning alive, even if you don't bring back any valuable information!"

The volunteers nodded in acknowledgement, and then made for the wall. They only met at the doors, they wouldn't leave through them as the Valemén were likely keeping an eye on them. Or at least, it was better to assume that they were, even if none of the knights truly thought the Valemén had the discipline and organization to do such a thing.

All eight scouts would investigate their own separate areas of the pass, focusing on the largest clusters of campfires they could see from the top of the wall. Leon chose the biggest cluster of campfires, about half a mile from the doors of the wall.

[You made a bold choice,] Xaphan said as Leon jumped down from the wall to the north side of the pass. As the scouts were all third or fourth-tier, they could jump down easily, as well as back up when they returned, so what Leon did wasn't anything particularly special.

[I have the best chance to successfully scout out that area, and the better this scouting mission goes, the better chances we'll have to live through this,] Leon responded.

[Are you talking about that ring?] Xaphan asked excitedly.

[I am, indeed,] Leon replied with a smile. He'd finished figuring out how to use the invisibility ring he had taken from the assassins who came for him on the galley, but he hadn't had a good chance to use it yet—or at least, not a chance that wouldn't have left a squadmate on their own.

But, now that he was on his own, he could use the ring with impunity, without any fear of revealing another of the cards up his sleeve, as he had with Xaphan's flame. Alix hadn't followed up with the latter, so it seemed like his secret was safe on that front, at least for the moment, but he still didn't want to so openly display his capabilities.

Leon sprinted across the open field on the north side of the wall and vanished into the trees. He then hid himself behind a large bush and waited to see if any Valemén that might have seen him would show up. When no one came, he smiled and rubbed the emerald ring on his right index finger.

[First time actually *using* this thing, let's see how well it works,] Leon said to Xaphan with anticipation.

[You know,] Xaphan replied, [I've always wanted some kind of piece of gear with an invisibility enchantment, but I never managed to acquire one. So, this ought to be enlightening...]

Leon channeled his magic power into the ring, activating the enchantment. It took a few seconds, but light began to bend around him, obscuring his body with a black lightless veil, then making him completely transparent.

[Holy shit...] Leon muttered when he looked down and saw nothing; his body had completely vanished!

[Ok, that's pretty damned cool,] Xaphan appreciatively.

[It really is,] Leon responded with a smile, though no one could see it. [Time to get to work...]

Leon darted out from his hiding place and silently made his way through the forest. He moved boldly, not even stopping when Valemen appeared in front of him. He passed by three fairly sizeable Valeman camps, each with more than five hundred men within, and when he reached his destination, he felt a strange confidence that he never had before. The ring made him feel almost omnipotent.

But, Leon quickly quashed those feelings by remembering some of the limitations the ring had, like immediately dispelling the effect if he came into contact with anything else magical—such as another mage. If Leon so much as bumped into someone else, the invisibility effect would fail and it would take no less than five minutes for him to reactivate it, during which he would probably be killed. So with that in mind, Leon took a few deep breaths to calm himself down, then entered the main camp.

There were tents almost beyond counting, though Leon tried. His efforts weren't helped with the Valemen's haphazard method of building the camp, with no organization whatsoever; tents weren't arranged in a grid pattern, as the Legion did, rather every Valeman would set himself up wherever he saw fit.

Leon carefully made his way through the camp, ignoring most of the Valemen but making sure to count every third-tier mage he saw. None of them saw any sign of Leon among them.

After about five minutes, Leon felt his mana supply starting to run low, so he turned back. However, as he was doing so, he noticed a group of tents in the distance. They were near the center of the main camp, but no other Valemen set up their tents near this little sub-camp, forming a small uninhabited ring around it.

Leon could see several of the men in the sub-camp sitting and chatting around an enormous campfire, and every one of them had an aura that he couldn't see through, indicating their strength. These were Hakon Fire-Beard's thanes, and if they were around, then Hakon himself wouldn't be too far.

Leon's hand found its way to the hilt of his sword and he started to slowly edge forward, closer to thethane's camp. However, as he grew close, another man walked out of a tent. Seeing him, Leon froze.

This man was gigantic, over eight feet tall, though his hunchback was so severe that he was reduced to a mere six and a half feet. The proportions of his body were all off, with an inhumanly muscled upper body, arms that were long enough to reach past his knees, and legs that seemed far too skinny to hold up his massive frame. His skin was white enough that it almost glowed in the moonlight, but most of it was obscured by thick black fur-like hair that covered his exposed back, chest, and arms. His eyes burned blood red, and his face was elongated like the snout of an animal.

'A *werewolf*.' Leon recognized the misshapen body from his lessons in the Knight Academy. At that moment, he didn't wonder why the man was there, or why he was tolerated within the Valeman camp, but he didn't think that his ring of invisibility would help him much if he got closer; he suspected the werewolf would be able to smell him without any trouble.

Leon took a quick glance at the werewolf's aura, and when he saw that it was at least of the fourth-tier, Leon turned around and made to leave the Valeman camp without hesitation. When he reached the edge of the camp and plunged back into the dark forest, he allowed the invisibility effect to dissolve, and he leaned against a tree, panting from panic at seeing the werewolf and exhaustion from using so much magic power.

After a few minutes of quiet recovery, Leon hurriedly began sneaking back to the fort. There wasn't anything else he could learn from the Valeman camp that he thought was more important than bringing back word of a fourth-tier werewolf in the enemy ranks.

Chapter 148: Delaying Action I

"A werewolf?!" Jean asked Leon in shock.

"Yes," Leon confirmed, "and it seems like he's quite taken with the curse; his body is twisted and bestial."

"Shit," Jean muttered. "Well, that's something to think about..."

He didn't say anything more, even though he was panicking on the inside. Jean had been waiting at the doors for the scouts to return, and that's where he met Leon and received the report. They were still there, waiting for the other seven scouts, and surrounded by other Legion soldiers, so Jean couldn't afford to express his panic.

After a few more hours, six of the seven scouts came back through the doors, bringing back reports of their own. However, the last scout didn't return, even after Jean and the rest of the fort's leadership waited until almost sunrise.

"Where is he?!" Jean demanded in frustration.

"He's gotten captured," said the filthy supply officer that Leon first met when he arrived.

"... Paul's right, Sir, I don't think we're going to see Victor again..." one of the fourth-tier mages hesitantly agreed.

Jean grit his teeth, then said, "I guess there's no helping it, then. Everyone, to my office! We need to plan and compile your reports!"

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"AAAGHH!" the missing scout screamed in pain. His arms were tied to a pair of wooden stakes that kept him propped upright while a Valeman slowly made his way up the scout's leg, breaking a bone with a war hammer every time the scout refused to answer a question.

"How many of you are there?!" the Valeman demanded.

The scout clenched his teeth and growled through gasps of pain, "You'll... get nothing... from me... barbarian!"

"Won't I?" asked the Valeman as he raised his hammer, waited a moment for the scout to change his mind, then brought it down with a sickening crunch on the scout's right thigh. "Well that makes every bone in your right leg broken," the Valeman said. "Color me impressed. I suppose we're just going to have to move on to your left..."

The screams of pain and defiance from the scout continued for half an hour, drawing a large crowd of jeering Valemen. Many threw rocks, which knocked loose a few teeth and left the scout's face bloody and bruised. A couple drunk Valemen even came forward to urinate on the scout's head.

When the Valeman torturing the scout had made it to the scout's right arm, the crowd of spectators had grown to almost a thousand. They cheered with every crack and crunch that came from the scout and laughed at every cry of pain.

The Valeman with the hammer raised it again after another spit of defiance from the scout, but right before he was about to bring it down on the scout's hand, he noticed something odd: the crowd in the back seemed to be parting. Obviously, someone important was coming.

'About time,' the Valeman thought, *'I sent a messenger over an hour ago, but only now is a thane coming!'*

However, the Valeman was wrong. It wasn't a thane on his way, but Hakon Fire-Beard himself. The crowd split, and Hakon stepped forward, laying his cold blue eyes on the scout, then on the torturer. The torturer understood what Hakon wanted with that one glance, and he lowered the hammer and stepped back a respectful distance; he was only of the third-tier and didn't have high enough status to speak with the great chief.

Hakon approached the scout, who was slumped over against the stakes he was tied to, almost unconscious. Hakon grabbed the man's hair, wrenched his head up to look him in the eye, then said, "If you answer my questions, I'll end your suffering."

The scout glared back at Hakon, but he didn't have the will to say a single word of opposition.

"I'm looking for a man, probably third-tier, with black armor. Who is he? What is his name?" Hakon demanded to know.

The scout kept his silence.

"How strong is the commander of your people?"

Again, the scout remained quiet.

"How many of your people are cowering behind your wall?"

The scout glared back at Hakon, and no words fell from his lips.

Hakon gave a stoic grunt, then stood back up. He turned around and walked back to the edge of the crowd. There, he stopped and simply said, "Burn him," before returning to his own camp.

Many of the watching Valemens surged forward, grabbing leaves, twigs, and bits of wood, while others started to hack at the surrounding trees for branches. These flammable things were piled up at the scout's feet, and once there was a small pile, a Valeman ran to the nearest campfire with a leafy tree branch. As the scout watched the Valeman return with the flaming branch, he couldn't help but widen his eyes in terror.

But, he didn't make a sound. He faced the Valemens around him with as much stoicism as he could manage with his broken legs, and waited for the moment when he wouldn't feel any more pain.

—

"We have to attack them first, before they have a chance to attack us first!" argued one of the fourth-tier mages in Jean's cabin.

"That's suicide! Our reinforcements from the local barons haven't even arrived yet, and you want our *five hundred* soldiers to attack a force of over *fifteen thousand*?!" shouted back the other fourth-tier mage.

"They won't expect it, and we can catch them off-guard! With their lacking discipline, it should be easy to chase them off with only a few casualties!" shouted the former fourth-tier mage.

"I agree with Arrius," said a third-tier mage. "Although, I don't think we should be attacking head-on; rather, we should wait to attack them tomorrow night. I don't think they'll be quite ready by then, and we should get in some good hits before retreating back to the wall."

"That still leaves us open and vulnerable at a time when we don't even have enough men to guard the wall!" shouted the second fourth-tier mage.

"We're getting a little heated here," Jean said, trying to soothe the debaters a little, "let's bring the intensity down some. We're all friends here, and we don't need division in our ranks right now."

As he said this, Abel, a respected older third-tier mage who had been at the fort longer than anyone else, spoke up. "I, too, agree with Arrius. If the Valemens attack us, we're going to lose the wall. That's guaranteed. If we attack them, however, we *might* be able to swing the upcoming battle in our favor. It's a long shot, but it's better than a guaranteed defeat."

"But our focus is only to defend for as long as we can! If the wall is breached, then we can fall back and rendezvous with the Legions when the Consul gets here! Attacking will only serve to get our men killed, when their duty is only to defend the wall!"

"Edmond, I think you've made your case," Jean said. "Ultimately, the decision lies with me. We will do whatever I say..."

Everyone in the room watched Jean with bated breath—even Leon, as he knew that whatever was decided, as a third-tier mage he'd be right in the middle of it.

"We... will attack them. Tomorrow night," Jean said. Most of the men around the table had been convinced by Arrius and Gaston—the third fourth-tier mage—that attacking was a better alternative to simply waiting for the Valemens to come to them.

“We won’t kill enough of them to make them retreat,” warned Edmond. “All this will accomplish is to provoke them to attack us earlier than they were already planning to! It will hasten our defeat and our deaths when we should only be trying to prolong this!”

“That’s what we’re doing, Edmond,” said Gaston. “We must take the initiative, especially since we don’t know when they’re going to attack us. As you said, they’re guaranteed to attack us, and we’re probably going to lose that fight. We just don’t have the numbers. To hunker down here is to accept defeat.”

“Enough! I’ve made my decision!” Jean said forcefully. “*Moving on*, we need to find a way to deal with the werewolf Ursus saw. That monster might just be more dangerous than Hakon himself; the last thing we need right now is an outbreak of lycanthropy.”

“That assumes the information that the barbarian brought back is trustworthy...” a third-tier mage muttered.

Leon glared at the man, but he didn’t say a word. He just turned his gaze back to Jean, who was also glaring at the soldier.

“Say something like that again. *I dare you...*” Jean challenged menacingly. The man, who had been staring arrogantly at Leon suddenly turned sheepish and quiet. “We have tens of thousands of Valemén on our doorstep!” Jean continued, speaking to the entire room. “This is not the time for disunity! If I hear anyone disparage *any* of our officers here, I will personally throw you from the top of the wall and laugh as the Valemén burns you alive!”

The room was quiet in the wake of Jean’s threat.

“I’ll take that to mean that everyone understands. I’ll be *most aggrieved* if anyone doesn’t. Now, let’s get to the specifics of our attack. How are we going to do this? I’m open to suggestions...”

—

The Valemén were quiet the next day. They didn’t respond to the capture of the scout during the night, which Jean believed meant one of two things: either they were still waiting for more Valemén to arrive, or they were waiting for night to fall.

In the morning, there was a steady stream into the fort of about two hundred men, warriors in service of the local barons that were led by about a dozen knights, and taking up positions upon the wall. There wasn’t much conflict between them and the Legion soldiers, as most of the soldiers were locals and their spirits were lifted by quite a bit to see some reinforcements, even if the number was fairly limited.

Leon and Alix trained in the lower rooms of their assigned tower all day, alternating between sparring with swords and meditating. Just as he’d done with Charles, Leon passed on some tips and tricks that he’d been taught by Artorias. These weren’t anything special, no more really than what Alix would’ve learned if she had attended the Knight Academy, but she still started to make much faster progress toward the second-tier than she had when studying under Sam. These techniques, which had been passed down by some of the most powerful noble families in the entire kingdom, were far superior to what little wisdom she could’ve ever gleaned from Sam’s own insights into magic.

For his part, Leon could feel himself on the edge of the fourth-tier. He couldn’t say exactly when he might ascend—though he knew it wouldn’t be in time to help with the current crisis—but he felt it

would be within a month, maybe a month and a half. He was able to make that estimation because his brain had been adapting to magic so well, increasing his control of and sensitivity toward magic.

The two ended the day with a nap and more meditation, so that they could be ready for the night operations. They weren't needed to man the tower, only to be there in case of an attack, which gave them all the free time they needed to train and rest.

"Are you ready for this?" Leon asked Alix as they prepared to leave the tower.

"I'm ready," she answered with a determined look. "I want to push those Valemen back, to avenge my uncle and to make sure they don't cause those who live in this region the same pain!"

Leon didn't quite buy her resolute demeanor, so he said, "If you're not ready to kill, that's all right. I just... I'd rather you not have to suffer through losing an entire squad again."

"That's appreciated," she responded, without a hint of resentment or confrontation at Leon's seeming lack of confidence in her. "I'll be fine."

"Meaning you're not fine now?" Leon inquired.

Alix's face froze, and it took her a few moments to respond. "I'll be fine," she repeated.

"... Can you tell me, honestly, that you can do this?" Leon asked.

"Yes," Alix said without hesitation.

Leon stared at her for a few seconds, then said, "... Well, good enough, I suppose. Let's go."

Leon thought he could sense a hint of killing intent in her aura. And that made him smile; it assured him that she was ready to kill, at least.

The two met up with three hundred Legion soldiers near the doors, who were armed with spears and bows, while Leon was also packing a few spells he'd prepared. Jean and the other three fourth-tier mages were there as well, ready to lead the soldiers out into the pass and kill some Valemen. They, and the eight third-tier mages who took on lesser leadership roles, had already briefed the soldiers on their jobs, and now, it was the time to execute their mission.

Chapter 149: Delaying Action II

Leon, Alix, and three hundred other Legion soldiers went over the wall and charged into the forest. They were being led by Jean and the other three fourth-tier mages. Not counting Leon, there were eight third-tier mages leading the force as well.

In contrast to these mages, however, Leon wasn't assigned any leadership role. Jean may have told Leon upon his return to the wall that he needed every leader he could get his hands on, but in practice, he seemed to be reluctant to allow a Valeman to lead his soldiers. Or maybe those soldiers didn't want to be led by a Valeman and Jean was simply preventing any problems that may present themselves with Leon in charge of a couple squads.

Leon honestly didn't care which it was, as it meant that no one was going to tell them what to do, to an extent—Jean and the fourth-tier mages could still do so, but they were attacking different camps than

Leon. Instead, Leon and Alix accompanied a group of about fifty soldiers toward one of the larger camps. They were armed with bows, though Alix hadn't much training in that area, and were ready to inflict some damage on the Valemén.

The opportunity to do so came early, as the soldiers in front of them spotted a few Valemén about a hundred feet from them. The soldiers were marching in a rough line three men deep, so word was quickly spread, and the soldiers rapidly shot the Valemén dead before any alarm could be raised. There were a couple more encounters that went similarly, and none of them held the soldiers back for long. Less than half an hour after leaving the wall, Leon, Alix, and the rest of their group found themselves looking down at their target camp from a small hill.

"You're up, let's see what you can do," the third-tier mage leading the rest of the soldiers muttered to Leon.

Leon smiled back, reached into his satchel, and pulled out a small stack of several dozen sheets of spell paper. "Pass these out," he said. These were all fire spells. The soldiers only had to tie them to their arrows, activate them, and then shoot them into the camp. A few more volleys with regular arrows would be their follow-up, but the fire spells would do the bulk of their damage.

The third-tier mage started passing out the papers to the best archers present. Naturally, Leon kept one of them, and he gave one of the spells to Alix.

"I'm not good with bows," she said, trying to hand the spell back to Leon.

"You don't need pinpoint accuracy," Leon said, pushing the spell back into her hands. "All you need to do is get it into the enemy camp."

Alix sighed, then nodded. "... I can do that much," she muttered.

The two of them quickly wrapped the spells around the shaft of the arrows they planned to shoot, then tied the spells to keep them secured.

"Everyone ready?" the group leader asked quietly. He glanced around at the fifty soldiers with him, none of whom said they weren't. "Good," he whispered. "Then nock your arrows and prepare to fire!"

"And don't hit the trees!" said another third-tier mage who was essentially acting as second-in-command.

"Aim for the largest tents and any piles of boxes or barrels you see," Leon added.

"Draw," the leader whispered, and the soldiers drew their bowstrings back to their cheeks.

"Loose!" the leader said, and fifty arrows were launched toward the Valemén camp. It was large enough that from their hill, the soldiers could see dozens of tents, with even more deeper in the forest. Each likely held half a dozen or more Valemén, judging by their size.

Alix fired her arrow as well, while Leon had to prepare himself a little with his shot; he was still using the same bow he'd bought back in the capital, and like his armor, he hadn't gotten around to enchanting it yet. The other soldiers were using bows given to them by the Legion, which were lightly enchanted. This made up for the strength difference between most of the soldiers and Leon, allowing all of them to have similar range.

Leon only delayed a second before firing his own arrow. It sped through the air toward the largest tent he was confident he could hit. A second later, the camp was rocked with dozens of explosions, and illuminated with bright white fire. Tents went up in flames, as did the Valemén sleeping within. There were dozens of Valemén still up and spending time around the campfires, but many of them were hit by arrows from the soldiers who didn't have the fire spells, though few of the hits were fatal.

Leon's arrow hit its mark. Leon chose his target due to the size of the tent and the strength of the Valemén that surrounded it. He guessed that it held the supplies for the Valemén in the camp, and he couldn't help but smile as it was burned to the ground. Unlike the last time he used these fire spells, which was to burn the supplies of the allied trainees back in the Knight Academy, these spells weren't designed to contain the fire. The tents burned, with white fire starting normal orange fires that the Valemén scrambled to extinguish.

But, only a few of the Valemén tried to tend to the fires; the rest had grabbed their weapons and began running out into the trees, searching for their attackers. Many of these Valemén were felled by the next volley of arrows fired from the soldiers, but again, few of these injuries were fatal.

"Fall back!" the leader said once the soldiers fired their third volley.

"Come on, we can stay and kill a few more, can't we?" one of the second-tier soldiers asked.

"No! If we stay, we'll be killed by all those Valemén! Better to leave now and be satisfied with the damage we've already done!" the leader replied. His words made the rest of the soldiers give the camp another look, and they saw that they had really kicked the beehive, and now hundreds of Valemén were streaming out of their tents to help with the fires and to find the soldiers.

"Staying here to fight would be tantamount to suicide," the other third-tier mage said, backing up the leader. There were no more arguments after that, and the soldiers melted back into the darkness of the trees. They rapidly moved back south, stopping only to kill one more group of four Valemén they encountered along the way.

"There! We're almost back!" the leader said once the wall came back into sight.

"Get moving!" the other third-tier mage said, hurrying the men along and keeping them from getting complacent at this last leg.

And it was good that he did so, since just as all fifty soldiers had left the trees, another dark shape emerged barely a quarter mile from them and started barreling towards them at an alarming speed. Most of the soldiers were too busy running for the doors in the wall to see it, but Leon noticed it just in time.

"Valeman on our right!" he shouted while slowing down and preparing an arrow. But, before he could fire, the dark shape was upon them, ripping through one of the soldiers with its right hand and sending Leon flying over a dozen feet with its left. Had Leon not been wearing his armor, he suspected he would've been torn in half, like the other unfortunate soldier.

The shape didn't stop there; it slammed straight into three more soldiers and killed them almost immediately. As Leon struggled to his feet, he took a moment to get a good look at it. It was enormous,

covered in thick black hair, had an extreme hunchback, and its body's proportions were all wrong, being considerably top heavy.

It was the fourth-tier Valeman werewolf he'd seen the previous night. It snarled and growled and lunged forward, striking with its sharp claws at the nearest soldier, who was so terrified that he'd stopped running.

"NOT SO FUCKING FAST!" the third-tier leader shouted as he stabbed at the beast's outstretched claw with his spear. The force of the claw and spear connecting was tremendous, as it shattered the spear and knocked the leader backward. But, it had also thrown back the werewolf—though not as far as the leader had been—and saved the soldier from death.

Leon drew his sword and charged at the back of the werewolf. Its attention was on the leader, as the soldier it was originally targeting had taken the opportunity to get moving again. The soldier understood that he wouldn't be any help in this fight, so he retreated as fast as he could.

Leon's sword sank into the werewolf's flesh, but not nearly as deeply as Leon expected it to. The werewolf's skin wasn't particularly thick, but its freakishly big muscles in its back were like steel, and Leon's sword barely drew blood. But, the beast still felt the strike, and twisted on its stumpy legs. Leon was thrown off its back and sent flying again, but he was able to use the momentum to roll and spring back to his feet almost immediately.

While the werewolf was reacting to Leon, the leader struck again, targeting the beast's legs with his freshly-drawn dagger. He slashed at the heel tendon, but just like with Leon, the muscle proved too thick to cut, though he still managed to draw a little blood.

With another swipe of the beast's claws, the leader was thrown back with deep gashes in his chest. Leon barely had time to process the potential fallout from that, as he was too busy lunging forward again; his fighting style relied almost exclusively on attacking, so he could ill-afford to remain on defense even if he were fighting an enemy of comparable power to him.

Unfortunately, like his last attack, Leon's slash failed to penetrate the beast's armor-like muscles, but he struck at the werewolf's exposed flank and drew significantly more blood than he had before. In fact, though Leon didn't slice through the beast's muscles, the werewolf still yelped in pain and slammed its claw into Leon's chest again. Fortunately, Leon's armor wasn't penetrated, but he was still thrown back again.

"... You..." the beast growled through its garbled snout, "... you are... the one that... killed Eirik?"

Leon had no intention of replying, but he also didn't know what he could do in this situation. He didn't want to rely too heavily upon Xaphan's fire, especially in a place that could be so easily seen by the soldiers on the wall, but he didn't feel like he had much choice. He started to call upon the demonfire and felt the familiar feeling of being burned from the inside.

The werewolf had waited a moment for Leon's answer, and when no answer came, it snarled and leaped forward with its claws outstretched, ready to cleave straight through Leon. However, before it closed the distance and before Leon could raise his left arm, a hail of arrows rained down upon the werewolf.

Leon glanced over and saw the last third-tier mage, Alix, and about two dozen of the soldiers about a hundred feet away, continuously firing arrows at the werewolf. Their fire was supplemented by the arrow fire from a dozen more soldiers from the nearest tower and a few more along the wall. This amount of force stopped the werewolf's charge cold.

"Come on!" the third-tier soldier shouted to Leon, beckoning him to run to the wall.

Leon took off sprinting for the wall. He didn't stop for the dead men as they were close enough to the wall that they could be retrieved once the werewolf had been killed or chased off.

"You're not leaving!" the werewolf shouted as it lunged at Leon again, but the arrows that pelted its body didn't let up. None were causing serious damage, but all those that hit its skin tore it open and drew blood, not to mention blunting its charge. Leon managed to scramble away, but the werewolf ignored its mounting injuries and pursued. It quickly closed the gap between itself and Leon, then extended its claws to try and tear through Leon's midsection...

... and hit a sword.

"Not a fuckin' chance, monster!" shouted Edmond, one of the fort's fourth-tier soldiers. He stood between Leon and the werewolf, his sword raised and blocking the werewolf's razor-sharp claws.

"Animals like you should be killed on sight!" added Gaston, another fourth-tier soldier, as he appeared from behind the werewolf and struck into its back with his sword. He wasn't able to drive his sword any deeper than Leon had, but he leaned forward and put all of his weight on the hilt, slowly driving the blade further into the werewolf's back.

The werewolf howled in pain, but just as it was about to shake Gaston off its back, another soldier appeared: Jean. These three fourth-tier soldiers had finished their attacks and returned to the fort before Leon, and they had come running as soon as they saw the attack take place.

"Creatures that feast on men are lower than dirt," Jean said as he slashed at the werewolf's heels. Unlike when the third-tier mage leading Leon's did the same, Jean's sword managed to cut through the beast's thick muscles and cripple its legs. The werewolf fell to the ground with a tremendous crash.

But, it wasn't done. It swiped at Edmond to its front, knocking the fourth-tier mage back, then shook its back and threw off Gaston. But just, as it was about to try and turn itself to face Jean, Leon and the remaining third-tier mage of his group sprinted forward and went for its throat and eyes, respectively. The third-tier mage sank his dagger deep into the beast's left eye, while Leon's sword slashed its throat open.

The five men then jumped back, while the werewolf slumped over with a quiet gurgle.

"Shoot this monster!" Jean shouted, and dozens of arrows fell upon it from the watching soldiers. Without mana supplying magic to its muscles, the arrows sank deep into the werewolf's flesh. The beast twitched and struggled a couple more times, but then it ceased to move.

"AGAIN!" Jean bellowed, and the beast was pelted with more arrows.

"Grab our men and get back south of the wall!" Edmond shouted to Leon's group of soldiers—specifically, he shouted at those who weren't shooting at the werewolf. These men surged forward and

grabbed the men who had already been killed by the werewolf, as well as their leader, who was still breathing but had two massive gashes in his chest that were leaking blood at an alarming rate. Then, everyone beat feet and sprinted for the wall.

The strongest mages took the casualties and jumped right up the wall, alongside the unencumbered second-tier mages, though the latter had to get some help from those already on the wall. The first-tier soldiers, however, had to have a number of rope ladders lowered to them, something which the men on the wall would never have done if three of the fourth-tier mages weren't present.

But, in minutes, all fifty of Leon's group had made it over the wall. The werewolf was left there lying motionless in the dirt, surrounded by bloody grass and a couple hundred arrows sticking up from the ground.

Chapter 150: Ulfr

Hakon's camp was in chaos. He had sent his thanes out to restore order among the war party when the attacks began, but there were still third-tier warriors coming and going constantly as the fires were put out and the dead were counted.

But, finally, after two hours of getting what passed for coordination among the Valemén reestablished, the camp quieted down and Hakon's thanes returned. They immediately made for Hakon's tent, which was easily the largest tent in the entire war party and decorated with small silver statues and black silkgrass banners depicting Thunderbirds. In the center of the tent was another banner, with a black mountain beneath the pale blue sky, representing the Mountain Father and the Sky Mother.

"So, in total, our losses appear to be seven hundred and three dead, and one thousand three hundred and sixteen injured," Hakon's white-haired thane reported.

"Horned Serpents take those father-less bastards!" Hakon muttered bitterly. "Sometimes I wish I weren't Chief of our tribe, so I could pursue our enemy myself! Waiting here and yelling at worthless third-tier jackasses who don't know how to put out a damned fire isn't nearly so fun as running through the woods with an ax in hand!"

"Speaking of fires," the white-haired thane said, paying no mind to Hakon's frustrated ramblings, "the Black-Valley Tribe's camp was the worst hit. Over fifty tents were burned, along with all of their occupants. Their supplies were also burned, so if we don't get them some food by tomorrow morning, then we're going to have four thousand angry warriors stirring up trouble."

"I'll leave it to you, Hrorekr," Hakon said to the white-haired thane.

"Just pushing your duties onto me, huh?" Hrorekr said with a playful smile.

"I doubt anyone will make any trouble if you tell them to give up some food. Especially since I ordered it..." Hakon stated, glaring at the dozens of third-tier warriors who surrounded him and his thanes. Those warriors who were representatives of subordinate tribes scowled, but none of them had the guts to go against Hakon's order and deny the Black-Valley Tribe food.

"Moving on, where's Ulfr? I sent him to hunt down as many Southern bastards as he could find, but he hasn't returned. Haven't all of those dogs returned back south with their tails between their legs, or is he still out tracking?" Hakon asked, looking at his five remaining thanes.

“He’s... still not back yet,” answered one thane, a man of average stature and looks. He had a round face, light brown hair, and brown eyes. In fact, apart from his relatively young age and fourth-tier aura, there wasn’t anything particularly notable about the thane judging by appearance alone.

“Well then where is he?!” Hakon demanded.

“None of us are sure, it’s not like he keeps us informed of where he goes,” Hrorekr said with a shrug.

Hakon frowned and went quiet for a moment. Ulfr may be a werewolf, but he was still one of his most trusted thanes. Hakon would’ve been perfectly comfortable with placing his life in Ulfr’s hands, so the fact that he wasn’t back yet despite the attack being over for more than an hour gave him a bad feeling.

“Hjalmar,” Hakon began, directing his next order to the average-looking thane, “I want you to get some people together and find Ulfr. I’m sure he’s fine, but I want to make sure...”

“Of course!” Hjalmar said, rising immediately and gesturing to a handful of the third-tier warriors behind him. His group left the tent to begin their search.

“Now, then,” Hakon continued, “What are we looking at? Is the war party ready for an attack?”

“Despite the losses we just suffered, yes we are,” Hrorekr said. “All twenty-seven thousand warriors have assembled—less our casualties, of course—and will be ready to assault that wall tomorrow night!”

“Good! Make sure everyone gets their rest today!” Hakon shouted. “And get some damned lookouts! We can’t allow a repeat of what just happened before we get our own attack underway!”

The warriors heard their chief’s orders and left his tent to get the parts of the war party they were responsible for ready. The following night would be long, but glorious. Every warrior that followed Hakon south knew that this was their chance to be part of a legend that every Valeman would know of for generations to come.

—

“Bring some bandages to the first-aid tent!” Jean shouted as he, Leon, and the rest of the men carried their casualties over the wall. Most of them were dead, but the third-tier mage who led Leon’s group was still breathing. Unfortunately, the blood seeping from his wounds had started to bubble, showing that air was leaking into his chest.

“MOVE!” Edmond yelled, getting the men on the wall out of their way as he carried the third-tier mage down off the wall, closely followed by Jean and Gaston.

For a moment, Leon was going to let them go and tend to the wounded soldier themselves, but Alix walked up to him and said, “Aren’t you going to help?!”

Leon gave her a strange look and said, “Wasn’t planning on it. Why?”

“This fort lacks healing spells! That man’s going to die without them!”

Leon’s eyes narrowed in annoyance. He had made some healing spells, which Alix knew about, but he thought that the fort simply didn’t have many such spells. He figured that what few they had would be taken out for the third-tier mage, and that he didn’t need to bother.

But, under Alix's accusatory gaze, he nodded and sped off after Jean and the others without another word. They moved quickly once off the wall, and Leon didn't catch up to them until they were already in the first-aid tent, trying to bandage up the man's wounds and prevent more air from deflating his lungs.

"If we can bandage the wound, he might make it!" one of the medics said to Jean. "His own natural healing abilities from being a third-tier mage *should* be enough to help him live through the night, and if he can do that, he'll make a full recovery."

"But it's not just the chest wound that's the problem," Jean informed, "those wounds were made by a werewolf's claws. If Hugh's contracted lycanthropy, then he'll probably die from the wounds."

The medic frowned. "We don't have the supplies to treat lycanthropy here..." he said helplessly.

Jean was about to shout in frustration and disbelief, but he knew the supply situation of the fort better than anyone. That they could help Hugh with what their paltry medical staff had available was a fool's hope.

"Keep an eye on him," Jean said. "If his condition worsens..."

"Sir!" interrupted one of the other handful of medics. "We just received some healing spells!"

The medic speaking with Jean immediately turned and ran over to the other medic who had just spoke. Leon had just handed him a small stack of about ten healing spells, and both medics closely scrutinized them.

"You made these?" the lead medic inquired.

Leon quietly nodded.

The two medics glanced at each other, whispered a few words, then raced over to Hugh's side. They both pressed a pair of healing spells onto Hugh's chest, and the spells sparkled with golden light showing that they were working.

"We might be able to save him with these," the lead medic mused.

Everyone was so preoccupied with Hugh's treatment that no one noticed Leon slip out of the tent, despite being responsible for the healing spells. There simply wasn't anything more he could do, so he left.

He made his way back to his assigned tower, where he found Alix waiting for him, though he made a quick detour to their original tent first to grab his books, enchanting supplies, and some of his clothes. If he was going to be stuck in the tower during the day, then he wanted to at least get some work done. He wrapped everything up in his white snow lion coat and returned to the tower.

"Did you give them the healing spells?" she asked.

"I did," he answered.

Alix's face broke out into a radiant smile. "Good!" she said. "Sir Hugh and Sam were friends. He's a good man, and I didn't want to see him die..."

"He may still die," Leon said bluntly. "They're treating him now, but that doesn't mean he'll live."

Alix's smile quickly disappeared, replaced with a worried expression, and Leon quickly regretted his choice of words.

"... I'm sure he'll be fine," Leon said. "The medics were hopeful and had already gotten to work when I left..."

Alix grimly smiled at him, but she didn't speak. An awkward silence followed, during which the two sat down on a pair of cots they'd moved from their tent to the tower.

"You should get some sleep," Leon said. "Or train if you can't sleep. No use sitting up worrying over something that you can't change..."

"I suppose..." she muttered. She then sat up to meditate and help herself relax from the night of tension and violence.

After a few seconds, Leon added, "... And thanks for staying. I mean you shooting arrows at that werewolf. I know you said you weren't that good with bows, so I do appreciate you not being like those other guys who just ran away..."

"You helped me get back to the wall after my uncle's death," she responded matter-of-factly. "I wasn't going to leave you behind like that."

The two stared at each other for a moment, then Leon nodded and let her get back to her meditation. She wasn't quite used to violence and needed to meditate to wind down, but he was already starting to relax. In mere minutes, he had already nodded off to sleep.

—

"He's dead?!" Hakon asked in a disbelieving tone.

"That's what I was told," Hjalmar responded. He was pale and out of breath, a strange sight to see for a fourth-tier mage, but he had sprinted back to Hakon's camp as soon as he heard Ulfr's fate.

"What happened?!" Hakon demanded.

"From what we can tell, he pursued a group of Southerners all the way back to their wall but was then killed by the archers in the nearest tower," Hjalmar responded. "I was even told that they left his body there, to rot!"

"Show me!" Hakon shouted. Hjalmar turned around and ran out of the tent with Hakon right behind him. They blitzed through the trees and arrived within sight of the wall in minutes.

"He's there..." Hjalmar said, pointing to a large dark shape lying several hundred feet past the tree line. It had been clearly shot by dozens of arrows, and there were hundreds more still sticking up out of the ground all around it.

"Ulfr..." Hakon whispered in grief. He was far away, and it was dark, but he could still recognize his friend. There were about a dozen other Valemén around, so he couldn't express his grief; instead, he channeled those feelings into anger, and his killing intent drove the other Valemén around him to their knees.

“Those Southerners will die tomorrow night,” Hakon whispered. “Alert the camps! I don’t give a single fuck if we’re still waiting on a few small groups to arrive! We attack that wall tomorrow! And we will burn everyone within to raise the souls of our dead!”

With that said, Hakon reined in his aura, allowing the surrounding Valemén to rise back to their feet.

“We need to get his body,” Hjalmar said. “We have to lay him to rest...”

“I’ll get it,” Hakon stated. Then, with barely any time for his thane to register what he said, Hakon burst out of the trees and sprinted for Ulfr’s body.

“Wait!” Hjalmar shouted, but he was far too late. He swore under his breath, then charged out after his chief.

Just as Hakon reached Ulfr’s body, he heard the sound of a horn coming from the nearest tower on the wall, and Hjalmar reached him less than a second after.

“They’ve seen us,” Hjalmar said.

“You’ve a splendid grasp of the obvious,” Hakon growled. “Help me with Ulfr, he’s fuckin’ heavy!”

The two powerful Valemén each grabbed one of the werewolf’s enormous arms and pulled. They started dragging him across the open space between the wall and the tree line, while all around them, arrows began to fall.

—

“What happened?!” Jean demanded as he arrived at the wall.

“Valemén, Sir!” answered the nearest knight. Jean recognized the man as one of the knights sent by the local Barons.

Jean glanced over the wall and saw two men hauling the corpse of the werewolf back to the trees, while the first volley from the archers fell all around them. There were only about fifteen archers, and they had all arrived at the wall that morning. Thus, they needed that first volley to gauge the range they were firing at; none of them expected to hit their targets with their first volley, but their second volley would be aiming to kill.

“Draw!” commanded the knight, and the archers drew back another shot.

‘That’s Hakon Fire-Beard!’ Jean thought to himself as he stared at the two men. One of them he could tell was a fourth-tier mage, but it was the man whose aura he couldn’t see through that drew his attention. There was only one man who could possibly have such a strong aura that Jean couldn’t see through it, and the blood-red beard Jean could see from the wall only confirmed his suspicions.

“Take your time and aim carefully!” Jean told the archers. “That’s the leader of the Valemén down there! I will personally reward all of you if you can bring him down!”

—

Hakon and Hjalmar kept dragging Ulfr's corpse across the ground. The werewolf was incredibly heavy, and even those two were having a hard time maintaining any kind of speed. Then, to compound their problems, more arrows fell around them, with a few even lodging themselves in Ulfr.

Hakon growled in anger and frustration, but there wasn't anything he could do except keep dragging Ulfr and hope to not get shot. Well, he could always drop Ulfr, but if he was willing to do that he never would've run out into the line of fire to begin with.

"Almost there!" Hjalmar shouted as they passed a few trees. The arrow fire thinned out, but just before they reached safety, an arrow pierced Hjalmar's thigh.

"Keep going!" Hakon shouted, and Hjalmar fought through the pain and kept dragging his fallen friend.

Fortunately for them, no more arrows found their marks, and they reached the safety of the trees.

"Are you ok?" Hakon asked Hjalmar when the arrows stopped and the other Valemens rushed out to keep dragging Ulfr.

"I'll live," Hjalmar said as he pulled the arrow out of his leg. "Barely even a flesh wound," he said with a smile.

"Still, make sure to get it bandaged up," Hakon said worriedly. "Too many of my friends have died these past few days, I'm not adding you to that list!"

"Right!" Hjalmar said with a smile.

The two had lost many friends before, so while they mourned for Eirik and Ulfr, they didn't slow down. But, they kept that grief and anger in the back of their minds, and with a last, hateful look at the wall, the two Valemens returned to the central camp, with Ulfr's body in tow.