

Storm King 91

Chapter 91: Patrol Training

The second week of Small Unit Tactics started off with a pleasant surprise. When Leon's group had gone to get Monday's breakfast, they found a few extra boxes which contained enough bows and training arrows to equip the rest of the Snow Lions!

Leon passed out the new bows with a slight smile on his face as soon as his group returned to the gorge, not even waiting until after breakfast.

Starting that week, he and those few other Snow Lions who accompanied him to afternoon classes had made skipping their second class of the afternoon official, something that Leon had already been doing. Leon didn't truly care about his reading class as he had only chosen it to fill time in a quiet way. The other trainees had done similar, taking the class that was more important to them first, so losing that second class wasn't that big of a loss.

They spent that extra time training with the rest of the unit, running extra squad exercises. The Snow Lions had practiced patrols enough that the Instructors saw fit to add in a few new elements to their training, those being a squad-on-squad battle.

Basically, one squad would post up on the other side of the gorge, while the other would launch an attack on them. The Instructors had the third-tier mages lead a few squads themselves, rather than assist with running the exercise. Of course, they would only fight against other squads with third-tier trainees in them, otherwise there would be little point; they'd steamroll any other squad of comparable size that lacked a third-tier mage.

To that end, the third-tier mages were allowed to choose the members of their own squads. Alphonsus and Castor both chose a pair of second-tier mages whose families served theirs, but that was expected and so surprised no one. In this respect, Leon actually had more freedom. His lack of connections in the nobility meant he could essentially choose any other second-tier trainee that had stood out to him that wasn't already on Alphonsus' or Castor's side.

In the end, he chose Hostilius, the son of a Praetorian, and an eighteen-year-old man named Obellius. What threw Leon for a bit of a loop was finding out that Obellius wasn't actually noble, as Leon had initially assumed when first learning everyone's faces and names in the first few days of the training cycle.

Instead, Obellius was the son of a wealthy merchant from the southern coast of the Bull Kingdom. His father had spent a considerable portion of his fortune to make sure Obellius had the finest training money could buy and even shelled out the silver for an expensive potion that was of enormous help when Obellius ascended to the second-tier.

Unfortunately, this also meant that Obellius needed substantially more time adjusting to his new second-tier strength, but it also made him one of the strongest second-tier mages in the Snow Lions that wasn't already affiliated with Castor or Alphonsus.

Leon filled out the rest of his ten-man squad with the expected five of Henry, Alain, Charles, Bohemond, and Matthew, plus two more first-tier trainees named Theoderic and Martin.

On Monday morning, Leon's squad was the first to undertake the training exercise as the patrolling squad, while Castor's squad would defend a position. After they were done, regardless of who won, Leon's squad would take the defense while Alphonsus would attack. Then Alphonsus would defend while Castor attacked.

And then the second-tier units would cycle through in a similar fashion.

"Everyone ready?" Leon asked, looking to the nine men at his right and left as they prepared to enter the forest in the gorge. Once he got an acknowledgment from everyone, he said, "Then let's go."

The squad entered the forest in a loose wedge, with Leon leading the way and the others in a rough row behind him. Hostilius and Obellius were on both ends of the line, securing the flanks and making sure no one broke formation.

The squad moved with about five to six feet between each member, allowing them to both cover plenty of ground and to form a defensive line if they felt the need.

But there wasn't a need; they came within sight of Castor and his squad after about ten uneventful minutes of trudging through the forest. Fortunately, Castor's squad had moved out about twenty minutes beforehand and seemed to have gotten a bit lax and inattentive in that time. Consequently, they didn't see Leon's squad approach, giving the attackers time to consider their options.

Leon silently halted his squad behind a line of shrubs big enough to shield them from view.

"Here's what we're going to do," Leon whispered, "Obellius, Theoderic, and Henry, you three will be our archers. You will make our first move by shooting as many of Castor's guys as you can. Try and target the second-tier mages if possible. You can get set up over there." Leon indicated a small cluster of trees to the side of the shrubs which had a decent line of sight on their target clearing.

When the three Leon singled out nodded back to him, he continued. "Hostilius, you'll take Alain and Bohemond and fall back a few hundred feet, then swing left and hit them in the flank after the battle begins. Try to stay hidden until things kick off, got it?"

"Got it," Hostilius muttered. He, Alain, and Bohemond silently ran back into the forest for a ways, then swung left relative to the clearing. Soon, they disappeared from view.

Leon had specifically built his squad for a maneuver just like this. Hostilius had proven himself quite competent in the last two weeks, so Leon put him in charge of the flanking action and gave him two of his strongest first-tier trainees. Obellius, meanwhile, was one of the more proficient archers among the Snow Lions. Leon figured he must have picked up his skills in the swampy and densely forested Southern Territories, which had a rich hunting culture among its upper-class residents. Just like Hostilius, Leon put Obellius in charge of two of his better archers.

"And that leaves you three," Leon said to Charles, Matthew, and Martin. "You're with me. We'll form a slanted line and try to keep Castor's guys in range of the archers and have their backs exposed to Hostilius."

"We got this," Charles said with a confident smile.

"Without a doubt," added Matthew.

Martin simply nodded.

“Then let’s get to it,” said Leon, his face breaking out into a smile of his own.

The four quietly walked around the shrubs they’d been crouched behind and started moving toward Castor’s still unaware squad. They weren’t too far away, only two hundred feet at the most. But, they were paying so little attention that it wasn’t until Leon made a gesture to his archers and the first three arrows fell upon them that they noticed Leon’s squad had arrived.

The armor the trainees were wearing did their jobs; the first three arrows didn’t do much damage and one even bounced right off the second-tier mage’s scale armor on impact.

“Those arrows came from over there!” shouted the second-tier mage who had been struck in the head. It was easy for him to identify where the arrow had come from and made even more so when Leon and his three guys stood up and started slowly walking toward the clearing.

“Don’t just stand there!” shouted Castor, “Get into line and go attack them!” Castor’s men had their own bows, but they were slung over their shoulders, so he figured it would be better to get his people moving rather than stop and switch weapons. The next three arrows from Leon’s squad showed him just how bad of an idea that was, stunning two first-tier trainees unconscious and leaving Aemilius—who, to the surprise of no one, Castor had put into his squad—with a stunned left arm. Fortunately for him, he was right-handed, but the arrows didn’t stop. In addition, Leon and his three squadmates had only moved about forty to fifty feet in their direction then stood and waited. It was clear Leon had no intention of giving Castor the straight fight the noble expected.

“You two! Get out your bows and shoot at them!” Castor shouted at the two nearest first-tier trainees. “Everyone else! Get in line!”

The eight remaining men in his squad scrambled into motion, with six forming a battle line and advancing toward Leon, while the two Castor shouted at hurriedly trying to pull their bows off their shoulders.

Three more arrows hurtled out of the trees, stunning another of Castor’s first-tier trainees.

Castor scowled, then started charging at Leon. It was a short enough distance that he didn’t need to wait for the rest of his squad, so he bolted out of the clearing and directly at Leon.

“Hrrah!” he shouted as he stabbed forward at Leon with his arming sword. Leon dodged it with ease, then countered with an upward slash. His attack missed, and the two third-tier mages locked each other down with a series of lightning-fast attacks, feints, and counter-attacks.

The others in Castor’s squad caught up in only a few seconds, and to them, it looked like it would be an easy win. After all, they only had to take out the three first-tier mages at Leon’s side, then eliminate his archers. However, they were so taken with the enemy in front of them that they completely missed Hostilius, Alain, and Bohemond who seemed to appear from nowhere right behind them.

In fact, to Castor’s squad, the three of them had appeared so suddenly that two first-tier trainees were stunned by Alain and Bohemond before they could even react, while the second-tier mage Hostilius targeted only stayed standing thanks to his armor absorbing Hostilius’ blow.

In that moment of panic that arose from being attacked from behind, Matthew, Martin, and Charles darted out from their positions and joined the battle at Leon's command. As they did so, the three archers behind them let loose another salvo, stunning the two archers Castor had left behind and hitting Aemilius in the thigh. This additional paralyzed limb left the second-tier mage vulnerable enough that he was dispatched by Charles and Matthew in short order.

With the advantage in both numbers and position, the last two of Castor's first-tier trainees fell after a brutally short skirmish and left Castor's last second-tier mage alone. But that wasn't to say he was helpless; in fact, Hostilius seemed a little overwhelmed by the man, to the point that he could barely get a hit on him after the first surprise attack.

But, Hostilius wasn't alone. He was now backed up by five first-tier trainees, who managed to use the second-tier mage's targeting of Hostilius to their advantage and struck him from all sides in the middle of one of his swings.

Despite his duel with Leon, Castor was able to see his squad fall. He knew he had just lost and there wasn't much he could do about it. So, he dodged one more of Leon's strikes by the skin of his teeth and started lowering his sword in surrender.

However, Leon wasn't the type to stop and wait for his opponent in a fight, so all he saw was Castor lowering his guard. Leon immediately lunged forward and stabbed the other man in the chest with his training sword. Castor's armor did its job, though, and he remained on his feet with both eyes open.

"Relax, Leon, I'm beaten!" he shouted before Leon could attack again. Fortunately, this got through to Leon who managed to stop himself despite being halfway through a follow-up strike.

With Castor's surrender, Leon's squad had won, not that there was any kind of prize other than bragging rights. The trainees began picking up and carrying the unconscious Snow Lions back to the clearing, where the three instructors had appeared. They had been watching both squads from a distance and had gotten a rough view of both sides' strengths and weaknesses.

The Instructors made their way to clearing and began attending to the stunned trainees, whipping out spells that could wake them up. Thanks to their armor, none of them had been hit in vital areas like the spine, so they were easily revived. While they woke themselves up, the Senior Instructor pulled Castor aside so they could have a chat about what he could improve for the next training exercise, such as being more attentive, organized, and to always have at least two or three archers at the ready. He would have a similar talk with Leon when they were done, though there wouldn't be as much criticism given he hadn't taken a single casualty.

While the Senior Instructor and Castor were speaking, Leon was walking around the clearing and checking out the location. After all, it was his turn to be on the defense, while Alphonsus and his squad would attack.

Chapter 92: Planning an Attack

"Good luck!" Castor said to Leon while giving him a respectful nod, which Leon returned. Castor then led his squad back to the caves to wait for his turn to go on the offense.

Once they had all gone and Leon's squad was left alone, Henry couldn't resist saying, "Ahhh, that was awesome!"

"Indeed, that was quite exhilarating," added Alain. No one really disagreed with them, as there were few things more exciting than a victory that came at little cost.

Hostilius, however, gave the two of them a slightly reproachful glare when they said it out loud. He preferred that they revel in their victory in *quiet* dignity, as he was doing. But, neither Henry nor Alain saw him, as he was too quietly dignified to say anything, especially since Leon didn't seem to mind their celebratory mood.

Leon gave them a few more minutes to enjoy their victory, but then it was time to get to work.

"Listen up!" he said, quieting everyone down. "My team will stick with close-range combat. Hostilius, your team will join Obellius' on ranged duty, at least for the first few seconds of battle. Fire off two shots, then reinforce my team at close range. Obellius, I want your team to keep firing your arrows as long as is practical and stay behind us. Everyone got it?"

No one questioned him. His last plan had seen them through a battle completely unscathed, after all.

"Good. Then keep quiet and alert. I don't want us to get taken off-guard like Castor was."

Leon, Charles, Matthew, and Martin took up positions watching the tree line while the other six readied their bows and stood a few feet behind them, close enough for their positions to be reversed at the drop of a hat if need be.

But, their caution went largely unrewarded. It took Alphonsus nearly twenty minutes to arrive, a long enough time for Leon's squad to grow restless and impatient. And when the attacking squad did arrive, Alphonsus didn't even try coming up with a tactic or strategy to win; his squad sauntered out of the forest and seemed almost surprised to see Leon's squad facing them.

Alphonsus wasn't particularly shocked. He probably knew where Leon's squad was, he just neglected to tell his squad, leaving them a little taken aback and hurriedly drawing their swords.

"There they are! Let's get them!" shouted Alphonsus, causing Leon to sigh and gesture to his archers, wordlessly telling them to open fire.

Six arrows whistled through the air and immediately knocked three of Alphonsus' first-tier trainees unconscious. Leon's squad fired another salvo before Alphonsus' squad was able to cover the distance between them, stunning one more first-tier trainee and a second-tier trainee.

Things proceeded quickly at that point. Leon tied down Alphonsus while Hostilius took on the one remaining second-tier trainee. Leon's first-tier trainees made quick work of their numerically inferior opponents, which then allowed them to gang up on the second-tier trainee. By the time he was taken down, Leon had already disarmed Alphonsus and had the noble at his mercy. Again, Leon's squad had taken no casualties, though it hardly felt like an accomplishment after Alphonsus' rather uninspiring display.

Alphonsus had been unable to do anything other than grit his teeth and keep himself from shouting in anger. He was barely able to maintain his dignity as a noble and keep his mouth shut. His team might've

fares better had he actually given them orders other than just 'let's get them', but that was a moot point with the battle already over.

"Do you yield?" Leon asked, his training blade at Alphonsus' throat.

Alphonsus remained silent, his eyes burning with shame and his jaw clenched tight. Leon gave a tiny shrug and dramatically pulled his sword back in as obvious a preparation for a final strike as he could manage to display.

"Fine!" shouted Alphonsus just as Leon's blade started its descent. "I... yield."

To Leon, it sounded like Alphonsus could barely spit out those words, but that didn't change the fact that the words were indeed said. He lowered his sword, while the instructors stepped out from the shadows of the forest.

Again, there wasn't much to say with Leon, given none of his squad members were knocked unconscious.

The same couldn't be said of Alphonsus, who received a much longer lecture about the importance of not showing his position until the last possible moment and actually using the bows his squad had brought along.

Leon's squad started making their way back to the camp.

"The Ancestors have granted us two great victories today," said Obellius.

His statement didn't sit well with Hostilius, though, who glared at him and grumbled, "The Ancestors didn't do a damn thing. We did this ourselves."

"Really?" asked Henry indignantly. "Do you have to be *that* guy?"

"Watch it, peasant," responded Hostilius.

"How about all of you cut that shit out right now?" Leon said with only a hint of killing intent, but a hint was all that was needed to shut them up.

"We just performed admirably, let's not start going for each other's throats, yeah?" added Bohemond.

"Whatever..." growled Hostilius, causing Leon to frown. He'd picked Hostilius to be in his squad because the second-tier noble had stood out from the rest of the second-tier trainees during the first-aid course and the previous week, not for his personality. In truth, though, Leon hadn't heard him speak that much and simply took that to mean the noble was the quiet and polite sort.

He started to regret the decision as Hostilius continued shooting glares at Obellius, who seemed deliberately ignoring the other man.

The next few minutes proceeded in tense silence while the squad walked back to the other side of the gorge. When they arrived, Leon sent them to continue practicing their archery; it was his use of the skill—as well as Castor and Alphonsus' lack thereof—that had given him such an advantage during the two exercises, and he wasn't about to let that advantage lapse.

But, they had done quite well, so he didn't mind when the first-tier trainees started slacking a bit.

Leon himself decided to get in some time training while waiting for Castor's squad to run through the patrol course. He wasn't particularly in the mood for meditation, so he simply practiced his fighting style while releasing magic into his blood. He didn't really need the practice; he would've gotten the same result had he meditated, but he just wanted to keep moving his body.

After about forty minutes, the other two third-tier trainees returned, and the squads reformed with second-tier mages in charge. It was now their turn to run through the patrol course.

While those squads were out doing so, it was expected by the Instructors that the third-tier mages would supervise the supplemental training of the rest of the Snow Lions. This mostly just meant they had to keep the rest of the trainees practicing their archery, a task they didn't really need to devote much attention to. Instead, the three young mages took to chatting amongst themselves.

Or at least, Castor did, while Leon mostly listened and Alphonsus rather pointedly stared disinterestedly into the distance.

"... but the way you emphasized your archers was truly eye-opening! I'd never even considered it!" said Castor, speaking quietly enough that Leon could hear him, but the nearby trainees couldn't.

"Using the all available tools is only common sense..." responded Leon.

"Yeah... I suppose it is..." said Castor with some embarrassment. "Well, the sword and spear were always emphasized in my training growing up, I guess that's all I really think about... Regardless, I'm thinking that we should start talking about how to regain our banner."

This last sentence got both Leon and Alphonsus' attention. It had been more than two weeks since their loss to the Deathbringers, and both third-tier mages were itching for some payback. Alphonsus, especially, as he had the impression that the unit might return to their tower if they manage to reclaim their banner.

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

"Well, we shouldn't attack this week. I'd like our second-tier trainees to get a few more runs of this training course before making our move. Plus, I want everyone to get properly used to their bows because I can guarantee that the other units aren't putting nearly so much emphasis on archery as we are."

"Reasonable," Leon said with an understanding nod. "Plus, the longer we wait, the more the Deathbringers will lower their guard."

"Right. But, we should also prepare for the possibility that they'll have the door under guard anyway. Maybe we ought to scout them out a bit beforehand?"

"Not a bad idea. If possible, we should attack at night and move as quietly as we can. If we can retrieve our banner with as few Deathbringers knowing as is feasible, all the better."

Alphonsus narrowed his eyes in displeasure at hearing Leon's suggestion. "What? We need to reclaim our lost honor! How would a night attack accomplish that?! We should attack them head-on, so they know who beat them!"

"Maximize our chances of success," Leon reasoned.

"I'm liking the idea of a night attack," Castor added. "But, we'll definitely need some extra time practicing before we're ready, I'd say."

"A little extra practice never hurt anyone," responded Leon.

Alphonsus turned away from the two of them with a faintly disgusted look, leaving them to their plans and strategies. He was truly regretting his decision to enroll in the Knight Academy. He just wanted to get away from that disgusting cave and go home to the Southern Territories. He'd already resolved to only stay in the Royal Legions as long as necessary for his knighthood.

"We should also get our squads locked in. Having semi-independent squads who can follow the plan and also take the initiative would be incredibly valuable," added Leon, ignoring the quietly sulking Alphonsus.

"Yes, let's get that squared away tonight. Do you have any suggestions for squad leaders? I have a few myself..." said Castor. He didn't specifically ask the question to Leon, but given how little both he and Alphonsus were paying attention to each other, it was clear he didn't expect Alphonsus to offer any names. And that was fine by him; it allowed him to stack another supporter or two of his own into leadership positions.

Leon and Castor continued deliberating over who to make squad leaders for another half hour. Leon only wanted both Hostilius and Obellius to lead squads of their own, to avoid having them in a squad with each other. Since he was only asking for two out of the seven spots, Castor happily accepted. The third-tier noble managed to secure four of the other squad leader positions for his own followers, Leon only stepping in when he tried to appoint a second-tier noble who had failed rather miserably in the first-aid training course. The two ended up compromising with another second-tier noble who wasn't affiliated with any of the three third-tier mages.

Since he was too busy sulking and feeling sorry for himself, none of Alphonsus' people received a squad of their own.

Leon also made plans to check out the Deathbringers' tower after his first class. The unit would still be busy with their second class during that time so the banner wouldn't be present, but he could still get the lay of the land around the tower and see if it matched the Snow Lions' tower in layout.

To complete their plans, they ended up asking the Senior Instructor several hours later if he would release the restrictions placed on the trainees forcing them to lose their weekend privileges if they retrieved their banner. He reminded them that he could only implement those restrictions because they had lost their banner, and if it were to be retrieved then the restrictions would have to be lifted whether he liked it or not.

Once their plans were complete, Leon and Castor announced to the entire unit their decision to retrieve the banner and how the trainees would be able to re-enter the city on weekends if they accomplished it. Every Snow Lion was energized by the announcement, throwing themselves back into their training to try to guarantee their success. Even Alphonsus' spirits were slightly raised, even if it was only due to the prospect of getting back into the city and out of the caves for a few hours.

Leon and Castor decided that the day of their raid would be a week from Friday, eleven days from then.

Chapter 93: Banner Raid

After eleven days of hard training, the Snow Lions were ready. It had been almost a month of living out in the caves, and though they had no intentions of leaving the gorge and returning to their tower anytime soon, they still wanted their weekends in the capital back.

And they wanted revenge on the Deathbringers. Revenge motivated some of the Snow Lions even more than the prospect of spending time in the city. Henry and Charles were not among those people, as they were far more interested in the capital than in revenge. Leon had watched with some concern as they, and several others to a lesser extent, started going stir-crazy after having been cooped up in those caves for so long.

"It's fuckin' time. Let's do this. Break those damned Deathbringers. Bring fuckin' death to *them*, then find some ladies in the capital," muttered a frustrated Henry.

His words fell into the ears of an agreeable Charles. "Absolutely. Get our fuckin' banner back, then get back to the city. Haven't seen Jeanne in almost a month. Think I might kill any Deathbringers in my way..."

"Don't go too overboard," said Leon. "I want this done quickly and quietly. Emphasis on *quietly*. All we need to do is stun any Deathbringers on the first floor, grab both banners, then leave. Easy as that."

"Assuming the banners are even still there," Hostilius cynically whispered a dozen or so feet away.

"Yes, assuming the banners are still there. I'm guessing they are. Not like they've been given any reason to move the banners so far," responded Leon, making Hostilius look away with a frown.

"Let's get this done. I'm sick of being stuck in this damned gorge," complained Henry. And he was in luck because not even five minutes later, Leon was joined at the front of the trainees by Castor and Alphonsus, both of whom looked absolutely ready and willing to seize back their banner.

"ARE YOU ALL READY?!" shouted Castor to the assembled unit.

"Fuck yes!"

"Yeah!"

"We're going to gut those bastards!"

Encouraged by the shouts of support from the first-tier trainees, Castor kept going.

"THOSE DEATHBRINGERS HUMILIATED US AND STOLE OUR BANNER! LET'S GO DO THE SAME TO THEM!" He didn't intend to keep it short, but he did anyway—mostly because he could tell that despite his words working up the first-tier trainees, not only were Leon and Alphonsus silently staring at the back of his head but the response from the second-tier trainees was significantly more subdued. He cut himself off just as he got going with a faintly embarrassed "FOLLOW ME!" and turned around to lead the Snow Lions out of the gorge.

The three Instructors stoically watched from the top of the gorge. They wouldn't interfere in the coming battle, but they would stick to the Snow Lions like a shadow and watch.

The second-tier trainees quickly dispersed among the first-tier trainees, wrangling them into something that resembled a marching formation. They moved through the forest in two columns, with the second-tier trainees making sure they were kept staggered from each other. The second-tier trainees also made damn sure to keep everyone quiet, to ensure they remained undetected as they approached their target.

The Snow Lions had set off just after the sun set and the Deathbringers' tower was only a few miles away. Consequently, they arrived much earlier than they had planned, so the third-tier trainees had them stop and wait about a quarter mile into the forest. Leon took his squad and moved forward far enough to see the door to the tower, but he advanced no further, sticking to the shadows of the forest.

After several more hours of the Snow Lions almost obsessively checking and re-checking their weapons and armor to pass the time, the final light in the tower's windows went out and Leon sent Alain back to report to Castor.

As soon as he received the message, Castor got everyone on their feet and moving. They rapidly approached the Deathbringers' tower, but Castor held them up at the tree line. The Snow Lions were still well concealed there, only a couple hundred feet from the tower; plenty close enough for the entire unit to sprint there in less than a minute.

Leon had already set out. He and his entire squad were huddled around the door, testing to see if they could open it. To his pleasant surprise, Leon found that he could push it open with no problems; the Deathbringers had neglected to lock their front door.

This didn't surprise Leon. The Snow Lions had been missing for weeks and none of the other units had started to fight in earnest, so the Deathbringers had probably felt there was no need to lock the doors. Plus, the locks on the front door of the towers were deliberately terrible. The Knight Academy administrators wanted those locks to slow down potential attackers rather than keep them out entirely. Had the door been properly secured, Leon still could've opened it, but he would've had to do so in a way that would alert the entire tower.

The locks on the bedrooms were the real deal though. Since the bedrooms were where the trainees would store their personal items, they were required to have robust locks.

Leon waved to Castor from the open door and silently led his squad inside to secure the entrance hallway. Castor and rest of the Snow Lions emerged from the tree line and sprinted as quietly as they could to the open door.

From there, the squads proceeded without talking. They had practiced this half a dozen times in their own tower over the past week and a half, so they were all well aware of exactly what they had to do. It had been correctly assumed that the Deathbringers would feel secure enough to leave their bedrooms unlocked, and four squads split up into eight teams to seize the first floor of the tower.

Ideally, the Snow Lions wouldn't have to go further than that. They could just leave the rest of the tower sleeping in blissful ignorance after stealing the banners, but both Leon and Castor felt that it was necessary to stun the already-sleeping Deathbringers on the first floor to keep them from waking up during their raid.

There were a few Deathbringers who were still awake when the Snow Lions' raid began. There were only two or three on the first floor, though. One rather diligent Deathbringer was silently meditating on his bed when the door to his bedroom opened.

The Deathbringer opened his eyes in surprise; everyone who slept in his room was already in bed, there shouldn't be anyone else who needed to open the door. What he found were five Snow Lions spilling into his bedroom. His eyes widened and he opened his mouth to shout, but the first Snow Lion who entered was the second-tier Hostilius who reacted far quicker than the Deathbringer did. Hostilius lunged forward with his already-drawn blade and stabbed the Deathbringer in the center of the torso, directly under the sternum.

The Deathbringer fell back into his bed, silent and unconscious. His body did make a little noise as it hit the mattress, but the rest of Hostilius' team had already used their own training blades to ensure that the other Deathbringers wouldn't stir.

Similar scenes were playing out in the seven other bedrooms on the first floor of the tower, and half of the Deathbringers' first-tier trainees were stunned into unconsciousness less than five minutes after Leon opened the door.

Leon himself led his squad into the first-tier common room alongside the other six squads. Upon seeing the room devoid of other life and both banners in the shrine, most of the Snow Lions couldn't help but smile. A few of them even had to stifle their own cries of excitement.

The second-tier mages wrangled the first-tier trainees together to get into their planned positions. Two squads of their best archers—one led by Obellius—faced the stairs and knelt, nocking an arrow at the same time. Anyone who appeared at the foot of the stairs would be in for a bad time. Three more squads were right behind them with swords drawn, ready to push past and engage anyone who might hypothetically get past the arrow barrage, with both Leon and Alphonsus keeping an eye on one of the two stairways.

Castor, meanwhile, went to work getting the banners out of the shrine. Aemilius, being the standard-bearer for the Snow Lions, had the most experience with this so he helped—or rather, he did most of the work. However, after having trouble extracting the Snow Lions' banner from its shrine during their own assault, Linus had taken the time to learn exactly how to operate the contraptions that held it in place. He'd gotten so good at it that despite the Snow Lions having no trouble extracting their own barely secured banner from the bottom of the shrine, the Deathbringers' banner proved much trickier.

It took a little elbow grease, but Aemilius and Castor started opening the locks in the shrine's dome, loosening the banner. Like the locks on the front doors, these were only meant to slow down an attacker rather than keep them out completely. However, just as the two Snow Lions undid the sixth out of twelve locks, every magic lantern in the tower turned on as bright as they were capable of and the shrine itself sent a high-pitched whistle through the entire tower.

"Shit," muttered Leon. His sentiment was shared among the other Snow Lions, all of whom knew that they had tripped some kind of alarm.

"We need to hurry it up, we're down to minutes here," said Castor. He was absolutely correct, the alarm sound from the shrine had died down after five seconds, but it—combined with the sudden extremely

bright lights—had woken the entire tower. After only fifteen seconds, the third-tier Snow Lions could hear some of the Deathbringers start getting up to investigate what had just happened.

“Castor?” Leon whispered.

“Just a few more...” answered Castor.

“... from downstairs...” The Snow Lions could hear the Deathbringers from the second floor walking to the stairs. It hadn’t been enough time for them to don their armor, but they were almost certainly armed with their training weapons.

About ten seconds later, the first awake Deathbringer stepped out from the stairs and was immediately stunned by an arrow to the chest, courtesy of Obellius.

“Good shot,” Leon said.

“Thanks,” Obellius said back. They weren’t too bothered with whispering anymore, since as soon as the arrow found its mark, one of the Deathbringers further up the stairs paled and reeled back in surprise. As soon as he scurried past the turn in the stairs, he started shouting about the tower being under attack by the Snow Lions.

Fortunately, that was also the moment that the Deathbringers’ banner finally came loose.

“Got it!” shouted Castor, grabbing the banner while Aemilius secured their own banner on his back.

“We’re leaving!”

Immediately, Leon and Alphonsus ran forward to block anyone from coming down the stairs while the rest of the Snow Lions ran past them back into the entrance hall.

Less than a minute later, two second-tier Deathbringers appeared at the top of each stairway and made eye contact with Leon and Alphonsus. Leon smiled and raised his training sword in an obvious challenge while Alphonsus simply glared up at the Deathbringers.

“Come on!” shouted Castor from the entrance hall. The rest of the squads had already made their way out, so Leon and Alphonsus were the only two Snow Lions left in the tower. They responded without delay, but Leon was a little disappointed he didn’t get the fight he had been looking forward to.

Seeing the two third-tier mages run, the second-tier Deathbringers hurtled down the stairs in pursuit. However, as soon as they turned around and ran into the entrance hall, they were faced with a Snow Lion archer squad, which let their nocked arrows fly. All ten arrows found their targets, knocking the four Deathbringers unconscious instantly. The Snow Lions then made a break for the tree line.

“Hold on!” shouted Leon as soon as they made it.

“What are you doing?!” shouted both Castor and Alphonsus.

“Showing them exactly who did this,” Leon said, smiling at Alphonsus. “Have everyone get out their bows and form a firing line. We can spare one or two salvos.”

Alphonsus couldn’t help but smile and look to Castor with expectation.

“... Sure, why not...” Castor said, hesitating a little at the change of plan.

“Haha! Yes!” shouted Leon. It was fortunate that the four unconscious Deathbringers in the entrance hall gave the rest of them pause because it took another minute or so for the Snow Lions’ second-tier trainees to get the unit into position and ready at the tree line.

In fact, Gaius, Linus, and Actaeon had all ran into the entrance hall just as the last Snow Lion was getting into position. They were a little confused, but after coming all the way downstairs and seeing the empty shrine, they knew exactly what had happened.

And they quickly came face-to-face with those who had stolen the banners when they emerged from the tower and saw a calm and serious Castor, a cheekily grinning Leon, and a smug Alphonsus looking back at them from the tree line.

“Loose!” shouted Castor as soon as the three third-tier Deathbringers were seen. At his shout, one hundred bows loosed their arrows at their unarmored opponents. Linus and Actaeon both suffered direct hits and fell unconscious before they could do much more than take a few panicked steps back towards the tower.

Gaius, however, had thrown himself back into a couple of the second-tier trainees still in the doorway, avoiding all but one arrow that struck him in the shin. Five additional second-tier Deathbringers were also caught in that hail of arrows, though only one was knocked out.

The Deathbringers hurriedly pulled back into their tower to get their armor, but it was almost ten minutes before anyone stuck their head out the door and by then, the Snow Lions were long gone. A few Deathbringers had watched them leave from the windows, but that wouldn’t do them much good as the Snow Lions ran back to their tower before running back to their camp in the mountains. They didn’t want to give any Deathbringers clues about where they had set up camp by showing the direction it was in, after all.

The Snow Lions made it all the way back to their caves in the gorge without incident and barely able to contain their excitement, as the Deathbringers most willing to follow them were either unconscious or—as was the case with Gaius—had a limb stunned by the Snow Lions’ arrows. Even the normally stoic and professional Instructors were affected by this celebratory atmosphere and had to wait a few minutes for their faces to stop proudly smiling and drop back into their usual stern and serious expressions so they could join their trainees.

Unbeknownst to anyone, these three men were not the only ones watching the Snow Lions; a pair of figures were standing on top of the opposite cliff. Had they been normal men, the Instructors wouldn’t have had any trouble seeing them, despite the darkness of near-midnight. However, these were not normal men. They were the two who resided in the immense stone tower in the center of Aeterna, and they were watching Leon with great intensity.

Chapter 94: A King’s Demand I

The Master and disciple pair from the center of the continent stood upon a wall of the gorge and watched as the Snow Lions returned with the two banners in hand. Leading them were Castor, Alphonsus, and most importantly, Leon.

“Master, may this disciple ask a question?”

“No need to be so formal, go right ahead.”

The normally stiff and exceptionally formal disciple took a deep breath and relaxed a little. He’d been learning under his Master for thousands of years now—an enormous abundance of time for the two to get comfortable around each other—but the old habits he made during his early years of instruction were hard to break.

“Is it... wise... to let that one grow without interference, given his heritage?” the disciple hesitantly asked while nodding at Leon.

“It’s fine,” replied the smiling and completely unconcerned Master. His tone was light and cheery, but there was a hidden edge to it that only someone like the disciple who had spent so much time around him could pick up on. He dutifully shut his mouth and didn’t speak up again.

But, intimidating his disciple into silence was the farthest thing from the Master’s mind. In fact, watching the progress Leon was making had lit a spark in him, reminding him of the last time he had faced down those of his lineage, the last time he had felt truly alive.

—

Nearly eighty thousand years before Leon was born, a great storm had appeared on the edges of the sea in the center of Aeterna. From the moment the plane had come into being, that sea had always been supernaturally calm. Not even the tiniest of ripples had ever been seen on its surface.

But that storm changed things. The storm itself wasn’t anything out of the ordinary for the people who lived at the edge of the sea; the Master who lived in the great stone tower in the middle of the sea would occasionally call forth rain and wind on a whim—though the vast majority would have no idea it was he who brought them. However, it soon became clear to those few who knew of the Master that this wasn’t one of his whimsical moments, as the wind turned into a howling gale and the sea began to roil and churn, kicking up enormous waves that crashed upon the beaches and swept away anyone who hadn’t gotten to safety out into the sea to drown.

The Master, sitting in his usual place at the very top of the stone tower, didn’t bat an eye at the cataclysmic storm that gradually surrounded the sea. Not even when pitch-black clouds rushed in to encroach upon the miles-high tower did he react. These clouds brought with them a torrential downpour, but not a single drop of rain ever touched the tower, or the man sitting at its summit.

It was only when he felt the rumble of distant thunder that he finally reacted by cracking the tiniest of smiles and glancing out to the horizon. In seconds, that distant thunder arrived, accompanied by hundreds of immense bolts of lightning, striking from the highest and thickest clouds onto the lower reaches of the tower.

Behind the still-calm Master, a man suddenly appeared. He was clad head-to-toe in gleaming golden armor—or at least, armor that appeared gold at first glance. With the tiny movements that accompanied his breathing, the color seemed to shimmer between various shades of white and gold, as if the armor contained the Thunderbird’s lightning sealed just under the surface. This sealed lightning was so strong that even the Master was impressed as he felt his hair start to stand on end.

This man clad in golden armor had youthful features and seemed as calm as if he were out for a relaxing stroll. His mouth was tilted into a smug and confident smirk that, with his grand attire and entrance, showed all the arrogance of a proud and powerful king.

The Master didn't need to turn around to know who this man was; the Storm King himself had finally come to pay him a visit. His subordinates had conquered the nations of Aeterna more than fifty years prior, but the Storm King had only arrived six months ago, during which time the Master had been sitting atop his tower, waiting for the King to come.

There was a brief silence. The Master was in no hurry to speak, and the Storm King clearly wasn't, either. After more than a minute had gone by with neither one acknowledging the other, the Storm King's pride could no longer contain itself and he broke the silence.

"Do you know why I've come, Grave Warden?" The Storm King's voice barely rose beyond a whisper, but the Master had no trouble hearing him despite the constant thunder.

The Master turned to the Storm King and smiled good-naturedly. "There's only one reason for a man, even a king as strong as you, to come here. You want something that belongs to me, something that the Great Lord Khosrow himself bestowed upon me to fulfill my mission. You now defy his last order, coming here to claim it for yourself." His tone was upbeat and carried no hint of malice, but the killing intent that radiated from his body was profound and immediately wiped the smirk from the Storm King's face.

"You're not wrong. I'm here for your Universe Fragment," he said, calling upon his own killing intent to clash with the Master's. When the two killing auras met, they seemed to carve all in existence in two. The clouds overhead split and the entire tower was cracked in half. The auras were so strong that weaker mortals on the beaches who were still fleeing the storm died on the spot, while even the most powerful of Aeterna's mages in the area felt their legs go soft.

The Master chuckled to himself. "Hehehe... Truly audacious! To take my Universe Fragment would be the gravest mistake you could ever make! Not that I would let you, of course..."

"You don't have the power to stop me," responded the Storm King, his hand moving to the sword at his hip. His weapon was magnificent to behold, crafted of the finest materials in the universe and covered in so many arcs of lightning that many of the details in the blade were difficult to discern, even for the Master. Every so often, a new arc of lightning would spark from the handle of the sword, causing another bolt of lightning to fall from the clouds and smash into the tower.

"You already have two Universe Fragments, though you only brought one of them," said the Master, nodding his head to the Storm King's sword. "You shouldn't be so greedy."

"How did you know about that?!" demanded the King in response, a look of surprise briefly appearing on his face before being replaced with intense fury.

"I've been around a very long while, you foolish boy. The treasures of the Thunderbird were once quite well-known, even if their fame has become as faded as the Primal Age they helped shape." The Master's nonchalant smile grew wider and he closed his eyes and turned his head to the sky. "You may not have brought the Storm Diamond, but I would recognize the Iron Needle anywhere."

The Storm King hadn't thought it possible, but it seemed the rumors he had heard about the twelve Wardens of the planes that made up the Divine Graveyard were true. These mages were some of the oldest humans that yet lived; they were survivors of the cataclysmic conflict that left all Original beings of the Nexus dead. All the Gods, Devils, and Divine Beasts that had been born in the Primal Age had died in those wars, leaving the Nexus for the ascended humans to inherit.

'No. It's impossible he could be so ancient. He may be old enough to have heard about the clan's treasures, but he can't be from the Primal Age, no one can live that long!' the Storm King thought to himself, talking himself back into confidence.

"You're quite knowledgeable, Grave Warden, but simply knowing about my weapons won't save you from them. Make with the Universe Fragment, or I will call upon all the strength I possess to level this plane." The King intended to leave it there, but after a moment of thought, he added, "And don't try to threaten me with talk of the Great Lord. The dead don't frighten me."

"... I suppose that's all that needs to be said..." said the Master. It was clear from his demeanor that he had no intention of handing over what the Storm King demanded of him, so the King's hand went to his sword.

Before he could draw, the Master serenely closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He savored this last moment before the battle began.

As soon as his eyes opened, the storm that battered the island vanished so quickly it was as if it had never been there to begin with. The Storm King wasn't deterred, though, and didn't hesitate to draw his sword and strike out at the Master. A lightning bolt of such cataclysmic power had covered the blade that even the Master felt apprehensive about taking it head-on, leaning to the side to avoid the attack.

The Storm King's attack missed by a hair. The Master's smile grew wider when he felt the lightning's heat, transforming from mere good-naturedness into excitement.

The Master pushed his palm out, slamming into the Storm King's exposed chest. His attack did no damage, only impacting the armor plate a little, but the King was also forced back several steps.

Neither side waited for the other. A spear materialized in the Master's hands while the Storm King's eyes flashed with lightning, sending a shockwave at his opponent. The Master held out his empty palm and stopped the shockwave with ease, but it had taken his attention away from the Storm King.

The King had taken that opportunity to use the incredible speed of lightning to appear behind the Master almost instantly, striking downward with his sword.

But the Master wasn't taken by surprise. He twitched his hand and the pommel of the spear shot up to block the sword. The sword stopped dead in its tracks, but the lightning within it surged through the spear. The Master immediately dropped the spear and summoned a stone wall from the tower to block the Storm King's attack.

The stone tower began to twist, turn, and sprout massive growths as if it were a living tree, all according to the Master's whims. The Storm King lost his footing as the tower beneath underwent a titanic transformation, but it only took him a moment to right himself and launch himself into the air.

The stone branches that had sprung from the tower pursued him into the air, hurtling toward him with more than enough energy to crush his body between them. However, the Storm King swung his sword several times and the stone branches turned to dust under the weight of his lightning bolts.

Hovering in the air, the Storm King raised his arms and called another storm, darkening the sky with multiple layers of deep black storm clouds.

The Master's smile grew even wider as the wind picked up and he felt the first few raindrops of the coming downpour. He threw his head back and laughed, before five enormous pillars of rock burst out from the ground surrounding his tower, each so gigantic as to dwarf his gargantuan home. These five pillars bent like fingers, converging on the Storm King in the sky.

The Storm King looked down on these rock pillars with disdain, waving his hand and summoning a dozen lightning bolts to descend upon each from the waiting clouds, crushing and splintering the pillars and sending the debris crashing back down upon the island.

But the Master was unharmed by the falling boulders. All it took from him was a single thought and all the broken rocks momentarily froze in the air, then suddenly rushed together forming a stone giant so large that it shook the island with its first stumbling steps before it found its balance.

It only took several seconds for the rocks to form the giant, but that was enough time for the Master to appear on its head and for the Storm King to send more lightning bolts from the heavens. Unlike with the rock pillars, the King's lightning had no effect on the giant, which straightened up and stood so tall that the Master's tower only came up to its waist. The giant raised its hand and swiped at the Storm King far faster than its size should've allowed.

The Storm King raised his sword and struck out at the giant's hand, letting the strength of the Iron Needle in his sword flow outwards. Unlike with the Storm King's previous attack, this had the intended effect; the giant's entire arm all the way up to its shoulder shattered and was blown away by the wind.

But, when the Storm King looked back to the giant, the Master had vanished.

In that instant, the Storm King felt something as heavy as the heavens impact him at the point where his right shoulder met his neck, knocking him out of the sky. He hit the ground so hard he nearly broke the island in half. Foreign magic ran rampant through his body, but the Storm King gripped his sword a little tighter and his own power quickly stamped out that invasion.

But he was far from uninjured. His shoulder had fractured under that blow and he could barely lift his sword arm. He clenched his teeth and switched his sword to his left hand.

When he glared upward, he saw the Master smugly smiling down at him, wielding the colossal war hammer that had knocked him down into the dirt.

"Give up, young man. You can't win here," the Master said.

The Storm King spat out a mouthful of blood that had risen from his throat. His powerful healing factor was already at work fixing the internal injuries he had just sustained, but it would take a few minutes before he would lose the taste of blood. He took a deep breath, summoning every ounce of magic power he possessed, and shouted, "I'm not done yet, Grave Warden! I *will* have that Universe Fragment!"

Right on cue, the sky filled with lightning bolts beyond counting, all falling upon the Master hovering in the sky above his tower.

The stone giant raised its remaining arm to protect the Master. The lightning bolts peeled apart the stones and boulders on the surface of its arm, but none touched the Master, who barely even looked up. He kept his eyes on the Storm King.

Massive spikes erupted from the ground at the Storm King's feet, stabbing at his legs. These spikes were made of raw diamond, and yet they broke upon contact with the Storm King's armor. But, they still trapped his legs and prevented him from moving.

As the Storm King raised his sword to destroy these diamond spikes, the lightning that filled the sky ceased and the remains of the giant's arm fell to the ground, sending a shudder through the entire island. Then, the giant raised one of its legs and stomped down at the Storm King.

The earth shuddered, while the Storm King found himself buried in a mountain of rock, unable to move and barely able to breathe. Despite this, the Master far above didn't let his guard down. He watched the foot of the stone giant, waiting for the Storm King's response. He was certain the King hadn't lost quite yet.

The Storm King relaxed his body and took as deep a breath as he could manage. Things had gone far worse than he had feared, but his pride made him refuse to stop. He felt the Iron Needle in the hilt of his sword vibrate and send a tiny wisp of lightning magic into his palm, calming his racing heart and steadying his breathing.

The Master knew the Storm King's next move was coming, as the gale that roared in his ears and the rain that already threatened to flood the cities on the coast of the sea intensified.

Lightning suddenly surged through the giant's leg and burst up into the clouds. The giant finally fell with the destruction of its leg and the Master didn't bother to raise it again. Instead, he turned his attention to just over a quarter mile away, where the Storm King hovered. His body was battered and his armor broken, but his eyes were filled with fighting spirit, reflecting the quiet joy the Master felt in fighting a strong opponent.

But his duty came before his entertainment and the fight continuing wouldn't be beneficial for anyone, so the Master said, "If you continue, you won't find a pleasant end. You're bloody and injured, while I'm yet untouched. Stop this and you have my word that you and your clan won't be harmed until the Nexus finishes its Reconstitution."

The Master desperately hoped the Storm King would realize his situation and lower his weapon. He greatly enjoyed a good fight—especially after his eons of isolation—but he enjoyed making new friends even more.

His hopes were dashed when the Storm King painfully smiled and raised his sword again. The Master sighed and prepared his war hammer.

The power and violence of their next few attacks and counter-attacks put their previous attacks to shame. The entire plane rumbled and quaked while the storm spread, bringing near-total destruction to almost everything within a thousand miles of the central sea. Floods were widespread while great

fissures opened up and swallowed entire cities. The wind ripped apart even the sturdiest of stone buildings and random lightning strikes killed thousands.

Lightning fell like rain upon the island beneath the battle. The tower was completely levelled, and the sea boiled from the heat given off by the bolts, in spite of the torrential freezing rain.

The battle finally ended when the Master crushed the last bits of armor covering the Storm King's chest and broke every rib in his body. The King fell from the sky, but he didn't rise again. The Master waved his hand and the ground opened up, swallowing the Storm King.

The Storm King managed to emit enough lightning to blast the dirt and stone off of him, but then he was faced with the Master plummeting down like a meteor. The Master slammed his hammer into the Storm King, bringing an end to a man who possessed power comparable to that of the Gods and Devils.

Chapter 95: A King's Demand II

The Storm King was lying dead at the Master's feet. There was no doubt in the Master's mind that he was dead. Sometimes a mage might survive their body's death if their magic body or something similar was able to flee in time, but the Master was far too experienced in these matters for that to have happened here. The Storm King was completely, irrecoverably dead.

Or at least, that's what he was in the Master's eyes. But the Master was familiar with a great many old myths and legends from the Primal Age that were filled with tales of resurrection. Several of these tales the Master knew to be true, if embellished. Those stories all had one common element: the body had to be mostly intact.

On a personal note, the Master would be quite happy to see the Storm King rise again; he found their fight to be quite exhilarating, after all. However, the Master's duty came first, so he sent his power into the Storm King's corpse, liquifying all of his internal organs and ensuring that he would never walk among the living again.

Then, the Master turned his eyes to the Storm King's sword. It lay in the dirt just outside of the King's reach. The Master wanted a closer look at it, so he reached down to pick it up. But, just as his hand was about to come into contact with the hilt, a tiny but extraordinarily powerful lightning bolt surged out and struck his hand.

The Master hurriedly withdrew his hand with a wince of pain, then gave a slight chuckle and said, "Fine, then. Have it your way."

In an instant, the sword became enveloped in enough lightning to nearly blind the Master. The lightning didn't last long, but it was still enough to completely disintegrate the ornate handle, pommel, and guard of the weapon, leaving nothing but the blade itself. For the briefest of moments, the Master was able to see a long, thin protuberance in the blade's tang—the part of the blade that the handle had been built around.

That protuberance was the Iron Needle, one of the single most powerful and valuable treasures of the Thunderbird Clan. But before the Master could do anything more than look on in wonder, the blade vanished with a blinding flash of lightning and a deafening clap of thunder.

The Master sighed at the lost opportunity and sat down, exhausted, on a nearby boulder. The Storm King had given him serious injuries, but those had almost entirely healed in the first few minutes after the battle. More importantly, much of Aeterna had been obliterated from the force of their fight and millions of mortals and mages alike were dead.

The Tower behind the Master had been split in half and was starting to collapse, so that's where the Master started his reconstruction. It took little more than a thought and lazy gesture for the Tower to return to its pristine, pre-battle state. Then, working outwards, came the surrounding sea.

Almost a quarter of the entire sea had evaporated away from the lightning that fell into it, despite the accompanying downpour. Again, the Master simply waved his hand and the sea was refilled to pre-battle levels.

Moving on, he stopped the earthquakes and dissipated the storm clouds that had continued flooding many low-lying regions of the plane. There wasn't anything he could do about the staggering number of dead, but he made sure the survivors could rebuild.

After solving these problems as best he could, the Master took the Storm King's body and returned to the top of his Tower to wait. The Storm King had brought hundreds of the strongest members of the Thunderbird Clan to Aeterna with him—in addition to the thousands of strong mages that conquered the continent in anticipation of his arrival years before—and none of them would be happy that their King, the strongest man in their Clan in the past thousand millenniums, had been killed.

Sure enough, after calmly watching the Thunderbird Clan's forces gather under the Storm King's children, the vengeful army arrived outside the Tower only a month later. They numbered a mere five thousand, but each man was a powerful mage that even the Master couldn't dismiss out of hand. Plus, he also spotted a pair of demons among their ranks, one a mass of swirling shadows and the other a tangled web of roots and branches.

A dozen mages—the obvious leaders of the army—flew up to the top of the Tower to meet with the Master. The Master took careful notice of the size of this group as there were a couple individuals who were conspicuous by their absence.

"Grave Warden!" shouted the man in charge. He was the First Prince, the eldest son of the Storm King. His looks were a near copy of his father's, but he dressed in significantly humbler and less grand armor.

The Master took his time before acknowledging their presence.

"What could possibly bring all of you fine young mages here today?" he asked, feigning ignorance.

"You damn well know why we're here! You killed our father and King!" shouted a young woman with a fiery disposition. She was the Storm King's only daughter. She was also the strongest of his children, but she didn't have the patience for royal duties so she had quite happily supported the First Prince's claims to the throne, which left her with more time to train.

She would've continued into a full-blown furious tirade, but the First Prince held up his hand, silencing her before she could start a battle too early with a poorly timed insult.

"My sister speaks out of turn, Grave Warden, but she isn't wrong. My father, our King, is dead by your hands. We want you to return his body to—"

“Done,” replied the Master. The Storm King’s body appeared in front of the First Prince’s entourage, who immediately began checking its condition after a moment of surprise.

The First Prince was more than a little flustered from the Master’s action; he had been prepared to fight for the Storm King’s body. In fact, he had rather counted on the Master not returning it so the clan had a cause for war other than simple vengeance—not that they really needed one.

He stayed silent while his siblings and the Clan’s elders busily checked his father’s body. There was some outrage from the obvious destruction of his organs, but the Storm King was still perfectly recognizable with most of his bones intact and enough of his residual aura that those inspecting him knew it wasn’t a fake.

But, there was still something missing.

“Where’s our family’s sword?” asked one of the younger Princes.

“It’s gone,” answered one of the elders.

The First Prince looked at the Master with a cold and serious look. The Master shrugged, smiled, and said, “Don’t look at me, I don’t have it.”

He was actually a little amused that not once did they bring up the ravaging of the kingdom they’d built in Aeterna. It seemed to the Master that they didn’t care in the slightest about the people they had subjugated here, though they had at least avoided pointless cruelty. If they hadn’t and ruled the lands they conquered with an iron fist, then the Master would’ve been far more proactive, rather than choosing to simply wait for the Storm King’s arrival.

“We can’t leave without that sword, Grave Warden. You must return it immediately.”

“Did you not hear me just now? I. Don’t. Have. It.”

The First Prince sighed in mock dejection. “I wanted to solve this problem peacefully, but now you leave me no choice.”

“Ha!” laughed the Master. “There’s no one here but me and all of you. Who are you putting on that act for? No one’s going to judge you for taking your vengeance! Why bother looking for other excuses?!”

The First Prince frowned, as did his entourage. They were obviously there to avenge the Storm King, but being called out on their actions wasn’t something they were used to. No one would question their motives so openly if they were back in the Nexus.

And this only enraged the Storm King’s children further. The First Prince drew a massive two-handed sword from his soul realm, and his siblings and elders took hold of their own weapons. They fanned out and surrounded the Master, but he wasn’t particularly concerned. He wasn’t as interested in playing with them as he was with the Storm King, so he’d taken some time to prepare. With a single snap of his fingers, the ground around their army at the base of the tower collapsed and gargantuan stone hands burst from the earth, crushing many of the assembled mages.

Three stone giants made by the Master had been buried in anticipation of the army’s coming, ready to strike at a moment’s notice. The First Prince had left the army almost literally standing on top of them, leading more than a thousand of the finest mages belonging to the Thunderbird Clan to their deaths.

Most of those who remained weren't uninjured and were forced to contend with the stone giants. The First Prince might've ordered several of the elders with him to support the remains of the army, but his group was far too absorbed in attacking the Master to spare much attention for what was happening below.

That attitude proved fatal to those still on the ground as the stone giants easily stamped them down like ants. Even the two mages who held the contracts with the demons were killed, releasing both from their obligations to the Thunderbird Clan. They immediately vanished, choosing to return to the Void rather than contend with the Master's stone giants. By then, only a few hundred mages of the army were left, throwing lightning bolts and striking out with their enchanted weapons.

At the top of the tower, the Master had easily dodged the attacks of the Princes and Princess, then smiled condescendingly at the elders. Thick clouds had kept the central sea overcast for the previous couple weeks, and the Master had hidden tens of thousands of fist-sized rocks within them. With a thought, he ceased holding them up and pulled them back down to Aeterna with great force.

These rocks hit the tower hard so hard they stunned the avenging party long enough for the Master to whip out his war hammer and instantly kill four elders.

"You bastard!" screamed the Storm King's daughter as she lunged forward with all the speed afforded to her by the Thunderbird Clan's command of lightning. Unfortunately for her, the Master raised his war hammer by several inches and blocked her attack with ease.

The young woman stared daggers at him, but he only gave a slight smile in return. She tried to push against his war hammer to knock him off balance or at least to pin him down for one of her brothers to strike, but she wasn't able to stick with it as a pair of shiny black diamond spikes erupted from Tower roof and impaled both of her feet.

She cried out in pain, but she had bought the rest of her party enough time to recover and press the attack.

The Master blocked a flurry of blows from three angry sons of the Storm King and the four remaining elders that accompanied them. The Thunderbird Clan's most powerful warriors kept the pressure on, but the Master hardly seemed to care, constantly dodging and blocking with little effort. He kept this going for another minute or so, keeping their attention on him rather than what he was doing.

In an instant, the perfectly level and smooth roof of the tower formed a great depression, causing the attackers to lose balance for a moment. The Master took the opportunity to strike out and kill one of the elders with a well-placed blow from his war hammer, but that wasn't the point. The extra stone that resulted from the depression reached up and encased all of the combatants within a thick dome, preventing any escape.

Then, more spikes burst forth, killing the Storm King's daughter to the horror of her brothers. The dome began to slowly shrink, constricting them and causing great panic.

"To me!" shouted the First Prince, burying his grief at his sister's death. The other five rallied to him in the center of the rapidly shrinking dome. They didn't intend to try to break out of the dome; they knew that would be impractical at best and impossible at worst. Instead, they retargeted the Master, who was standing near the edge and watching with great interest to see what they would do.

They channeled their magic and began conjuring great bolts of lightning to hurl at the Master. It wasn't too difficult for them to realize that attacking head-on wasn't getting them anywhere, so they tried to engage him at what little range they had. The Master created a wall of stone, blocking their potent lightning spears from piercing him, much to their rage and frustration.

The Master decided to stop playing and brought the dome crashing down upon the attackers with a tremendous roar. He then leisurely returned to the top of the Tower—causing all the falling debris from the dome to miss him with a mere thought—and wait to see if anyone survived.

Once he came back out into the light, he curiously glanced over the edge to see how his stone giants were faring. To his surprise, his giants had almost cleaned up the rest of the Thunderbird Clan's army; all but a small handful of the strongest mages that had accompanied the Storm King's avenging children were dead! This small handful was about as capable of combating the giants as the rest of the army had been, and the giants quickly made short work of them.

From behind the Master came a loud explosion. He knew that the collapsing dome wouldn't kill all of his attackers, but he was surprised again to see no one but the First Prince limp out of the jagged and broken crater.

The First Prince glared at the Master with as much hatred and loathing as anyone was capable of expressing. He could tell from his magic senses that everyone he had assembled and brought with him had been killed, including his elders and siblings. Even his almighty father was dead, and all by the hand of the man in front of him. Of course, he spared no thought to the reasons why they were now dead, or that continuing to attack the Master would be tantamount to suicide. All he saw was red, spurring him on to attack the Master again.

But the First Prince was heavily injured and far weaker than the Master. Even the most intense lightning he could call forth barely caused the Master's hair to stand on end at this point, and his strongest sword strikes were blocked with ease.

"You know," said the Master with a calm and relaxed tone, in stark contrast with the First Prince's frenzied assault, "the Storm King had five sons if I recall correctly. And yet, only three sons have shown themselves today..."

The Master left his statement hanging there, as it was clear the First Prince wasn't in any state to listen to him, let alone answer with any coherence. After a few more moments, the Master sighed and brought his war hammer to bear, dodging the last of the First Prince's attacks and crushing his chest with a single blow. He then followed through with a second strike, flattening the First Prince's skull between his hammer and the Tower.

"I guess where they are hardly matters. Not like I actually have to watch out for them, hehehe..." After that final morbid chuckle, everything fell silent. The Master cleaned up the mess that had been made and buried the entire army around the island. They had at least given him a fine diversion, so he made sure to honor them.

In fact, his battle with the Storm King had been thrilling enough for him that he even built a small underground tomb for the man and his children, covering it with a massive boulder and a mound of earth.

Then, he sat at the edge of his Tower to watch what happened to Aeterna next and to wait to see if the Storm King's remaining two sons would seek their own vengeance. He barely moved for the next two millennia.

The plane collapsed into anarchy following the massive depopulation of the central regions and the destruction of the ruling class in most other regions. Over time, these now-sparsely populated lands were resettled and the four empires that would come to dominate the areas around the sea were founded. These nascent empires exploited the remains of the infrastructure built by the Thunderbird Clan to become the most powerful nations in Aeterna.

The massive storm that nearly wiped out all of humanity within the central regions was rather understandably blamed on the Storm King, who turned from a foreign conqueror in the stories told by Aeterna's people into a genocidal maniac. The few weak and isolated survivors of the Thunderbird Clan that were found were quickly put to death, leaving only a few small, secret enclaves scattered around Aeterna. In less than five thousand years, a few of these enclaves were rooted out and slaughtered, but most of them lost so much of their records and supporting infrastructure that they could no longer awaken their blood.

For all intents and purposes, these scattered remnants were no longer members of the Thunderbird Clan. They had become mere tribes of exceptionally reclusive lightning mages, wielding power far inferior to what their ancestors had. The Thunder Kingdom in the remote region that would one day become the Bull Kingdom was the sole exception, as the Thunder Kings retained enough power and influence to both keep their Inherited Bloodline strong and to fight off the vengeful locals.

The Master watched as much as he could. He wasn't all-seeing, but he was able to come to the reasonable conclusion that the Thunderbird Clan had been wiped from Aeterna—the Thunder Kings managing to avoid his gaze by virtue of their reluctance to awaken the blood of more than two or three members of each generation. But it wasn't until the political situation had become relatively stable that he realized that there would be no more attacks on his island, and he finally went back inside for some much-needed rest.

Chapter 96: Safety Measures

The Master stared hollow-eyed at Leon, lost in the past. He genuinely regretted killing the Storm King back then. He had fallen into something of a rut after the battles with the Thunderbird Clan, and it took him a while to figure out why; those two battles had been the last time he felt alive. Ever since, he had been overcome with boredom more often than not, with hardly anything to break the monotony he so despised yet had grown accustomed to.

"Here's the thing," the Master suddenly said, startling the Disciple. "I don't want that boy killed. Let him grow strong. I love making new friends, but I love having strong rivals even more. I can't wait to see which he'll be..."

"And if he starts worshipping that demon within him?" asked the Disciple with a big frown appearing on his face.

"Then he worships the demon within him," answered the Master quite matter-of-factly. It didn't matter to him if Leon was a demon worshipper. All he cared about was that he had the potential to shake up

the status quo, and maybe, just maybe, grow strong enough to give him as exhilarating a fight as the Storm King had.

The Master just hoped Leon didn't get himself killed before then.

—

The mood in the Snow Lions' camp was beyond jubilant; they had managed to secure not only their own banner, they'd even gotten the Deathbringers' banner! And since no one knew where they had gone after leaving their tower, there was next to no danger of retaliation.

If they weren't as tired as they were, they would have undoubtedly started partying. Instead, they split off into their own small friend groups to excitedly chat about what to do over the weekend.

Leon's group, consisting of the man himself plus Charles, Matthew, Bohemond, Alain, and Henry all collapsed onto a number of chairs carved into the side of the cave. The cave systems the Snow Lions had moved into were quite extensive, as they found out in the days following their move. They had been specifically designed to house an entire training unit and so had several lounges complete with stone furniture. These caves weren't nearly as comfortable as their tower, but they were perfectly adequate for resting after a late-night raid on a rival unit.

"Haha! And did you see the faces of those oh so high and mighty third-tier nut-lickers when they came outside?! Priceless!" Henry shouted in glee.

"Yeah! They normally consider themselves invincible among the lower tiers, but that attitude didn't prove arrow-proof!" added a smiling Bohemond.

"Ahhh, damned satisfying evening the score," muttered a sleepy Charles. "But what's going to be even more satisfying is getting back into the city tomorrow!"

"Damn skippy, my friend! I think I might go insane if I stay in these caves another week without a break! Any of you got plans?" asked Henry.

"Food," responded Alain. "All the food. I'm getting all the food and putting it in my face."

Matthew raised an eyebrow, looking quite interested. "That is the best idea anyone has ever had. You know, there's this place I know run by a guy from the Samar Kingdom, serves the best kebabs in the city. I've been craving some lately, want to go with me?"

"Sure, but that certainly isn't going to be my only stop for the day. I said *all* the food, and I meant it!"

"Anyone else want in?" Matthew asked, looking around at the other four.

"Sure!" said Bohemond instantly, making it clear just how eager he was to get some food that Leon didn't have to carry back to the caves.

"I'll go too, but I'm reserving my afternoon for finding some ladies," replied Henry.

"I'm out. Spending time with Jeanne," said Charles, to the disappointment of the other three.

"*Fwooh-Ksh!*, " said Henry, miming the snapping of a whip.

“Whatever, man. I get to spend time with my girl, while *you’ve* got to impress some random woman on the street with your winning personality. Good luck,” responded Charles, his words dripping with sarcasm.

“Got room for one more for the food thing?” asked Leon, shocking the others into momentary silence; Leon asking to go with was perhaps the most unexpected thing he could’ve said.

“Really?” Matthew asked upon recovery.

“... Yeah. I like food, and Alain’s plan of finding and eating as much of it as possible sounds great...” Leon said.

“Well the more the merrier!” shouted Alain, throwing his arm around Leon and laughing.

With their plans set, they didn’t say too much more. They, like most of the other tired Snow Lions, simply sat back to savor their victory and the reclamation of their banner.

After about fifteen minutes, the Instructors arrived. All the Snow Lions were called to gather around them in the largest cavern.

“That was damn fine work, everyone! Get those banners over here so we all can see!” shouted the Senior Instructor. Normally, he was of an exceptionally stern and sober disposition, but once Aemilius and Castor brought both banners out, he allowed himself to crack a rare smile.

The two Snow Lions raised the banners high, and the rest of the unit couldn’t help but puff out their chests in pride. A few of them even cheered. They quieted down quickly when the Senior Instructor indicated that he had something to say, though.

“Now, as I told you previously, the restrictions I placed upon the unit preventing you lot from heading into the city can only be enforced for units that don’t have banners! You have seized yours back, so those restrictions are now lifted! After breakfast tomorrow, the three of us will hand out the stipends, including the money that has backed up over the past month, then you will all be released!”

With that said, the Instructors didn’t stick around and departed, leaving the Snow Lions standing in stunned silence in the cavern. The surprise was understandable for them, as the Instructors had told them that they would be receiving a much larger amount of money than they were expecting.

That silence didn’t last long, and the Snow Lions broke back into their usual groups. Most didn’t stay awake to talk for very long, heading for their tents less than half an hour after the Instructors left. They wanted to be fresh and well-rested for the following day.

Leon’s group wasn’t an exception to this, with most of them going to bed without staying up to train. Given how their night had gone thus far, none of them felt any pressing need for the extra combat training. Charles did meditate for half an hour before falling asleep, though.

Leon intended to do the same, feeling that nothing would cap the night off like some good restful meditation, but Castor seemed to have other plans. He approached Leon and said, “Hey, do you mind if we talk a little?”

Leon frowned, but said, “I suppose it’s fine...”

“Good. Head to our meeting chambers, I’m going to get Alphonsus to join us. We need to make some plans in case the Deathbringers attack us in the streets again.”

“I guess. Not much we can do to stop them save for attacking them as they leave their tower in the morning, though.”

“... Hopefully, that won’t be necessary.”

Leon certainly had more to say about that, but he ended up holding his tongue and silently walking to the meeting chamber while Castor went to find Alphonsus. He found his target relaxing with a pair of his second-tier followers, not quite tired enough for sleep.

“Hey, let’s talk a bit,” Castor said, interrupting the conversation.

Alphonsus momentarily frowned at the annoyance before his face turned back into a lazy smile. “Yeah, I figure we have some things to talk about.”

The two third-tier nobles walked to the meeting room in awkward silence. They were friends, born to a pair of southern noble houses whose lands bordered each other, yet neither was able to find any words to say to the other. Things between them had become awkward ever since Castor supported Leon’s idea to move out of the tower and into the caves. Alphonsus had argued vehemently against the idea as he was loath to leave the comforts of the tower behind, but in the end, his unwillingness to give up the finer things lost to Castor’s and Leon’s desire to move the Snow Lions to a safer location while giving them much harder training conditions.

“So,” began Castor once he and Alphonsus entered the meeting room, “there’s no doubt in my mind that the Deathbringers will be planning some kind of retaliation.”

Alphonsus raised an eyebrow in confusion. “Oh? I thought...”

“What?” asked Castor after a moment of silence.

“Nothing...”

“Come on, my friend, out with it!”

“... It’s just that, I thought this talk was about the unit moving back into the tower...”

Castor looked at Alphonsus in confusion, not quite sure he’d heard his friend correctly. “We... It was never the plan for us to leave these caves, Al. They give us a tremendous advantage since none of the other units know where we are and they’re quite defensible even if they somehow manage to find out.”

“I guess...” muttered Alphonsus. His shoulders slumped down a little and the happy light in his eyes vanished. He didn’t say another word for the rest of the meeting.

“Back to the matter at hand,” continued Castor after Alphonsus made it clear through his body language that he wasn’t going to press the issue, “we ought to prepare some kind of counter-strategy.”

“Well, there isn’t much we can actually do to prevent the Deathbringers from retaliation, though it probably won’t be tomorrow,” said Leon. The possibility of the Deathbringer’s Senior Instructor invoking the same policy that his counterpart in the Snow Lions had that deprived the Snow Lions of their

weekend privileges only crossed Leon's mind long enough for him to dismiss it; their own Senior Instructor had indicated that such an invocation was rare and thought to be cruel enough that the Legate had considered banning it.

"What makes you say that?" asked Castor with genuine curiosity. Ever since he and Leon had fought almost back-to-back when the Deathbringers attacked their tower, he had developed a great respect for the other man, and he started putting a greater and greater deal of stock in what Leon had to say.

"There isn't much time for them to coordinate assaults on our guys again, especially with the morale blow of losing their banner and needing to wait for their unconscious people to wake up. Maybe they'll seek retribution next week, but I think tomorrow ought to be fairly safe."

"I still think we should come up with a few rules for our unit to follow. For instance, those who were ambushed in the city back then were only attacked when they were in relatively low-traffic areas. If our people stay in more crowded locations, we can hopefully avoid those kinds of attacks."

"If you *really* want to avoid anything happening, we could always do what I mentioned earlier and just ambush the Deathbringers on their way out of their tower..." Leon said with a vicious smile.

"No. Let's not get too personal here. If they make moves against us off Academy grounds, then that's another story, but for now, let's wait and see how they handle losing their banner."

"So if they do attack us in the city..." Leon began.

"Then we'll hit them back Sunday morning," responded Castor without hesitation.

"Good," Leon said, the smile he was wearing growing slightly wider.

'If I didn't know better, I'd say he actually wants them to attack us tomorrow!' thought Castor, seeing Leon's look of anticipation.

"Additionally," Castor continued out loud, "we ought to make sure the rest of the unit travels in groups of three or more. Safety in numbers."

"Makes sense," Leon agreed.

"And come to think of it, are we allowed to carry our training weapons outside of the Academy?"

"We can ask the Senior Instructor tomorrow. Moving on, we should also move as an entire unit back to the tower..." Leon paused for a moment to fetch a detailed map of the training grounds. "... and we ought to decide on a good route. If I were in the Deathbringers, I would have someone watching our tower just in case anyone returned. If the returning group was small enough then they would be open for an ambush, while if it wasn't, simply following the direction they came from could give a clue as to where the camp was. Thus, we need to figure out an approach direction beforehand, then proceed on to the city from there."

"That's an excellent point. We can also have our trainees meet back up in the tower when their business is done in the city, then we can return to the camp together."

"Exactly what I was thinking."

Leon and Castor spoke for a few more minutes to hammer out the remaining details. They were so into their discussion that they didn't even notice Alphonsus roll his eyes and leave until after the meeting had come to an end.

Chapter 97: Introspection

When Saturday morning came, the air in the Snow Lions' camp seemed charged. Everyone had woken up early from the excitement of finally heading back into the city for the first time in over a month and were desperately trying to make themselves busy so that time would seem to go faster. Noticing this restlessness, Castor got everyone organized to do some extra training. It wasn't anything particularly strenuous—just some light sparring—but it helped get their minds off their upcoming day.

There was some slight tension when Leon led a group of a dozen trainees back to the tower to pick up the unit's breakfast, as they weren't sure if there would be any spies watching the tower or not. Fortunately, Leon had been leading the food run-group on fairly long and winding paths every day to and from the tower for the past couple weeks, and every time was different so he wasn't that concerned about an ambush. But, he did suspect someone would be watching the tower, so he left the group behind about a quarter mile back into the forest and went to scout the tower out alone.

His caution wasn't necessary, though, because the area around the tower was deserted.

'Maybe the Deathbringers haven't gotten their act together yet; it hasn't even been twelve hours, after all. Not enough time for the news to spread, either, so no other units would be watching...'

Regardless of their reasons, it was clear to Leon that it was safe to begin transporting the food back to camp, which he immediately began doing after signaling to the waiting group that it was safe to approach their tower. Leon didn't let his guard down for the entire time his group was there, though, and he resolved to be extra alert for the next week or two for the inevitable response from the Deathbringers.

Leon's group returned to the camp in the gorge without any trouble, much to their relief. About half an hour later, after everyone had finished their meal, Castor got up in front of them to explain the new rules he and Leon had decided on the previous night. Both Leon and Alphonsus stood next to him, though the latter appeared remarkably sulky and even a little angry, despite his attempts to hide it.

While Castor was speaking, the Instructors arrived at the camp. Castor paused for a moment, but the Senior Instructor simply said, "Keep going, don't mind us for now." He wanted to hear their plan before launching into the standard safety briefing.

However, once Castor was finished, the Senior Instructor felt that there wasn't much to add. He merely spoke a few words about staying away from shady areas and the importance of returning to the Academy on time. Then, he indicated to the other two Instructors to begin passing out the silver to the trainees.

While the Snow Lions were distracted with the enormous bags of silver coins the Instructors had brought, the Senior Instructor quietly approached Leon and said, "The Academy received a priority communication from the Heaven's Eye Merchant Guild, addressed to you." He pulled out a small blue scroll from his pocket and handed it to Leon.

Leon raised his eye in momentary confusion before realizing that it was probably about the ingredients he commissioned them to find for Xaphan's recovery. He took a few steps away from the rest of the unit, then hurriedly broke the magical seal on the scroll and unfurled it.

The first thing he noticed was a pleasant fragrance wafting off the paper, which he recognized as the same perfume that Elise wore. He knew immediately that she had written this message without even having to see the elegant handwriting or the signature at the bottom.

[Hey Xaphan,] Leon said, knowing the demon was busy concentrating on his recovery and wasn't sparing any attention for what was going on outside his soul realm, [looks like Heaven's Eye has made some progress on those ingredients you're waiting on.]

[Hmm? Oh, really? It's about damn time!]

—

While the Snow Lions were busy preparing themselves for heading back into the city, the three third-tier nobles in charge of the Deathbringers were having quite the heated conversation in their common room at the top of their tower.

"This isn't something that can go unanswered! They've humiliated us!" shouted Actaeon, his face red from passionate argument.

"But we haven't a clue as to where the Snow Lions are! We can't just storm their tower again, can we?" answered Linus, his friendship with both Castor and Alphonsus giving him a more moderate opinion.

"Then we find some Snow Lions and beat them until they reveal where they and the rest of those cowardly rats hole up!"

"You're suggesting to attack them in the streets again?! That was a terrible idea then and it's even worse now! How would it reflect upon us if it were to be found out that we had our subordinates attack our fellow trainees outside of the Academy?! How would it look to our families if it gets back to them that we're engaging in such underhanded and *blatant* attacks on our countrymen?! If we gain a reputation for such dishonorable means, then we are no better than common thugs, terrorizing people in back alleys!"

"We're encouraged to fight amongst ourselves! This is just an extension of that prerogative! We *need* to retrieve that banner or we have no honor to save!"

"I can only speak for myself, by *my* honor is more than a piece of fabric! I won't sully my hands with such an endeavor and I *will* stop any attempts to attack the Snow Lions off the Academy's training grounds! We may have lost both banners we held, but we are *noble*, our reputations are worth more than a thousand banners!"

Throughout this argument, Gaius had remained uncharacteristically quiet. In fact, it appeared that he wasn't even paying attention; his chin was resting in his hands and he was staring into the fireplace with such a tired look that no one would've ever guessed he'd been awake for less than an hour.

He certainly felt the expected amount of rage and indignation at the Snow Lions' seizure of the banners, as well as the personal defeat he and the other two third-tier mages suffered in that final arrow barrage,

but the knowledge that his older brother would be watching his response *very* closely was severely tempering his response.

He had to admit to himself that he'd gone a little wild after leaving Lentia, letting his pride swell out of his control once he was away from his father's austere gaze and swift hand that punished any 'behavior that was unbecoming of a noble'. His year in the Knight Academy, the squireship to a high-ranking knight, his time in the Royal Legions, that was to be his time to fully enjoy the benefits of his nobility until he returned to House Tullius to serve his father and eldest brother.

But then, not even two weeks into his new unrestrained life, he met Leon.

His anger at the loss of the banners burned almost as hot as when he had woken up after the combat test, but it wasn't immediate revenge in the name of merely satisfying his ego that he thought of now. Instead, his thoughts were occupied with the idea raised by Tiberias after they had assaulted the Snow Lions' tower and the chat he had with his brother a couple weeks before.

His raw emotional reaction was to find where the Snow Lions hid themselves and strangle them in their sleep, but his rational side won out. He finally made his decision about what to do in the short-term: nothing.

"Actaeon, would you just... shut your mouth?" Gaius asked with a pleasant yet tired tone, though the way he glared at Actaeon made it clear it wasn't a request.

"Wha-Why?" Actaeon demanded indignantly as he turned to face Gaius, but as soon as he made eye contact, he sheepishly continued with a "Su-Sure..."

"Good," said Gaius. He then took a deep breath and paused for a moment to search for the right words.

"... I... understand the desire to seek immediate vengeance. I think that fact is not lost on anyone in this entire Academy; I haven't exactly been subtle with my hatred of the barbarian. And that attitude has gotten me here, having suffered several humiliations, recriminations from my family, and the loss of our banner." Gaius paused again, his eyes repeatedly flitting between Actaeon and Linus. Both were equally silent, puzzled and concerned over what Gaius was now saying.

"We can certainly pursue pure vengeance today, seeking out and ambushing what few Snow Lions we can find in that enormous city. We'll get four, maybe five, and then they'll respond by ambushing us. We don't know where they sleep, so we won't be able to retaliate again, except by ambushing them in the streets of the capital another time.

"They'll move in groups, sticking to more crowded areas, I'm sure. Our people will be seen and our reputations will suffer, while theirs will only grow after enduring these assaults and successfully counter-attacking." Gaius paused for a third time, letting his eyes wander around the room for a moment. Neither Actaeon nor Linus dared to break the silence. They were both quite taken aback at Gaius' seriousness and somber attitude. Just half an hour beforehand, the two nobles had expected him to emerge from his room so wrathful as to be spitting fire and demanding the two of them join him in personally hunting down Leon to skewer him like a pig.

But now here he was, calmly analyzing the situation and considering their options, without a hint of rage in his face.

“Assaulting our rivals in the streets may be gratifying, it may bring us some momentary satisfaction, but that is not what we need right now. We need a concrete plan, one that doesn’t degrade us, one that doesn’t make us look like a bunch of spoiled rich boys throwing a temper tantrum, a plan that won’t end with our trainees being ambushed on the road outside our tower. We need a plan that retrieves both our banner and our honor, and most importantly, befits our nobility.”

As Gaius finished, his two noble comrades could only stare at him in shock.

“What the fuck is wrong with you two?” he demanded.

“... It’s nothing...” muttered Actaeon.

“We just weren’t expecting all of that...” said Linus.

“Mmm...” responded Gaius, choosing that it would be best for his ego not to dig into those answers.

“Whatever. Go tell the second-tier trainees my decision: no one attacks the Snow Lions until I say we’re ready.”

“They’re not going to like that...” Actaeon said with a grim expression.

“It doesn’t matter what they like. *I’m* the leader of this unit, so I make the decisions and they follow them.”

“That won’t change the fact that they’re out for blood after losing the banner, especially those first-tier trainees who were stunned in their sleep. Apparently waking up after that brings a massive headache...”

Gaius glared at the two of them; he clearly didn’t want to hear these things that sounded like excuses. Linus and Actaeon got to their feet and made for the stairs to relay Gaius’ decision. They returned several minutes later after forcing every second-tier trainee in the unit to personally swear not to attack the Snow Lions for the time being.

Gaius used those few minutes to think, and when the other two third-tier mages sat down at his table, he let them in on his thoughts.

“So, it seemed to me that wherever the Snow Lions have been, they’ve used their time well. Their teamwork was far better than ours, and they knew exactly what they were doing. They moved with purpose, stealing our banner as fast and as quietly as possible, only sparing the time to stun those who were absolutely required. I’d guess they practiced a few times in their own tower.

“We’re going to need a similar level of teamwork if we’re going to fight them on equal footing. As it is, even if we knew where they were hiding, I’m not sure we could win in a straight up assault as we did last time, especially not without outside help like Tiberias...”

As proud and arrogant as Gaius was, he couldn’t deny Leon’s strength anymore—or the strength of his unit.

‘He may be a barbarian, but he is damned good at fighting. I can’t underestimate or dismiss him anymore...’ he thought.

“So,” Gaius continued, “we’re going to double down on our training. And not just for the three of us, we’re going to get the Deathbringers as ready for our next fight with the Snow Lions as they can possibly be.”

Linus and Actaeon slowly nodded in agreement, steeling themselves for the hard training that was to come.

Gaius, too, started to mentally ready himself, but that didn’t stop him from sparing a few brain cells thinking about how to strike at Leon outside of the Academy. It wouldn’t be in the near future, but when he had better access to his family’s resources, he absolutely intended to send some strong mages after the barbarian that had caused him so much trouble.

Chapter 98: Acquiring Ingredients I

Not long after the Snow Lions were dismissed by their Senior Instructor, Leon pushed open the doors of the Heaven’s Eye Tower. He had wasted no time making his way over, though this did mean that he’d had to cancel getting food with his friends. He’d been looking forward to eating some great food—especially after everyone else had hyped up their preferred food places.

But, Xaphan’s potion took priority. Leon could sense the demon’s excitement growing during the journey to the Tower.

Despite losing out on trawling for some of the best food in the capital, Leon truly didn’t mind helping out Xaphan. Especially so since it also meant he could spend more time with Elise, who he found himself liking more and more, though it would take quite a bit for him to admit it to anyone else.

He didn’t need to admit his excitement to Xaphan, though, as the demon could sense it just as easily as Leon could sense his own anticipation. However, probably out of a stubbornly stoic and childish desire not to admit to each other how excited they both were, neither spoke very much after Leon received the priority message.

Leon had barely stepped a single foot inside the Heaven’s Eye Tower when he made eye contact with Elise. She had been sitting in a chair by the door reading a book and sipping tea waiting for his arrival, appearing to be the perfect picture of the beautiful and elegant noblewoman that she was, despite her casual clothing and loose-worn hair.

As soon as she saw him, she smiled and rose from her seat, giving her book to a nearby servant at the same time.

“Leon! It’s good to see you!” she exclaimed as she walked over, a look of delight on her face.

“You too...” Leon said back, a shy smile tugging at his own mouth.

“So, I take it you got our message?” Elise asked as she took his arm and gently steered Leon further inside, toward the magic lifts. She knew enough about his personality at this point to understand that he didn’t particularly want to stick around such a crowded place as the Tower’s lounge for very long, so she intended to take him directly to the seventh floor where they could conduct their business in relative peace.

Plus, as much as she typically ignored them, she wasn't too keen on the attention she drew from the other patrons of the Tower who were spending their time in the lounge.

Once they entered the privacy of the magic lift, Elise put aside the pleasantries and got down to business.

"We've managed to locate a core from a fifth-tier magma salamander, I trust that should be sufficient for your purposes?"

After a quick consultation with Xaphan, Leon responded, "It should be fine, but I would need to see the core to be certain."

"Of course," Elise said with a smile. "Additionally, we've also found a Kagu flower that ought to fulfill your needs. Unfortunately, we will need to leave the Tower to acquire it..."

Leon's eyes narrowed in surprise and some slight displeasure, but his personal feelings about being out in public wouldn't stop him from getting that flower.

"The merchant you commissioned is waiting for us with the core, then after that, I'll happily escort you to the alchemist who's currently holding the flower," Elise said, showing Leon a brief but dazzling smile before turning to face the doors of the lift. She was fast enough that Leon didn't notice the faint reddening of her face, despite being a little more comfortable around her after his recent experiences helping to train the Snow Lions.

When they arrived at the seventh floor, Elise hurried them along to a private room where a merchant with a gaunt face and serious expression was waiting. Off to the sides of the room were a pair of attendants, waiting to facilitate their transaction.

Things went smoothly with Elise doing most of the talking. The merchant took out the perfectly spherical core and placed it on a waiting cushion. It gave off a brilliant orange light and filled the room with enough heat to make the attendants start to sweat. Leon closely examined the core, giving Xaphan a good look at it at the same time. Once the demon grudgingly admitted that the core was sufficient, Leon agreed to the purchase. The merchant, being well-versed in the financial matters that took place on the seventh floor, tactfully walked to the other side of the room to fill out a few forms, giving Leon enough privacy to finalize things with Elise by giving her his gold card.

She and one of the attendants left the room for about ten minutes before returning with a pair of receipts for Leon and the merchant. Elise gave Leon his card back with a glowing smile while the attendant wrapped up the core for him.

Leon smiled a little bitterly when he was handed his card back; that core had cost him over two hundred thousand silvers, and he still had two more rare ingredients to buy!

The merchant immediately took his leave once everything was settled, but both attendants waited by the door as inconspicuously as they could just in case Elise needed anything else from them.

Elise didn't care about their presence, being far too preoccupied gently smiling and staring at Leon, enjoying how nervous he was getting under her gaze.

“So... uh, we ought to go and get that Kagu flower. Square that away. Best not to leave these things for later...” Leon babbled, hoping Elise would stop staring and say something. But, when she did speak, it was only to tease him more, much to his dismay.

“Oh... So you want to leave so quickly? Don’t you like spending time with me?” she asked, clearly trying to embarrass Leon. Fortunately for him, she was keeping her relative distance and not invading his personal space, so he was still able to think clearly enough even if his heart felt like it was trying to break free of his chest.

And then something came to mind that calmed him down considerably, perhaps the only thing that could possibly take his mind off the smiling Elise who continued to take advantage of his shyness.

“As a matter of fact,” he began, “there is something I would like to do before we set off, and I would be honored if you were to join me.”

Leon spoke with such clarity and poise that Elise was completely taken aback. She was stunned almost speechless by the sudden change in Leon’s demeanor and was only able to say, “What... did you want?”

“I only had a light breakfast, which was a terrible mistake; it’s left me rather famished. However, this place has some fantastic food!” Leon’s eyes lit up with excitement as he spoke, but they quickly turned bashful again as he continued. “Besides, this could give us more time... to, you know, talk...”

Elise giggled at his behavior, especially at his complete earnestness when talking about food, then happily agreed. The two attendants were immediately sent off to bring them some food, which Leon was fairly confused about.

“What’s wrong?” Elise asked, seeing his raised eyebrow.

“We can eat here? I thought we’d be returning to the ground floor lounge...”

Elise giggled again at his remark, before remarking with a look of pride, “We don’t have to. Since my mother is the Tower Lord, I can reserve any room in this entire building to eat in.”

“Wait, what? Your mother is the Tower Lord?!” Leon asked, the surprise and incredulousness evident in his tone.

“Hmm? Oh, haven’t I mentioned this before?” Elise responded with a carefree attitude.

Leon sighed, and the two continued to chat while waiting for their meal. They filled their time by talking about what had happened since they had last seen each other. Leon actually did most of the talking, telling Elise all about his experiences with the Knight Academy. By the time their food arrived, he had managed to relax enough to speak with barely a hint of nervousness.

Their meal didn’t last long; Elise hadn’t been that hungry so her plate had been quite light, while Leon devoured his food as quickly as he was able without forgetting what few table manners Artorias had taught him.

“Oh my, you really like the food here, don’t you?” Elise said half-teasingly. Leon’s face went a little red, but he answered quicker than he would have only a month beforehand.

“There wasn’t much of any spice—or any other flavoring, really—in the Northern Vales. Everything this far south tastes better, even the bread! Even the Greenhand produce would taste bland in comparison!”

“Greenhand? What’s that mean?”

“Oh, well the Vale I was in before coming south was ruled by the Brown Bears, but they weren’t the only tribe around. They were—or, I suppose *are*—the strongest tribe, but there are several other smaller subordinate tribes that live there as well. The Greenhand tribe is one of them, and they’re the only tribesmen who have any sort of knowledge about nature magic. Most of the wheat, potatoes, and silkgrass that are grown in the Vale are grown by them.”

“I see,” responded Elise, being fairly curious about what the politics looked like where Leon had been raised. She had a few more questions which Leon answered to the best of his ability, but they couldn’t delay much longer. It was time for them to get that Kagu flower.

“We just need to head over to the Alchemist Forum. Almost all the ingredients that are bought by every alchemist in the city goes through there. There’s a certain merchant who runs a store there who is holding the Kagu flower you asked for, so that’s where we’re going.” Elise set off through the door of the room holding Leon’s arm, leaving the two attendants in the room to finish cleaning up.

“What in the name of the Ancestors was *that* about?” whispered one of them to the other. “An ingredient merchant merely *holding* something Heaven’s Eye wants? Not a chance. They would, without a doubt, bring it here for the sale.”

The other man was an older and far more knowledgeable attendant, having worked at the Tower long enough to have seen Elise grow up. “The merchant in question actually offered to bring it here, but the Young Lady refused. She insisted that she and the client would come to pick it up personally,” he explained.

“Huh...” said the first attendant, an odd look on his face. “Why would the Young Lady do that? It’s not a good look for her to go and meet a merchant at his own place rather than have him come here...”

“I... can only guess,” said the other attendant, almost without thought. After a moment of silence, though, he said, “Actually, never mind. It’s not for us to speculate as to the motives of the daughter of our Lord.”

The first attendant frowned and stared at the other man. “Really? There’s no one else here, why the hesitation?”

“Mmmmm,” mumbled the other attendant, trying not to give in to the temptation to show off his insight, for it would be very bad manners on his part.

“Well that’s just no fun...”

The first attendant continued muttering good-natured insults about his partner ‘acting smart’ for a while longer, but the other attendant wasn’t paying any attention. Instead, he thought about how warm Elise seemed to be with Leon, as opposed to the usual sensual-but-distant atmosphere the Tower Lord had raised her to have. Had she been interacting with anyone else, she would’ve adopted a seductive attitude, but she never would’ve gotten too close to anyone, an odd combination of her mother’s lessons and her own youthful rebelliousness constantly contrasting with each other.

'It's good to see her letting her guard down around someone that isn't a close friend,' thought the second attendant. He'd correctly guessed that Elise simply wanted an excuse to take Leon on a date without actually calling it such.

Chapter 99: Acquiring Ingredients II

The Alchemist Forum was a paradise for all alchemists within the Bull Kingdom, whether they were mere apprentices or venerable masters. There were dozens of buildings surrounding the forum, awash with color from bright tile murals and exceptionally detailed paintings depicting plants and flowers of all kinds. The forum itself had over two hundred smaller stalls filled with gorgeous flowers and other luminous and regal alchemy ingredients. All the rarest and most expensive products were kept indoors where they could be easily protected, but there were enough exotic plants around that the density of magic in the air around the forum was considerably higher than in other areas of the city.

It was a very important place to the Bull Kingdom and was afforded all the security such a place deserved: dozens of guards posted around the clock at key points in the forum and dozens more constantly patrolling around the shops and stalls. Most of them had little to actually do, though, as their presence was so great that street crime in the area was nearly nonexistent. The primary job of the guards was actually to remove any loitering mages who were hoping to use the atmosphere to train, rather than to do business.

Despite its name, there were far more than alchemists browsing the various wares in the vast jungle-like marketplace. Alchemists were certainly in the majority, but there were also enchanters looking for interesting or unconventional materials to mulch into paper or ink, and servants of nobility looking for flowers to fill out a garden or courtyard. There were even a number of merchants looking for new products, trying to buy the seeds of whatever caught their eye.

It was to the Alchemist Forum that Elise was leading Leon, questioning him about the ways of the Valemen along the way. Leon had done his best to answer, but since he had spent so little time among the Brown Bears—barely a few days every couple of months—he couldn't provide every answer she sought.

"So there's none at all?" Elise asked, the disappointment in her voice impossible to miss.

"Well, human sacrifice isn't *common*, but it's still around in some places. I grew up in the east, and Torfinn Ice-Eyes all but put a stop to the practice a few years ago. Which, as I said, doesn't mean it's gone completely. I've personally seen some of the priests put a couple murderers to death in the name of the Mountain Father."

"You said that it's only *recently* dying out in the east, but what about the west?" asked Elise. She was quite fascinated with the strange and mysterious culture of the Valemen, especially since it was something she could get Leon to actually say more than a few words about.

"I can't say anything for sure about the western vales, but I have heard a few stories. Most of them aren't particularly pleasant..." Leon trailed off, hesitating to repeat what he had heard, but Elise wasn't dissuaded.

"Surely you don't think I can't handle a few horror stories?" she asked with an impish and expectant grin.

“... I’m sure you can...” Leon muttered, a faint smile appearing on his own face. “There have been some recent changes in the north. A man named Hakon Fire-Beard has united most of the western vales, and his methods of ruling are... extreme—assuming that what refugees that flee his territories say can be taken at face value and haven’t been overly exaggerated.

“They say Hakon Fire-Beard is extremely fond of burning people alive, and that he’s put entire villages to the torch to appease the Mountain Father. He also allegedly has captured warriors of rival tribes crucified for a whole day, then burned as a sacrifice to the Sky Mother.”

“Hmm... So there’s no cannibalism? No flaying of enemies and wearing of their skin for clothing?”

“No. Or at least, not that I’m aware of.”

“Oh...”

Leon chuckled, then said, “You sound almost disappointed.”

“I am! You’re basically telling me that those mystical and unnatural rites that everyone in the Bull Kingdom *knows* about aren’t true!”

“So sorry to let you down,” Leon said with a sarcastic grin. “The people in the Vales value peace and stability as much as the people in the south. They’re just not quite so organized, which leads to more conflict.”

“Well are there at least demon-worshippers? Tribes of werewolves that interbreed with actual wolves? Ancient vampires that live in caves high up in the mountains and feed on any unfortunate soul that strays too close?”

“I... Where do you even *hear* these things?”

“So they’re not true?”

“The first two, definitely not. The last one, most likely not, but the Frozen Mountains are quite large, so who knows?”

[There *were* demons in those mountains, though. Or at least, *one* demon...] murmured Xaphan.

[But you weren’t being worshipped, were you?] Leon shot back.

[No, though I should have been. It isn’t every day a Lord of Flame shows himself...]

The demon didn’t continue, so Leon turned his attention back to Elise. She was cutely pouting because Leon had ruthlessly shot down her preconceptions, but her face brightened up considerably when she felt the distinctive change in the air as they got close to the Alchemist Forum. She took Leon’s arm and started walking as fast as she could without losing her dignity.

They both couldn’t help but let out an “Ahhh,” of wonder and delight as they entered the forum, as the bright and vibrant colors, heavenly scent of the flowers, and high density of magic in the air created a near-overwhelming feast for the senses.

The two wanted to stand right where they had stopped and savor the atmosphere, but the throngs of people coming and going from the gigantic market weren’t going to stop on their account, so Elise and

Leon pressed onward. For ten minutes, they did nothing except wander the outer stalls of the forum, where the wares were little more than decorative. Elise even spotted a number of one of her favorite flowers, a lotus-like plant that gently glowed red in the mornings, purple during the day, and blue in the evenings. She made a big enough show of smiling and staring at them that even the socially inept Leon could tell that she wanted one, so he dug out a few silvers and bought one for her.

In response, Elise threw her arms around his neck in a joyous hug, making the few dozen people around them who were witness to her happiness smile uncontrollably at the scene. Once Leon managed to extricate himself from Elise's arms, the stall keeper handed him one of the flowers with a wink and a nod and even knocked a couple silvers off the price—only taking a single token silver coin from Leon.

At first, Leon was only going to give the flower to Elise, but she smiled and leaned towards him while giggling and tilting her head. Leon was utterly baffled as to what she was doing, but fortunately for him, Xaphan was watching in fascination and came to his rescue.

[She wants you to put the flower in her hair, dummy.]

Leon didn't respond to the demon, but his face immediately went red and his hands started shaking. He managed to gently thread the vivid purple flower behind one of her ears despite his nervousness, though.

"So, how do I look?" she asked, giving Leon a sly look.

Leon was about to respond, but when he made eye contact with her, his words caught in his throat. He had to take a deep breath to steady his heart before he could finally say, "You... you look stunning."

She smiled and happily took his arm. From that angle, Leon couldn't see the red that had started to spread through her cheeks.

After several minutes of walking in an embarrassed silence that neither wanted to break, Elise led Leon into one of the biggest buildings around the forum. Its walls were opulently decorated with lavish paintings of forests and mountains, and the entrance hall had no roof both to allow sunlight to reach the indoor gardens and to give them a greater feeling of openness.

As soon as they walked in through the door, Elise was recognized by the Heaven's Eye representative she'd sent over several hours beforehand. As he walked over, Elise released Leon's arm and took up a significantly more authoritative attitude.

"Lady Elise! Everything's ready and waiting for you," the representative said, skipping the pleasantries and getting right down to business.

"Good. Lead the way," responded Elise, barely glancing at him.

"Yes, my lady." The man started walking further into the building, giving Elise and Leon a considerable amount of space to follow.

"This should be quick," Elise started explaining to Leon, "we've already hammered out most of the details and negotiated a fair price. All that's needed now is for you to finalize the deal and take your Kagu flower."

Leon nodded in acknowledgment. He was far too busy trying to ignore the stares from the store's employees—who were extremely curious as to who Elise and Leon were to warrant being led inside—to ask her for any specifics about the deal.

Once they left the entrance hall and started walking through the more private areas of the building that were reserved for transactions far too large or important to be handled by the public employees, it became clear just how rich the owner of the place was. The walls were just as richly decorated as they were outside, but the roof here was made of actual living tree branches, kept alive and permanently green through the use of complex nature magic—a blend of earth, light, and water enchantments that greatly aided plant growth while providing a host of other benefits.

Leon and Elise were shown into the largest meeting room in the building where three people were already waiting. The oldest of these three, a man who appeared middle-aged, immediately stood up to greet Elise. He noticed the flower in her hair and the fact that she had brought a man with her after informing him that she would bring the client to pick it up from his place. But as soon as he smiled knowingly and made a comment about it, Elise's face became as stern and stoic as Leon's default expression. With a few barbed words that implied she had been insulted, she made the merchant lower his price by ten percent.

Leon barely registered any of that. As soon as he walked in the door, his eyes were drawn to the beautiful volcanic flower on the central meeting table. It radiated fire magic, raising the temperature of the room so much that the other two people waiting in the room—not even being first-tier mages and thus having little defense against such magical auras—were quite obviously uncomfortable, nearly sweating through their clothes.

Leon drew closer to the table to get a better look at the flower; he could feel Xaphan's rising excitement so clearly that it compelled him to inspect the flower. It was barely larger than his palm, with hundreds of long, needle-thin red-orange petals radiating out from the central bulb, a shining golden sphere.

[Yes, yes, ever-everything looks fine...] muttered Xaphan, desperately trying to keep his voice calm. The Kagu flower was by far the most important part of the potion he needed. The other two ingredients could be a great many things, though he had specifically asked Leon to find the two he had believed to be the easiest to acquire.

"Is... is there any problem?" the merchant timidly asked. He still hurt from Elise gouging out a huge chunk of the money he had expected to make, so he wanted to make sure that Leon hadn't seen anything that would drive the price down further.

"It's fine," whispered Leon, not taking his eyes off the flower.

The merchant breathed a sigh of relief, and what followed was several minutes of paperwork between his assistants and the Heaven's Eye representative to organize the money transfer. Leon didn't even need to pull out his card, Elise had taken care of that part when he had given it to her earlier in the day.

Fifteen minutes after they had walked into the store, Elise and Leon walked back out with Leon carrying a big wooden box under his arm. The box would keep the Kagu flower's aura sealed within, to prevent it from bothering anyone around him. It had only been unsealed in the meeting room to facilitate his inspection.

“So...” Elise hesitantly began, her severe facade fading away, “do you have any other plans for the day?”

Leon guessed that she was subtly suggesting that she would like to spend more time with him, which excited him to no end, but he could feel Xaphan’s impatience almost literally hammering on his soul realm. “I... I’m sorry, I’ve got to go, these ingredients need some preparation before they’re ready and it’s not something that should be put off... I can at least walk you back to the Heaven’s Eye Tower, though.”

Elise gave him a dazzling smile and said, “I’d like that.”

They walked through the streets in silence, simply enjoying each other’s company. They kept their quiet until they reached the Tower, when they spoke their goodbyes. Just as Leon was about to turn around and head back to the Knight Academy, Elise hurried forward and swiftly kissed him on the cheek.

She laughed quietly, then said, “We’re working on getting that fourth-tier feather for you. In the meantime, don’t be a stranger.”

She happily walked back to the tower doors and, with one last wave to Leon, she went back inside.

After another moment, Leon finally managed to respond. That kiss had made him freeze up, but he gently touched his cheek when he regained control of himself. He looked at the Tower one more time, then made his way back to the Academy with the biggest smile on his face.

Chapter 100: Potion Preparations

Despite Leon’s attempts to regain his usual stoicism, he couldn’t have made his joy at Elise’s kiss more obvious as he walked through the busy streets of the capital on his way back to the Academy. His smile was a mile wide and his eyes bright; he practically exuded happiness from every fiber of his being.

In fact, many of the people he passed who stared at this inexplicably happy young man wouldn’t have been at all surprised if Leon were to break out into song and skip down the street. But, fortunately for his own ego and sense of shame, he hadn’t lost that much self-control.

[Hehe, hehehe,] chuckled Xaphan. He made it a point to do so loud enough for Leon to hear him.

[... What is it that you find so funny?] asked Leon, the irritation in his voice obvious.

[Oh, *nothing much*,] answered Xaphan once he was sure Leon could feel his attention.

[Nothing much? Explain yourself, demon, what does that mean?]

[You don’t know what those words mean? You’re even further gone than I thought, human.]

[I *know* what the damned words mean, what did *you* mean when you said them?]

[Oh, I was just watching a little chaste boy losing his mind over one tiny kiss. You know, *nothing much*.]

And just like that, the smile on Leon’s face vanished. He sighed, but when he was about to respond to Xaphan, he decided to hold his tongue. Instead, he turned his thoughts back to Elise, determined as he was not to let his demonic acquaintance ruin his good mood as he had done before.

[Awwwww, come on, don't be like that! Brooding is quite unbecoming, you know. I mean, I'm sure it works on some people, but I doubt it works on anyone that you know.] Xaphan was met with silence, so he, too, sighed, then moved on to business.

[Listen, before you leave the city, there are a couple things you should probably pick up if you don't already have them back in your fancy little cave...]

—

After another half hour spent in the capital, Leon finally made his way back to the Snow Lion camp in the gorge. There weren't many people in his unit who had returned to the caves so early, and those that had—or simply never left in the first place—weren't particularly numerous and kept to themselves, which suited him just fine. He made his way farther in all the way to his private room.

In the first week after moving in, the Snow Lions had thoroughly explored their new home and had realized that the cave system had as much if not more space than their tower did! This meant that Leon, as a third-tier mage, was able to have his own room, unlike when he had to share a room with Alphonsus and Castor after the Snow Lions had first arrived.

[Alright, first things first,] Xaphan began as soon as Leon set down everything he had bought, [Use that curtain to block the entrance to the room.]

Leon quickly complied, hanging a thick black curtain over the entrance of his door-less room, then quickly dug out a few small magic lanterns to scatter around so he wouldn't have to constantly channel magic into his eyes to see in the pitch-black caves.

[Good. When we take the Kagu flower and that salamander core out of their packaging, they'll emit far too much magic for you to avoid questions. That curtain will block the magic aura from spilling out of this room, though,] said Xaphan as Leon unpacked the rest of the things he bought.

First, Leon took out a narrow two-foot-tall stone cylinder and accompanying lid. Then, he pulled out half a dozen water-coals, so-called for being able to burn in water. They were fairly cheap, but they would work for his purposes.

[Next,] instructed Xaphan, [fill that container about halfway with water.]

Leon grabbed the cylinder and made for the bathroom. As with the tower, the trainees had made the discovery that the caves had their own bathrooms that even had fully functioning water runes. It had been an incredible morale boost, as they had for several days been living primarily on the water from the stream in the gorge and a few smaller water runes made by Leon and the others who were in the enchanting class.

The cylinder was filled with the requisite amount of water and Leon hurriedly returned to his room.

[Drop the coals into the water,] said Xaphan. As soon as Leon did so, he impatiently continued with, [Now the core.]

Leon dropped the core into the cylinder as instructed, letting the glowing red crystal sink to the bottom and rest among the coals. The fire magic it radiated ignited the water-coals, causing them to gently burn a dull blue at the bottom of the cylinder.

[And the flower, stem first.]

Leon carefully extracted the Kagu flower from its box, saturating his room with sweltering fire magic, though he found the heat strangely comfortable. Leon gently dipped the long stem of the flower that had been hidden in the box into the water, threading it through the gaps between the salamander core and the water-coals. To finish up that part of his preparations, he set the rest of the flower onto the surface of the water, where it stayed floating even as he closed the lid of the cylinder.

There wasn't any concern about allowing the flower access to sunlight; all it needed was fire energy to stay alive for as long as Leon and Xaphan needed it to. The coals would provide that energy so as not to drain the core before Heaven's Eye managed to find the final necessary ingredient. Leon would need to change out the coals every week, but that was a fine sacrifice to make given how much it cost to buy the salamander core.

[Finally,] said Xaphan, interrupting Leon as he leaned back onto his small stone bed, [we need to inscribe a few simple runes onto the cylinder so that the burning coals don't transfer too much heat into it instead of the water. We want as much of the heat and fire energy to stay in the cylinder as possible.]

[What?] Leon complained, [Why didn't we do that to begin with? Now I have to do this when it's full of water and expensive ingredients?!]

[It was far more important to make sure the Kagu flower was properly taken care of and that the core's magic wouldn't dissipate into the surrounding environment. So hurry, we need to make sure the water doesn't boil away. I mean, the lid should keep most of the steam in, but there's no point in relying on 'should'.]

Leon sighed, but he still said, [Fine. What's needed?] As soon as his mind was open to Xaphan's information, Leon saw exactly what had to be done. He reached for his ink and spell paper and got to work.

It took about an hour of careful work and more spell paper than Leon would care to admit, but even Xaphan couldn't find any fault with his work. Leon plastered the side of the cylinder with the paper, which stuck as soon as he activated the enchantments.

[Any more steps?] asked an exhausted Leon. He was perfectly willing to perform any more necessary steps but writing the enchantments had left him feeling mentally drained.

[Nope. We're just waiting on that feather, now. Nothing else to be done except drop in new water-coals every three or four days.]

Leon gave a deep sigh of relief as he laid back onto his bed. He missed the bed back in the Snow Lions' tower. He'd made the stone bed in the cave relatively comfortable with a few blankets, but it still couldn't hold a candle to a proper mattress designed for a noble.

Regardless, he fell asleep almost as soon as he got settled. He certainly wasn't intending on sleeping; he had wanted to spend the rest of his day reading, but he was just that tired.

—

Leon woke up in time to head for the unit's tower in time to meet up with the returning trainees. To his surprise—and the surprise of the rest of the extremely cautious Snow Lions—no one had been attacked. The Deathbringers hadn't made a move the entire day.

In fact, almost no one saw the Deathbringers at all throughout the entire weekend. The other units found them strangely somber and silent during meals, and it was only on Monday that they learned why, when the Deathbringers arrived at the training field with no banners. Since none of the other units had either banner that had been in the Deathbringers' possession, it didn't take long for everyone else to realize that the Snow Lions had gotten their revenge.

Some playful insults were thrown around from the other units, but the Deathbringers endured them with a quiet dignity that was most uncharacteristic of them. Gaius especially seemed to have taken the loss completely in stride, interacting with the other nobles as if nothing had happened.

Even during the afternoon enchantments classes when he and Leon shared the same room, Gaius hardly even blinked in frustration or anger. He did send a few looks Leon's way, but they didn't carry the tiniest hint of malice, hate, or killing intent. Not even when Leon and Valeria exchanged a few greetings did Gaius' mood change.

If he dug deep, he would still find the oceans of anger that would've erupted had the Snow Lions attacked only a few weeks before, but the weekend had been enough time for him to bury that fury and let it cool. He would only bring dishonor to his family if he acted rashly and without a plan, so remained calm and in control, as if his father were watching over his shoulder. Although, given that his brother was Tribune working at the Academy, it wouldn't be that inaccurate to say that Duke Tullius had his eye on his youngest son.

But even then, Gaius found his anger oddly easy to suppress. He'd accepted Leon's fighting strength and skill and a degree of respect couldn't help but follow, despite his hatred of the Snow Lion. Consequently, rather than waste his time with rage, Gaius channeled that energy into his training. Over the weeks following the Snow Lions' seizure of the banners, Gaius threw himself into his training and dragged the rest of the Deathbringers with him.

Actaeon had put up a token resistance, but he loved training and had gotten on board with Gaius' new policy quickly. Linus could see the benefits of the extra training, and though he personally valued his off-time, Gaius was able to convince him to join the training as well.

With all three third-tier mages on the same page, no one else in the unit was able to go against them. They trained hard, with the nobles supervising the lower-tiered trainees and giving out pointers where needed. Additionally, their Senior Instructor had contemplated invoking the same right as the Snow Lions' Senior Instructor had, that of revoking all weekend privileges until the Deathbringers had retrieved their banner, but he found that he didn't have to; Gaius had already forced the Deathbringers into weekend training.

Gaius knew they were behind. The Snow Lions had over a month of hard training on the Deathbringers, and Gaius needed to push his unit to catch up as he doubted the Snow Lions would halt their intense training after recovering their banner.

That training paid off less than two weeks after it began, as the heightened attention to security that the increased training brought allowed them to repulse an attack from another unit that tried to exploit their seeming weakness. Securing the front door of their tower every day was made a priority, so when another unit arrived to try and bully the Deathbringers, it took them several minutes to force their way into the entrance hall. By then, they were faced with the prepared Deathbringers, fully armed and armored and ready to defend their dignity. And they did so with aplomb, eliminating two of the enemy's third-tier trainees and a dozen others besides with an initial volley of arrows, giving the Deathbringers the advantage in numbers.

That outcome gave the other units that were hoping to throw their weight around and use the Deathbringers for their own training pause, allowing the Deathbringers plenty of time for the training that Gaius wanted.