

Storm King 81

Chapter 81: Capital's Tower Lord

Elise didn't have any plans for the Saturday following the second week since Leon entered the Knight Academy. She hadn't acted as an official attendant since returning to the capital, so she found that her days could be difficult to fill. Every day, she would wake up relatively late and start her day with a few hours of magical training.

Her training did not include any form of combat training, as she felt there was little need for it in her position. Her magical training was spent almost exclusively dancing and exercising in a private courtyard in her mother's estate that was filled with exotic trees, plants, and carved obelisks that raised the density of magic in the area to more than five times the normal level for the capital.

This training was paying off; she could feel herself growing in magical power at a rate that left her certain she could ascend to the third-tier in less than a year. She used to slack off in her training before moving to Teira which left her far behind her younger third-tier friends. After meeting Leon, though, she never slacked off again. She immediately started training in earnest after coming home.

Leon's influence wasn't the only reason she continued though; she found herself getting hooked on the physical aspects of magic training as she relished the feeling she had when she was finished. Her limbs were tired and sweaty, but her body was always filled with magic power. After resting with a long bath, the abundance of magic power in her body would fill her with energy and give her an almost euphoric feeling.

Elise's routine wasn't any different on that Saturday.

After a very late breakfast, she found herself sliding into boredom. She had met up with Valeria and Asiya the week before, so she knew they planned to stay at the Knight Academy over the weekend. This didn't leave her with many options to alleviate her boredom. For a moment, she contemplated heading over to the Heaven's Eye Tower, but that would involve dressing in fancier clothes and otherwise preparing herself to look like the daughter of the Tower Lord, a process she had no interest in undergoing at that time.

After a quarter of an hour, she decided to read for a while. She moseyed around the estate's library and settled into a chaise lounge in an adjacent room with her chosen book, a tragic romance novel about a pair of knights who were raised together, only to find themselves on the opposite sides of a civil war. The male knight's side lost the war and the lady knight rebelled against her king after he ordered her lover to be executed. The two were mortally wounded trying to escape and died in each other's arms.

Elise adored this novel, turning to it and other works by the same author whenever her mother got too pushy in her insistence that Elise find herself a husband or two.

She wasn't going to spend her time in peace, though, as she had barely been reading for twenty minutes when she heard the sound of approaching footsteps. She couldn't help but frown because it sounded like at least four or five people were coming.

"Elise, darling! There you are! I've been looking for you everywhere!" A woman with hair as bright red as fire walked into the reading room, accompanied by four men with highly varying appearances.

One was tall and lean and possessed a proud and noble bearing; obviously, he was a lower to mid-ranked noble.

The second man seemed to be of common birth; he had a healthy tan and a fit body, but he was of average height and did not enjoy the first man's commanding presence.

The third man was a foreigner from the Samar Kingdom to the south; bronze skin, staggeringly tall, and built like a millennium-old heartwood tree.

The last man could barely be called a man; he appeared just old enough to be considered an adult. He was short, lithe, and had a round and smooth baby-face. He kept looking around timidly as if he didn't feel like he belonged in this lavish estate.

"Mother..." replied Elise with little enthusiasm, looking to the stunningly gorgeous red-haired woman who led the group. She gave a slight nod to the noble in the group but completely ignored the other three. She didn't even get up from her seat, turning her eyes back to her book instead in an obvious attempt to ignore the newcomers.

"Oh my, that's certainly a warm welcome, isn't it?" responded the red-haired woman with a smile and good-natured sarcasm. She walked right over to Elise and took a seat directly across the table from her. She sat there and stared at her daughter until Elise was forced to sigh and turn away from her book.

"So, what brings you here?" she asked.

"Do I need a reason to want to spend time with my only daughter?" the red-haired woman responded with a mock-hurt expression that Elise easily saw through.

"No, but I doubt you'd bring your newest toys if you just wanted to spend time with me," said Elise while briefly glancing at the four men who were respectfully waiting at a nearby cluster of chairs and tables.

"I just want them to get to know you, as well as the estate," the red-haired woman said with a look of complete sincerity.

"Sure, you do. Trying to persuade me to find some 'toys' of my own by parading yours in front of me surely isn't what you were doing, right?" asked Elise with a sly look. Her mother's face froze for a split second, then immediately turned into a smile of her own.

"Of course, that wasn't my intention! But, now that you mentioned finding yourself a toy, I did see that pile of gifts that were sent to you by... what was his name? That son of a Duke from the Western Territories?"

"Tiberias," answered Elise with a slightly insulted look.

"Right! He's a handsome enough boy, wealthy family, noble heritage. If you want, I could have him made your first husband in an instant! Or even make him your concubine if you prefer!" The red-haired woman started working herself up out of excitement, so much so that she didn't even notice Elise sigh and slightly roll her eyes.

"I've told you before, Mother, I don't need your help!"

The red-haired woman frowned. She was about to say something more when a young man entered the room.

He bowed to the red-haired woman with a "My Lady," then turned to Elise. "Young Lady, that young man you instructed us to watch for has just entered the Tower."

Elise's immediate reaction was to smile and jump to her feet, only to freeze when she looked at her extremely pleasantly surprised mother.

"Oh? Who is this young man you've been watching? Tell me, I need the details!"

The red-haired woman's face was nearly split in half with her smile and her eyes were as wide as they could get in expectation. But, she didn't get anything out of her daughter.

Elise hurried out of the reading room and made for her changing rooms with her mother following close behind. Elise wasn't nearly as put together as she usually was when she spent time in the Tower, so she needed a few minutes to change and get ready.

'Can't do much with my hair, I'm going to have to go with something simple. Same with my clothes... Ahhh, why didn't I go to the Tower today?!'

She pulled her hair into a simple loose ponytail but left enough to leave her face well-framed. The clothes she wore were exceptionally thin and did little to hide her body despite not showing much skin, so she decided to change into something a little more formal that would only show what she wanted to show. However, most of her formal attire would take too long to change into, so she settled on a loose dark red shirt and tight black pants.

When she came back out of the changing room, she found her mother standing in the hall with bright eyes and an ecstatic smile. The messenger stood just behind her with an apologetic look. Elise sighed, knowing that her mother had just grilled the messenger for information on Leon. She tried to ignore them, but her mother stopped her just as she walked out of the room.

"Hold on, darling, let me look at you!" The red-haired woman examined Elise from top to bottom, then smiled in pride, clearly not caring in the slightest at her daughter's informal choice of clothes. "You look amazing! You could twist a god around your finger with your looks! That boy you're interested in will be yours without a doubt!"

"I'm not interested in him..." Elise retorted in a quiet and very unconvincing tone.

"Of course, you're not. I'm sure you're this excited to get going because you're only interested in his money or status," the red-haired woman said back in an equally unconvincing tone, causing Elise to frown and silently curse the messenger for bringing her this news while her mother was present. "Just remember, my dear, it is entirely in your own power to take anyone you want! You only need to be confident, be bold, and they'll be putty in your hands!"

Elise nodded to hurry things along, but she thought to herself, *'I already tried being confident and bold! It only makes him lock up!'*

Finally, she managed to extricate herself from her mother and hurried to the Heaven's Eye Tower. The estate was just behind the Tower, so she only had to quickly walk through a magnificent garden and she had arrived.

When she pushed the door open and entered the lounge, she naturally drew the gazes of men and women alike. However, despite many of those who suddenly had their eyes glued to her being high nobles and obscenely wealthy merchants, Elise didn't spare her admirers a single glance. Her eyes swept through the entire lounge until she found the familiar silhouette of Leon at a table happily digging into the special meal on the day's menu: lightly cooked duck with a side of vegetable stew. The meal came with a heavenly aroma that was undoubtedly the reason why Leon had decided to eat before continuing with his business.

As Elise made her way over to his table, he paused for a moment after hearing the commotion but decided to ignore it and proceed with his meal. Several seconds later, Elise wrapped her arms around his neck in a brief but intimate hug that caused many of the watching nobles to scowl and emit a few flashes of killing intent directed at Leon.

"It's good to see you, Young Lord!" she whispered into his ear.

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Although the red-haired woman left the estate after Elise did, she arrived at the Tower first. She was, of course, the Tower Lord in charge of not only Heaven's Eye operations in the capital but also in the entire kingdom. It was a position that demanded an individual with exceptional magical strength, and she did not disappoint.

In addition, she was so strong that the wards that normally blocked magical senses had absolutely no effect on her, so she was able to watch Elise enter the lounge and make her way over to Leon without delay. Her brother—Ajax, the Tower Lord in Teira—could do similar, but he was only strong enough to see auras through the walls and floors, not appearances.

She very carefully observed Leon. Everything from the strength and stability of his third-tier aura to his table manners was seen by the red-haired woman, and she wasn't particularly impressed. She wasn't disappointed, either, but she couldn't help but feel that Elise could definitely do better.

For instance, Tiberias, who had been unambiguously trying to court Elise by sending gifts and invitations to parties and small get-togethers, was from an incredibly powerful and wealthy family and was quite magically talented as well. He was even better looking—at least in the red-haired woman's eyes.

But, whenever she saw her daughter around Tiberias, or any other strong, handsome, and rich nobleman, Elise could barely stand to be around them for more than an hour. She certainly didn't smile as genuinely with them as she did with Leon.

Suddenly, she felt a pair of arms wrap around her waist from behind, and she heard a familiar voice softly speak into her ear.

"Well, what do you think about that boy?"

She couldn't help but smile and lean back into the arms of her first husband, a man who was now in charge of all the Heaven's Eye guards in the city.

"All of you, get out," she commanded, looking at the servants and the four men who had been following her the entire day. They all respectfully bowed and made to leave, though the nobleman in the group slightly frowned and hesitated before doing so.

"I don't think that one likes me very much," said her first husband when the nobleman finally left the room.

"Don't worry about him, I'll fix his attitude later," responded the red-haired woman with a smile.

"Good. I'd hate to have to break one of your playthings. Again." The man chuckled a little morbidly and smiled with something that resembled anticipation, almost as if he wanted that nobleman to try and attack him so he had the excuse to cut him down.

The red-haired woman turned around in his arms and gave him a coquettish smile. "Don't you dare break my new toys," she said playfully.

"Speaking of toys..." he reminded her.

"Ah yes."

The two turned their attention away from each other and back to Leon, who the man could see through a magical light projection he'd called up. This sort of magical engineering was extremely complex, so much so that only the Heaven's Eye Guild and the Four Empires in the south had the knowledge and techniques to utilize it.

"I suppose he's adequate, at least compared to the nobles this far north," said the red-haired woman.

"Only 'adequate', hmm?" the man replied teasingly.

The red-haired woman narrowed her eyes in suspicion. "Do you know something I don't?"

"Maybe I do..." he replied.

"Jordan..." she warned.

Jordan only lasted a few moments under her fiery gaze before spilling the beans. "Lord Ajax contacted me with a report on a young man, the only man in fact that Elise showed much of an interest in back in Teira. He's called Leon Ursus and carries a gold card."

"A *gold card*?" the red-haired woman asked in disbelief, easily guessing what her brother didn't put in the message.

"Yep. Lord Ajax didn't come out and say it, but I suspect that this boy is probably the son of Artorias Raime. As I recall, he and his wife named their kid Leon as well, though they never did get him registered here before the incident at their home. Of course, I don't have any proof, but..."

"A son of House Raime..."

Jordan leaned in to whisper into her ear. "Given *that* family's history, I'd say that Elise chose well."

"You *may* be right," the red-haired woman agreed with a smile, after several more moments of thought. "But, she doesn't really seem to be giving it her all to make him hers..."

Jordan turned his brilliant green eyes back to the light projection. Indeed, Elise wasn't being nearly as forward and intimate with Leon as she had in their previous encounter, let alone their first meeting back in Teira.

"You know, Emilie, being so forward and boldly seductive doesn't work on everyone, despite what you've taught her..." he said slightly admonishingly.

Emilie turned to stare at him with a sadistic smile. "And what do you mean by *that*?"

"I've been watching him since he entered the Tower. My first impression of the boy is that he isn't too fond of contact with other people, physical or otherwise. If our daughter were to follow your teachings, I think it would drive that boy away."

"You've been watching him for what, ten minutes?"

"That doesn't matter, I'm usually right about these things and you know it! Besides, it would behoove us to keep his ancestors in mind if we have to intervene for any reason. You haven't forgotten the results of your own seduction attempt with Archduke Kyros, have you?" Jordan gave Emilie a cheeky smile.

A frown appeared on Emilie's gorgeous face when she remembered being turned down by Leon's grandfather. She had never been rejected before, especially not when using seduction tactics that would put what she taught Elise to shame, but she was turned down after she tried every trick in the book to tempt the late Archduke into becoming one of her husbands. Unfortunately for her, no matter how shamelessly she threw her body at him, Archduke Kyros adamantly refused to join a harem, preferring instead to have a harem of his own as a statement of his nobility.

Emilie's frown lessened a little. But just as Jordan was about to relax, she pushed him back into a nearby chair and gave him a vicious smile.

"You're definitely going to pay for reminding me of *that* particular failure..."

"Am I?" asked Jordan with a defiant smile. "Well bring it on, my love, I'm looking forward to it..."

Emilie climbed onto his lap and began pulling Jordan's clothes off as fast as she could. Jordan tried to do likewise to her, but she ended up tying his hands to the chair with silk ropes she pulled out of her soul realm. Jordan struggled a little, trying to take the initiative, but Emilie just continued smiling at him and tied him down tighter.

In the end, she had to physically tear off some of his clothes after tying him down, after which she 'made him pay' for several hours.

Chapter 82: Search for a Bow

Leon felt a little conflicted when he didn't see Elise in the Heaven's Eye Tower's lounge when he first entered. He honestly couldn't really tell if he was grateful or disappointed, but Xaphan certainly seemed to think it was the latter.

[Well that girl doesn't seem to be here, isn't that a shame...]

Leon could tell the demon was trying to provoke a reaction, so he didn't respond.

As he took a few more steps into the lounge, a beautiful attendant approached him and bowed. Like all the other attendants, she had a gorgeous face, a great body, and a very expensive black dress that showed it off.

“Welcome, Good Sir, to this Heaven’s Eye Tower. Is there something I can help you with?” She gave him a seductive look and purposefully pushed out her chest, but Leon found her actions quite tame compared to Elise. Of course, that isn’t to say that he had an easier time talking to her—she was still a stranger after all.

“I-I was... I’m looking for...” He meant to ask about finding some spell paper and a new bow—and had even been rehearsing how best to ask the entire way over from the Academy’s training grounds—but he was thrown off a little when he discovered that Elise didn’t seem to be in the Tower and was now scrambling to find his words.

It was subtle, but the attendant clearly gave him a look of annoyance, so Leon cleared his throat and tried again. Before he could, though, a tantalizing aroma wafted over to him, drawing his eyes over to the dining area.

“I hope it’s no trouble, Good Sir, but may I see your account card?” the attendant asked, carefully keeping any exasperation out of her voice. This Heaven’s Eye Tower was meant to cater to wealth and nobility, and those who possessed neither were to be escorted off the premises. The attendant clearly thought Leon didn’t belong here, given his nervous attitude and plain black clothing which completely lacked the ornamentation that usually adorned the clothes of those with money.

Fortunately, Leon was still able to pick up on the derision in the question, which helped him to find his tongue.

“It is a trouble, so how about you instead take me to find some of whatever they’re eating over there?” Leon responded with an unexpectedly forceful tone and a nod to some of the other patrons in the restaurant. Leon was himself quite surprised by his outburst and his cheeks went a little red, but the attendant was even more taken aback. She froze as she tried to decide on a course of action. After a few long moments, she decided to drop her previous request and lead Leon over to an empty table, though she certainly didn’t look very enthusiastic. Whether he had the means to stay or not would become obvious soon, anyway.

Leon ate relatively slowly, savoring the food that was so delicious it nearly brought a tear to his eye. He was so taken with his meal that he ignored everything else, even Elise’s entrance ten or so minutes later and the stunned silence she left in her wake.

Leon didn’t notice her until her arms wrapped around his neck and her lips brushed against his ear, whispering “It’s good to see you again, Young Lord!” She didn’t linger in that position, withdrawing her arms and elegantly taking a seat across the small table from Leon.

Leon froze, though it wasn’t from the killing intent directed towards him from the watching patrons of the Tower, but rather from Elise’s ravishing smile and her completely different look compared to how he had seen her previously.

“Um... Hi... You, uh, you look good,” was all he was able to say with his heart nervously beating so fast after Elise’s sudden appearance that he could hear the blood rushing through his head.

“Really?” she asked with a little uncertainty, “I threw this outfit together pretty quick...”

“It suits you,” said Leon with a slight nod. Her outfit was indeed significantly less overtly sexy than what she had worn when they had met previously, but he quite liked the significantly more casual look she had now.

“Thank you!” responded Elise, giving him a glowing smile.

Leon felt the undercurrent of killing intent in the air that was directed toward him intensify a little. He glanced around, partially in embarrassment from receiving Elise’s dazzling smile and partially to see where the killing intent was coming from.

A good portion of the nobles in the lounge were giving Leon faintly murderous looks, though there was so little killing intent coming from them that none of them concerned him. However, he did notice Tiberias with a small group of other nobles—three of whom Leon recognized as leading the Black Vipers training unit with Tiberias—over in a private booth, and the man seemed frozen in anger. The nobleman’s fist was clenched around his steak knife so tightly it seemed like the metal was about to bend, and he glared at Leon so harshly that if looks could kill then Leon would cease to exist under his withering gaze.

Needless to say, it was from Tiberias that Leon felt the most killing intent despite the nobleman having a fine degree of control over his aura.

“I should probably hurry up and finish...” Leon absent-mindedly said aloud.

“Please, take your time!” said Elise, still over the moon from Leon’s unexpected compliment.

In spite of Elise’s slight reassurance, Leon still finished his meal in short order. Elise quietly watched him as his usually stoic face gave way to pure joy despite his haste, smiling all the while.

However, while she was enjoying that sight, she did make a subtle gesture to the attendant who was dutifully standing off to the side of Leon’s table, and the young woman paled and silently walked away. Elise could tell from the attendant’s attitude that the woman didn’t have a good impression of Leon. She found it hard to blame the attendant as Leon wasn’t dressed like a man of means and certainly didn’t act like one, but Elise still felt an anger in her chest at seeing the attendant’s obvious disdain for Leon that was ruining her good mood.

After another minute or so, Leon was finished with his food. His dishes were practically clean, and it was less than ten seconds before a busboy appeared to take them away.

When Leon looked up at his table companion, he found that Elise was still watching him and serenely smiling. His cheeks reddened but the rest of his face settled back into its usual stoicism.

“So, what brings you here today, Young Lord?” asked Elise, her captivating voice bringing Leon back to his senses.

“Well... uh... first, you could stop calling me ‘Young Lord’. Not too fond of that form of address... And I’m looking for a good bow to hunt with, and some cheap enchanting materials to practice with...”

“Of course! Let’s head upstairs and see what we can find!”

Elise almost jumped out of her seat before taking Leon's arm. However, she didn't press herself against him and even seemed to be trying to give him a little more space. It was a minute difference in her behavior, but one that Leon noticed and appreciated. It seemed that the more familiar Elise was with his muted personality, the more space she gave him, and he was quite grateful. It would've been almost impossible for him to come here repeatedly if she had continued to act the way she had when they had first met.

The two made their way to the magic lift and rose to the second floor. Along the way, Elise decided to strike up a conversation, since she was fairly sure that Leon wasn't going to do so himself.

"So, how has it been, your time so far in the Knight Academy?" She kept her tone light and inquisitive, making sure not to be too pushy.

Leon thought for a moment before answering. "It... It has been quite exhilarating..."

"Really? How so?"

"Well, there are plenty of strong people giving me ample opportunity to test myself. Plus, I've always been fascinated with enchanting, and being at the Academy is my first opportunity to learn."

"I can understand the second reason—learning about something you enjoy is always fun—but you find testing yourself against strong opponents to be exhilarating?" Elise asked with an amused smile.

"I guess... I learned how to fight from my father, and in all the time he was teaching me, I never won once against him. He was a very strong fighter, but sparring with him never brought me the same excitement I've found in fighting other people, especially after coming here. In the Academy, there are people that can match me for every one of my moves but aren't so much stronger than me that it's clear they're going easy and could effortlessly break me if they tried..." As he spoke, Valeria appeared in his mind with her glaive and cold attitude, and Leon couldn't help but smile a little in fulfillment. "...though there are also a few... irritating individuals..." The image of Gaius replaced Valeria's in his head, causing his smile to disappear.

As he was speaking, they arrived on the second floor of the Tower where the merchants were based. Leon could find his enchantment supplies here, as well as a good bow if he wasn't looking for something custom made. If that were the case, then Elise would simply take him to the third floor with the blacksmiths and enchanters.

"So, you're having fun?" Elise asked as she led Leon to a respected merchant well-known for representing reliable manufacturers of spell paper and specialized ink.

"Yes," Leon answered with a simple smile.

"That's great to hear," she said. There was something more she wanted to ask, but she hesitated a little which led to a momentary silence between the two of them. Before that silence could be broken, they arrived at the desk of the merchant Elise sought, and after a few minutes of talking and a few hundred silver coins changing hands, Leon had acquired enough cheap spell paper to last him for the foreseeable future.

As they made their way to the merchant Leon would need for his bow, Elise made up her mind to ask Leon what she had been thinking about.

“Have you ever considered other paths than the Knight Academy?” After she asked this, her hold on Leon’s arm unconsciously tightened just a bit, but neither of them noticed.

“I did, though not for long...”

“Why not?”

“My father told me stories about the knights of the Bull Kingdom, and I guess I just always kind of wanted to be one...” Leon had finally managed to relax around Elise, due in no small part to her slightly more distant behavior, but as he spoke his face went a little red again.

“I see...” Elise responded. “I... Is there...” She tried to continue on to the point of her asking that question, but the words stuck in her throat.

‘Come on, say it! Say it! You’re the daughter of the great Tower Lord, asking him this question should be the easiest thing in the world!’

But, as much as she wanted to ask Leon to join Heaven’s Eye instead of continuing on to become a knight of the Bull King, the words just wouldn’t come. Leon glanced at her and waited patiently, but they arrived at the bow merchant Elise had picked out for Leon before she could proceed.

There was a short back and forth with the merchant to find Leon what he was looking for: a simple but well-made bow with minimal enchantments. The bow he used in the Northern Vales had a crude enchantment carved by Artorias that would speed up the arrow as it left the bowstring. However, Leon now intended to practice hunting to keep his skills sharp. As he had no intention of relying on his kills to eat, he decided against buying an overly fancy bow, instead choosing a relatively short recurve bow made of a beautiful dark red wood that had been polished to a near mirror shine. The bow had little in the way of ornamentation, but Leon quite liked its clean aesthetic.

It would suit his purposes quite fine, though it wouldn’t be of much use in fighting something of the third-tier or higher unless he got lucky and hit the beast in a weak point, as he had done when he fired an arrow into the mouth of the snow lion back in the Forest of Black and White. Arrows fired from it would also struggle to penetrate even poor-quality armor, but Leon didn’t intend to use the bow in actual combat. That being said, these weaknesses also had the effect of making the bow far cheaper than many other bows that Leon could see.

In addition, he bought a quiver and two bundles of thirty arrows. Unfortunately, even with the relative cheapness of the bow, the price still cleaned out all but a small handful of the silver coins Leon had.

When Leon brought that up with Elise, she smiled at him and took his gold account card over to a floor runner waiting nearby for precisely this sort of thing, spoke a few words, and the runner scurried off. Elise did this with a subtle touch, ensuring that none of the merchants or other patrons of the Heaven’s Eye Guild around saw the card and that the runner didn’t know who the card came from. The runner returned not even five minutes later and handed Elise two thousand silver coins and the gold card, who then gave them to Leon a few seconds later after leaving the sight of the runner.

“So, withdrawing money is just that easy?” Leon asked.

“Withdrawing money is just that easy for *gold* card holders,” responded Elise with a smile. “You get a lot of credit for having that card. It’s just assumed that you have the money you request, and an invoice will be sent to Teira where your records are stored. They’ll take care of everything.”

“Well, that’s certainly convenient... Are these cards particularly rare?”

Elise smiled at Leon’s question. “Oh, yes! Most nobles can’t ever hope to get one! They’re typically only reserved for royalty... Didn’t my uncle tell that to you back in Teira?”

“I don’t think so...” replied Leon, a little quieter than usual. It made a certain kind of sense to him that House Raime would’ve had a gold card in the past, as they were kings in their own right before the First Bull King built the kingdom by subjugating or conquering his neighbors.

With Leon’s business finished, the two walked back to the magic lift in silence. Elise was unable to ask Leon to stay in the Tower, so she stayed quiet, though her cheeks did become quite red.

As for Leon, he wanted to ask her if there was anything she wanted to do during the day, but due to his own embarrassment, what came out was quite different.

“So, um... Would you... T-thanks for accompanying me to buy these things...”

“Of course, Young Lo-... Leon... Remember, whenever you come back, look for me!”

“I’ll do that...” he replied.

“Wonderful! Oh, I almost forgot, we’re making some progress with those ingredients you commissioned us to find. Hopefully, it shouldn’t be too long, a matter of months at the most!”

Leon nodded appreciatively to her as the magic lift arrived at the ground floor.

Elise escorted Leon back to the door and saw him off with a brilliant smile. The smile he returned wasn’t nearly so breath-taking, but it was still a far cry from his usual impassive demeanor.

After walking a dozen steps, Leon glanced back at the Tower and saw Elise still standing by the door. When they locked eyes, she gave him a short wave, then walked back inside. Leon’s mouth turned into a brief bitter smile before resettling back into his usual dispassionate expression.

And then Xaphan spoke up.

[Hey-]

[Don’t fuckin- don’t start with me, demon!]

[Whoa, no need to jump down my throat! I was just going to say that I was a little impressed with you. You just spoke more to that girl than I think you have to anyone else, at least since we signed our contract. I mean, it’s not quite asking her out, but at least I’m not completely mortified at my partner’s behavior this time.]

[Right...] Leon responded without much enthusiasm. Xaphan had started off fairly complimentary, but then his last sentence didn’t continue the trend.

[Oh, and by the way,] the demon continued, [I may have mentioned this before, but ‘Xaphan’ is a good name for a kid, just saying. But I suppose if your and Elise’s first kid is a girl then she might need something a little different. How about ‘Xaphina’? Or maybe ‘Xaphira’?]

Leon quietly groaned in exasperation and had to fight the urge to facepalm. He tuned Xaphan out and began making his way back to the Snow Lion’s tower.

Chapter 83: The End of Basic Combat

“Are you alright, Young Lord?”

Tiberias had grown so furious at seeing Elise and Leon together and acting so intimate that the other nobles at his table couldn’t help but say something. Normally if something like this happened, the noble who gets angry will bottle it up until they’re out of the public eye, but Tiberias was so obviously pissed that it compelled his tablemates to speak up and try to remind him of his dignity and image.

Tiberias glared at the man who spoke, a third-tier knight in service to his father, the Duke of Aurelianorum, an extravagantly wealthy region along the western coast of the Endless Ocean.

The veteran knight shut his mouth under Tiberias’ intense gaze and nearly jumped out of his own skin when Tiberias responded with a curt “I’m fine!”

However, barely five minutes passed before Tiberias suddenly rose from the table, dropped a roll of silvers on the table, and left without another word. Those he was eating with were left flabbergasted, but none followed him to see what was going on. Given how much difficulty he seemed to have maintaining his noble bearing, everyone else at his table silently agreed that his departure was for the best.

Before too much longer, Tiberias found himself passing the lavish estate of the Duke of Lentia. Gaius—the Duke’s third son—was undoubtedly here, spending his off-time partying with a few of his close friends.

‘Might as well stop here for a while... It’s as good a place as any to cool my head,’ he thought to himself.

Tiberias identified himself to the guards at the gate of the estate and was shown inside in short order. He was led through halls of pure white stone and marble extravagantly decorated with gorgeous mosaics, masterfully crafted statues, and magnificent paintings. However, none of the decorations made any impression on Tiberias, as the wealth and luxury of Aurelianorum far outstripped that of Lentia several times over.

Regardless of its effect—or rather the lack thereof—on Tiberias, the estate was still quite extensive, so it took a fair amount of walking to arrive in the brightly lit hall where Gaius, Actaeon, and Linus were spending their time with several beautiful women.

“Tiberias!” exclaimed Gaius. He hurriedly moved the woman on his lap so he could rise and greet his fellow noble. “I wasn’t expecting you to come here today! You there, bring my friend some wine!” Gaius waved at a nearby attendant who dutifully presented Tiberias with a full cup.

Actaeon and Linus also rose to greet Tiberias, though they let Gaius go first as he was the host. Tiberias simply accepted their hospitality in silence. He was searching for the right words to say, but his seemingly stoic face masked a pitch-black killing intent that clouded his mind.

“So, what brings you over here, Tiberias?” asked Gaius as the four sat down. Gaius and Linus put their arms around the attendants serving them, while Actaeon went a little further and ran his hands over his attendant’s body a few times.

After taking a long moment to think, Tiberias said as casually as he was able, “Do you actually plan on retaliating against the Snow Lions?”

His question took the other three by surprise, so much so that they were stunned into a brief silence.

“Of course we are...” said Actaeon a little hesitantly, as he was concerned that he had misheard Tiberias’ question due to being slightly preoccupied with his attendant.

“Obviously...” added Linus, confused as he was as to why Tiberias was bringing this up completely out of the blue.

“Yeah, we were planning on waiting until after our first-tier guys had completed their Basic Combat training. Why do you ask? Did something happen?” Gaius responded.

“No, nothing at all...” said Tiberias, though a subtle clenching and unclenching of his fist made it clear how truthful he was being.

“Well, alright then! We’ll strike back against them at the end of the upcoming week when we finish our Basic Combat classes,” said Gaius with a smile of anticipation.

“Not to be rude, but why do you care?” asked Actaeon to Tiberias.

“Oh, I asked him to join us during our attack,” responded Gaius.

“You didn’t tell them?” Tiberias growled in obvious displeasure.

Gaius gave him a playful look and said, “I wanted it to be a pleasant surprise.”

“Ancestors damn it...” muttered Linus, quite cleanly summarizing the other three’s feeling towards Gaius’ decision.

“Well, since we’re all here, let’s hammer out the specific schedule,” suggested Gaius.

“Yeah, wouldn’t do for any of us to be late,” Actaeon said sarcastically.

Gaius sent an angry look his way and asked, “You got a problem?”

“So long as you’re not keeping any more secrets, then no.”

Gaius stared at Actaeon for a long few seconds before smiling at him and saying, “Good, then there’s no problem...”

They spent the next fifteen minutes debating exactly when to attack, where to attack from, and what specific day and time to meet up. When their plan was over, Tiberias immediately rose to leave. Gaius

invited him to stay, but Tiberias refused and made to leave the estate. He had regained his usual calm, but his wrath still lingered deep inside of him.

'I only need to hold back for a few more days...' he thought to himself, forcing his face into a bright and noble smile.

—

When Leon returned to the Snow Lion's tower, he dropped off most of what he had just bought in his room and ventured back out into the forest to try out his new hunting bow. The only other things he brought with him were his family's sword, a one-handed training short sword, and a dozen arrows.

He wasn't really intent on hunting, he only wanted to get used to the new bow. He strolled into the forest until he found a clearing. It was reasonably quiet there, so there was where he stopped. The clearing wasn't that large, barely more than half the range of Leon's bow even if it hadn't been enchanted. Still, Leon missed a target he carved into a tree with his first round of arrows.

He sighed as he went to retrieve them. He was out of practice and the new bow just felt a little weird in his hand. He had used his old bow for so long that the grip had been slowly molded into the perfect shape for his fingers, and this new bow just couldn't match up, even with its more well-crafted enchantment.

Leon spent hours shooting at his target and when the time came for him to return to the tower, he felt that he had hit the mark more times than he had missed, though it wasn't by much.

He spent almost the entire Sunday in that clearing as well, shooting at the tree until, by the end of the day, he could consistently hit it ten or eleven times out every dozen shots. But that wasn't enough for him, and he intended to keep practicing when he had the time.

—

The following week proceeded much the same as the previous had. The trainees were now familiar with the routine, so their Senior Instructors led them to the training field without any fuss.

The third-tier trainees had gotten bored of sparring with each other, so they all but stopped by the end of the week. The Senior Instructors didn't press them to continue, allowing them to chat and build connections with each other for the last two days.

However, the same complacency was not found in Valeria or Leon, as the two battled each other five times during that week and each time was just as spirited and vigorous as their first few bouts. Their record barely budged, though, with Leon winning twice, Valeria winning twice, and their Friday fight ending in another draw.

With the exception of the duels between Valeria and Leon, the third-tiers breezed through the rest of the Basic Combat classes with remarkably little effort. The same could not be said for the second and first-tier trainees, who were drilled in the basic fighting style of the Royal Legions almost to the point of exhaustion.

Furthermore, the first-tier trainees had started to bicker amongst themselves, especially the Snow Lions and Deathbringers who nearly started fighting in the middle of class over a few muttered insults.

Normally, the instructors teaching the classes would have the first-tier trainees spar against each other and deliberately feed these little conflicts, but the tension between these two units convinced them that the usual tactics used to encourage the battles between units weren't necessary, so the units were made to spar amongst themselves for the last few days.

Thanks to the additional instruction given to them by Leon, Charles, Henry, and Alain performed admirably during these sparring sessions, quickly gaining a reputation as some of the strongest first-tier fighters in the Snow Lions. Bohemond and Matthew also acquitted themselves well, though they'd only been training with the others for less than two weeks.

The afternoon classes were just as uneventful as the morning classes were. Since the trainees were split up into dozens of different classes, there weren't as many Snow Lions and Deathbringers in the same place, not to mention the Senior Instructors made sure to keep the peace among the first-tier trainees during their Magical Theory classes.

—

The Senior Instructor had more than usual to say to the Snow Lions at the end of Friday. "Basic Combat is over! You're all at least mildly competent with the standard Legion sword! First-Aid will take up all of next week, and then it's on to Light Infantry classes!"

The trainees began to excitedly chat amongst themselves. The start of Light Infantry classes was when they would be issued their armor as well as when they would start learning how to fight as the smallest standard group in the Legion—squads of ten or so trainees, each containing seven or eight first-tier trainees and two or three second-tier trainees. The third-tier trainees would be free to choose which group they wanted to join.

The Senior Instructor wasn't done talking, though, and he angrily shouted at the chatting trainees, "Shut the fuck up! Those who speak before I'm finished will run the circuit a few hundred times!" Running the circuit was to run around the tower with increasingly large logs and stones. All three instructors had made enough people run the circuit in the past few weeks for everyone to know that the Senior Instructor wasn't playing around when he ordered them to be quiet.

The room fell silent in seconds, with no one willing to break it.

"Good. First-Aid training will be fairly straightforward, you'll learn all about how to activate and utilize low-grade healing spells, as well as how to apply tourniquets, bandages, and splints! After that will be a couple days of drills until you can all save your buddies if they get hurt in combat!"

The Senior Instructor glanced over at the second and third-tier trainees before continuing. "All of you will be expected to step up and fulfill your duties as the leaders of this unit next week! Do *not* fuck this up!"

With those words said, the Senior Instructor turned around and left the tower, dismissing the trainees.

Leon and the usual group got together for some additional training. Everyone, that is, except Henry, who slumped down onto a chair nearby with a long sigh.

"What's wrong with *you*?" asked Charles, sensing a possible moment of weakness to exploit in revenge for Henry poking fun at his chosen elective.

"Haaaaaaah, I... *need* to get laid," replied Henry.

"What?" asked Charles in confusion, while Bohemond nodded in understanding and Matthew just laughed.

"It has been more than a month since I last touched a woman!" complained Henry while adjusting his pants. "Gragh! It's getting so bad I'm growing a damn third leg!"

"Then go out and find a willing girl and get it on... with... her..." said Charles, leaving the others to give him odd looks as he trailed off. Charles only paused for a couple seconds before continuing with a mocking tone like he'd just solved the mysteries of life, the universe, and everything. "Oh, wait! I know exactly why you're not getting any ladies, it's because none of them can stand to be in *your* presence for more than a few seconds at a time!"

"Oh ho, you want to get personal, huh?" said Henry with a grin as he stood up.

"So what if I do?" asked Charles.

The two men started approaching each other as if they were about to fight, but the barely concealed grins on their faces betrayed just how serious this little back-and-forth was. They stared each other down for a moment, then laughed and went back to what they were doing.

Henry returned to his seat and asked, "But seriously, I'm hitting up the beach tomorrow. Anyone want to come with? Matty? Bo?"

"Nah, I've got a fiancé," responded Matthew.

Bohemond also refused, saying "Same here. Well, not a fiancé, but a girl I've been seeing for a long time back home."

Henry was left staring at them in equal parts dejection, admiration, and surprise.

"Seriously?! How is it that all of you have girlfriends or fiancés and I don't?!" He paused for a moment before turning to Leon, who was quietly moving through a few sword forms that Artorias had taught him years ago and listening to the group's conversation with a slight smile.

"Hey, Leon!" In response, Leon glanced over at Henry but didn't stop moving. "You want to go to the beach with me tomorrow? Come on, the only two single guys here!"

Leon chuckled a little but politely shook his head. "I plan on staying here over the weekend brushing up on my knowledge of fire enchantments..."

[.. and I'll be expecting your help, demon,] he added in his mind.

[Huh? What?] asked a slightly taken aback Xaphan.

[You promised to provide me with 'power, wisdom, and knowledge'. I've given you plenty of time, now you've got to deliver.]

[... So be it.]

“You know what?” Henry asked Leon rhetorically after a bit of thought. “It’s probably better you don’t go with me. As you’re a third-tier mage, you could probably just stand there looking as sharp as a sphere and you’d still have better game than everyone else here, without a doubt.”

“I... don’t know about that...” Leon responded bashfully. He knew he wasn’t that great with people in general—and women in particular—and if it wasn’t for Elise constantly approaching him, he doubted that he would be able to speak more than a few sentences to a woman before locking up.

“Whatever, I’m going to bed. I’m going to need to be in peak condition tomorrow...” Henry said as he rose and made for his bed.

The rest of the group wasn’t that far behind, only staying up for another hour before turning in as well.

However, not everyone in the Academy was turning in early. A second-tier trainee ran out of the Deathbringer’s tower not long after sundown bearing a message for Tiberias. The message was a short and simple reminder: tomorrow morning.

When he received the message about half an hour later, Tiberias merely nodded and smiled. He’d calmed down significantly over the week and no longer particularly cared about Gaius’ attack itself, but still looked forward to it as a pleasant distraction while he contemplated less petty and far more permanent ways to get rid of Leon.

Chapter 84: Assault on the Snow Lions I

Breakfast the next morning was inexplicably tense. Most of the units were happily talking amongst themselves and making plans for what they would do with their time off.

The Deathbringers were the only exception. They seemed incredibly subdued, even more so than after the ambush Leon carried out on their people.

Tiberias was the only trainee not in the Deathbringers who knew the reason for this strange behavior: the nobles in their unit had forced the other trainees to give up their time off and join their planned assault on the Snow Lions.

Many of the Deathbringers didn’t actually require any convincing. Tensions between them and the Snow Lions had only grown in the past two weeks, and they yearned to take their mounting frustrations out on their rival unit. Other Deathbringers didn’t want anything to do with the assault, as it was perceived as a reaction to the public dispute between Gaius and Leon, and those first-tier trainees were loath to get involved in a fight between the third-tier trainees.

But, they had been left with little choice with both the nobles and the first-tier trainees who had already agreed to join the assault putting pressure on them to join too.

The other nine units were too preoccupied with their weekend plans to notice how strangely the Deathbringers were acting, but they were still subtly affected by their depressing aura. This unpleasant atmosphere drove all of the trainees to eat remarkably fast in order to leave quickly.

Like the rest of the units, the Deathbringers also left quickly, hurrying back to their tower where their Senior Instructor formally dismissed them.

“Let’s fucking go!” shouted Gaius, spurring his unit to get their training weapons and everything they needed to attack the Snow Lions before their instructors had even left the tower.

The Senior Instructor stopped before he made it to the door and turned to face Gaius. “What are you doing?” he asked.

Gaius smiled at him and responded, “We’re getting our revenge on the Snow Lions. We’re going to attack their tower and seize their banner.”

“Hmmm.” The Senior Instructor went quiet as he thought for a moment, after which he simply said, “Don’t fuck this up,” and walked out of the door.

“Not a damn chance...” Gaius whispered to himself.

The Deathbringers were ready to go barely five minutes after being dismissed, and Gaius led them out of the tower and toward their designated meeting place to wait for Tiberias. Since the Deathbringers and Snow Lions’ towers were relatively close, it was assumed that the Deathbringers would arrive before Tiberias. This assumption proved correct, as Tiberias was nowhere to be seen when they arrived.

Their meeting point was at the foot of a large hill that overlooked the road from the Snow Lions’ tower to the training field. When the training grounds were first established, the earth and nature mages that built the roads and the forests made sure to create a number of ‘natural’ ambush points along each road, such as large boulders, hills, and thick tree lines. This would help to reinforce many of the lessons the instructors intended to teach the trainees, one of the most important being to keep off of roads as much as possible when on the move. Due to this ambush-friendly design, most trainees typically stop using the roads to move around the Academy by the fourth or fifth month of training, which is when most units really start to fight amongst themselves.

By the ‘final test’ of the training cycle, a simulated two-month long free-for-all war between the units known as the FTX or Field Training Exercise, traveling along the roads would be seen as near-suicide.

“He’s not here...” said Actaeon after looking around.

“Give him some time. He’s coming from farther away. In the meantime, have everyone spread out and keep an eye on that road,” responded Gaius. Actaeon and Linus immediately got to work coordinating the second-tier trainees. As they were all educated nobles, they moved quickly, but the same could not be said of the first-tier trainees. Eventually, the entire unit had formed a rough line that watched the road from the hill, hidden from view—though it had taken several minutes.

It wasn’t even five minutes later that the first group of Snow Lions was seen walking down the road. They walked at a leisurely pace, chatting amongst themselves. There were only ten of them, and they were all first-tier trainees at that.

When Gaius was informed of their sighting, he took a look for himself. He recognized several of them as people who frequently sat at Leon’s table during meals. If he listened closely, he could even hear what they were talking about.

“... just go to a family clinic. They’ll typically sell these contraception spells in packs of five for twenty silvers.”

“No shit?! How have I not heard about that before?!”

“I know, right? I only just found out about them last week. I bought a few and tried them out last time I was with Jeanne. Worth every coin.”

As they were speaking, they drew near the hill. Gaius waited until they were about halfway down the line, then emerged from the trees on the hill. The Snow Lions weren't paying enough attention to notice him, but he didn't care. He simply made a 'follow me' gesture to the waiting Deathbringers and charged down the hill with all the speed of a third-tier mage.

As soon as he started moving, Actaeon and Linus lead the second-tier Deathbringers out from the tree line and charged the Snow Lions, who were so surprised that they barely reacted until Gaius had already crashed into their group and brought his training sword down on one of them, knocking him unconscious. Gaius barely even glanced at most of the Snow Lions, turning his head to the three in the group who he saw around Leon all the time and giving them an incredibly sinister smile.

The man who reacted first was the largest and most heavily-built man among them. He was the one Gaius targeted first, and he just barely managed to draw his sword in time to block Gaius' strike. He lacked the strength to hold the third-tier mage back, though, and his own sword was ripped from his hands by Gaius' blow and painfully slammed back into his shoulder.

Gaius finished the job and knocked him out with a dismissive follow-up strike, then turn to the other two.

In the time it took Gaius to dramatically turn and derisively smile at them again, they had drawn their swords and took the opportunity to attack him. He sneered at their impudence and swung his own blade to meet their attacks. Just like their friend, they had no ability to defeat him in a head-on fight, and they were almost instantly defeated, falling unconscious at Gaius' feet.

By the time Gaius was finished with them, the rest of the Snow Lions had been taken apart by Actaeon and Linus before the second-tier trainees could even arrive, let alone their first-tier trainees.

“Hehe, fucking peasants,” mocked Actaeon.

“Quiet,” reprimanded Gaius. He was about to issue more instructions when another man emerged from the trees and calmly walked down the hill.

“Looks like you all started the party without me...” he said.

“No choice. If we hadn't attacked when we did, these worms would've escaped,” replied Gaius. The newcomer was, of course, Tiberias. When he swaggered over to Gaius, Linus, and Actaeon, many of the more hesitant Deathbringers could only stare with enormous smiles on their faces. None of them had any idea that they would have another third-tier mage joining them! This would all but guarantee their victory!

“Well, now that we're all here, how about we stop wasting time and get to that tower?” suggested Linus.

No one disagreed, and the Deathbringers began running down the road, leaving the ambushed Snow Lions lying where they had fallen.

The Deathbringers only encountered one more group of Snow Lions on their way to the tower, and this one was led by none other than Alphonsus.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” he furiously demanded at the sight of Gaius and his entire unit appearing from around a turn in the road to block his way.

“Come on, Al. It shouldn’t be too difficult for you to realize what’s happening,” responded Gaius, who then proceeded to wave and order the attack on Alphonsus’ group. Alphonsus himself put up a valiant fight, but with four third-tier mages against him and only five second-tier Snow Lions at his back, he was no match for the Deathbringers. The fight was short and left him and his subordinates lying unconscious in the dirt.

Under more normal circumstances, the Deathbringers would’ve never left nobles like Alphonsus—or even his second-tier followers—in such an undignified position, but Gaius was furious and excited. His mind was filled with nothing but their own desires to inflict harm on Leon, and despite his seeming calm, this led him to ignore Alphonsus and his group and continue on to their objective.

Actaeon followed without hesitation—as did Tiberias, who was in a similar but much better concealed mood as Gaius—but Linus stopped long enough to look back at Alphonsus and whisper an apology before following the others.

The Deathbringers arrived at the tower only a few minutes later. When seeing the giant doors leading inside, Gaius smiled and took a deep breath.

‘This is it. The weeks of humiliation I’ve endured, the disrespect that animal has shown me, even going so far as to come between me and Valeria! I’ll pay it all back with interest!’

Gaius gave his unit a few seconds to ready themselves, then he ran forward and threw himself against the door. As the Snow Lions didn’t anticipate such a brazen attack, the doors weren’t secured in any way; they opened immediately, allowing the Deathbringers to surge inside. They were greeted with the sight of half a dozen very confused Snow Lions who were immediately cut down by the Deathbringers’ training weapons.

They then immediately moved on to the inner door, pushing it open and spilling out into the first-tier common room, catching the rest of the first-tier Snow Lions completely by surprise.

Gaius gleefully lunged forward and started attacking any Snow Lion in his range, with the Deathbringers behind him doing the same.

“WE”RE UNDER ATTACK! EVERYONE GET YOUR WEAPONS AND GET OUT HERE!” bellowed a second-tier trainee. His voice carried through the entire tower, telling everyone exactly what was happening. In all, the Deathbringers had managed to incapacitate about half of the entire unit so far, while taking minimal casualties of their own.

“Yes! Call your people! It’ll save us having to go to them!” shouted Actaeon in response. Gaius smiled, greatly appreciating Actaeon’s eagerness.

It took a few moments, but eventually the second-tier trainees started pouring out from the stairways. However, the instant they appeared, they found themselves facing Actaeon and Tiberias, who each had half a dozen second-tier mages behind them. They hit this third-tier wall and were immediately

repulsed. The Deathbringers easily forced the Snow Lions back into the stairway, while their first-tier and spare second-tier trainees rampaged through the other rooms, attacking the Snow Lions who still hadn't come out into the common room yet.

"Gaius! Come here and help me with this!" shouted Linus from the center of the room. He was reaching into the central shrine where the black Snow Lion banner was kept. It was secured with an odd mechanism that Linus found himself struggling to undo.

Gaius rolled his eyes but went over to help, though he kept most of his attention over on the stairway, so he could be ready for when Leon arrived.

'Come on, savage, come show yourself. Come to me, so I can repay everything you've done...'

He didn't have to wait long. The two third-tier mages hadn't even figured out where to start to remove the banner from the shrine when they felt an icy cold killing intent radiate from the stairway, a killing intent that was far more potent than any another aura in the tower.

Gaius smiled in anticipation; he knew the source of that killing intent was Leon. He dropped what he was doing and sprinted for the stairs without hesitation.

"Show yourself barbarian! I'm ready!" he muttered to himself. It was time for him to take his vengeance!

Chapter 85: Assault on the Snow Lions II

On the morning of the Deathbringers' assault on the Snow Lions' tower, Leon was holed up in his room on the top floor, practicing a fairly simple enchantment given to him by Xaphan. The demon himself oversaw Leon's work and provided some criticism wherever he saw necessary, as well as few times when he didn't.

"No no no no!" Leon said in frustration as another sheet of enchantment paper started burning on the table he was working at.

[Hehehe, maybe take a little more time and draw the fire rune with more care next time...] said Xaphan, taking immense glee in seeing Leon's growing frustration.

"Grah! The fire rune was fine! It was that damned modifier that set it off!" Leon crumpled up the half-burnt paper and threw it into the trash bin, where almost a dozen more sheets of enchantment paper could be seen, burnt and blackened by improperly drawn fire runes.

[No, you actually drew that modifier branch quite well, it simply didn't mesh well with the slightly less-good fire rune.]

Leon sighed, then reached for another sheet of paper. He dipped his pen in the ink that was specially prepared for enchantment work, then got started again. First came the core of the enchantment, a runic circle made of one fire rune and a pair of light runes connected with lines as perfectly round as he could make them.

Leon took extra care with the fire rune, drawing it almost excruciatingly slow over several minutes.

[Hey Leon,] said Xaphan suddenly, moments before Leon was finished with the rune. Fortunately, while Leon did jump reflexively at the unexpected distraction, he managed to yank the pen back from the paper so it wouldn't mar his work.

[Yes, demon?] Leon asked in a slow, exasperated tone.

[... Don't screw this up,] Xaphan said mischievously, before breaking out into uproarious laughter when Leon's face struggled to maintain its impassive look under his resulting anger.

[You're hilarious, truly the greatest comedian of our age...] Leon responded sarcastically. He ignored the rest of Xaphan's laughter and turned his attention back to the fire rune.

[Oh, come on! Don't sulk! I was just having a bit of fun! Not like there's anything else to do in here, at least not until you get those potion ingredients...]

Leon continued to ignore Xaphan and went back to painstakingly drawing the enchantment. He finished up about fifteen minutes later. The enchantment was made up of the central runic circle, then four additional lines of modifier runes forming a thin horizontal 'X' shape. The final touch was a pair of runes to connect the ends of the modifier branches into two rough triangle shapes. He then activated the enchantment by placing a finger in the center of the runic circle and channeling his magic into it.

[Hey, it isn't burning up! Not bad! And it only took you twelve tries!] mocked Xaphan.

Leon didn't respond, choosing instead to take a deep breath and wave his hand over the runes. As soon as the shadow of his hand passed over the enchantment, a tiny flame started flickering in the center of the runic circle, conjured by the fire rune. After half a second, it shot up about five feet into the air and became so bright that Leon felt himself squinting a little until he channeled some magic into his eyes.

[Well look at that, a completed Flare Enchantment...] admired Xaphan. As soon as he finished speaking, the minuscule flame vanished with a flash of light. [... but you've still got some practice ahead of you. That flare should've lasted for half a minute, not three seconds.]

Leon still had a huge smile on his face despite the demon's criticism, and just as he was about to respond, he heard an odd muffled sound from below him. A mortal would never have been able to hear it, but Leon was a third-tier mage and he heard it almost as plain as day.

"What is that so--"

Just as Leon was trying to identify what he was hearing, a voice boomed through the tower. It said, "WE'RE UNDER ATTACK! EVERYONE GET YOUR WEAPONS AND GET OUT HERE!"

"The fuck?!" he said, before immediately reaching for his swords. As the reality of what was happening sank in and he could finally identify that what he was hearing was the sounds of fighting, he burst out of his room and into the third-tier common room to see that Castor had done the same. The two men glanced at each other before drawing their swords and running for the stairs. Leon took one stairway while Castor took the other.

As they raced downstairs, the sounds of fighting grew louder and fiercer; it was clear that whoever had attacked them had pushed their guys at least to the bottom of the stairways.

They hurtled down those stairs so fast they arrived at the second floor before ten seconds had passed. There, they saw a couple second-tier trainees waiting at the top of the stairs.

“Castor!” shouted one of them who Leon recognized as Aemilius, the man who carried the Snow Lion banner whenever the unit left the tower for training.

“What’s happening?!” asked an angry and confused Castor.

“It’s the Deathbringers! They barged in and attacked us!” answered Aemilius in a panicky voice.

When Leon heard this, all he could think was *‘That fucking bastard!’* He wasted no more time and barreled through the second-tier nobles in his way, drawing his sword as he went.

The stairs were only wide enough for three people to get through comfortably, but Leon managed to get through without too much fuss. As soon as the second-tier trainees saw it was a third-tier mage trying to get past, they would move to get out of his way.

The first Deathbringer Leon saw was Actaeon, fighting against two second-tier Snow Lions at the same time. The size of the stairway worked against both sides, preventing them from going all out. However, this also gave an advantage to the stronger Actaeon, and the higher position the second-tier Snow Lions held only helped to keep them from being immediately overpowered. With every swing of his sword, Actaeon was forcing them back step by step.

Leon unleashed his killing intent directly at Actaeon and the five Deathbringers behind him. Unfortunately, the second-tier Snow Lions were also caught in it and so couldn’t capitalize on Actaeon’s momentary freezing as they were just as frozen. In fact, Actaeon recovered first, but by then Leon had already appeared in front of him and he hadn’t waited to go on the attack.

Actaeon just barely managed to raise his own blade in time to block Leon’s first strike, but it knocked his sword away and almost knocked him off balance. When Leon followed up with a slash from below, Actaeon had to block with his arm. The force of the blow knocked Actaeon backward and the third-tier nobleman was sent rolling down the stairs into his own followers.

Leon lunged forward to take advantage of the Deathbringers losing their footing on the stairs, but his attack was just barely blocked by the second-tier trainees. As Leon prepared another slash, he felt some killing intent that dwarfed the auras of the other Deathbringers. It didn’t hold a candle to his own, but he could tell that it was potent enough that its possessor wouldn’t be adversely affected by Leon’s killing intent.

He only needed to wait a few seconds before learning the source of that killing intent: Gaius, who had just charged into the stairway, pushing past the second-tier nobles in his way until he stood in front of Leon.

“YOU FUCKING BARBA-“ the nobleman started, but Leon wasn’t the type to give his opponents the chance to speak; he wasted no time seizing the initiative and striking down at Gaius, putting all of his weight and considerable third-tier strength behind his sword.

“DISHONORABLE SCUM!” shouted Gaius as he raised his blade to block. When Leon’s sword crashed into his, Gaius felt his sword shake as the tremendous force behind the blow was transferred to him. In fact, his hand almost went numb, but Gaius held his ground.

Leon frowned a little but didn't let up. He pushed down on Gaius, trying to force the nobleman back down the stairs. However, behind Gaius were half a dozen relatively strong mages, and they all supported him, keeping him upright and helping to give him the ground he needed to push against Leon.

Leon only relented and pulled his sword back when he noticed that Actaeon had gotten back to his feet and was rushing to assist Gaius. Leon nimbly retreated a few steps while Gaius floundered a little after the surprising release of pressure. Leon might've considered attacking again during this moment of weakness, but by then Actaeon had made it to Gaius' side and the two Deathbringers immediately pressed forward.

Tactical options were extremely limited in such tight spaces; Leon could barely dodge, which severely hampered his fighting style, while Gaius and Actaeon couldn't use their full strength fighting at an upward angle. Leon continuously tried to take back the initiative and get back on the attack, but he was time and time again forced to block and go on the defense. He couldn't exploit any of the openings he saw in his opponents because he was too busy blocking the other.

He decided to try something new. Over the course of about thirty seconds, he allowed his killing intent to slowly fade. This change was gradual enough that Gaius and Actaeon failed to notice the lessened pressure. Once Leon's killing intent faded, he suddenly allowed it to explode just as he blocked one of Gaius' attacks and Actaeon was trying to use the opening that had been created.

With their own auras soaring, neither Gaius nor Actaeon froze this time, but they were taken off guard just enough to stumble. In that one instant, Leon made a snap decision. There was only enough time to attack one of them one time. He chose to attack Actaeon as he already had one disabled arm; Leon was all but guaranteed to take him out, whereas attacking Gaius had a lower chance of success.

Leon's sword was brought down square on Actaeon's shoulder and upper chest, knocking the nobleman out completely.

"YOU SON OF A WHORE!" bellowed Gaius as he watched Actaeon fall back into the second-tier trainees behind them. He went on the attack again, slashing and stabbing at Leon like a frenzied beast. Gaius lost any remaining shreds of his sense of dignity and started screaming with every attack. That he could barely hit Leon only made things worse.

Leon himself was hardly doing much better. If they were to have this fight in a tight hallway with even footing, he guessed that he might quickly lose to the raging Gaius. However, he still had the height advantage which kept him in the game.

The second-tier trainees behind both fighters could only watch in awe at the strength and speed of their senior mages. Gaius' attacks were so fast they could barely be seen, but Leon's own sword would appear just in time to block or deflect.

However, Leon's defense was a lot weaker than the Snow Lions had hoped. Without the initiative, without being able to effectively dodge and go on the attack, he was being pushed back a step at a time.

Things were hardly looking good in the other stairway. Tiberias was fairly low-key about it—typically only fighting opponents who were far inferior to him and never showing his true skills even during the Basic Combat duels—but he was easily one of the strongest fighters in the entire training cycle. Castor was as strong and capable a fighter as anyone would expect given he was a third-tier mage, but he just

wasn't up to the task of holding Tiberias off. Even with the height advantage and fighting alongside several second-tier Snow Lions, with more ready to take their place if they were to fall, he just couldn't stand firm against Tiberias.

This made a certain degree of sense. Tiberias' fighting style relied on having a rock-solid defense and using quick and deadly stabs to do damage. Castor's fighting style was closer to Leon's, focusing on quicker movement, dodging, and using wider and more powerful strikes. The cramped space they found themselves in was the perfect place for Tiberias' style to shine, while also stifling Castor and keeping him in Tiberias' range.

"Why are you attacking us?!" demanded Castor of Tiberias, however the Black Viper remained silent, merely smiling at the Snow Lion and pushing him back another step.

Things took a turn for the worse when Linus shouted loud enough for the entire tower to hear, "I've got their banner!" Almost all the Deathbringers roared in triumph, but Gaius and Tiberias ignored them and continued their advance.

Leon and Castor grit their teeth, but they still found themselves powerless to change the situation. At least the second-tier Deathbringers were a little confused as to why Gaius and Tiberias weren't falling back. Humiliating the Snow Lions by seizing their banner was the whole point, so they couldn't help but frown as the two third-tier nobles kept pressing on.

After a few more minutes, Leon and Castor were forced out of the stairs and into the second-floor hallway. The hallway was a little wider and afforded more room to move than the stairs, but not so much that the Snow Lions could turn the tides. In fact, the only thing this extra room really allowed was for the second-tier trainees to start fighting.

Even though their third-tier mages were tied down, the Snow Lions fought magnificently. They were almost literally fighting back-to-back, so they used every ounce of strength and vigor they had in them to fight against the Deathbringers. This didn't stop them from losing a few second-tier trainees during the next minute or two, but they caused several more Deathbringer casualties than they endured.

Eventually, Linus got fed up with waiting at the bottom of the stairs and followed the others to the second floor with the rest of the first and second-tier Deathbringers at his back.

"What's going on?! Why haven't you all pulled back yet!" he demanded of a nearby second-tier Deathbringer who was still too far back to fight the Snow Lions.

"Tiberias and Gaius wouldn't stop!" the second-tier noble answered.

Linus grimaced, then glanced at Castor, Leon, and the remainder of the Snow Lions. All were nobles at least of the second-tier, with the exception of Leon. To push fellow nobles like this was incredibly petty and vindictive, and the other Deathbringers knew that; they looked to Tiberias and Gaius with increasingly disapproving gazes. A few also looked to Linus to join them, to use his strength to break the stalemate in the third-tier battles and deal the final blow to the Snow Lions.

Complicating matters, Linus knew both Castor and Alphonsus personally, with all three nobles hailing from neighboring counties in the Southern Territories. Their fathers frequently collaborated on public works projects to bring prosperity to all of their lands and had strong friendships and economic ties. For

most of the nobles who attend the Knight Academy, the inter-unit battles were little more than a game they played amongst themselves. What Gaius and Tiberias were now doing went far beyond that.

After another moment of thought, Linus came to a decision of what to do.

“Deathbringers! Fall back!” he shouted.

“What the fuck are you saying! We’ve almost won!” Gaius shrieked in rage.

“We have the banner! We have what we came for! We’ve already won!” Linus roared back. Indeed, there had been several conversations between them when they promised to prioritize the banner.

Gaius was about to argue the point, but the second-tier trainees at his sides listened to Linus and fell back without even waiting for him to speak his piece. Gaius howled in fury, then he took a few steps back.

Tiberias rolled his eyes at Gaius’ undignified display before silently following suit.

While the Deathbringers fell back to the stairs, Leon made to follow them. Now that the pressure was off, he could go on the attack now, an idea that several of the Snow Lions seemed to share as they followed him. However, they were stopped by a shout from Castor.

“No! Let them go!”

Linus respectfully nodded to Castor, then led the Deathbringers back downstairs to collect their casualties and leave. Tiberias didn’t waste time there and went downstairs as well, but Gaius took the time to send one more hateful glare towards Leon before doing likewise.

It only took the Deathbringers a few minutes to gather their people and leave, waving the Snow Lions’ banner all the way back to their tower. They had taken about fifty casualties during the assault.

“Remember this, savage! You are only still standing because *I allow it!*” shouted Gaius on the way out of the door.

Leon, Castor, and the remaining half dozen second-tier nobles could do nothing but watch and glare as they left, with the sound of Gaius’ forced laughter ringing in their ears. The Snow Lions had been completely beaten.

Chapter 86: Missing Snow Lions

“HAHA! WE DID IT!” shouted Actaeon as soon as he woke up on the way back to the Deathbringers’ tower. The personal defeat he suffered at Leon’s hands blunted his celebration somewhat, but in the end, he couldn’t help but get swept up in the jubilant mood of the victorious Deathbringers. The entire unit, including those who were incapacitated during the assault and those who were hesitant to join, watched with pride as the Snow Lions’ banner was placed at the base of their banner shrine.

“Now then! We can celebrate our victory, but be wary of a Snow Lion counter-attack! Cato, Licinius! You two go and secure the door!” shouted Linus as the unit started to party. The two second-tier nobles he called out quickly went to make sure their doors were closed and locked. It wouldn’t prevent anyone from entering forever, but the Deathbringers wouldn’t be caught off guard as the Snow Lions had just been.

As the lower-tiered trainees got to partying, Actaeon was the only third-tier noble who fully joined them in mind and body, bringing most of the food and drinks from the top floor down to the first-tier common room so everyone could enjoy themselves. However, as Actaeon and many of the other trainees started drinking and talking about their own personal achievements during the assault, Linus quietly made his way upstairs. He was happy they had come out ahead of the Snow Lions, for sure, but Castor and Alphonsus were his friends. Or Castor was, at least, and the petty vindictiveness shown by Gaius and Tiberias when they refused to leave before breaking all of the Snow Lions didn't sit well with him.

'Oh well, I'll sleep on it and speak with them later. Make them see that it wasn't personal on my end, and any fights we have from here on out will be a little more honorable, I'll make sure of it...' he thought as sat down on a couch in the third-tier common room. After about half an hour of restful thought, he decided to rejoin the party—though he wasn't nearly so enthusiastic as Actaeon, preferring instead to sit in a corner quietly drinking and watching the others celebrate.

As for Gaius and Tiberias, well they weren't very happy either. The entire point of assaulting the Snow Lions, in their eyes, was to inflict harm on Leon. Since Linus had forced them to leave before that could be done, then the purpose of going out hadn't been fulfilled and they found their victory profoundly unsatisfying.

"Mark my words, Tiberias, I'm going to kill that savage one of these days. The humiliation he's caused me will only be erased with his blood," Gaius muttered.

Tiberias, sitting next to him in the corner of the first-tier common room, sighed. He was a lot calmer than Gaius was right now, appearing significantly more pensive than Gaius' obviously glum expression.

"Sure you will. But I for one am content to wait for now," responded Tiberias quietly.

"What?! Don't you want to kill that barbarian just as much as I do?" asked Gaius in shock.

"Of course, and there still isn't anything I'd rather do right now than boil that knuckle-dragger alive and feed his bones to my dogs. But I can hardly do that *here*, now can I?" Tiberias smiled serenely to Gaius, but it looked more devilish and terrifying to the other man.

"What, then, are you suggesting?" he asked Tiberias.

"Wait. Sate yourself with this victory, then make another move in a year or two, when you have the weight of your family behind you. Plus, you'll have the time to think of a method that won't harm your reputation or lead to being arrested for killing a member of the Royal Legions. At least, that's what I intend to do. I can wait that long." Tiberias was forced to suppress a frown as he said this. The image of Leon and Elise together was hard to banish, and he didn't know what he would do if he were to see it again. However, his noble father had always taught him the value of patience. Thus, he decided to wait to act more decisively against Leon until he was out of the capital.

Gaius frowned, being about as satisfied with Tiberias' plan as he was with the outcome of the assault. Which is to say, not very. That being said, he couldn't fault the man for it; their options were indeed very limited while they were at the Knight Academy.

"Anyway," continued Tiberias, "I should get going. Your unit is celebrating, and I feel more than a little out of place..."

“Please, you’re welcome to stay as long as you like!” offered Gaius, hoping Tiberias would stay so that he wouldn’t have to mingle with the rest of the Deathbringers and pretend to be happy and exuberant.

Unfortunately for Gaius, Tiberias refused and left the tower after saying his farewells to Actaeon and Linus who had just come downstairs.

Reluctantly, Gaius put on a big smile and rejoined the party.

—

The mood at the Snow Lions’ tower was decidedly more subdued. In fact, it was as depressing as anyone might expect it to be. The few Snow Lions who managed to remain standing did their best moving through the various rooms collecting everyone who had fallen and laying them out in the first-tier common room.

It took an hour or so for everyone to wake up, and for those who had left earlier to come stumbling back, including Henry, Charles, Alain, and a livid Alphonsus.

“This is all *your* fault, you fucking barbarian!” was the first thing the third-tier noble shouted upon his return to the tower, while staring daggers at Leon.

Leon was about to respond, but Castor beat him to it. “This isn’t his fault, Alphonsus. It was the Deathbringers who made the decision, they are the ones to blame.”

“If *he* hadn’t angered Young Lord Tullius then this-“

“Quiet!” Castor’s outburst immediately shut the complaining Alphonsus up. The former glanced around at the rest of the Snow Lions. Some held their heads in their hands, others nervously paced or sat slumped in a chair. Most were staring at their third-tier mages, watching Alphonsus very publicly castigate Leon. However, regardless of what they were doing, all of them had the same defeated look about them. In fact, this started affecting their aura, giving the entire tower a depressing air, making everything seem flat and colorless.

Castor glared at Alphonsus, then looked over at Leon. “Let’s take this upstairs.” He then turned to Aemilius, the second-tier noble he had chosen to carry their banner, and said, “Get this place locked up as tight as you can. You three, help him out.”

Aemilius and the three second-tier nobles beside him nodded to Castor and immediately got to work, though with significantly less gusto than they might have had Castor given them the same order several hours before.

Castor, Alphonsus, and Leon all slowly made their way back up to the third-tier common room to discuss what to do now, with Alphonsus barely containing himself the entire way.

As soon as the door to their common closed, Alphonsus instantly tried to shout at Leon again, but Castor silenced him with a glare.

“Al, this isn’t the time to start blaming anyone. Besides, the ultimate decision to attack us came from the Deathbringers, so turn your vitriol to them if you truly need to vent that much. However, our time would be better served figuring out how to deal with this, especially with the loss of our banner...”

Alphonsus glared at Leon again, which the latter ignored, but he didn't start shouting again. Instead, he said, "Well, obviously we need to go and get our banner back and avenge this humiliating defeat!"

"That would be... difficult..." muttered Leon.

"And what would you know, barbarian?!" Alphonsus couldn't help but blurt out. Castor gave him an exasperated look, reminding the other noble to hold his tongue.

"What're you thinking?" Castor asked Leon.

"They'll undoubtedly prepare for a counter-attack, and we wouldn't catch them in separate groups like they did us. Not to mention Tiberias might still be around. We'd be fighting a losing battle."

"We should still try! Without our banner, we have nothing but shame and dishonor!" Alphonsus argued.

"I'm not saying we shouldn't get it back, just that we shouldn't go gallivanting off right now without any preparations," Leon responded. "Besides, I'd say we have honor and... pride aplenty without that bolt of cloth."

"And I don't suppose *you* have any preparations in mind?" Alphonsus asked sarcastically with a derisive look on his face, Leon's last comment flying right over his furious head.

"Al! Let's try and be respectful! Leon is our comrade, a fellow third-tier mage!" shouted Castor, both having gotten fed up with Alphonsus' attitude and caring about the banner far less than Alphonsus did.

"He's a *barbarian*!" Alphonsus shouted back.

Just as Castor was about to continue arguing with Alphonsus, Leon spoke up, completely ignoring their heated exchange.

"I actually *do* have an idea..."

—

The counter-attack that the nobles in the Deathbringers expected the Snow Lions to mount didn't come. However, as all the Deathbringers stayed in their tower the entire day celebrating their victory, and the Snow Lions obviously didn't go anywhere else that day, none of the other units heard what had happened until dinnertime. Less than five minutes after the Deathbringers' arrival, though, the entire training battalion had heard the news.

Many of the nobles laughed somewhat good-naturedly at Castor and Alphonsus' expense; this was just all a big game for them, after all. The first-tier commoners were decidedly less good-natured about it, though, laughing and telling jokes about how terrible the Snow Lions were at fighting, among other far more vicious and demeaning insults.

Everyone waited for the Snow Lions to arrive, to see how defeated they appeared and to size them up. Many of the nobles in the other units were even contemplating attacking the Snow Lions just as the Deathbringers had, but only to test their own trainees against the unit that now seemed weak and easily bullied.

Those waiting for them would be disappointed, though, when enough time passed for it to be obvious that the Snow Lions weren't going to show up. The areas they usually sat in remained empty for the entire meal.

"HAHA! We beat them so badly they don't even want to show their faces! What cowards!" Actaeon shouted at one point. Many of the nobles agreed, laughing along with the Deathbringers.

But there were a few that didn't agree, and Valeria was one of them. Leon didn't come across as a coward to her, and she had fought against him enough times to be certain in her belief.

Alcander and Marcus were two more who didn't think the Snow Lions were cowardly. Castor and Alphonsus had never really stood out from the other third-tier mages, but to become a third-tier mage at such a young age suggested a boldness and fearlessness to Marcus that precluded cowardice. Additionally, his own analysis of Leon from watching him duel Valeria brought him to the same conclusion she had reached.

Alcander's certainty came more from a gut feeling. He would never be able to explain it if anyone asked, but he didn't think any less of the Snow Lions for not appearing. In fact, he turned to Marcus and whispered, "I think we should attack the Snow Lions as well; I never did get that duel with Leon that I wanted..."

Marcus smiled and shook his head. "Not yet, my friend. You'll get that duel, but we have four third-tier trainees in our unit. Attacking another unit in such a weak position compared to us wouldn't seem very sporting, would it?"

"Why would *you* care if something is sporting, *Young Lord of House Aeneas*?" Alcander asked, putting enough emphasis on Marcus' title to remind the other noble about his family's reputation. House Aeneas was famous for their many effective if questionably honorable tactics they employed to repel the frequent raids by the giants in the Border Mountains to the east, so for Marcus to bring up sportsmanship struck Alcander as a little ironic.

"We're at the Knight Academy competing with our fellow nobles of the Bull Kingdom. What's wrong with reserving a little honor in this case?" Marcus smiled at Alcander so unnaturally that the latter knew to drop the matter right then, which he did, turning back to eating his food in silence.

The Snow Lions didn't grace the dining hall with their presence for the entire night. Few questioned it, though, seeing it as a natural response to such a humiliating defeat.

—

When the Instructors for the Snow Lions arrived at the tower to escort them to the dining hall, they didn't really find anything odd about the tower. It was a little quiet, but they didn't notice the strange stillness in the air.

However, as soon as they entered the first-tier common room, it became obvious that the tower was empty. However, the most striking thing in the eyes of the Senior Instructor was the empty shrine. His eyes widened in alarm as he immediately hurried over to the shrine to inspect it, hoping that he was mistaken.

Of course, he wasn't. "WHERE THE FUCK IS THE BANNER?!" he roared, his voice echoing throughout the entire tower. "EVERYONE GET THE FUCK OUT HERE RIGHT FUCKING NOW!"

Seeing how incensed the Senior Instructor was at the absent banner, the other two instructors began running through the first-tier bedrooms looking for any first-tier trainee to yell at. All they found were deserted rooms. They hurried back to report to the Senior Instructor, who furiously stormed through the rooms himself.

The Instructors didn't search particularly thoroughly. If they had, they might've noticed that even though some clothes were gone, as well as most of the training weapons, many personal effects were still there. However, all they saw was what they didn't see: The Snow Lions.

The tower was devoid of life, the entire unit was simply gone.

Chapter 87: Absence

The Snow Lions didn't turn up to breakfast on Sunday, either. This put the triumphant Deathbringers in an even better mood. They were in such a great mood, in fact, that their Senior Instructor had to reprimand them for getting too rowdy before dismissing them for the day.

Several of the third-tier nobles who doubted the cowardice of the Snow Lions were even starting to be convinced, leaving very few who held the Snow Lions in any esteem.

Marcus and Alcander were two of those few. The Snow Lions' continued absence only piqued their curiosity rather than drawing their scorn and derision. Alcander even convinced Marcus to accompany him to the Snow Lions' tower, ostensibly to challenge Leon to the duel Alcander desired, but they really just wanted to see what was going on.

When they arrived at the tower, Alcander approached the door and thundered, "Leon! I'm challenging you to a duel! Get out here and fight me!" After speaking his challenge, Alcander waited for several long minutes until it became obvious that Leon wasn't coming.

While Alcander had been watching the door, Marcus had been standing behind him keeping an eye on the rest of the tower. He figured it would be natural for some of the Snow Lions to come to the windows to see what was going on, but he didn't see hide nor hair from anyone within the tower. Just as Alcander readied himself to shout his challenge again, Marcus stopped him.

"Hang on, something's off here..." Marcus began walking up to the door.

"You don't want to wait for the traditional three challenges before knocking?" asked Alcander in mild surprise.

"... I don't think waiting will change anything..." Marcus muttered, barely loud enough for Alcander to hear him without straining.

Marcus expected the door to be locked and tightly sealed given the previous day's events, but it swung open with barely a single touch, leaving the third-tier noble standing in the doorway looking a little confused for a moment.

Alcander walked up behind him, staring into the empty entryway in front of them.

“Want to go see what’s up?” Marcus asked him.

“Sure,” he responded while readying his training ax with an enormous smile on his face.

‘I’m getting that duel, one way or another...’ he thought to himself.

The two nobles wasted no more time and burst into the first-tier common room. They didn’t quite know what to expect, but the empty room that greeted them certainly wasn’t it.

“Huh...” grunted Alcander in bewilderment. “Where the hell are they?”

Marcus didn’t respond verbally, instead quickly checking the rest of the floor. The bedrooms were locked up tight, but it was easy enough for the two third-tier mages to tell they were just as empty as the common room.

They checked the rest of the tower, or at least, whatever wasn’t locked. This basically meant just the second-tier common room, but it was enough to confirm that the tower was completely deserted.

When they returned to the first floor, they were quite taken aback when they found two people poking around in the first-tier common room. Marcus reached for his sword while Alcander did likewise with his ax, but they froze when they saw who these two people were: Asiya and Valeria.

These two ladies had come to the tower for the same reason Marcus and Alcander had, to try and figure out what was going on with the Snow Lions. When they heard footsteps coming down the stairs, they had also reacted in the same way, by drawing their weapons. Asiya’s saber and Valeria’s glaive were pointing directly at Marcus and Alcander, and when the two men slowly let go of their weapons, the ladies did likewise.

After a moment of silence, Marcus said, “The tower’s empty. We just checked...”

“Huh...” answered Asiya.

A long awkward silence followed with the four staring each other down. Eventually, Valeria and Asiya glanced at each other, slightly nodded, then walked back out the door. Marcus and Alcander waited a few minutes for them to leave, then looked at each other and shrugged, fighting the urge to break out into laughter. They, too, made to leave the tower. They hadn’t learned much coming here, but they at least knew that the Snow Lions weren’t the cowards the Deathbringers claimed them to be. If they were, the tower wouldn’t be empty; rather it would be full of Snow Lions too scared to leave.

But that still left the question of just where the Snow Lions were hanging in the air. No one who visited that tower could do more than guess.

—

Dinner came and went with still no sign of the Snow Lions. The Deathbringers were still in celebratory moods, especially without their rival unit present, but a day in the capital had been enough for them to get the rowdiness out of their systems and keep things quiet and civil during the meal.

That quiet civility didn’t carry over to when they returned to their tower where they continued the party they had started the day before.

It wasn't until Monday that the other units began to suspect that something was truly wrong with the Snow Lions, something more substantial than simple cowardice, as the unit didn't appear for morning training.

None of the knights or instructors present seemed to care, proceeding with the first lesson in making sure the trainees knew how to use their medical gear. For several hours, the trainees' heads were filled with nothing but bandages, tourniquets, and healing spells. This would be enough to stop bleeding and keep a fellow legionary alive if they were wounded, should a medic not be around to do the job.

The third-tier trainees were largely excluded from this training, though. As with Basic Combat, it was rightly assumed that they already knew far more than the instructors could teach them in only a week. Because of this, the instructors wanted them to help teach their fellow trainees, but there was still little for them to do during Monday's First Aid class.

Naturally, this led the third-tier nobles to separate themselves from the group of a thousand or so trainees and talk amongst themselves. At first, they only spoke about what they had done over the past weekend, what they planned to do over the upcoming weekend, and jokingly threatened each other's units with the seizure of their banners.

However, all the myriad conversations between the third-tier nobles eventually turned to the Snow Lions. It had been long enough that it was difficult to simply write it off as mere cowardice, as their Senior Instructor would've dragged them here to the class regardless of their own personal feelings or how ashamed they might be at the loss of their banner. Fueling the mystery, the empty tower found by Marcus, Alcaender, Valeria, and Asiya became known to the rest of the nobles.

Of course, none of the other nobles could do anything more than speculate on the Snow Lions' whereabouts. A few of them asked their Senior Instructors if they knew anything, but they found no answers with them.

'Who cares where the Snow Lions are?!' thought Gaius. *'If they have any brains at all, they'll never come back!'*

Tiberias was quite relaxed about the entire affair; the disappearance of the Snow Lions didn't concern him in the slightest. *'Keep running, little barbarian. No matter where you go, you won't escape me...'* he thought to himself with the assuredness of a man who felt that the capture of his prey to be inevitable.

Given how utterly unexpected a unit going missing was, especially with how completely unconcerned the instructors were, no one was surprised at how it caught the attention of the entire training battalion.

When afternoon classes started, no one expected the Snow Lions to show up, and for the most part, they were correct. In Leon's enchanting class, Valeria had continued to sit in the back, but Gaius had made the decision to join her seeing as Leon wouldn't be around to spoil his mood. He spent the minutes waiting for the enchanting instructor to show up boasting about the part he played in the assault on the Snow Lions' tower.

"... and they were pushed all the way to the second floor! How pathetic is *that*? Well, in the end, Linus seized their banner, so we good-naturedly decided to call it quits. Beating them is one thing, after all, we didn't want to completely obliterate them!" Gaius was so into telling the story that he didn't notice how

disinterested Valeria was. Granted, Valeria's demeanor was just as stoic, icy, and detached as it nearly always was, so even if Gaius had been paying attention, he might not have noticed how little she cared anyway.

But then, something happened that caused Valeria to seemingly straighten up and almost jump out of her seat. No matter what Gaius was doing, it would've been impossible for him to miss that.

"Are you alright, my lady?" he asked. Valeria's gorgeous blue eyes were staring at the front of the classroom, and when Gaius followed her gaze, his sight landed on Leon, calmly walking through the door and making his way to the back of the room. His movements were watched in stunned silence by all the other trainees in the room.

Gaius had taken Leon's usual seat so he could sit next to Valeria, leading Leon to send him a momentary glare before taking a seat just across the central aisle. For several seconds, Gaius could only stare in shock at seeing Leon nonchalantly sit down and patiently wait for the instructor. When the shock wore off, though, his face contorted into a hideous scowl and he began to emit trace amounts of killing intent.

After a moment, Gaius immediately clamped down on his emotions and controlled his aura, restraining his killing intent, but it didn't change anything. Every few seconds, Valeria would glance over at the as-usual stoic and dispassionate Leon. Eventually, her curiosity got the better of her and she decided to get up and move over to sit next to Leon.

"My lady, where are you going?" asked Gaius in a surprised and faintly dismayed voice. He knew that she was joining Leon at his table, but he held on to the slim hope that his voice would remind her of his presence and how rude it would be to walk away from him so abruptly—his own recent rude and inconsiderate behavior not once crossing his mind.

Valeria barely acknowledged his question, merely whispering "Good day..." to him without even slowing down and gracefully sliding into the seat right next to Leon.

Gaius clenched his teeth and curled his hands into fists, but he took a deep breath and suppressed his violent rage. Despite his attempted emotional control, his face still contorted in anger making his feelings on the matter quite evident.

Leon nodded to Valeria in greeting when she took her seat, which she stoically returned. After a moment of silence, and without allowing a single crack to appear in her own indifferent expression, she quietly asked, "And where have *you* been?"

Leon slightly raised an eyebrow in confusion at her question. It took him a moment to respond as he was caught completely off-guard; Valeria had barely ever spoken to him before, despite their frequent duels and near constant company during this class.

"Away," he said.

Valeria quickly stole a glance at him with her eyes narrowed in displeasure. "'Away'?" she asked, clearly wanting more details.

"Away," he repeated.

Knowing she probably wouldn't get anything more out of him, she turned her head back to the front of the classroom with a "Hmph!" and neither spoke again during the rest of the class.

There were similar expressions of shock throughout the campus when the Snow Lions arrived, though only about a dozen of them had accompanied Leon to their afternoon classes—and none of them were of the first-tier. The most extreme reactions came from the classes where both Snow Lions and Deathbringers were enrolled, where a couple fights were almost started from glares alone.

But, everyone controlled themselves with the Academy's Instructors present. Fighting wasn't allowed in the classrooms, after all. And besides, nearly everyone involved was noble and had their reputations to consider, so the Snow Lions carried themselves with as much grace and dignity as they could muster in the face of the Deathbringers.

On the inside, most of them wanted nothing more than to tear into the Deathbringers in revenge, but Castor and Leon had made it *abundantly* clear how they ought to behave while they were far away from the majority of the unit who were spending the first few hours after lunch meditating in their camp.

The surprises continued that day, as once the afternoon classes were over and it was time for the trainees to eat dinner, the Snow Lions were absent again. A few curious souls, including Valeria and Alcander, investigated their tower that night and found that it was just as empty as it was the last time they had checked in with the Snow Lions.

The unit had disappeared again!

Chapter 88: Where They Were

On the night of the Deathbringers' assault on the Snow Lions, the three instructors had arrived at the Snow Lions' tower to find it deserted and the banner missing. After tearing through the tower, they confirmed their initial findings and met back in the first-tier common room to discuss the matter.

"Couldn't find the third-tier mages, either..." said one of the flabbergasted instructors.

"Where could they possibly have gone?!" asked the other in an angrier tone than the first, but still just as confused.

"Wherever they've gone, it doesn't seem to be for good," said the Senior Instructor. When he had first seen the missing banner, he had been thrown headfirst into a pit of rage and didn't stop to properly analyze the bedrooms. But after a few minutes, his head cooled and he took a second look while the other two instructors searched the upper floors. "They left many of their personal effects, like clothes and even silvers. They'll be back soon enough, and when they are, they'll all run the circuit until they fucking die!"

Almost as if it were given a cue, the door of the tower opened. The eyes of the instructors immediately darted over to see who had opened it, and they locked gazes with Aemilius, one of the second-tier mages who accompanied Castor to the Knight Academy.

"You!" shouted the Senior Instructor, his cool head immediately heating up again with a Snow Lion before him. "Where the fuck is everyone else?! And where the fucking fuck is the damned banner?!"

"Sir... we, uh..."

“Speak up, damn it!”

“We lost it! The Deathbringers stormed our tower and seized our banner!”

With Aemilius’ words, all three instructors fell silent in shock. This would be the fastest in the history of the entire Knight Academy that a unit had lost its banner! Not even a full month had passed since the training cycle had begun!

And this humiliation happened to *their* unit. Most of the third-tier nobles treated their banners and the seizure of them as a game, but it was for more to the Instructors. They stayed in those training units for longer than a single training cycle and had a far greater attachment to the banners than the trainees did, after all.

“Sir, Castor, Alphonsus, and Leon came to a decision about how to deal with this, I’ve been asked to lead you to them,” said Aemilius.

It took a moment for what he said to sink in for the Senior Instructor, but when it did he was as livid as he could possibly be. “... *Lead me* to them?! Who the fuck do they think they are?! They should be the ones who come to meet me! Fine, whatever. I’ll go to them. And they will experience hell...”

The Senior Instructor radiated a potent killing aura, and Aemilius had to fight for a few seconds to keep his legs from turning to jelly. After seeing him struggle, the Senior Instructor restrained his killing intent so the young man wouldn’t have to constantly fight against it, and Aemilius led the three instructors out of the tower and off into the woods.

About twenty minutes and several miles later, the four found themselves in the western mountains. The mountain range wasn’t that big, relatively speaking, but it was certainly large enough to get lost in and contained a veritable maze of valleys, gorges, and cave systems.

It was to one of these hidden gorges that Aemilius took the instructors. It was quite beautiful, with vivid green grass, tall trees replete with leaves, and a crystal-clear stream. Set into one of the rocky walls were a series of caves that led all the way up to the top of the gorge, and it was in the largest cave closest to the ground that the instructors found the Snow Lions.

Most of the first-tier trainees were sitting and resting in a fairly spacious cavern about fifty feet from the entrance. Looking around at them, the instructors could tell that few of them were particularly happy about the current arrangements. There was some light conversation, but most of the first-tier commoners looked defeated and depressed and were simply sitting in silence. A couple of them didn’t even look up when the instructors arrived.

The second-tier trainees were further into the cave in an adjacent cavern. They hardly looked happier than the first-tier trainees, but they were at least active and busy taking inventory of whatever they had brought from the tower. Training weapons and healing spells were the two big ones, but there was also enough cloth and wood to build a few crude tents. It wasn’t much, but the instructors were still quietly impressed that they had brought even this much.

In the smallest cavern at the back of the cave, the instructors finally found the three third-tier mages. Castor and Leon were enthusiastically making plans—or at least, Castor was quite enthusiastic; Leon was

his usual stoic self. Alphonsus was listening in to their conversation, but he seemed to prefer to sit a few feet away and sulk rather than participate.

“What is all *this*?” the Senior Instructor demanded upon arrival.

“We’re moving out here, Sir!” responded Castor. He then continued, going into the why before the Senior Instructor could even ask. “After we lost our banner to the joint Deathbringer-Black Viper assault, we came to the decision to set up somewhere that will be difficult to find, let alone assault.”

“We didn’t decide on shit...” Alphonsus bitterly mumbled, causing Castor to briefly glare at him before turning back to the Senior Instructor.

“This place was found by Leon last week and it was his idea to come out here, Sir, and I liked it. And since *I’m* in charge of the Snow Lions, we go where I want us to go,” Castor said.

The Senior Instructor could tell that his last sentence was just another way to tell Alphonsus to deal with it, so he didn’t argue semantics about who was in charge. In fact, his anger at the unit losing their banner had nearly vanished after seeing how far they were going in response to their miserable defeat.

He took a seat on a nearby rock while the other two instructors waited by the cavern’s entrance. “So, what’s your next step?” he asked.

“Well, Sir, we’re working on setting up a few water runes to give us access to at least some clean water without relying on the stream outside. We got very lucky finding these caves; they seem tailor-made for a unit of about our size to hide out in...”

The Senior Instructor was well aware that the presence of these caves was not down to luck. When the mountains and forest were built, a great many hidden places for the units to establish themselves in were scattered around the entire Academy’s training grounds. It was the units that found and exploited these ‘natural’ forts that typically excelled during the unit field training exercises.

While there was still some work to be done to the cave system to make it habitable, most of the hardest work had already been done. There was enough room for the entire unit to live comfortably with a modicum of privacy, as well as pre-built baths and toilets—though they lacked the water runes they needed to work.

Beyond getting their water running, they would also need to conceal and fortify the caves, which the Senior Instructor would be only too happy to show them how to do over the next few weeks. The loss of the banner still infuriated him, but given how much initiative the Snow Lions were now showing—the unhappiness of the trainees notwithstanding—he couldn’t really be angry at them.

“We’re also working on getting some tools out here to help with what we need to do. I was planning on sending some people out with a few thousand silvers to get what we need in the forums tomorrow,” continued Castor. “This place isn’t much, but it’s where we’ll be when we’re not in class.”

After a moment of thought, the Senior Instructor said, “No. You’re not going to go to meals or morning classes anymore.”

The three trainees gave him confused and surprised looks when he said this; Alphonsus in particular looked like he was about to argue until he went blue in the face. However, the Senior Instructor continued after his short pause, cutting all three off before they could speak.

"I'm invoking the Centurion's Rights of Command. This will give me the full authority to remove you from your classes and teach you wherever and however I see fit." As he was talking, he sent a meaningful look to one of the other instructors, who nodded and left to inform the higher-ups about the Senior Instructor's decision. "The Legate was considering banning the Centurion's Rights of Command, but he fortunately hasn't. That being said, the policy can only be called upon for a unit that has lost its banner.

"Additionally, this will give me the ability to requisition what you need to live outside of the tower. That means meals will be brought to the tower and you'll need to organize some people to go and bring them back here. Tools will also be provided for you. However, this also means that the entire unit loses their weekend privileges, so no more going into the capital on Saturdays and Sundays. From now on, we'll be training as much as possible. I will make men out of all of you boys, and we won't stop until the banner has been retrieved!"

The Senior Instructor gave the three third-tier mages a sinister smile. The Knight Academy gave a great amount of leeway for the third-tier trainees to shine, but these three had lost their banner due to almost non-existent leadership. With the Senior Instructor now taking full charge, that short time of lacking leadership was now over.

"Sir?" asked Leon, speaking for the first time since the Instructors had arrived. "What about our afternoon classes?"

"Magical Theory is just time set aside for meditation at this point. Those who attend it can easily do that here. Beyond that, if the trainees want to attend any other classes, that should be fine, but you three need to make sure they don't leak the location of these caves, understand?"

"Yes, Sir!" Castor answered immediately. Leon nodded, responding nonverbally. Alphonsus barely responded at all, only nodding when both Castor and the Senior Instructor glared at him.

"Alright! No time like the present to get started!" shouted the Senior Instructor. It was time for him to show these boys how to get their camp set up!

Over the next few hours, he guided the trainees through setting up proper water runes for their toilets and baths. Since Leon and a few others had taken enchantment classes, they did most of the work on that front.

After getting their water situation squared away, the Snow Lions got to work setting up where they would sleep. The supplies they brought with them were turned into a few large tents and set up in the biggest cavern in the cave system, allowing the seventy-six first-tier trainees to sleep relatively comfortably. The second-tier trainees would sleep in the second largest cavern under similar circumstances, but each person would get more personal space compared to the first-tier trainees. Leon, Castor, and Alphonsus each got their own small cavern to sleep in; despite how prohibitive these caverns were, they still had the most personal space out of the entire unit.

Once all that was taken care of, the instructor sent to the administration building returned. Everything needed to get meals to the Snow Lions' tower had been taken care of, and several trainees were organized to get the food and bring it back to the caves. They were led by Leon and included Henry, Charles, Alain, Bohemond, and Matthew.

After they finished that meal, the instructors left, and the Snow Lions almost all immediately went to sleep. With the loss to the Deathbringers and the move to these caves, the Snow Lions were exhausted and slept so long that the Senior Instructor had to start waking them up when he returned Sunday morning.

Leon and his group of a dozen or so Snow Lions returned to their tower to fetch the unit's breakfast and found a number of much-needed tools that had been requisitioned for their use with the food. After eating, the Senior Instructor began guiding them to properly fortify their caves using those tools. By the end of the day, the front entrance to the cave system had been sealed off and concealed from the rest of the densely vegetated gorge.

All this work helped the Snow Lions get their mind off their defeat, and they were even feeling fairly good by Monday morning.

And then their training under the Senior Instructor started.

Chapter 89: First-Aid Week

On Monday morning, Leon grabbed a dozen trainees and made the trip back to the tower to pick up the Snow Lions' breakfast. He kept them moving as quickly and quietly as he could; he didn't think the tower was being watched, but he decided to be cautious anyway.

He left the group a few hundred feet into the tree line and personally scouted out the tower, only calling them to pick up the food when he was satisfied that no one was watching.

After the Snow Lions had eaten, their training began. The Senior Instructor had arranged for the materials he needed to teach first-aid to be delivered with the food. The same things taught to the rest of the battalion at the training field was taught in the Snow Lions' camp in the hidden gorge. The three instructors even had the three third-tier mages help out with the class—after ensuring that all three knew what they would be teaching, of course.

Leon wound up showing the five guys he usually hung around with how to properly apply bandages and tourniquets, as well as the application of healing spells. The former was practiced with the actual medical equipment, while the latter was practiced with simulated healing spells that only lit up with bright light when correctly activated. They couldn't heal the tiniest of splinters, but they could be used repeatedly, making them perfect for training and instruction.

After several hours of this, Leon led his group back to the tower to carry their lunch back to the camp, following which the Senior Instructor had the first-tier trainees head back into the caves to meditate.

It had only been two days since they lost their banner, so most of the second-tier trainees still felt too much shame to show their faces during afternoon classes. Consequently, most of them stayed in the caves and passed the time by joining the first-tier trainees in meditation. Castor and Alphonsus decided to do likewise.

However, Leon had no intention of missing his enchantment class. A handful of other second-tier trainees felt the same, so he led them back to the tower and gave them strict instructions to meet him back at the tower after classes were over. They didn't want to lose their camp's greatest strength—its hidden location—with a few moments of carelessness.

The group attended their classes, much to the astonishment of the other trainees. When the classes were over, the Snow Lions returned to their tower to meet Leon, just as he had instructed. Leon carefully looked around the tower to make sure none of them were followed, then led them all back to the camp, while carrying the unit's dinner that had already been delivered.

This was generally how the next week progressed. The Instructors and the third-tier mages would teach the trainees how to stop bleeding and apply healing spells in the morning. In the afternoon, everyone—save for Leon and a few others who still wanted to attend their afternoon classes—would meditate or train in their sword techniques.

There was one event that broke the new routine, though: One afternoon, Leon noticed that some of the second-tier trainees had been followed by spies from other units as they assembled at the tower.

In order to deal with this problem, he softly whispered to the group, "Head a few hundred feet into the forest. Make sure to move with purpose. You'll be followed, so make it look convincing that you're actually going somewhere. I'll be right behind you..." After he finished speaking, he calmly walked back into the tower, leaving the other Snow Lions a little confused and on edge due to the sudden predicament.

After waiting a few moments, the group of Snow Lions started walking off to the north-west of the tower. They walked quickly, not bothering to keep an eye on their surroundings. Instead, they started up a conversation about what they had done that afternoon, acting as if they were completely unaware of what was happening.

Leon allowed them to get a good head start, then quietly followed. The Steel Century, Crimson Tigresses, and one more unit Leon had not yet come into contact with, the Silver Legionaries, had all sent a second-tier mage to follow the Snow Lions back to their camp.

Leon doubted that the other Snow Lions would've noticed these spies if he hadn't, given their seeming proficiency at hiding among the trees and underbrush of the forest. However, Leon had spent almost his entire life hunting in a forest much denser and wilder than the one in the Knight Academy, so these three watchers from the other units stuck out to him like sore thumbs.

It took no more than three minutes for Leon to take care of the situation so silently that the other Snow Lions didn't hear a thing. He crept up behind the spies one-by-one while they were captivated with the other Snow Lions, and with a single slash of his training sword apiece, stunned them all into unconsciousness.

"We're good! Help me with them!" he shouted when the last spy had fallen, summoning his aimlessly walking unit mates. They carefully carried the three second-tier nobles back to the tower. The two noblemen from the Steel Century and Silver Legionaries were rather unceremoniously dropped at the door, while the lady from the Crimson Tigresses was carried inside and left on a chair in the entrance hall.

Leon and the group then grabbed the unit's dinner and made their way back to the Snow Lions' camp, with all of them alert for any more signs of uninvited guests.

Fortunately, Leon had taken care of the only spies, and the three units who sent them seemed to get the message and didn't try again. At least, they didn't try again that week.

The week ended with a scenario the Instructors ran each squad of Snow Lions through, ten trainees at a time. First, they were 'sent on a patrol' to the other end of the gorge, where they would find an 'injured' Snow Lion. After notionally treating the nonexistent wounds, the squad would have to carry the injured trainee back to the camp while keeping an eye out for the Instructors and the third-tier mages, who may attack them if they think things aren't going so well.

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"Keep alert and don't forget to call out if you see anything," said Hostilius, the second-tier mage leading Charles and the others through the course. He was one of the few second-tier mages descended from minor nobility that wasn't affiliated with any of the third-tier nobles. He was actually from a family of hereditary knights who served in the Praetorians, the Bull King's royal guard.

The other nine Snow Lions in his group nodded to him in acknowledgment, and they set out. They followed the stream west, toward the other end of the gorge, where their 'injured' comrade lay.

Hostilius' eyes continuously scanned everything around the group, desperately searching for the two instructors and three third-tier mages he knew were out there. He didn't need to search for the Senior Instructor, though, as he was right behind the group, watching and evaluating their every move.

"Spread out a little," Hostilius said as they put some distance between themselves and the camp. Their opponents wouldn't attack all at once, so it would be better to cover as much ground as possible. Charles, Henry, Alain, and another second-tier trainee spread out in a line to his right, while Matthew, Bohemond, and the last first-tier and second-tier mages in his squad spread out to his left.

But, for all his attention, he wasn't looking for the injured Snow Lion. He didn't really need to as the gorge wasn't so wide that they'd get lost or miss their objective, but it was certainly wide and densely forested enough for someone to hide in. If his squad wasn't vigilant, they could be attacked from the shadows without warning.

The walk to the other side of the gorge was uneventful, though it was the walk back that Hostilius was far more worried about.

"AARGH! HELP ME!" came the shout of someone rather unconvincingly pretending to be in pain.

"Over there!" shouted Hostilius, pointing toward the sound. The squad rushed over, but they did so with little caution or organization. In fact, once they saw the first-tier trainee on the ground in the middle of a clearing, they all gathered around to stare while Hostilius and one of the other second-tier mages began applying first-aid to the injured trainee, ignoring the rest of their surroundings.

"What's wrong, are you alright?!" asked the second-tier mage.

“Fuck no, I’m not! I’ve lost my arm!” the injured trainee shouted, indicating toward his clearly still attached right arm. A strip of red cloth had been tied about halfway up his bicep which was meant to indicate where the severed arm was supposed to end.

Hostilius reacted immediately and broke out a tourniquet and one of the fake healing spells they’d been training with, while the other second-tier mage ran his hands over the injured trainee’s body to check for blood.

“What the fuck are you all doing, standing there like slack-jawed idiots?!” shouted Hostilius to the rest of his squad, who were still watching this play out. “Keep an eye on our surroundings!”

Charles, Henry, and Alain moved the quickest, turning around and keeping an eye on the trees, though not without a slight reddening of their faces from embarrassment. The others followed suit, but the damage had been done, and the Senior Instructor growled with a malevolent look in his eye, “Charles, you just took an arrow to the left thigh.”

Charles simply muttered “Shit...” and fell to the ground.

“Ancestors damn it!” shouted the last second-tier trainee, who rushed to Charles’ side while pulling out bandages and a pseudo-healing spell of his own.

Fortunately, Hostilius finished tying the tourniquet on the injured trainee and finished up with a flash of light from his fake healing spell while the man attending to Charles ‘removed the arrow’, applied some bandages, and used his own healing spell, all without the squad taking any more casualties.

Neither Charles nor the injured trainee could walk, so Hostilius’ two other second-tier trainees slung both of them over their shoulders in a fireman’s carry and the squad made for the forest.

“Keep your eyes peeled!” shouted Hostilius. The other two second-tier trainees were now beside him, where before they were on the ends of the line, so now he was forced to rely more on the first-tier trainees than before.

Despite their attentiveness, just as Alain walked past a tree, Leon appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

Alain barely had time to reach for his training sword, let alone call out, before Leon’s own training sword was brought down on his shoulder. Alain fell with a shout of pain and Leon melted back into the forest.

Hostilius swore and had the squad form a circle around him while he tended to Alain. A few bandages and another healing spell later, and Alain was draped over Hostilius’ shoulders.

The squad breathed a sigh of relief when they made it back to the camp without any more casualties, and the three ‘injured’ trainees were set back on their own feet.

“You only took about fifteen minutes, not bad,” said the Senior Instructor in appreciation. “I mean, it isn’t good, either, but there’s always room for improvement. Henry, you’re the new casualty.”

Henry grimaced while the rest of the squad smiled and relaxed. The first-tier trainee they carried back gave the red cloth to Henry and went to rejoin his own squad while Henry ran back into the forest. One of the other Instructors would take charge of him.

This entire training drill wasn't very long, with every squad accomplishing it in ten to fifteen minutes. This allowed the entire unit to go through it several times over Thursday and Friday until every trainee had treated a casualty of their own and every squad made it through the course so well that the Senior Instructor didn't have to punish any of them by 'injuring' any more trainees during the exercise.

And with that, their first-aid training came to an end, and the unit couldn't be more excited about what was coming the next week: Small Unit Tactics, and the issuing of armor!

But before that came a weekend filled with nothing but weapons training and meditation to get ready for their first real classes in combat, rather than one-on-one duels. The Instructors also planned to have the first-tier trainees undergo some grueling physical training, to help their muscles adapt to magic and facilitate their advancement to the second-tier.

The first-tier trainees hated it at first, but they saw results almost immediately when one of their strongest first-tier trainees made the jump to the second-tier late Sunday afternoon. It was an incredibly welcome encouragement to the Snow Lions, as this broke the record for the fastest promotion of a first-tier trainee in the Academy's history, a significantly more appealing record for them to set than the last record they broke, the quickest loss of a banner.

Consequently, the trainees vowed to double down on their training and looked forward to the next week with bright eyes and smiles all around.

Chapter 90: Armor, Small Unit Tactics

Finally, the day came for the Knight Academy trainees to receive their armor. The other units had to go to the training field for their armor, but the Snow Lions simply returned to their tower, where they found several dozen large boxes waiting for them.

If they hadn't been accompanied by their Instructors, they would've swarmed the boxes in excitement, tearing them open in a manner more reminiscent of a riot than a cohesive unit receiving gear.

Instead, the Instructors had the Snow Lions organize themselves by tier and size, then had the third-tier mages pass out the armor. Leon, Castor, and Alphonsus had to roughly guess what size the trainees were and pass out armor accordingly.

As this was only the Knight Academy and not a place that expected to see actual combat, the armor given out was defective—unfit for any real battle. It could stand up against a couple hits of a training weapon, but any properly enchanted blade or arrow would pierce through it with no trouble at all. But the training armor was made from authentic materials and so was as heavy as the real thing. Training weapons were about as effective against it as a regular weapon would be against functional armor, so the Knight Academy could justify saving a little silver by using this armor instead, even if it was stretching the definition a little in calling it armor.

But all that didn't stop the armor from looking authentic. Every trainee in the unit was issued a red gambeson for padding, plus metal greaves and a leather bracer for their sword arm. Finally, every trainee was given a skirt made of leather strips to protect their legs from where their greaves ended to the bottom of their torso armor, as well as a simple metal helmet to cover their head but left their faces bare.

However, the armor that covered their torsos differed considerably depending on the trainee's power and effective rank, despite the rest of their gear being identical. The first-tier trainees were only given a chainmail shirt that covered everything from their upper bodies to just below their hips, plus their arms down to their elbows. The second-tier trainees were given armor made of tiny dark red metal scales, as well as a bright red sash around their waists. The armor given to the third-tier trainees were a series of interlocking metal plates much larger than the scales given to the second-tier trainees and providing a much more robust defense. They were also given black sashes to denote their rank.

This was the typical armor issued to members of the Royal Legion, to ensure that every soldier was adequately protected, though they could wear custom armor if they could afford to. Given what they were paid, most knights of the fourth-tier and up could absolutely afford better armor, though they were still required to wear their sashes or other highly identifiable marks so their subordinates wouldn't have trouble distinguishing them from their enemies in the chaos of battle.

Despite normal armor being fairly effective, Leon found himself profoundly disappointed in what he was given. As this armor was defective, it would be returned at the end of the training cycle and he would be issued new armor when his squireship began, but it still represented the quality of what he would gain. And it made him seriously regret not buying armor when he had the chance.

He immediately made the decision to inquire about custom-made armor the next time he was in the city.

It took about twenty minutes for all the trainees to get into their armor. However, there were still several unopened boxes waiting for them. They weren't filled with food, as Leon had already led a team to fetch their breakfast earlier in the morning.

Castor nodded to several of the waiting second-tier trainees, who immediately opened the boxes. Inside, they found several dozen short bows and hundreds of arrows. Each arrowhead had been made with the same white metal as their training weapons, so they knew exactly what they were for.

Both Leon and Castor wore wide smiles when they glanced inside those boxes, though Alphonsus chose to remain aloof. He had no love for bows, preferring to fight with swords where he could see his opponent.

But Castor held a much different attitude. He recognized the advantage that range would give them in battle.

"All we lack now are shields..." he muttered just loud enough for the Senior Instructor to hear.

"Those come later when we start running you lot through larger-scale training," he responded.

Leon and a few second-tier trainees passed out the bows and arrows, and once they were finished, the Snow Lions took off back to their camp.

"First thing first! Who here can shoot a bow?!" asked the Senior Instructor as soon as they returned. Leon smiled and stepped forward, as did about two dozen other trainees, including Castor and ten second-tier trainees. After the Senior Instructor passed them a bundle of training arrows and a bow each, there were still fifteen bows remaining.

“Pick fifteen more,” the Senior Instructor told Castor, “though it hardly matter who, you’ll eventually get enough bows for everyone.”

“Who wants to learn how to shoot?!” shouted Castor to the Snow Lions.

Charles, Matthew, Bohemond, Hostilius, and five more trainees stepped forward. Castor randomly grabbed six more trainees of the second-tier, and the Senior Instructor gave each of them one of the remaining bows and arrow bundles.

Leon, Castor, and the Senior Instructor took over teaching archery to those with bows, while the other two instructors went with Alphonsus to run the rest of the Snow Lions through some sword drills. The Instructors kept at it for about an hour and a half when they transitioned to teaching the trainees about actual tactics and formations—most of which included archery—they would be expected to be familiar with if they were assigned to light infantry roles in the Legion.

This meant navigation in harsh environments, marching formations, and quickly establishing a defensive line in case of attack.

For the first three days, it was all archery lessons and tactical theory, but on Thursday, they put that theory into practice.

The exercise was simple: The Snow Lions would ‘patrol’ the gorge, walking from one end to the other, in squads of ten. This time, the third-tier mages would directly participate, unlike during the first-aid drills. The Instructors would watch these patrols, offering critique as they did so.

Unfortunately for the trainees, a few of the groups were failed by the Instructors during these patrols, usually from being unable to maintain a good marching formation.

Normally, such a small patrol would move through the forest in one of two formations: the first, a pair of staggered columns that moved quickly but was prone to flanking without other squads to support them. The second was a wide wedge that covered much more ground but was also easier to see by their enemies and harder to keep under control. The squad leader relied a lot more on the second-tier trainees acting as his men-at-arms in the latter formation.

The squads that failed couldn’t keep their spacing right, or trainees would wander too far outside of their assigned position and the leaders of the patrol weren’t attentive enough to correct them.

Needless to say, the Instructors were fairly harsh with their punishments. The offending trainees couldn’t run the circuit around the tower anymore, so the Instructors had them do squats in full armor while carrying logs or small boulders. Sometimes, if the Instructors felt like it, the trainees would be forced to run around a clearing that had begun forming around the mouth of the cave.

By the time the punishment was over, the trainees would invariably look half-dead.

Castor made great efforts to get the Snow Lions up to snuff, constantly reminding the second-tier trainees of their responsibilities and organizing additional training after the Instructors had left for the day. Leon wasn’t so zealous, but he certainly helped wherever he could in his own subdued way. This mainly manifested in training the first-tier trainees who weren’t running the patrol course in slightly more advanced sword styles.

The behavior of these two greatly impressed the Senior Instructor. He had been given a good first impression of Leon when he motivated some of the first-tier trainees to stay running with the group on the very first day of the training cycle, as well as not being a dick and cutting the line for dinner later that evening. His opinion of Castor wasn't so positive at that time, but neither was it particularly bad. He was just another third-tier noble to the Senior Instructor.

But the both of them had really started stepping up to the leadership role that the Knight Academy expected of them, Castor especially.

However, Alphonsus was starting to become a problem. One of the squads that had performed miserably during some of the first patrol exercises was one that he had led, an unconscionable failure for a third-tier nobleman. Alphonsus barely seemed able to tolerate their living conditions, often complaining to his second-tier followers about the lack of amenities available to someone of his station.

Castor had attempted to get him to come to terms with their living situation, or at least to stop being so overt about his displeasure as his attitude was carrying over to many of the other trainees. Alphonsus and his subordinates barely participated in the training, doing what was required of them but not sparing a single second after.

Mostly, they stayed in the cave and sulked, much to Castor's frustration.

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At the same time, the other nine units were doing largely the same drills, though with a significantly lower intensity. In fact, by the end of that week, the absence of the Snow Lions was no longer something that most of them thought about. The only real reminder they had of it was the sight of the Snow Lion banner rolled up and rather unceremoniously attached to the Deathbringers' banner upon the wooden platform during morning training.

But, a few of the third-tier nobles did miss the Snow Lions. In fact, it was only two of them that truly held strong feelings on the subject: Valeria and Alcander. Their reasons were basically the same, Valeria missed having someone so close to her own skill level to spar against, while Alcander desperately wanted to duel Leon himself. That Leon refused to skip his enchantment classes made it that much more difficult for the two of them to forget their desires, though Leon would always vanish after the first class of the afternoon which made challenging him somewhat difficult.

Since the Snow Lions were nowhere to be found and the Deathbringers seemed to be in no hurry to find them, the rest of the trainees had started to pay attention to a new source of drama. Over the previous weekend, a trainee in the pointlessly and dramatically named Blood Eagles had started a fight with another trainee from the Black Vipers, Tiberias' unit. That fight had escalated into a brawl that dragged more than five others from both units into the mix.

There wasn't any official retaliation from either side since then, but the air between the two units was tense enough that their Instructors and the knights assisting them started putting them right next to each other during morning training to stoke the fires of their conflict.

And those fires grew fast. There would've already been fighting had the knights not intervened by telling the units to save it for when training was over.

But, since the third-tier nobles who led those units hadn't gotten past some jokes and friendly teasing about paying a visit to the other's tower, there hadn't been much actual progress in the conflict—especially since Tiberias didn't particularly care about seizing banners.

This certainly wasn't nearly so dramatic and exciting as the Deathbringers attacking the Snow Lions on the streets of the capital or storming their tower, but it was more immediate, so it easily covered up for the missing Snow Lions.

But just because almost everyone else in the Academy had stopped paying attention to their conflict didn't mean it was over and done with. Castor, Leon, and Alphonsus met many times to talk about when they would take their revenge against the Deathbringers and steal back their banner.

Alphonsus wanted to retrieve it as soon as possible, then move back into their tower with their honor and dignity restored. Leon and Castor, however, were of slightly different minds. They could see how much improvement the other Snow Lions were making out in the gorge, and they wanted that to continue—not to mention their own general ambivalence toward such an esoteric concept as honor. Plus, the Deathbringers would be unable to retaliate against them if they didn't know where the Snow Lions were, so returning to their tower wasn't on their minds.

With both of the other third-tier mages advocating for more training and less immediate action, Alphonsus only grew more depressed, bitter, and quiet, until he eventually stopped talking to Castor altogether, saving his words for the occasional unflattering comment he slung at Leon when the latter wasn't around.