

Storm King 111

Chapter 111: Burning Pain

"You'd best surrender now, you won't get another chance," Antonius loudly said to Themistocles.

"Fuck surrender and fuck you!" Themistocles shouted back. "You humiliated me last time we fought, and now I'm going to do the same to you!"

Without even waiting for the announcer to begin the fight, Themistocles launched himself at Antonius and swung wide with his greatax. Leon noticed that despite only having a single enormous blade, there seemed to be far too much weight in Themistocles' swing, especially as he didn't even bother to stop the swing when Antonius nimbly ducked out of the way. Instead, Themistocles followed through by swinging his ax over his head and straight into another strike, which Antonius also dodged.

"What's the matter?" the Golden Man mocked. "You seem to have gotten even slower than you were five years ago! Even a mortal could easily dodge your pathetic attacks!"

Themistocles roared pulled back a little, taking a more defensive stance, but stomping on the ground as he did so. In response, all the sand around him for almost twenty feet solidified into stone and lifted both Themistocles and Antonius several dozen feet into the air. His intent seemed to restrict the amount of ground that Antonius could use to dodge him, but the Golden Man smiled derisively at him and slammed the pommel of his spear into the rock hard enough to crack the entire surface. Then, he concentrated his own light magic into the head of his spear and thrust into the rock again, causing what sounded to Leon like an explosion within the small plateau.

"You really shouldn't do something so foolish as this," Antonius said, not bothered by Themistocles' look of hatred, "those poor people in the lowest stands can't see us anymore..."

Themistocles snarled and took a menacing step toward Antonius, but at that very moment the plateau he had created splintered apart in a flash of light that briefly shone through the cracks.

Antonius leaped back to the sands of the arena with an almost inhuman grace, while Themistocles came down with all the grace of an avalanche. He barely managed to land on his feet, but he near-imperceptibly stumbled.

"Themistocles has lost," Leon said.

"Indeed, it's over," Valeria agreed.

"What makes you two say that?" Elise asked.

"He just stumbled. He was injured in that fall, and look at the way he's standing now, he's avoiding putting too much weight on that injured leg," Leon explained.

"He probably can't move that well anymore. He's a sitting duck for the faster Antonius," Valeria added.

Both of them left something out of their explanation, something that they could only suspect.

'That ax looks too heavy, Themistocles isn't used to its weight...' they thought. It wasn't much to go on, but they both had a feeling that somehow Themistocles was using the wrong weapon, meaning that the

match had been rigged in a way that was significantly less obvious than the earlier fights. Someone wanted him to lose—or, more accurately, they wanted Antonius to win.

The fight didn't last much longer after Themistocles' platform was destroyed. Antonius danced around Themistocles and attacked with impunity, while the larger gladiator could barely assume a stance stable enough to bring even half of his strength to bear thanks to a broken ankle.

"Let this be a lesson to you, you upstart!" Antonius shouted while sweeping Themistocles' good leg out from under him. "*Never* challenge me again!"

Antonius thrust his spear into Themistocles' head, sending his black helmet flying across the arena. Then, he viciously beat Themistocles around the head a few times with the pommel of his spear until the announcer finally declared him the winner. As soon as he did, Antonius spat in Themistocles' face—which had started rapidly swelling, bleeding, and forming bruises—then raised his arms in triumph, loving every second of the crowd's jubilant cheers in their champion winning yet another match.

Leon couldn't but frown and lower his view of Antonius even further. His actions were incredibly excessive and vindictive, though it was the spitting in the face of his fellow gladiator that really drew Leon's ire, as well as the suspicion that the Golden Man had cheated.

Antonius left the arena after celebrating his win and the announcer began the second main fight, a large-scale battle between two teams of thirty gladiators. Leon had no idea who anyone was, though, so he only watched out of curiosity in seeing their fighting styles. He quickly decided that he wasn't fond of said fighting styles, as it left many openings and focused more on flashy moves over practicality.

He and his group didn't stick around for long after the final match was over. Asiya and Valeria had some other business to attend to, so they said their goodbyes at the doors of the arena. As they did so, Elise noticed a few more looks Valeria gave Leon that raised some questions in her mind, foremost of which was, '*Does she like him?*'

They were hardly in a place for a private conversation, though, so Elise pushed it to the back of her mind just as she had when she saw the same thing in the viewing room.

"If you don't have anything else to do, why don't we head back to the Heaven's Eye Tower?" Elise asked Leon. "I actually have something for you there..."

"Sure," Leon swiftly responded. "There are some things I'd like to talk to you about, too."

"Anything in particular?" Elise asked with a smile as she took Leon's arm and set off for the Tower.

"... Let's wait until we get somewhere with a little more privacy..." Leon said, looking around at the crowds of thousands of people that were leaving the arena. His serious tone brought some anxiety to Elise's heart, leading to an awkward silence between the two until they had returned to the Tower.

The two wasted no time heading to one of the private rooms on the upper floors. As soon as they entered the room, Elise turned to Leon and said with a proud look, "Can you wait here for a moment?"

Leon's heart was racing due to his own anxiety about clearing up their relationship and he felt like he could use another few minutes to muster up his courage, so he nodded his acceptance.

"Then I'll be right back, don't go anywhere!" Elise said as she closed the door with a seductive look, leaving Leon alone with his thoughts.

[Look at you, so nervous you're practically sweating,] Xaphan said with faintly mocking tone.

[Of course I am,] Leon answered, [I don't know what she's going to say. What if she says that she only wants to be friends? Or worse, what if she avoids my question entirely?]

[Trust me, kid, you've got nothing to worry about,] Xaphan responded, dropping any hint of teasing in his voice after hearing how panicked Leon sounded.

[Trust is for the rational,] Leon shot back, [my fear isn't rational...]

[You sound rational enough if you can make an argument like that. Why don't you stop over-thinking it and relax? Either way, getting a clear, unambiguous answer will be good no matter what it is. You'll be better off with it than without, no?]

[Y-yeah,] Leon said. His voice wobbled a little, though, making it clear that he was in no way relaxed about the matter.

Just as Xaphan was going to offer a few more comforting words, Elise returned to the room with a small thin box. She was so excited to give the box to Leon that she almost skipped over to him with a huge smile on her face.

"What... is this?" Leon asked, his stoic face showing little sign of his inner anxiety.

"It's a dancing bear. Just open it!" Elise said with a laugh.

Leon undid the latch and opened the box. Whatever was within had been covered with a bolt of red satin, but Leon could sense an incredible amount of wind magic as soon as the lid was cracked.

"Is this..." Leon began, looking at Elise who was smiling and nodding furiously.

Leon pulled the satin out of the way, revealing a pure white feather.

[YEEEEESSSS! FINALLY!!!!] Xaphan couldn't help but roar.

"The final thing you wanted Heavens Eye to find was a feather from a fourth-tier bird who was strong in wind magic, no? Well, the one I acquired was from a *fifth-tier* Eskellion Dove," Elise said with a look of expectation. She wanted Leon to praise her a little, or at least say something, but he just stood there staring at the feather.

"Is there something wrong?" she asked with some worry after a moment of silence.

"No, it's perfect," Leon replied, a wide smile breaking out over his face. It had taken him a moment to respond because from within his soul realm had come an overwhelming feeling of surprise, followed by excitement and joy. Xaphan's feeling was infectious and he had needed that moment to calm himself down enough to speak.

"How much is this?" Leon asked.

"... It's a gift!" Elise said with a proud smile after a moment of slightly confused silence.

"Are you sure? This couldn't have been cheap..."

[JUST TAKE IT AND FINISH MY POTION DAMN YOU!] Xaphan bellowed, having completely forgotten that Leon still had something to discuss with Elise. In fact, his excitement had given way to impatience, and Leon could barely stand still while holding the box due to his connection with the demon.

"Please take it!" Elise said, with a steely firmness in her voice. She wasn't going to let Leon pay a single silver coin for a gift she had presented him with.

"Thank you!" Leon exclaimed. Perhaps out of the restlessness that had overcome him from Xaphan's desire to finish the potion, or simply out of sheer happiness and gratitude at receiving a gift from Elise, he took a few steps forward and threw his arms around her, pulling her into a hug. "This was very important for me. I can't overstate my gratitude for your help in this matter."

"Don't mention it," Elise said, her face rapidly turning red. Leon's quickly followed suit as soon as he realized what he was doing, and he just as quickly released her.

"So," Elise continued, feeling a little awkward from the unexpected hug, "what was it that you wanted to talk about when we left the arena?"

As soon as she said that, Leon froze. He needed to know where he stood with her, but he also felt an extreme compulsion to hurry back to the Snow Lions' tower stemming from Xaphan's wild joy.

[... Right, you have to have a conversation with her, don't you... I can wait...] Xaphan said, though even through the mental communication Leon could tell that the demon's teeth were clenched. He'd waited almost eighty thousand years to leave that prison and recover his former power, and now Leon was holding the final ingredient he needed to give his recovery the jumpstart it needed. He deferred to Leon's judgment, but the young mage could tell what Xaphan thought was more important.

And he couldn't honestly disagree. The faster Xaphan recovered, the faster he could provide Leon with his true power, beyond the occasional blast of killing intent.

"That... is a conversation that can wait..." Leon reluctantly said after a moment of thought. "It's not too important. I mean, this feather actually kind of answers it already... Well, it would be nice to hear it from you... But I do need to head back to finish... what I needed this feather for..."

Elise promptly stepped forward and interrupted Leon by putting her hand on his cheek.

"Whatever you wanted to say, I can wait to hear it if I need to," she said with a gentle tone. "I'll be here whenever you want to talk again."

Truth be told, she was just as nervous as he was, as she had a feeling that whatever Leon wanted to talk about was serious enough to completely change their relationship. That scared her more than a little, and she was perfectly willing to kick that can down the road a ways.

"... Well... next time, then," Leon whispered, pulling Elise into a gentler, but more deliberate hug than the previous one.

"Next time," she agreed, returning his hug. They stayed like that for a few moments more before Xaphan's impatience finally boiled over and Leon said his goodbyes.

After leaving the Heaven's Eye Tower, Leon hurried back to the Knight Academy as fast as he could, sprinting through the streets of the capital. He didn't care one whit for the stares he attracted as he hurtled past the early afternoon crowds.

[I must apologize to you, Leon...] Xaphan muttered.

[Don't mention it, demon.]

[But-]

[*Don't mention it, demon.*]

[... Very well.]

When Leon made it back to the Snow Lions' tower, he rushed up the stairs straight to his room. Waiting for him in the corner was the tall bowl covered in spell paper. He grabbed it and moved to a table in the center of the room.

[Now, what do we do?] Leon asked.

[First, remove the water-coals. They're not needed and will only get in the way,] Xaphan immediately replied, though the demon kept his voice calm and measured so he could communicate the right information.

Leon removed the lid of the bowl and, using a pair of thin metal tongs, removed the water-coals and threw them into the sink in his bathroom. They almost immediately stopped burning without water around them, but they were still too hot even for a third-tier mage to handle with his bare hands.

[And then?] Leon continued.

Instantly, a flood of runes forming a complex enchantment entered his mind. [Take as much time as you need to inscribe this enchantment. It must be perfect,] Xaphan said.

Leon didn't hesitate to get to work. As he wrote each rune, his hand was steady and his penmanship near perfect. His practice in the enchantment classes was truly paying off; although this was the most complex enchantment he had ever written, it only took as many tries as he needed when learning how to make a crude flare spell. He finished in only two hours.

[Hmmm,] Xaphan murmured as he inspected Leon's work. Once he was satisfied that everything was in order, Leon peeled off the spell paper already on the bowl and replaced all of it with what he had just written.

[So what does that enchantment do?] Leon asked.

[What do you think it does?] Xaphan asked back. He wasn't trying to be a sarcastic dick, he only wanted to fill some time and distract himself with speech while the enchantment went to work.

[The enchantment's core was made of more than half a dozen separate runic circles, totaling three light runes, eight wind runes, and more than twenty fire runes. The modifiers had something to do with bodies, though I couldn't quite parse what they did exactly. So I would have to guess that it fills your body with fire magic that was stoked with the wind magic, plus a little healing from light magic.]

[Not bad, though not very specific either and missing quite a few very big and important details. The enchantment is actually an amalgamation of two different enchantments. The first creates the potion itself, while the second dictates the potion's effects.

[The salamander core is going to melt, releasing so much fire magic that it will saturate and feed the Kagu flower. Then, after the flower has had its fill, it will secrete a juice that will combine with the fire magic-rich water, which will form the potion. Lastly, you will need to eat the feather, then wash it down with the potion. And don't eat the remains of the Kagu flower! You'll probably be incinerated from the inside if you do...]

[But what will the potion and enchantments *do* exactly?] Leon asked.

[Once it settles in your stomach, all of its magical energy will be directed into your soul realm, thanks to the second enchantment. From there, the magic power will enter my body and stimulate my recovery. Essentially, the light runes will give the potion the healing properties it needs to enter your body without causing permanent damage, while the fire energy will invigorate my own atrophied demonic core—where my magic is produced, much like your magic comes from your bone marrow. The wind magic will help to feed those flames, prolonging their effect until the job is done.]

[Well, sounds easy enough,] Leon said. He figured that he had finished the hard part, a notion that Xaphan wasn't in a hurry to dispel. It wouldn't help anyone if Leon spent the next hour or so while the potion finished being made in a state of dread.

Leon spent his time quietly meditating, while Xaphan used his magic senses to monitor the bowl.

[It's ready,] the demon finally growled.

Leon's eyes opened and he opened the box he received from Elise and grabbed the feather. It was only as long as his index finger, making it easy enough to put in his mouth, even if it was less so to swallow. Complicating things was the strength of the wind magic the feather possessed; it vibrated and filled Leon's mouth with air, making getting it down his throat a difficult task, especially as the air quickly turned sharp. Leon's mouth was filled with shallow cuts and he spat out blood.

[Ugghh,] he moaned in pain.

[Swallow the potion! There's not much time! It will hurt, but the injuries and the pain will only be temporary!] Xaphan shouted, spurring Leon onward.

With an awful look of pain on his face, Leon cracked open the bowl and started chugging without even looking at the thick red liquid in the bowl. The potion was scalding hot from the fire magic and it felt like his stomach had been set aflame, but Leon didn't stop. The pain wasn't nearly so intense as what he had felt when he had awakened the Thunderbird's Bloodline.

[How are you doing?] Xaphan asked with a little worry as Leon finished, leaving nothing but a few drops of potion clinging to the side of the bowl and the shriveled Kagu flower at the bottom.

Leon barely managed to say [Alright,] through the burning pain. The potion had settled in the pit of his stomach, growing stronger as the feather kept vibrating.

'At least the potion is suppressing those tiny wind blades...' Leon thought, grateful for the small comfort.

Despite his brave face, Leon took a few staggering steps toward his bed before collapsing onto the floor, barely stopping himself from screaming in pain. He could feel the magic of the potion slowly moving through his body, scorching him from within. Eventually, the pain grew too great and he slipped into the comfortable oblivion of unconsciousness.

Chapter 112: Severe Burns

It took less than fifteen minutes for the potion to wear off. Every last speck of magic power had flowed into Leon's soul realm, where it was drawn to the fire demon waiting for it. Where before Xaphan was like a bonfire, with the power of the Kagu flower and salamander core—plus the Eskellion Dove's wind magic fueling his flames—he became like a tornado of fire.

Xaphan himself was in an inordinate amount of pain, but he didn't have the luxury of passing out as Leon did. He channeled the fire magic into his demonic core and compressed it as far as he could. After five minutes, it felt like his core would explode; after ten, he felt so much pain that for a moment he was sure it had. The fire magic spread throughout his body, feeding his malnourished body but wreaking havoc at the same time. His bones cracked and his hard obsidian skin glowed red hot.

But after five more minutes, the pain faded. The fire tornado died down and the wind stopped blowing. Xaphan took a few minutes to catch his breath and collect himself, then cast his magic senses inward to inspect the state of his body.

Eighty-thousand years of immobility in a prison that sapped his magic power had left his core as dry as a desert. It had been so malnourished that he could barely generate any magic power at all. Leon had taken the demon into his soul realm and Xaphan had tried to use the young man's own power to feed his core and recover, but Leon was just too weak. He didn't possess enough magic for Xaphan's core to heal in any reasonable amount of time. For all intents and purposes, the demon had been forced back to being a third-tier demon, even if the physical foundation he had laid during his rise to demonic Lordship was still there.

But the potion had been like a heavy downpour refilling a dry oasis. His powers hadn't returned completely, but he could feel his core outputting roughly the same amount of power as he had when he was the equivalent of a fifth-tier mage.

[Good, I can work with this,] Xaphan muttered. He could've made due even if his core could only produce the same power as a fourth-tier mage, but he theoretically could've risen back to the sixth-tier from the potion so he couldn't help but feel a modicum of disappointment. Still, with his core now given the kickstart it needed to recover, he was a happy demon.

Leon, on the other hand, wasn't nearly so happy when he woke up. His entire body was sore and stiff, though the burns and cuts from the feather and potion had been healed.

[Did it work?] he asked, rolling over onto his back and not intending to bother getting off the floor.

[It did,] Xaphan said.

[Good,] Leon whispered before closing his eyes and taking a few deep breaths. [So, what now?]

[I'll need a few days, maybe a week to take stock of my new situation.]

[More waiting, then.]

[These things take time, young mage. Just because the potion worked doesn't mean everything's immediately peachy. As I said, a week at most and we'll know where we stand.]

Leon sighed and struggled to his feet. It was getting close to dinner time, so he made his way down to the first-tier common room. Upon reaching it, he saw the usual group chatting in the corner, so he walked over and joined them.

"Leon!" shouted Henry as soon as he saw him. "Leon... Leon...."

"What?" Leon asked, seeing Henry stare at him with an absolutely stupefied look on his face.

"I... I was at the arena today. Who was that girl that was all over you?!" Henry stared at Leon with a look of confusion that someone as unsociable as Leon could find a girlfriend and awe that said girl was so beautiful.

"Yeah, how could you keep this a secret from your buddies!" Charles said, throwing his arm around Leon's shoulders in a brotherly manner. Alain, Bohemond, and Matthew also stared expectantly at Leon.

For his part, Leon froze up while his face rapidly turned red and his face twitched, not quite knowing what expression to settle on in his surprise and embarrassment.

After a moment of silence, Alain decided to give Leon a little help and ask a few simple questions to get the ball rolling.

"So, what's her name?"

"... Elise," Leon whispered, the gears in his brain finally turning again.

"A beautiful name for someone we've been told is more than beautiful enough to deserve it," Alain said, glancing at Henry. "Why don't you tell us a little about her, Leon? What's she like?"

"And how did you meet her? And when?! And can you introduce us?! And-" Henry wasn't even close to being done with his barrage of questions, but Alain slapped the back of his head and shut him up.

"We understand if you don't want to talk about this lady friend of yours," Alain added, giving Leon a reassuring smile.

"No, it's fine," Leon said, giving Alain a look of gratitude for giving him some time to think and process the surprise. "I met Elise in the Heaven's Eye Tower in Teira about eight months ago."

"*That long ago?*" Charles asked in disbelief.

"Yeah..." Leon responded with a bashful look, causing Charles to facepalm.

"Come on, man! How long were you going to let this go on without telling your buddies about this girl?" Bohemond asked in slight frustration.

"Whoa there, let's not go making a big deal out of this," said Matthew. "It's not as if Leon is particularly talkative to begin with. If he wants to see a lady in private, that's his choice."

"Indeed, there's no need for him to say anything," added Alain.

"Well," Leon began, "I suppose I find it hard to say definitively that we're even 'together'."

"The fuck does *that* mean?!" demanded Henry. "I saw how she was acting in the arena, if you two aren't together then why in the name of all the Ancestors would she have been so intimate with you?! Unless you're saying you paid her, in which case you must be broke because no way any man could afford her..."

Upon Henry's not particularly serious insinuation of Elise being a prostitute, Leon's killing intent momentarily spiked, leaving Henry frozen in terror and sweating through his clothes.

"I did *not* pay her," Leon said with a quiet and grim severity that drained all the blood from Henry's face.

"Right... Sorry," Henry squeaked.

"So then what do you mean by 'hard to say you're together'?" Alain asked, quickly moving on.

What followed was a moment of silence while Leon carefully chose what words to say. He'd been troubled by this very problem for a while, but he never thought he would ever bring it up with these guys. But the guys waited patiently for him, having come to a reasonable understanding of Leon and how reluctant he typically was about sharing personal details.

"When... When we first met, she came off... she was very direct. I don't really know what she saw in me, why she approached me to begin with, but... I walked into the Tower and then, without any warning, she was there, talking and smiling and... She's given me a bit more space ever since, but with the context of how forward she was with me before we had even properly met makes it hard for me to see what's genuine..." Leon babbled a little and wasn't too detailed, but the others didn't press him for too many specifics despite their burning curiosity. Well, most of the others didn't; Henry was still too overcome with jealousy to pick up on the fact that Leon wasn't too keen on providing those details.

"'Forward', huh? So how good in bed is she? 'Cause today she looked like she knows exactly what to do... Come on, man, I need details!"

Again, what Henry said infuriated Leon, but he refrained from releasing his killing intent a second time. Instead, he decided to clear the air, to correct any misconceptions his vagueness may have made.

"No, I've never- we never did that."

The other five young men heard the second part of Leon's statement, but it was the first part that made them all stare at him in shock. Leon felt incredibly awkward about how intently they stared at him, so he didn't say a word either, leading to a long moment of silence.

"So," Matthew said, being the first to recover, "you're a third-tier mage, barely seventeen, but you've never had sex?"

"I haven't," Leon said quietly. He'd never been very concerned about being a virgin until leaving the Northern Vales and hearing how often these guys would discuss it. Over the course of the seven months in the Academy, he had grown self-conscious that he'd never been so intimate with a woman because it meant that it was something he couldn't relate to and talk about with his friends.

"That's... very surprising," Matthew said in wonder.

“Yeah,” added Bohemond thoughtfully, “most of the girls I’ve seen have been incredibly attracted to just first and second-tier mages, even if they were ugly or middle-aged. Power is incredibly attractive, especially when it comes from a very young man who is already a third-tier mage and still has enormous potential...”

“This... this cannot stand!” Henry said loudly, finally finding his tongue. “Leon! If you’re not going out with that girl, then you have to come with me tomorrow! We need to get you laid!”

“No, no, that’s fine. We don’t have to do that...” Leon whispered. Ever since the conversation had taken this turn, Xaphan had started to laugh uproariously from his soul realm and he was trying to block it out. This wasn’t easy, as Xaphan’s hysterics were only growing louder.

[Shouldn’t you be busy evaluating your current power?] Leon asked angrily.

[Yes! But how... can I not... appreciate... this...?] Xaphan choked out between laughing fits.

“Yes, come on buddy! All you’d have to do is let your third-tier aura do its thing and you’ll have any number of ladies you want!”

“No!” Leon said again, with more emphasis and a hint of killing intent. Henry wisely closed his mouth and let his invitation drop.

“Nothing wrong with virginity,” Alain said.

“Well, maybe a *little*,” Charles added, exchanging a knowing look with Alain. “Leon, you like Elise, right?”

Leon slowly nodded, not quite sure what Charles was getting at.

“Well, if what Henry has told us—and if what you said about how forward she is—then you’re going probably going to be completely overwhelmed by her if you ever manage to seal the deal and get into her bedroom...”

Leon couldn’t really argue with Charles there. In fact, he started sweating from panic now that Charles had mentioned this problem that he had overlooked.

‘I wouldn’t be surprised if she has experience, there’s no way I’d satisfy her! I’d be fucked, literally! I’d last all of ten seconds, and then she’d probably leave in disappoi-’

“But don’t worry!” Charles said, cutting off Leon’s line of thought after seeing panic breaking through Leon’s normally stoic exterior. “We’re here, and we’ve got the all the advice you need!”

“Anything you want to know, we’ll do our best to tell you,” said Matthew.

“Indeed. You’re our friend, we’ll help as best we can,” Bohemond added, giving Leon a nod of solidarity.

“We’ve got your back,” Alain said with a smile.

“You’ve taught us about fighting, so let’s repay the favor!” Henry added. However, as soon as he said that, he launched into a story about how he slept with both of a noble’s daughters and his wife all on the same night, a tale that was doubtlessly highly exaggerated if it was even remotely true. Since no one really believed him, everyone else chose to ignore him.

“So listen,” began Alain. He already had three fiancés, so his words and advice on this subject carried a great deal of weight and authority. “We should start with the single most important part of this for a virgin who might not be too confident in his abilities: foreplay. Trust me, my friend, your fingers and tongue can carry you through any deficiencies in other areas, such as a virgin’s lack of stamina...”

The group spent the forty-five minutes they had until dinner giving Leon various sex tips. Alain and Charles were particularly detailed in their descriptions of what they found worked. In fact, none of them had ever gone into so much detail before, and the conversation turned into everyone sharing tips for the benefit of all the others, not just Leon.

Leon himself didn’t talk much; the immense sense of privacy he had built up during his isolated childhood making him far too embarrassed to participate in the conversation. He did eventually relax after a while, but not so much as to ask many questions. Still, he did his best to absorb what everyone else had said.

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That night, after dinner was over and Leon had gone to his room for his nightly training before bed, Xaphan spoke up.

[Leon, I need a favor.]

[What kind of favor?]

[I want you to try and use some of my power. It will help me understand how much I can give you, which in turn will help me realize my own output.]

[Alright, what do I do?]

[Remember how you did it last time? You only need to pull on the connection between us to summon my power, then you can manipulate it as if it were your own power.]

Leon took a deep breath and, just like when Xaphan had first taught him how to use his demonic flame on the journey between the prison and Teira, carefully located the connection between himself and Xaphan. He couldn’t really feel it unless he was looking for it, but now that he was aware of it, the connection felt like a string connected to his heart that he could tug at will. As he did so, power flowed out of his soul realm and into his body, but unlike his own power, this magic felt foreign and faintly unsettling.

[Careful, don’t go summoning too much, wouldn’t want you bursting into flame,] Xaphan said, the caution in his voice readily apparent.

Leon directed the demon’s power into his arm as best he could, but his face began to scrunch up from the strain. A third-tier mage trying to control the strength of a fifth-tier mage-equivalent wasn’t easy in the slightest.

But, soon enough, the power flowed into Leon’s left hand and it appeared to him that he was literally holding fire! A deep red flame had appeared in his hand!

And then things went wrong. Leon didn't stop channeling Xaphan's power, and the sense of discomfort he had quickly turned to pain, which then escalated into far more extreme pain. The flame in his hand winked out and he collapsed, barely holding in a scream.

[Stop! That's enough!] Xaphan shouted, but Leon couldn't stop the flow of magic stemming from the demon.

Before his eyes, Leon's arm turned red from heat as it burned from the inside. Leon's teeth clenched together so tightly from the pain that he couldn't speak even if he wanted to. After a few more seconds, Xaphan managed to cut the flow of magic into Leon, but by then the skin on Leon's arm had started to peel and bubble up; the burns Leon sustained all over and within his left arm were profound.

Leon sat in the center of his room barely holding back the tears and cries of pain.

[I'm sorry, I didn't think things would be that bad! I thought your innate affinity for fire and the contract we forged would be enough to protect you!] Xaphan quickly said.

[Did... did you at least get the information you needed?]

[Yes, but... Yes, I did.]

[What was that 'but'?]

[It was nothing,] Xaphan said. Leon was in too much pain to pursue his doubt, so he let the matter slide.

Xaphan had only asked him that favor to satisfy his own curiosity. He did learn a little, but he didn't think it was worth the price Leon paid for it—but he refrained from telling that to the young man himself. The demon doubted that that would help the situation in any way.

After a few more minutes of channeling his magic into his arm to dull the pain, which had been so severely burnt that he could barely move it, Leon staggered to his feet and made for the bathroom where his first-aid kit and the healing spells it contained were located.

Chapter 113: Demon Fire

Leon had ten healing spells in his first-aid kit, all of which he had to use to regain the use of his left arm. Even then, his arm was still covered in light burns, but he could move it without pain if he was careful.

[Well, that was certainly enlightening,] Xaphan said flippantly in an attempt to lighten the mood.

[... That's one word for it, I guess,] Leon muttered sarcastically.

[At the very least, we learned two things,] Xaphan continued, ignoring Leon's comment. [The first is you need to focus on controlling the magic you borrow as well as only taking what power you need. The second is that the power I gave you was a little wild and outside of my own control. Fortunately, these are very fixable problems.]

[How so?]

[All we need is time and practice. For now, I'll focus on regaining the proper control of my power; it shouldn't take more than, say, a week or so.] Xaphan decided to be cautious after Leon's injury. He estimated that it would only take a day or two to shake off the rust and bring his flames under enough

control so as to not burn Leon again, but he wanted the extra time to make sure he had gotten used to the sudden jump in power.

[I think I'll take that time to make a few new healing spells,] Leon said, looking over at the pile of spells he had just used and then to his burned arm. It still hurt to move the arm quickly, but the spells had healed him enough that apart from a lot of peeling skin, there weren't many obvious signs of injury, especially when he wore long-sleeved shirts. He was sure he could heal what the spells hadn't in a week.

Despite that surety, Leon used the first few healing spells he made that night to clean himself up. His peeling skin had vanished during the night, so while his arm appeared to completely heal, holding a shield during training still caused some discomfort.

The week passed quickly with hardly a single word exchanged between Leon and Xaphan, but finally, it came time for Leon to have some real practice with Xaphan's power. To make sure he wouldn't be disturbed, Leon took the huge stack of healing spells he'd drawn up during the week and ventured out into the maze of gorges and cliffs in the north-western part of the Academy.

[So, has this been enough time for you to get a good handle on your power?] Leon asked, with only a tiny hint of sarcasm.

[It has,] Xaphan responded, ignoring Leon's tone. [Are you ready to see what you can do with it?]

[Of course. Anything I need to know before we start, though?]

[Plenty. I guess the first thing I ought to mention is that part of the reason you were burned so badly last week was that you couldn't stop the flow of magic out from your soul realm. I'd guess that problem was because you didn't try until the flow had grown too large for you to properly handle, so keep it slow and ramp it up gradually.]

[Makes sense.]

[Another thing, demon fire is very potent. Just about anything can burn within it, so be careful about what you do with it. Don't go starting any large fires, keep it in control. Again, go slow until you have a good idea of how much you can handle.]

[Got it.]

[Then let's do this.]

Leon briefly smiled before his face turned deadly serious. He gently pulled on the connection between him and Xaphan and called forth the demon's power. He kept it as minimal as he could, letting the heat from the connection trickle out slowly, before channeling it into his arm and out into his palm. There, a small red flame appeared in the center of his palm, no bigger than the flame of a small candle that leisurely roiled and flickered as if it were burning in slow motion.

The first time Leon used Xaphan's power just after leaving the prison, this was all the power he had been able to call upon, so there was hardly a need for caution. This time, however, he had to hold back the demon's power that tried to burst free from his soul realm. The longer he held the flame, the more intense the pressure became. He felt like a flimsy dam trying to hold back a raging waterfall after barely a minute, which caused him to extinguish the flame and immediately stop summoning Xaphan's power.

Leon took a deep breath as the heat from the flame disappeared.

[You didn't burn yourself this time. Progress,] Xaphan said mockingly.

[Screw you, demon! I may have gotten burned, but at least I'm always in control of my power!]

[If you're so confident in your strength, how about you go about raising yourself from third-tier power to fifth-tier power in a matter of minutes and see how well you control yourself then!]

Leon grit his teeth in frustration. Xaphan did have a point; the demon had gotten used to his atrophied third-tier strength, so there would understandably be a short period of adaptation to the sudden spike to fifth-tier.

After a few minutes of rest, Leon began again. He kept the flame small, merely testing himself to see how long he could hold it. He made it about a minute and a half during his second test, about half again as long as the first try that morning.

[Hmmm. I'm going to try something,] Xaphan said as Leon extinguished the fire again.

[Like what?]

[I might be able to help you call upon only what you can bear. *Might*. I've never had to share my power before, so I'm learning as we go, too. Let's try again.]

For a third time, Leon summoned the demon's magic. This time, however, the pressure in his chest that came from his soul realm was greatly diminished.

[Whatever you're doing... it's working,] Leon mumbled, trying to concentrate on keeping the flame lit and under control. Xaphan was himself too busy concentrating to reply.

Leon managed to last five minutes that time thanks to Xaphan's assistance.

[It seems like it will be a collaborative effort if you ever find yourself needing to call upon my power,] Xaphan said after Leon put out the flame in his hand.

[Fine by me,] Leon said. He was starting to get a good handle on calling upon Xaphan's power and had already started thinking of how to maximize his time holding the fire. On his fourth try, he tried mixing Xaphan's magic with his own, an idea that wasn't theoretically terrible, but it left Leon feeling drained after only ten seconds. He guessed this was because he still lacked sufficient control over his own magic due to only being a third-tier mage that it felt so draining.

But, he had made Xaphan's power a little easier to control, even if it didn't last nearly so long as the previous attempts.

The two practiced for the remainder of the day. Leon's final practice run before he returned to the Snow Lions' tower lasted for almost fifteen minutes.

The next day, the pair changed their focus. Instead of trying to maintain a tiny flame for a long time, Leon tried to conjure a larger, more useful flame. He didn't try to summon a flame roughly the size of a torch or magic lantern as he had the week previously, but instead only increased the size of the candle-

sized flame by about half. He quickly found that such use of Xaphan's fire was quite inefficient, as such a small increase more than halved the time he could keep the flame lit.

Despite this inefficiency, Leon continued down that road of training. Keeping a fire the size of a candle lit was hardly practical for battle, so he needed to learn to handle greater amounts of Xaphan's power.

All throughout the next week, Leon would venture off into the western mountains whenever he got the chance. From a certain perspective, this kind of training wasn't productive for him, as he was merely learning to use borrowed power. His time in the long-run would be better spent working on ascending to the fourth-tier. However, when Xaphan brought this up, Leon responded that there would be hardly any point to making the contract between them if he never learned to use Xaphan's power. Besides, what Leon wanted was strength, and Xaphan's demonic fire would certainly give him that, even if it that strength was only temporary. Plus, it wasn't as if Leon completely neglected his own training; it was a tough decision for him to make, but Leon cut into his sleep time to make some extra room in his schedule for meditation and working to increase his own power.

Fortunately for him, he only had to keep this schedule up for another week. With Xaphan's help, Leon was able to conjure a small explosion of demonic fire out of his hand that had a range of about three feet, and he had enough control to do so two or three times before the burns accumulated enough to disable his arm. During this time, Xaphan also had to teach Leon how to douse the flames so as to not kill anyone he didn't mean to or set everything around him on fire.

—

Leon sighed in pain as he slid to the ground with his back against a large boulder. The ground all around the secluded crevice he had been practicing in was scorched and blackened, with the rocky walls not looking much better. It had been hard practice, and the skin on his left arm that was cracked and bleeding from the heat was proof of the intensity with which Leon had taken to his training. In fact, he had gone through more than three-quarters of the healing spells he had written, a total of more than one hundred and fifty that all went to treat his burns.

He had grown so used to the sensation of pain that Leon could barely even feel the fire that ravaged his arm during practice, but he had to force himself to take a break whenever he felt his arm started to grow heavy and lethargic, as he knew that the damage was severe. It got so bad that Xaphan had to intervene.

[You've already gotten enough of a handle on my power to fight with, there's no need to keep pushing yourself. Slow down!]

[I suppose,] Leon muttered, as he pressed more healing spells onto his burned arm. [I just want to learn enough control so that I don't have to worry about burning myself if I ever need to use your power.]

[No amount of control will lessen that risk right now. What you need to focus on is your own power. If you ascend to the fourth-tier, you'll probably be able to call upon much more of my power before your arm is burned to the point of disability. Ascension to the fifth-tier, I'd guess, would allow you to use this level of power with relative impunity. You don't specifically need control, you need to get stronger.]

Leon couldn't argue with Xaphan when his entire left arm had been covered in healing spells. The demon's fire was truly potent, but Leon felt that the pain had been worth it to have such a power that no one would ever suspect in his wheelhouse.

[You're right, I should double down on my own training,] Leon said quietly. [Though I am looking forward to when I can use elemental magic for real, rather than relying on you for it. Throwing even this small amount of fire is rather... intoxicating...]

[I don't like that tone...] Xaphan replied with a worried tone.

[Relax, I'm not talking about getting reliant on *your* power. If using only your magic were this fun, though, I can't wait to see how it feels to use lightning,] Leon said, every word dripping with anticipation.

As soon as his arm was healed, Leon drew his sword and began practicing. He flooded his body with magic, but the thought of learning how to use his own elemental power had made him too restless to meditate.

He'd rarely trained so intently with his father's sword before. Usually, if he were to practice his sword techniques then that was what he wanted to concentrate on, saving the flooding of his body with magic power for when he would meditate.

But now, he was doing both at the same time, even if the sword movements were only meant to keep him moving. And as he moved, a comforting warmth spread out from the handle of the sword and throughout his entire body, though Leon was so into his training that he wasn't even aware of it.

Chapter 114: Monster Classes

Castor blew his whistle, and the Snow Lions formed up into their layered shield wall in seconds. With another series of whistles, the unit was given the signal to begin marching forward, which they did in near-perfect unison. More blasts on the whistle brought them to a halt.

Turning right, left, back up, tighten the formation, spread out a little, all commands given by Castor via his whistle were carried out quickly and precisely. The three watching Instructors were suitably impressed. The Snow Lions had been in Heavy Infantry Training for four months and were moving with the same confidence and skill as career soldiers.

"Turtle formation!" shouted the Senior Instructor. Castor responded with a quick series of blasts on his whistle, and the trainees in the interior raised their shields above their heads while the formation tightened up to take cover beneath them. The trainees on the exterior of the formation kept their shields facing out, making the training unit a nearly impenetrable box of shields.

"Archers!" shouted the Senior Instructor. Castor blew the whistle a number of times to lower the 'turtle shell' that had been raised, then again to give the backmost rank their command. Under the watchful eyes of Alphonsus, the twenty men in the last row put their shields on the ground and pulled their bows off their shoulders, nocking an arrow and standing at the ready.

They held that position for about ten seconds—long enough for the Instructors to get a good look at them—before Castor signaled them to sling their bows over their shoulders, pick up their shields, and rejoin the formation.

“Alternate ranks!” shouted the Senior Instructor. With well-practiced movements and a signal from Castor, the Snow Lions in the front rank moved to the back. A few seconds later, Castor signaled again, and the ranks shifted again. This was repeated until the entire unit had cycled through the front lines.

“Splendid!” said the Senior Instructor. “Go ahead and relax! You third-tier boys come with me!”

The Snow Lions relaxed, letting the formation disperse as the trainees assembled into their usual friend groups. Alphonsus, Castor, and Leon, meanwhile, followed the Senior Instructor about a hundred feet away from the unit.

The Senior Instructor began with some rare praise, “That was a good showing, the time you all have spent training has clearly not been wasted.

“However, there’s always room for improvement. Heavy Infantry Training ends today, but don’t neglect it going forward.”

“We won’t, Sir. We know the importance of this training,” Castor said.

“Good. Moving on, next week begins your study of the common monsters you’ll face as knights. We can’t exactly go out and grab a vampire or werewolf for practical training, so these classes will be almost entirely theoretical. It won’t be as exciting as the more active classes, but the Academy still expects the same effort you’ve been giving in your previous classes, got it?”

“Yes, Sir!”

“Good.”

—

Their monster hunting classes began the following Monday. Rather than reporting to the training field in the morning, the entire training battalion made their way to the same huge hall that most of the first-tier trainees had been using for Magical Theory. First thing on their schedule was the most dangerous and insidious of enemies that knights of the Royal Legions would be expected to face: vampires.

For a week, the trainees learned all about how to identify signs of vampiric behavior, how to identify vampires themselves, and the general tips to fighting them. Fighting a vampire was remarkably similar to fighting a mage, only a vampire uses power gained from a demonic contract and augmented that borrowed power with blood. Of course, this blood magic would invariably involve consumption of blood—or more specifically, mana—and the point a blood mage became a vampire was when their bodies adapted to this foreign power and became dependent on blood.

Or at least, that was how a nest of vampires often got their start. The original blood-mage-turned-vampire would usually—but not always—seek out other like-minded mages to gain safety in numbers. These other mages would make contracts with the vampire, providing it with blood in exchange for some of the vampire’s demonic power. Unfortunately for that mage, their bodies would be corrupted by their connection to the vampire, and they would slowly turn into vampires themselves.

Most of what Leon learned during these classes he had already picked up from Xaphan who, being a demon, already had a robust knowledge of the demonic pacts that granted vampires most of their

powers. Xaphan had never actually forged a contract with a blood mage but he had been close to a great many other demons that had before he was summoned by the Thunderbird Clan and imprisoned.

The second week was devoted to werewolves. They were a little easier to learn about since they were only humans who had contracted a communicable curse, but that also made them more common than vampires. Additionally, they could potentially pass on their curse to any knight who might try to hunt them down, making them more dangerous than vampires to a certain extent.

The stone giants in the east were the subject of the third week. There wasn't much to say about them, except their physical dimensions and characteristics. They were about three to four times the size of an average man and made entirely of stone. They had incredible resistance to most kinds of magical attacks and had a great affinity for using earth magic.

Unlike the previous two weeks, the Instructors actually had some practical training for the Academy trainees. Unfortunately, it essentially boiled down to trying to break enormous boulders to simulate fighting a slow-moving giant.

Most of the Instructors had to fight the urge to cringe when directing their trainees to literally smash boulders and call it training. The Snow Lions' Senior Instructor in particular had to say his orders through teeth that had been tightly clenched from the absurdity of it. But, some brilliant genius in the Bull Kingdom's administration had thought that it was a good idea to get the trainees used to the toughness of stone giants, so the orders had been passed down to the Legate and made their way to the trainees.

"Man, what in all the fucks are we doing?" Charles asked as he swung a war hammer into a boulder.

Leon sighed before giving a terse response, "... Just think of it as physical conditioning. I'm sure you're getting close to ascending to the second-tier, so any extra exercise is good for you."

"I guess," Charles muttered, still unenthused at how repetitive and dull their task was. Leon was hardly any happier, as he didn't specifically need the exercise, being a third-tier mage.

"Out of curiosity, Leon, how close are you to breaking through to the fourth-tier? I mean, you've been third-tier for as long as I've known you, so it has to be soon, right?" Charles asked. As he did, Henry and Alain who were 'training' close by stopped their own conversation to listen in.

"Soon. I think," Leon answered.

"You 'think'? Shouldn't you feel it? I'm feeling close to the second-tier and I felt it when I got close to the first-tier as well. Isn't the fourth-tier the same?"

"Kind of," Leon said. He took a brief moment to think before continuing, as 'feeling' close to a magical threshold wasn't easy to put into words. "You knew you were coming close to those tiers because they have such drastic changes. Your muscles grow stronger and you can handle magic. These are easy to notice. Ascending to the fourth-tier involves changes in the brain and organs that are hard to notice, as they basically just make them work better. About the only thing a person *can* notice is an increase in the control they have over their magic power.

"And to that end, I have noticed that I have better control over my mana and magic power. I'm still not quite there yet, but I'm close. I'd estimate six months, give or take a few weeks."

"If the change from third to fourth-tier is so hard to notice, how do you know that you only need six months?" Henry asked as he and Alain were as interested in this topic as Charles.

"I... think it has to do with the changes in the brain. I guess it's kind of like how I can't do the math that would tell me how to hit a target with an arrow five hundred feet away, but I can eyeball it and guess with a reasonable degree of accuracy. I can't explain this in words, but I can estimate..." Leon trailed off, but he made his point.

"Well, whether it happens tomorrow or a year from now, you'll still be a fourth-tier mage before you hit nineteen! You can consider me *very* impressed," Alain said, clapping Leon on the shoulder in early congratulations.

"Hey..." muttered the Senior Instructor as he walked over to the chatting Snow Lions. "You're supposed to be breaking rocks. Get back to brea- I mean, get back to your *important and necessary* training." As soon as he said this, he turned around and walked away, not even bothering to make sure they followed his halfhearted order. He honestly didn't care if they went back to hitting rocks or not, but as their Senior Instructor, he had to say something.

The fourth and final week of their monster classes shifted the focus to other creatures a knight would have a reasonable chance of encountering, like chimeras, hydras, griffins, and more, all packed into five days of study. There were enough creatures that were brought up in that week that none of the Instructors truly expected any of the trainees to internalize much of the information, but they were confident that the trainees would learn quickly after getting some practical experience during their squireships.

—

The weekend after their monster classes finished, Leon decided to make his way back to the capital. He'd visited Elise several times since she had given him the last ingredient, but he still hadn't been able to muster up the courage to bring up their relationship again. In fact, he'd been so embarrassed about running off after receiving the feather that he'd barely been able to speak to her at all.

Elise was, if not happy with the arrangement, then at least content. She didn't pressure Leon to bring up what he'd wanted to speak with her about, but the anxiety of not knowing what he'd wanted to say had started to cause quite her a bit of stress. However, she was just as embarrassed to bring it up with Leon as he was to bring it up with her.

This trend of neither bringing up what they really wanted to say continued when Leon made his way to the Heaven's Eye Tower after the monster classes were done. He'd finally made the decision to commission some custom armor, and he could think of no better smith than one that worked with Heaven's Eye to forge a set for him.

The reasoning behind this was that he was quite unhappy with the quality of the armor the Academy had given him. He knew that it was defective and only meant to be used in the simulated battles in the Academy, but it also represented the armor he would receive after leaving the Academy, and he was not impressed. In fact, the only thing had stopped him from commissioning armor before was hesitation brought on by the cost; he knew he would have to pay an enormous amount of silver for even a passably decent set of armor.

But, with the end of the classes dealing with monsters and dangerous creatures, he was down to only three months left in the capital—after which he would leave for his squireship. He knew that forging armor was a time-consuming process and that he'd be gone for two months during the Academy's 'final test', the FTX. In other words, he was rapidly running out of time to find a smith and arrange for the armor to be made.

So, he made his way to the Heaven's Eye Tower. Elise was there as usual, and she introduced him to who she thought to be the best smith for Leon's purpose and price. Leon and the smith made their arrangements, and Leon returned to the Academy.

During his entire time at the Heaven's Eye Tower, he and Elise didn't speak about anything consequential. And as with his armor situation, he knew that he was quickly running out time to have the serious conversation that he knew they needed. But, he just couldn't spit it out, even with Xaphan's teasing and encouragement.

Chapter 115: Final Classes

The last few classes the Knight Academy taught its trainees during their training cycle were a random mash-up of various other aspects of a knight's job that the trainees would have to know. Unfortunately, there wasn't enough time to go into detail, so the burden of educating them fully in these parts of their jobs would fall upon the knights who the trainees would serve during their squireships.

The first class was camp construction. Leon had an easier time with this class than most of the other trainees, thanks to Artorias' education. Artorias had used most of the same principles in building their fortified home in the Forest of Black and White as the Instructors were teaching in the Academy, and he had made sure to teach Leon those same principles. As a result, Leon's squad was able to build their camp wall and tents during their practical exercises faster than anyone else in the battalion.

The rest of the classes weren't so smooth for him, however.

—

Leon hit the ground hard, landing on his back with a look of intense anger and frustration on his face. The horse that had just thrown him off turned around to stare at Leon, its bright eyes looking smug and self-satisfied to the young mage.

"This *fucking* animal!" Leon muttered bitterly. The horse had thrown him onto the ground half a dozen times, and he was more than sick of it.

As if it could understand what he said, the horse snorted haughtily—or so it seemed to Leon—and turned its head away. Once Leon rose to his feet and approached the horse to remount, it bucked its legs and took off running across the field, leaving Leon standing there feeling quite foolish and very frustrated.

"You alright there, Leon?" asked Castor as he rode over on a horse that seemed as tame and well-trained as an old herding dog.

"I'm fine," Leon said, his tone making it clear just how much of a lie his statement was.

“Need some help getting that horse back here?” Castor asked, looking perfectly willing to go after the running horse.

“No,” Leon answered. He started to emit relatively small amounts of killing intent as his eyes followed his horse around the training field, and Castor awkwardly laughed and rode away, leaving Leon to his own business.

Leon took a few deep breaths and released some magic from his soul realm into his blood. The horses the Knight Academy used for training weren’t anything special, but Leon would still need to utilize all of his third-tier speed to run down his horse.

After galloping away across the training field, the horse had slowed down and started to follow some of the other horses around. It had noticed Leon didn’t immediately run after it, so it wasn’t worried at all. Several minutes later, once it felt an ice-cold killing intent envelop its body, it knew that it had made a mistake by not paying any attention to Leon. Leon, seeming to appear out of nowhere, tackled the startled horse to the ground, aiding that realization.

Fortunately, neither the horse nor the extremely angry Leon was hurt, and the horse struggled to its hooves with Leon back in the saddle. Leon didn’t have nearly so much trouble for the rest of the class as he had in the beginning, but that wasn’t to say the horse had suddenly started cooperating with him. It only stopped trying to throw him off. By the time that class ended Leon still hadn’t gained control of the horse.

—

“I fucking hate horses,” Leon bitterly complained in the Snow Lions’ ground-floor common room, “and I hate *that* fucking horse in particular...”

“Well, *you* may not have had the best time, but it sure was funny seeing you getting tossed on your ass so many times,” Henry said with a laugh. Had anyone not in the small group of friends Leon had accumulated said the same thing, Leon would’ve responded with a potent blast of killing intent. But, after nine months around these guys, he had learned to just roll with the good-natured ribbing.

So, he only shot the snickering Henry a brief glare before sarcastically saying with a shrug, “At least there’s a silver lining.”

“Yeah, but I have to say, it’s weird seeing you not be good at something,” Bohemond said to Leon. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you really struggle at such a simple task as riding a horse.”

“There aren’t any horses in the Northern Vales! Where would I have ever learned this shit before coming south?!” Leon asked rhetorically.

“You could’ve taken the horseback riding class rather than whatever it was you chose for your second elective,” said Charles. “You had the opportunity to learn, but you didn’t.”

“To be fair, that horse was kind of an asshole,” Alain stated.

“It was, but a skilled enough rider would’ve been able to compensate and take control without their killing intent,” said Henry.

"Maybe. Maybe that horse was in heat or something; it kept following the mares when it got away from Leon. Horses go into heat, right?" Matthew mentioned.

"If it was a male horse, then I doubt it was in heat; that's a female thing. Was it male?" Leon asked.

"... Yes, it was," answered Matthew after a moment of stunned silence; he clearly thought the horse's sex had been obvious, but it apparently wasn't to Leon. Or at least, Leon hadn't paid nearly enough attention to his horse, which was perhaps one of the reasons why it was so uncooperative. "I mean, it was a stallion unless that fifth leg it seemed to have actually *was* a fifth leg..."

"That poor horse," Charles said sarcastically. "All he wanted was to take a ride with some fine lady horses, but instead he had to be ridden by *this* surly goon. My heart aches for him, it truly does."

Leon sighed. He wasn't in the mood to fire back at Charles, so he simply repeated in a low voice, "I fucking hate horses..."

—

The horse class lasted less than a week, not nearly enough time for Leon to actually improve in his horse riding skills. He was barely able to get his horse to move where he wanted it to, let alone pull off the fancy maneuvers that many of the third-tier nobles showed off to each other.

In fact, Leon's lack of skill with a horse had become something of a joke among many of the nobles. There were a couple of bets going on how long he'd be able to last before being thrown off his horse again. Of course, Leon was hardly alone in having serious trouble with his horse, but he was the only third-tier trainee who had such problems.

However, for the several dozen nobles who took great joy in seeing Leon finally seem to fail at something, one nobleman was notable for not taking the opportunity to deride Leon: Gaius. As a matter of fact, Gaius had been strangely quiet and reserved for months, though no one was upset enough at his relative silence to actually ask him about it.

When many of the other nobles quietly laughed at the sight of Leon struggling to control his horse, Gaius watched impassively and didn't say a word—or make any sort of reaction, for that matter. The young nobleman merely maintained his silence and kept to himself.

—

Fortunately for Leon, the next class was an introduction to the signals used to command Legions on the battlefield—a significantly easier subject than riding horses. The second-to-last week was spent learning the flag and horn signals in a classroom, while the final week was spent on the training field, putting those classes to practice.

The training units were arranged into three lines, staggered into a checkerboard pattern, and made to move in time to the signals they had learned the week before. Everything from battle commands to parade marching was covered—though the latter was only given a few cursory hours, as opposed to the days of the former.

And, when the last day was over, the training units retired to their towers to rest. They had the next week off, and then it was on to the FTX, the two-month long final test of the skills they acquired in the

Knight Academy. It would involve all ten units fighting against each other with the goal of seizing as many banners as they could.

The results of the FTX would have a major impact on where the trainees would be sent for their squireships. Since most lords and higher-ranked knights kept their former squires on as knights in their own units or retinue, where the trainees would be sent for their squireships was essentially where they would spend the majority of their career in the Royal Legions.

Thus, most trainees considered it of the utmost importance to perform well, so that they could be sent somewhere pleasant. 'Most' trainees, of course, meant the commoners; the nobles were confident they'd be sent somewhere befitting of both their nobility and education in the Knight Academy, regardless of their performance in the end. But that wasn't to say that they didn't take the FTX seriously. To beat the other units would be to confirm their own greatness, an incredibly attractive prospect to the proud and egotistical nobles.

The Snow Lions were no exception to the general state of things in the Academy. Every trainee in the unit wanted to win, a desire that was amplified by the fact that they hadn't done any fighting since seizing the Deathbringers' banner; they were ready for a good fight, and the FTX was the perfect opportunity. To that end, Leon, Castor, and Alphonsus convened in the third-tier common room to discuss their strategy going forward.

"We've been passive for too long! We need to go on the attack!" said Alphonsus emphatically.

"I agree," added Leon, "and the sooner the better. The longer we wait, the more chances everyone else will have to not only find us but also to dig in and fortify their camps."

"Indeed. Fortunately, we already have a fortified camp..." muttered Castor, causing Alphonsus to frown slightly. The latter truly hated that cave the Snow Lions had moved into for several months, and the idea of going back certainly wasn't appealing to him, even though none of the units were allowed to stay in their towers during the FTX; they had to venture out into the training grounds and build a fortified camp to stay in, rather than stay in the comfort of their towers.

"Any idea about who we should attack first?" Castor continued, letting the other two speak their minds before him.

"The Black Vipers!" answered Alphonsus immediately. "That shit stick Tiberias took part in that attack on our tower, and we haven't gotten our revenge yet!"

After a silent moment of thought, Leon said, "Works for me. The Black Vipers still have their banner, a surprise attack on the first night could work..."

"Hmmm... I was actually hoping to go after the Steel Century for that ambush they pulled on you back then," Castor said while looking at Leon, "but if the two of you are in agreement, then we can go after the Black Vipers first. *Then* the Steel Century."

Alphonsus laughed in anticipation, but Leon only nodded stoically.

"Beyond that, how do you two think we should fight?" asked Castor. "I'm thinking we ought to go out as light infantry and archers, attacking at night and disappearing during the day back into our caves. Thoughts?"

"I like it, especially the nighttime raids; however, I think we should also have a couple squads of heavy infantry just in case," Leon said.

"I can certainly take the heavy infantry in that case," Alphonsus said eagerly.

"Alright, Al your squad will take that role. Choose another squad to join you. If anything should go wrong, you'll be our shield wall that'll buy us time to escape. Hopefully, we won't need you..." Castor said, to Alphonsus' glee.

"And you," Castor continued, turning to Leon, "I'm going to put you in charge of three squads of archers. I think you'll be able to inflict plenty of damage with them."

"Most definitely..." said Leon with a sinister smile. "I also have a few more ideas about how we should proceed after the attack on the Black Vipers, whether win or lose..."

The three stayed up late that night planning their moves, but there was one more detail that they had decided on that didn't sit quite right with the rest of the unit: they'd be forgoing the week off to move back into the caves early. They wanted that extra time to prepare and fortify the caves further. Alphonsus certainly wasn't happy, but since he was only staring down two months in the caves, he held his tongue and accepted the decision.

Chapter 116: FTX Prep

"Are you fucking kidding?! You want us to give up our week off?!" shouted an enraged Snow Lion at the three third-tier trainees.

"Yes, and there's no need for profanity," replied a serious and straight-faced Castor, causing more than half of the one hundred and four assembled Snow Lions to groan or make some other noise to express their disagreement.

"No damned way!" shouted another Snow Lion. "We've all busted our asses in training, and once we finally get some real time off, you're trying to take it away?!"

"We're not asking for all of it, only the five weekdays. Both weekends can be spent in the capital," added Alphonsus, trying and failing to quench the anger of the Snow Lions.

"You're still taking nine days off and making them four! And for what?! So we can go back to sleeping in a cave?!" asked another trainee that Leon recognized from the start of the training cycle, a young first-tier mage named Theoderic who had gotten on the Senior Instructor's bad side in the first few days of the training cycle.

Not even Leon's friends could keep silent. Matthew stepped forward and said in a more composed but still angry tone, "We followed you nobles out into the western mountains so we could train better. We understand that that was something we needed to do to grow stronger. However, we've *earned* this week, and I for one am *not* giving it up!" He sent an apologetic look to Leon, but he stood his ground in front of Castor and Alphonsus. His position was bolstered by a chorus of support from a growing number of Snow Lions. Even a few of the second-tier trainees were making their voices heard, though none of them were nobles who followed Castor or Alphonsus.

The expression on Castor's face was as stoic as it could be under the weight of so much pushback, but those who knew him could plainly see his displeasure. Alphonsus' expression wasn't any better; if anything, it was worse, as he wasn't able to conceal his own anger quite as well as Castor was. Both third-tier nobles were clearly not expecting such vehement protest to their decision after almost nine months of relative deference among the commoners.

Castor raised his hands, quieting down the Snow Lions so he could speak. "I get your anger, believe me. I'm giving up my own week for this. But, this is something that we need to do, to maximize our chances of coming out of the FTX with the most banners!"

"Who gives a fuck about banners?!" shouted Theoderic. "You obviously don't, otherwise you would've had us attacking the other units before this!"

"I actually *do*," responded Castor, his voice taking on a hint of steel that silenced Theoderic, "otherwise why would I have ordered the reclamation of *our* banner after it was stolen from us?"

"Indeed. Plus, seizing more is only more honor and glory for us!" added Alphonsus, though the commoners cared so little for those concepts that they hardly spared him a glance.

"This plan will help us to win in the FTX!" shouted Castor again, but this time he sent a meaningful look to the second-tier nobles that followed him, which Alphonsus mirrored to his own subordinates when he saw Castor's people start to move. The second-tier nobles were preparing to drag the most vocal dissenters out of the common room for their insubordination, thus forcing the unit to follow Castor's orders. But, before they could do so, Leon stepped forward and silenced the entire room by unleashing all of his tempestuous killing intent.

It only froze the trainees for a handful of seconds before they could unleash their own magical auras to protect themselves, though a few of the first-tier commoners had to pick themselves off the floor from their knees giving out. Despite regaining their mobility, none of the nobles moved and none of the commoners continued to shout; instead, they all stared at Leon.

"First of all," he began, using a quiet but serious tone, "to shit with *honor* and *glory*! Such esoteric things are worthless!" His words caused Alphonsus to frown, but the third-tier noble held his tongue for the time being as Leon was far more respected among the commoners than the rest of the nobles. He didn't carry the same arrogance around that most of the nobles did; he was quiet, and he avenged them when the Deathbringers had attacked them in the streets, something the nobles had initially refused to do. His words carried more weight among the first-tier trainees than Castor's, even though it was the latter who was technically in charge of the Snow Lions.

Leon continued, "But! The Academy places great emphasis on these banners! So much so that they encourage their trainees to fight and beat each other for these big strips of cloth!" The entire unit could hear the scorn in Leon's voice as he said these words.

"Seems stupid to me, who grew up having to hunt down my own food in the Northern Vales, but the fact is that the banners have importance! The unit that seizes the most by the end of the FTX will be honored as the best trainees in the entire training cycle! Important knights from all over the Bull Kingdom will vie with each other to be sent squires from the Academy's best training unit!" As he spoke, the trainees began to visibly calm down, to the surprise of the nobles.

"I don't know about all of you, but I for one want to land myself as respectable a squireship as I can! This is, after all, something which will dictate the course of our lives for years! If I have to sacrifice five days to ensure that I'm sent to a Legion fortress under a Legate rather than to some tiny insignificant camp on the border under a Centurion, spending my days fighting petty bandits and stone giants, than I'll gladly give up those days!

"The more important and powerful the knight we are sent to serve, the more important and powerful we will be! But all of you want to throw that away for *five days* in the capital!" Leon's eyes scanned the room, and none of the trainees could meet his gaze. This wasn't necessarily because of how persuasive Leon was trying to be, it was also because no one wanted to oppose him.

Regardless, no one spoke up, despite Leon taking a long enough pause for anyone to speak their mind if they were so inclined.

"We're heading out into the mountains to prepare for the FTX next week! You'll still have both weekends off, but those five days will be spent getting our fortifications back into shape, as they've been no doubt fallen into disrepair in the months since we left! Our futures depend on this FTX! We must take it seriously and take the time to prepare as best we can! Are there any objections to this plan?"

Again, none could speak after Leon finished.

"No one? Good."

With that settled, the nobles returned upstairs, and the third-tier mages made their way back up to the top floor for one last meeting.

"Hey, thanks for that," Castor said to Leon. "That might've gotten ugly had you not stepped in."

"Yeah... that was... well done..." Alphonsus said, though it seemed to Leon that that short sentence was quite the struggle for the noble.

In response to the two, Leon just nodded his head; he felt like he had used all his words in that speech and now he could barely bring himself to utter one more sentence.

"But anyway, what was wrong with everyone?! I wasn't expecting such intense pushback!" said Castor in frustration.

"I know!" agreed Alphonsus, "I thought they had accepted us as their leaders! I mean, before this, they haven't made so much as a single complaint about the extra training or any other aspect of our leadership style since we retrieved the banner!"

"Oh, if only everyone else could have been so devoid of complaints during that time..." Castor said sarcastically while giving Alphonsus a cheeky smile. Alphonsus clenched his teeth and frowned, but he didn't say a word. He and Castor had made their peace after returning to the tower, though Alphonsus was still having some trouble accepting Leon as an equal.

"They understood the need for the extra training, and they could also see the benefits that training would bring them; more than ten of them have ascended to the second-tier now, after all," Leon whispered. His quiet voice sounded exhausted and he had slumped down into a chair in front of the fire

like the only thing he wanted to do was to pass out. Speaking so much in front of such a large crowd had sapped all the energy from him, though for all his exhaustion he took comfort in seeing that he was at least capable of such a performance, which was a far cry from where his social capabilities had been only a year before.

“That was why you both failed, I think,” Leon continued. “They don’t respond well to orders that take something away from them, or to concepts that are more abstract, like ‘glory’ and ‘honor’.”

“So you emphasized the practical benefits...” Castor whispered. Even after ten months of being technically in charge of the Snow Lions, Castor was still terrible at dealing with commoners who disagreed with him. He was used to dealing with nobles who respected the hierarchy of nobility; lesser nobles would fall in line behind the higher nobles with little question.

The commoners, however, had little respect for the rights of birth as such rights didn’t afford them much, if anything. Compounding this were the reforms made in recent times that expanded upon the rights of the commoners at the expense of the nobility. As they gained rights, the common people held less respect for and fear of the nobility. Castor, having grown up all his life as a rich noble with servants and knights that would always respond immediately to his commands, was still coming to grips with the fact that commoners could—and as he had just seen in the common room, *would*—question his decisions.

‘I’ll remember this,’ he thought to himself. ‘If I am to be a great leader in my own right someday, I must learn to get commoners to follow me, not only the knights...’

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At the same time the three third-tier Snow Lions were having their meeting, Gaius had arrived at the Administration Building, having been called there by his brother, Nicomedes.

“Little brother,” Nicomedes said in greeting as Gaius entered his office.

“Nico,” Gaius said back, “how’s everyth-“

“Let’s skip the pleasantries, with the FTX just around the corner I have a lot of work to do and not a lot of time to do it in.”

“... Sure...”

“Good. Have a seat, Gaius. I’ve given Father an update on your progress, and he’s not particularly happy...” Nicomedes let his sentence hang for several seconds while Gaius sat and nervously stared at him. “... However, he’s not disappointed either. You’ve done well since our last chat; though you haven’t managed to seize a banner, you’ve acquitted yourself well. Both Father and I are confident that you’ll do just fine in the FTX without our intervention.”

“But... you are still planning on intervening?” Gaius asked, picking up on the intention behind Nicomedes’ last sentence.

“... We are. I’m not too happy about it, but Father insisted on providing you with help. So as to not embarrass the family...”

“N-No!” Gaius said emphatically while rising from his seat. “I don’t need your help!”

"I know you don't need it, but Father *insisted*," Nicomedes repeated.

"But-" Gaius tried to argue, but Nicomedes interrupted him.

"Gaius! The help we are providing doesn't *necessarily* have to be used, but you are not allowed to turn it down!"

Nicomedes stared at Gaius until the younger man sat back down, though Gaius had to clench his teeth to stop himself from making an angry outburst.

"What kind of help is this?" he asked through his gritted teeth.

In response, Nicomedes took out a wooden box from his desk and handed it to Gaius.

"Open it," he said.

Gaius complied. Within was a bracer, no different from what he had been issued as part of his armor set.

"What is this?" Gaius asked, his anger lessening due to his confusion.

"It's a bracer, genius," Nicomedes said with a sarcastic smile.

Gaius rolled his eyes and shot back, "I know *what* it is, but what makes it so special that you're giving it to me with such seriousness?"

"Take a good look at it."

Gaius picked up the bracer and turned it over in his hands several times. He examined every inch of the exterior, and after not seeing anything noteworthy about it, he looked back at his brother. Nicomedes only stared back until Gaius took another look. And on that second time, Gaius found exactly what had been done to the bracer: his father's Mana Glyph had been inscribed on the inside!

Gaius recognized it immediately, a spruce tree made of thousands of tiny runes. His father had shown him his Mana Glyph before when Gaius was young, but he hadn't let Gaius examine it too closely. Despite this, Gaius still had no trouble recognizing the Mana Glyph for what it was.

"With that bracer, Father has effectively loaned you some of his power. When you wear it, you should be able to fire off about a dozen wind blades or use any other wind attack of comparable magic cost," Nicomedes said in a relatively light tone, but as he continued, he turned deadly serious. "I have to warn you, always keep that bracer safe. Since Father inscribed his Mana Glyph upon it, the bracer has become linked to his soul realm. If any of his enemies got ahold of it, they could curse him in a multitude of ways."

Gaius frowned. His father was showing him a great deal of trust in giving him the bracer, but he didn't feel the slightest bit of happiness. It wasn't the kind of trust he wanted, the trust to win on his own merits, though he couldn't honestly tell himself that he deserved that level of confidence. He slowly placed the bracer back into its box and closed the lid.

"You want me to cheat?" he asked bitterly.

“No, Father and I want you to *win*, using any means available to you. Support from your family is just as important as personal skill.”

“... Thank you, brother,” he said impassively after a long silence. “If there isn’t anything else, I will take my leave.”

“... Go ahead,” Nicomedes said after a brief moment. Gaius’ strange tone gave him pause but he knew that his little brother wouldn’t tell him why, so he didn’t ask. However, as Gaius was approaching the door, Nicomedes continued, “Good luck, little brother. I have every confidence in you.”

“Thank you,” Gaius said quietly, not quite believing what Nicomedes said—he was so confident that he gave Gaius the bracer, which was hardly a sign of his trust in his little brother’s skill.

After thanking Nicomedes, Gaius left, to take the next week to ready himself for the FTX.

Chapter 117: FTX I

It had been a long ten months, but it was finally time for the trainees to undergo the Field Training Exercise, their two-month-long struggle to see which unit could amass the most banners.

None of the units that had already seized a banner were required to return their spoils, so Marcus’ Steel Century started out in the lead with three banners, followed by the Crimson Tigresses and the Snow Lions, who each had two banners. The Black Vipers, Silver Legionaries, and Obsidian Cataphracts had each managed to hold on to their unit banners but had failed to seize any more, leaving them with one banner apiece. The Deathbringers, Blood Eagles, Phantom Bulls, and the Warriors of the Naga were the final four units, and they didn’t have a single banner between them.

The FTX itself technically began after breakfast on the first Monday after the trainees returned from their week-long break, but the trainees weren’t allowed to stay in their towers during those two months, so in practice, the actual fighting usually took a few days to begin. Most of the units needed those days to pour over maps and select the best place to set up camp. And they couldn’t ask their Instructors for help, as even though their Instructors would accompany them to the field, their job was to watch and evaluate the units’ tactics and strategy rather than to continue teaching. The Instructors would always be there to monitor the trainees, but since they couldn’t interfere in any operation unless the trainees were cheating or breaking laws, they were effectively not there at all.

The most popular places to set up camp in previous training cycles were close to the rivers in the forest, where there was plenty of water; the Academy would only be sending shipments of food to them, so water was critical. Those units whose trainees had knowledge of enchanting could be a little more flexible and set up in places with higher elevation, using water runes to fill their water needs.

The Steel Century was one such unit. When they left their tower, they knew exactly where they were going to set up camp, and it wasn’t next to a river. Instead, Marcus had selected a large hill near the foot of the western mountains, in the south of the Knight Academy’s training grounds and at least half a mile from any natural source of water.

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“Stay vigilant! If any of you see anything suspicious out in the forest, like someone following us for instance, then speak up!” shouted Marcus just as the Steel Century left their tower. As Marcus and the

other three third-tier trainees in the Steel Century got the unit moving, two squads separated from the marching formation and melted away into the forest. Before setting out, Marcus had ordered them to separate into teams of two and try to spy on the other units. Marcus wanted to know where they were setting up their camps as soon as possible.

He didn't have much expectation regarding the Snow Lions, but he was confident that he could learn the locations of at least half of the other units' camps with those spies.

In the marching formation, Marcus and Alcander both took point, with their three banner carriers just behind them. The other two third-tier trainees were respectively in the middle and back of the formation, though the unit was small enough that Marcus didn't feel it strictly necessary to do so. Still, he decided to be cautious and spread them out.

The Steel Century marched in near silence. They were carrying a lot of gear; they were all fully armed and armored, their shields on their arms, and bows over their shoulders. The first-tier and most of the second-tier trainees also had huge packs on their backs, full of food, tools, and various other materials they would be constructing their camp from. All in all, it was heavy, even for mages, heavy enough that no one wanted to talk much.

As the Steel Century moved further into the forest, Alcander watched Marcus slowly grow more nervous. At first, Marcus kept an eye on the ground in front of him, to ensure he kept stable footing, but more and more frequently he kept looking around until it looked like his head was on a swivel.

Alcander himself looked around into the forest and saw nothing of note. No one was out there, as far as he could tell. So, eventually, he just watched Marcus stare intently out into the trees, his eyes darting to anything that made even the slightest noise. And given the thickness of the forest they were walking through, almost everything made some kind of noise. After a few minutes of watching and desperately trying to stifle his chuckles—which only made him want to chuckle even more—Alcander lost control and started laughing at how nervous Marcus seemed to be.

"What is *wrong* with you?!" demanded an angry Marcus.

"What's wrong with *me*? What's wrong with *you*, you're turning your head around so much you look like you're about to break your neck!" Alcander said, his laughing fit quickly dying down once he let it out.

Marcus grit his teeth to keep from shouting and answered, "There's *someone* out there, watching us. I can feel their eyes on me... It's the same feeling I got back home when I went with my Father's knights to repel a raid by stone giants right before we were ambushed..."

His tone was deadly serious, and it gave Alcander pause. The latter took another careful look around, but he didn't see anything. As soon as he told this to Marcus, though, Marcus called the formation to a halt.

"I have to know, I have to see who's out there," he muttered.

"Hey, who cares if we're being followed?" said Alcander. "We're not trying to hide, anyway. And it's not like any other unit knows where we are going, so I doubt we have to worry about any ambushes. It would be impossible for anyone to get ready to attack without our knowledge..."

“No, I’m finding whoever it is who’s following us, and I’m going to get them to stop one way or another,” responded Marcus with a mad glint in his eye. He immediately went about reorganizing the Steel Century. Everyone was made to drop their packs in the center of a defensive circle formation made up of four squads—about forty people—who locked their shields together and faced outwards.

“Push out into the forest,” Marcus told the other four squads, “scout out the area, see if we’re being followed. If you do see anyone, don’t engage! Return immediately! We don’t want you guys running into an ambush when you’re separated, especially since we’re already short two squads...”

Each of the four squad leaders nodded and split up into four directions, pushing out into the forest. They had been trained to stay within eyesight of the group they were scouting for, which wasn’t that far within the underbrush of the forest, barely more than two hundred feet. After going out as far as they were able to without losing sight of the defensive formation, the four squads slowly walked clockwise until they had completed their survey of the surroundings.

“Well?! Did you find anything?!” Marcus asked the squad leaders upon their return while he desperately tried to hold himself back from manically grabbing their shoulders.

None of them found what Marcus sent them to find, which did nothing to calm him down. And he was right to be so vigilant, the trainees of the Steel Century were being watched. The squads only looked outward as they did their scouting; had they only looked up, some of them might have seen a pair of Snow Lions hiding up in the trees who had been following the Steel Century since they had left their tower.

These two Snow Lions were Leon and Obellius. Castor, Leon, and Alphonsus had sent out scouts to follow the other nine units, just as Marcus had, but since they had spent the previous week getting set up back in their caves, they had a lot more time to get their scouts into position. The Snow Lions sent to spy on the other units were all of the second-tier, and they were also split into groups of two. Leon insisted on spying on the Steel Century himself, though, as he considered this group that not only had the most banners but also organized an ambush targeting him to be the biggest threat in the FTX.

Leon and Obellius had masterfully navigated the thick forest completely unseen while keeping the Steel Century within either sight or hearing range. Unfortunately, for all their skills in evading detection, Marcus’ own third-tier senses were incredibly sharp; he had subconsciously picked up on Obellius’ second-tier magical aura consistently enough to instinctively know he was being followed.

But, as soon as Marcus called his unit to a halt, Leon and Obellius had, as quickly and quietly as they could, scrambled up the leafiest tree they could find within eyeshot. Thus, the Steel Century’s scouts missed them.

Marcus was frustrated at the scouts’ lack of results, but he couldn’t keep his unit sitting there forever, so he suppressed his seeming paranoia and had his unit pick up their gear and press on, reaching the hill they would encamp upon only half an hour later. Leon and Obellius stayed for a while longer until they had both become reasonably certain that the camp the Steel Century was setting up was the real thing rather than a ruse devised by Marcus.

It was only after they had left that Marcus was able to calm down and properly direct his unit in building their fortified camp. The camp was only a spiked wooden palisade and four watchtowers at the corners,

with nothing but tents in the interior, but the Steel Century would still need to make several trips back to their tower to fetch the rest of the materials. Under normal circumstances, the palisade would be either carried with the unit on carts or built from local materials, but the Knight Academy neither wanted to give them carts nor allow them to cut down the trees in the forest. Trees could still be cut down if absolutely necessary, but the watching Instructors would step in and stop the trainees if they went too far overboard. This left the trainees little other option than ferrying the provided materials to their chosen campsite.

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“They’re setting up here,” Leon said to Castor and Alphonsus while gesturing to a map. The three were back in the Snow Lions’ caves, with Leon and the other scouts marking where the other nine units had established themselves.

“Hmm, that’s not a bad position. They’ll probably have most of their defenses set up by the end of the day, making a frontal assault suicidal at best...” muttered Castor.

“Then we shouldn’t attack them head-on. Wait for them to leave their camp, then ambush them,” Leon said.

“Ambushes are hardly honorable,” muttered Alphonsus.

“We’ll hardly win if we stick to ‘honorable’ measures,” responded Leon. “Honor will handicap us and put our trainees in unnecessary danger. Honor is shit for that very reason. I’d rather stick to safer if more ‘dishonorable’ means.”

Leon’s statement caused Alphonsus to frown a little, but he didn’t respond. He hadn’t been seriously trying to argue against ambushing the Steel Century, but surprise attacks didn’t sit well with his ideas of how a knight should conduct himself.

“I agree with Leon on this,” said Castor. “Marcus is a dangerous enemy to have, I think. Better to not have to face an enemy unit in open battle—especially one that has one more third-tier mage than we do—any more than is necessary.”

Alphonsus’ lips tightened in mild displeasure, but he nodded anyway.

“Good. Any suggestions for who we should target first? I know we agreed on the Black Vipers last week, but looking at this map, I’d prefer the Silver Legionaries or Obsidian Cataphracts, personally...” Castor continued, his eyes turning back to the map.

“Either works for me,” said Leon.

“How about the Obsidian Cataphracts?” suggested Alphonsus. “The Silver Legionaries have posted up on a small hill on the north side of this river here, but the Obsidian Cataphracts are in a much less defensible location.”

Castor smiled. “The Cataphracts it is, then...”

—

In the main tent of the Steel Century camp surrounded by two dozen other tents, the wooden fence, and the four watchtowers that each had a pair of trainees, Marcus, Alcander, and the other two third-tier mages in the unit had gathered.

“So we are in agreement, then? No one else has anything to say?” asked Marcus. The four had been doing the same thing as the Snow Lions: debating which unit to target first.

Marcus’ question was met with silence.

“Then it’s settled. Inform the second-tier trainees, we’re attacking the Obsidian Cataphracts tonight. We have to move fast before they finish building their camp...”

Chapter 118: FTX II

“Get that watchtower raised! We need to get this camp secured by the end of the day!” shouted Elianus, the third-tier noble in charge of the Obsidian Cataphracts.

He’d chosen to have his unit set up camp on one side of a deep river that flowed through the southern parts of the forest. By the time the sun fell on the first day of the FTX, the Obsidian Cataphract’s camp hadn’t been completed; they still needed to raise part of their eastern fence and the watchtower in the south-eastern corner was only half-completed. And that created a vulnerability that, with the growing darkness, made Elianus nervous.

His Senior Instructor had told him that the fighting doesn’t typically begin until the second or third day of the FTX, but Elianus wasn’t about to relax because of what ‘typically’ happens. In fact, he had heard movement out in the forest past his unit’s camp borders several times in the past hour, sounds that he doubted came from local fauna. He had done the sensible thing and sent out a squad of scouts, but each time they returned having not seen a single thing worthy of note. And that only made Elianus increasingly paranoid.

He was absolutely right to be paranoid, even if his scouts came back empty-handed. The Steel Century had arrived about a quarter mile from the Obsidian Cataphract’s camp, just far enough to hide from Cataphract scouts. The sounds Elianus had heard was from Marcus and his squad spying on his unit, waiting for the right time to strike.

That time came about an hour after the sun had fallen, when the first-tier trainees in the Obsidian Cataphracts had started to turn sluggish from hunger and fatigue and work nearly stalled on finishing their camp. Just as Elianus was about to hurry over and hurry them along, a volley of fifty arrows landed in the camp, immediately stunning three Cataphracts into unconsciousness and fifteen more into some kind of temporary disability.

“WE’RE UNDER ATTACK! GET YOUR WEAPONS!” Elianus bellowed, drawing his sword and rushing back to his tent to grab his shield. Fortunately, he had insisted that everyone work in their armor, which was why they had so few people rendered unconscious.

But, the Steel Century weren’t about to give the Obsidian Cataphracts the time they needed to get organized; another volley of arrows descended on the camp mere seconds after the first, and another immediately after that. When the rain of arrows ceased, forty Cataphracts had been knocked out or

otherwise left unable to fight. And that was when the Steel Century appeared, steadily marching in a thin formation several hundred feet out into the trees.

The Steel Century couldn't assault the camp from the river, which bent and looped around the clearing the camp was built in, leaving them with only the north and east they could approach from. To that end, Marcus had his unit form a long line with heavy infantry in the front with shields raised and archers behind them. The formation was spread out so it could advance from both possible directions at once, tightening up as they neared the camp.

"Get over to the east side! Form a shield wall! Protect the camp!" Elianus shouted, desperately trying to keep the panic out of his voice.

The sixty remaining Obsidian Cataphracts formed up on the inside of the fence and locked shields. Fortunately for them, all four of their third-tier trainees had been unaffected by the Steel Century's arrow barrage.

"You five!" Elianus shouted at five of the trainees in the last line of the shield wall. "You get up that tower and fire down at the enemy! Everyone else not in the front lines, get out your bows and shoot!"

The five men Elianus singled out climbed the north-east watchtower and started loosing arrow after arrow at the Steel Century, as did thirty more Cataphracts from just behind the shield wall. However, the Steel Century's first line only had to raise their shields, with the archers taking cover behind the first line, and every Cataphract arrow bounced off its mark.

"Shit..." muttered Elianus as the Steel Century advance barely slowed.

There were about fifty feet between the edge of the clearing and the camp fence, and when the Steel Century finally made it to that edge, Elianus shouted, "Shields up!" Immediately, the ineffectual fire from the Cataphract archers ceased, save for the five in the tower, and all shields were raised.

But then, the Century's archers resumed fire, and their targets were the five Cataphracts in the tower. Two were immediately knocked out while the other three wound up forced to duck behind the waist-high wooden walls of the tower with their shields over their heads. Meanwhile, Marcus' fifty heavy infantrymen charged.

Elianus' face fell, as he had massed all of his remaining men at the small gap in the unfinished fence that he assumed would be the target of the attack, just south of the north-eastern watchtower. Instead, Marcus had his men attack the entire northern and eastern sections of the fence.

"Second squad guard the north! Third squad guard the east!" Elianus ordered, and two squads peeled out from the shield wall to guard their designated sections of fence. Each of these squads was commanded by a third-tier trainee. Their movements didn't go unnoticed by the Steel Century, though, and many of their archers retargeted these men who had broken from the safety of the shield wall.

Seeing this, Elianus became wracked with indecision; he could order several more of his men to put away their shields and take out their bows, but they would be made vulnerable to the Century's return fire. However, with the Century's heavy infantry charging the fence, their archers were just as vulnerable.

Almost none of Marcus' men attacked the hole in the fence that the Cataphracts had left, instead choosing to assault the completed parts of the fence, either by climbing over or having several second-tier mages attempt to destroy a section. The Cataphracts Elianus dispatched to protect the fence were hard-pressed to do so, given how outnumbered they were. They could attack through the fence posts, but that didn't change the number disparity. So, realizing that there wasn't much else he could do, Elianus made his decision.

"Follow me!" he shouted, charging out from the hole in the fence and attempting to flank the attacking Steel Century. There was a split second of confused hesitation, but the Cataphracts at his back followed him, with the last third-tier trainee taking a squad to attack Marcus' men who were attacking the east section of the fence while the rest followed Elianus to defend the north.

The battle became a chaotic whirlwind of shield bashing and sword slashes, but the Steel Century still had their archers and Marcus put them to good use. He had them shift their target again to the counter-attacking Obsidian Cataphracts. They hadn't reformed into their shield wall after their charge, not that doing so would've helped much against the archers. The Cataphracts fell in droves to the falling arrows, bringing the battle to a swift end.

Nearly all of the Obsidian Cataphracts were knocked out or disabled so they couldn't continue fighting the Steel Century, then one of Marcus' second-tier trainees retrieved their banner from the center of their camp, and the Century melted back into the forest. The last thing the few still-conscious Cataphracts saw was Marcus, cheekily grinning at them in triumph.

—

"That went better than I expected!" shouted an exuberant Alcander.

"Indeed, that was remarkably easy. It would've been much harder if they had prepared better, though..." said Marcus. The Steel Century had only taken about thirty casualties in the battle, while they had effectively 'wiped out' the Obsidian Cataphracts. Marcus was sure the Cataphracts would retaliate as soon as they were able, but he believed that they didn't know where the Century's camp was, so the threat they posed only brought a smile of anticipation to his lips.

"Stay cautious!" Marcus shouted to his unit as they reorganized themselves about half a mile west of the Obsidian Cataphracts' camp. "We can celebrate our victory back at camp, but right now we're not the—"

He would've continued speaking, but the arrow that had come from seemingly nowhere and struck him directly between two of his armor plates made that impossible. For a moment, Alcander stared in disbelief as Marcus crumpled to the ground before dozens more arrows rained down upon them. Most fell upon those at the front and back of their movement column, while those in the middle were largely hampered by carrying their casualties from the previous fight and were subsequently passed over.

"RAISE SHIELDS!" Alcander roared, just barely managing to do so himself in time to block an arrow that certainly would've knocked him out.

Three more arrow barrages fell upon the Steel Century, leaving more than sixty of the trainees unconscious, including those casualties sustained in the previous battle. Alcander wasn't one of them. He heard some footsteps a few feet in front of him—right where their banner carriers had fallen—and he peeked out from behind his shield to get a look at who it was.

Standing in front of him, just out of reach, was Leon, Castor, and Alphonsus.

“YES! FINALLY!” he shouted as he cast away his shield and reached for the enormous ax strapped to his back. “I’M GETTING THAT DUEL, LEON!”

“You *really* shouldn’t have done that,” Castor said with a smile, his eyes flitting to the discarded shield. Half a dozen arrows shot past the three third-tier trainees and hit Alcander, knocking him down before he could do anything more than widen his eyes at the realization of what Castor meant. His armor kept him conscious, but both of his arms and one of his legs had been disabled, leaving him helpless for the three second-tier Snow Lions who advanced to take the fallen banners. One of them, with a casual swing of his sword, finished the job the arrows had started and stunned Alcander.

“Hey, look at this,” said another, lifting the Obsidian Cataphracts’ banner.

“Huh. I guess these guys beat us to the punch,” Alphonsus said with a wide smile. He walked forward and personally took the extra banner, right in front of the last few still-standing men in the Steel Century.

“Drop that!” shouted one from the safety of the hastily established shield wall. When Alphonsus glanced over, he recognized the man as one of the third-tier trainees in the Steel Century—the last one who wasn’t stunned, he reckoned.

“Why don’t you come out and make me drop it?” Alphonsus challenged. The other man almost tried just that, but he only needed one look around to immediately think again; there were barely more than twenty men on his side who were in any condition to fight, and he could just barely see the glinting of the Snow Lions’ swords and armor, waiting to strike from the shadows of the forest. His side was horribly outnumbered and in a terrible tactical position. The Steel Century wasn’t going to win.

But he still couldn’t just let the Snow Lions leave with all four of their banners. The third-tier mage grit his teeth and leaped out of the tight ring of Steel Century shields directly at Alphonsus. He swung his sword down with all of his might, hoping to at least stun Alphonsus and make his unit’s defeat that much less terrible. Unfortunately for him, Alphonsus hadn’t made an empty challenge; he easily side-stepped, and the man was peppered with arrows.

“Well, good night to you gentlemen!” said Castor to the remaining Steel Century trainees, flashing them an almost mocking smile as he spoke. Then, he turned back to his own unit and said, “Now let’s grab those banners and head back to camp!”

And just like that, the Snow Lions vanished into the dark forest after firing one more volley of arrows, leaving those few men in the Steel Century who were left to tend to their stunned comrades.

When Marcus woke up, his first thought was to try and track the Snow Lions, but he had to wait for the rest of his unit to recover before he could start. When he was finally able to set out, he found that the trail disappeared at a river, not a quarter mile from where the Snow Lions had ambushed his unit.

“Ancestors damn it!” he shouted in frustration. “All of our banners! Gone!”

“We’ll get them back,” said Alcander with a determined look.

"You're damned right we will!" Marcus said with a wild light in his eye. "Every one of my kin who has gone to the Knight Academy has led their unit to victory, seizing the most banners during their FTX's! I will *not* be the one to break that trend, especially not when my own uncle is the Legate! We will find the Snow Lions, even if it takes every remaining second of this FTX, and we *will* recover our banners!"

Chapter 119: FTX III

"Well that was surprisingly easy," said Charles as he sat down in a stone chair. After the Snow Lions ambushed the Steel Century, they immediately returned back to their cave—though a few detours had been made just in case someone managed to track them.

"It was so easy because they had already taken casualties, about one-third of their guys I think, and they had to spare a bunch of people to carry them. Plus, we got *very* lucky running into them at all," said Alain, taking a seat across the table from Charles.

"Yeah, and Leon took out their leader right from the start," added Henry, who sat down next to Alain.

"And the rest of their leaders quickly followed," Alain said.

"Alright! But all that doesn't mean that that 'battle' wasn't easy!" said Charles.

"It was easy *for us* is what I was trying to say. We weren't the ones shooting arrows," Alain stated.

"Well, as one of those who *was* shooting arrows, I can say that it was pretty easy," Henry bragged.

"Are you guys really going to argue about how easy that battle was?" asked Matthew as he and Bohemond sat down with them.

"No," said Charles with a chuckle, "but you have to admit, that fight was kind of anticlimactic. I mean, I assumed that the Steel Century, the unit with the most banners, would've put up a better fight. At the very least, I never thought their third-tier mages would've gone down as quickly as they did..."

"A third-tier mage isn't invincible," said Leon, appearing seemingly out of nowhere behind Charles, who almost jumped out of his skin.

"By the Ancestors! Where did you come from?!" he asked.

"Just from over there..." Leon said with a slightly confused look, pointing to the third-tier meeting room. Then, without waiting for Charles to say anything more, he continued, "But as I was saying, a third-tier mage will probably beat all of you single-handedly in a straight fight. That's why we didn't fight face-to-face and relied on our archers and the element of surprise; don't forget that most other units have one more third-tier mage than we do. But, with the proper preparations and tactics, there isn't a mage who can't be defeated, as today should've shown you."

"It sure did," muttered Charles. The others all thought something to a similar effect, and their confidence grew that much stronger.

There was a mystique that surrounded the nobility in the eyes of most commoners—which almost every smart noble would actively work to maintain, or at least not damage—and that carried over to the trainees of the Knight Academy. After all, the nobles were objectively stronger than the commoners,

and they had the wealth and connections to stay that way. But, as the trainees were learning, that advantage only carried the nobles so far.

Castor and Alphonsus certainly wouldn't encourage this train of thought if they were there to hear it, but Leon didn't care. He only wanted his friends to fight better and to not fear enemies who didn't deserve it.

"This is how the rest of the FTX will go for us, isn't it?" asked Alain. "Fighting at night and sticking to ambushes, I mean."

"That's the plan," answered Leon. "As I said, most of the other units have more third-tier trainees than we do—and those that don't, the Crimson Tigresses and Deathbringers, are hardly weak. We'd most likely be at a disadvantage if we attack head-on, and we're sure that head-on is probably how they'll want to fight. But Castor, Alphonsus, and I don't want to fight them the way they want to be fought. We're going to fight them on our own terms, maximizing our chances to win."

"Makes sense," said Henry.

As they were speaking, the sun began to rise, letting some natural light filter into the caves through the fortified entrance.

"Well, I'm going to hit the hay. It's going to be another long night, so I'm going to get all the rest I can," said Leon as he rose to his feet.

"I think I'm going to stay up a little longer," said Charles. "I'm still a little charged from winning that battle, it's going to take me a while to get tired."

"Alright, not like there's any hard training scheduled for tomorrow," Leon muttered. He said his final parting words, then made for his room.

Charles stayed awake for about an hour and a half. The others eventually made their own ways toward their rooms, leaving him as the only one in the unit left awake—aside from the handful of Snow Lions assigned to keep watch over the gorge. Charles spent this time quietly meditating, as he could feel himself nearing the point where he could ascend to the second-tier of magic.

—

By the end of the FTX's second day, all of the training units had completed their camps. All of the units had also deployed their scouts, finding the locations of the other camps fairly easily—with the sole exception of the Snow Lions' gorge. With the need for access to water, all of the units avoided making camp in the mostly dry western mountains, making it pointless to scout the mountains unless they were specifically looking for the Snow Lions.

But, 'specifically looking for the Snow Lions' was an apt description for what the Steel Century had preoccupied themselves with. Word of their attack on the Obsidian Cataphracts hadn't spread, as the units weren't in a position to socialize with each other, not even during meals; the Academy's policy was to deliver food to the units every week and allow them to manage their supplies themselves. In fact, following these supply caravans were part of the reason why the other camps were so easy to find.

The Snow Lions, in contrast, met their supply caravan at a pre-arranged point, which the other units hadn't even realized they could do. With their entire unit present, it was easy to dissuade scouts from trying to follow them back to their camp.

The Obsidian Cataphracts had to fend off another assault on the second night, this time by the Blood Eagles who didn't know the Cataphracts had already lost their banner. Since their defenses had been completed and were far more alert due to the previous night's attack, the Cataphracts managed to fight off the Eagles.

A similar attack happened at the Black Vipers' camp at roughly the same time. The Silver Legionaries attempted to seize their banner in a surprise night-time raid but had been quickly beaten back by Tiberias' men. They managed to hold on to their own banner and retreat after the failed attack, but the casualties they took made them easy prey for the Crimson Tigresses, who had followed them since they had left their camp. In the aftermath of the second battle, the Tigresses took possession of the Legionaries' banner.

The Silver Legionaries' woes didn't end there, either. Upon returning to their camp, they found that another unit had attempted to raid them while they were gone. There hadn't been anything the Legionaries had thought was at risk of being stolen, as they had brought their banner with them when they left, but the other unit had disagreed; all the Legionaries' supplies were gone! An entire week's worth of food and over three thousand training arrows that they had been given by the Academy had been stolen.

Needless to say, this unpleasant surprise crushed what little remained of the Legionaries' morale. Not even the replacement food supplies their Instructors arranged to have delivered the next day could raise their spirits.

—

"Well *that* was disappointing," muttered Castor as he, Leon, and Alphonsus reconvened in their meeting room. The rest of the unit busied themselves storing everything they had stolen from the Silver Legionaries' camp.

"It wasn't guaranteed that they'd be there, can't be helped," said Leon with a shrug.

"We still should've stayed and ambushed them on their way back," said Alphonsus with a frown.

"We can leave that for tomorrow after they've spent a night without food," said Castor.

"But," suggested Leon, "we should probably have scouts keeping an eye on the rest of the units, to prevent our time from being wasted again."

"Hmmm," said Castor, resting his chin on his hand and thinking for a moment. "Was our time truly wasted here?"

"Well, no," Leon replied, "I guess that was just bad phrasing; effort spent seizing our enemy's supplies is never wasted. But, I think that our time would be put to better use seizing banners, at least for now."

"And *then* switch over to stealing supplies?" asked Alphonsus with a sadistic smile.

"Yes," said Leon, his lips turning slightly upward in a wicked smile of his own.

“Sounds like a fine strategy,” said Castor, adding his own smile to the mix, “I’ll get some scouts together to head out in the morning to get the lay of the land. I know that the Senior Instructor said that battles don’t typically start for three or four days at least, but I can’t imagine that the other units have been spending these past two days sitting on their hands in their camps. I mean, the Steel Century already made their first move and the Silver Legionaries were clearly doing *something* since they weren’t at their camp, no reason to think that the Crimson Tigresses or the Deathbringers have remained passive...”

“Right. We don’t necessarily know who has what banners anymore...” said Alphonsus.

“Well, we already have six banners, since we got lucky with the Steel Century and grabbed four all at once,” said Leon. “That only leaves the Warriors of the Naga, Black Vipers, Crimson Tigresses, and Silver Legionaries.”

“The Warriors of the Naga’s banner was seized by the Crimson Tigresses months ago, and they never managed to retrieve it. I doubt they’ve managed to retrieve in these two days...” said Alphonsus.

“So, should the Crimson Tigresses be our next target, rather than the Silver Legionaries? They have the most banners, after all,” Castor proposed.

“That... might be a hard-fought battle. I wouldn’t recommend a frontal assault on their fortified camp unless we want another defeat like we suffered at the exhibition during Heavy Infantry Training,” said Leon. “We’ll definitely need to wait for them to leave the safety of their camp...”

—

“Are you sure the Cataphracts don’t have their banner anymore?” Valeria asked a recently-returned Crimson Tigress scout on the morning of the third day.

“Yes, absolutely,” the scout replied.

“Well, then, that just leaves the Steel Century and the Black Vipers,” said Valeria.

“Aaand the Snow Lions,” reminded Asiya.

“And them, but we don’t exactly know where they are, do we?” Valeria said back in a detached tone that disappointed Asiya, who had been trying to tease her.

“Then we should go after the Black Vipers,” Asiya said. “I think they’ll be easier than the Steel Century.”

“Why? I doubt any Black Vipers apart from some scouts will leave their camp today,” Valeria said with a disapproving tone. She really didn’t like how passive the Black Vipers had been; she thought they should’ve taken a much more active role in the inter-unit battles if only to showcase their skills just as the rest of the units had done. That said, even though she had rarely seen him fight, her lack of knowledge of Tiberias’ fighting and leadership style made her apprehensive, and she didn’t want to attack him when he was at his strongest if possible.

“Well, it’s either them or facing down Marcus...”

Just then, another Crimson Tigress scout returned. She had been the one Valeria and Asiya had sent to check up on the Steel Century. And, to the shock of both third-tier ladies, she reported that the Steel Century had lost all three of the banners they had started the FTX with. Since their other scouts had

already reported back, Valeria and Asiya already knew none of them had the missing banners, leaving the Snow Lions as the only culprit for seizing not only the Steel Century's banners but the Obsidian Cataphracts' as well.

"The other units must have the same information as we do," said Valeria with some worry. "If it's down to us, the Black Vipers, and the Snow Lions, the other seven units will probably focus on us. We need to be extraordinarily careful today..."

"We're still going out? Shouldn't we hole up in camp and defend ourselves instead?" asked Asiya.

"No," Valeria swiftly answered. "I think we'd have to endure attacks all day if we stay put. It's safer to head out into the forest, even if we don't attack the Black Vipers."

"Hmm, in that case, we should take our spare arrows and at least some of our food with us. Best not leave it here unguarded, especially since we can't exactly spare any guards," Asiya said.

"Yes. Now, let's get ready! I want us out of this camp in less than half an hour!" Valeria said with high intensity. She could feel the pressure that the three banners her unit held were exuding; with only about half the number of trainees as the other units, and possessing three banners, the Crimson Tigresses would be seen as the most vulnerable—and thus, enticing—target to the banner-less units.

Chapter 120: FTX IV

The Crimson Tigresses didn't waste any time on the morning of the third day. The entire unit woke up before the sun rose and left their camp just as dawn broke.

But that speed didn't mean that their departure went unnoticed; Valeria distinctly heard at least half a dozen scout teams from other units keeping an eye on their camp. She guessed that there were at least three more, to make one team from each of the other units, but she couldn't detect them. Regardless, she hurried her unit out into the forest. Even if the other units knew that they had left their camp, she still believed they'd be safer by staying on the move rather than stuck in a camp where they'd be easily surrounded and be forced to endure attacks from all of the other units throughout the entire day.

Many of the scouts watching their camp made an attempt to follow the Crimson Tigresses into the forest, but they were quickly dispatched with well-placed arrow fire or the quick feet and quicker swords of second-tier trainees sent by Valeria. And so, the Tigresses quickly vanished into the forest.

The ladies ran for several miles until Valeria and Asiya were sure that they weren't being followed, then they stopped for a short rest. They were less than half a mile from the Blood Eagles, something that was by design. Valeria gave her unit several minutes to rest, then set out again. By the time the Blood Eagles left their camp and started making their way to the Crimson Tigresses' camp, the Tigresses themselves had already gotten into a strong position along the Eagles' most likely route.

Before they had traveled even a quarter mile from their camp, the Blood Eagles were hit with two volleys of training arrows, followed immediately after with Valeria and Asiya leading a dozen second-tier Crimson Tigresses out from the thick underbrush of the forest to crash into the Eagles' formation. The first two volleys of arrows and the Tigresses' surprise attack cut the Blood Eagles in half in less than fifteen seconds as well as cost them three of their four third-tier mages and more than three-quarters of

their second-tier mages. In the face of the determined and well-prepared Crimson Tigresses, the remainder of the Blood Eagles fell in short order.

But that wasn't to say that the Crimson Tigresses didn't take casualties; in fact, their losses amounted to a dozen trainees, more than a fifth of their entire unit. It was still a great victory, exchanging over one hundred Blood Eagles for twelve of her own, but Valeria knew that that pace couldn't be sustained. It would take the Blood Eagles a day or so to recover, as the Crimson Tigresses had elected to wipe them out completely rather than do the more common and honorable thing, which was to leave a few of their enemies standing to tend to their casualties and help them recover sooner.

But, this 'dishonorable' act bought the Tigresses some breathing room. The other units wouldn't come poking around the Blood Eagles' territory for a while, and by the time they would, the Tigresses would be fully recovered. For the time being, Valeria led her unit to take over the now empty Blood Eagle camp, leaving the Eagles themselves lying in the dirt.

There was no concern for their safety, as the Eagles' Instructors and other knights of the Academy lurking out in the forest wouldn't let the unconscious unit out of their sight. The same was true for all the other units in the Academy, whether conscious or not.

After a few hours passed, the casualties the Crimson Tigresses had taken recovered, and the unit left the Eagles' camp.

The other units were still searching for the ladies, but after so much time passed they fell back on their training. Instead of having entire units blindly wandering the forest, they posted up in easily defended places and sent out scouts to scour the surrounding forest. Their scouts wouldn't venture far, and when they had searched about a quarter mile from the rest of the unit, they would return. The unit would then move to another location and send out more scouts.

Valeria and Asiya had spoken about how to approach this problem. They were all too aware that with their numbers, they couldn't attack any of the other units when they were in their defensible positions, so they decided on something that most of the other units would think crazy: they split the Crimson Tigresses in half and left in opposite directions.

But even though they had done such a baffling thing, they had no intention of running or hiding.

—

After their defeat the previous day, the Silver Legionaries were out for blood. They were the first unit to arrive at the Crimson Tigresses' camp that morning, and they were the most fervent in their pursuit of the Tigresses. The other units understood the Legionaries' passion—especially the Obsidian Cataphracts—as they had managed to hold on to their banner throughout the entire training cycle only to lose it two days into the FTX.

The Silver Legionaries swept through the forest with vigor, not stopping to rest or eat lunch. They had to alternate squads on scouting duty because those they usually had to do that job were exhausted and in no shape to continue. But the other trainees in the unit weren't exactly fresh either, given how hungry and tired they were. And this left them open to making mistakes.

In particular, one two-man team had the singularly terrible luck to be the first team spotted by Valeria's group of Tigresses. They weren't paying the slightest bit of attention, staring at the ground twenty feet in front of them rather than surveying the forest as they were supposed to be doing. Consequently, they were shot down with training arrows before they could even register they were under attack.

And Valeria's three squads didn't stop there. It had taken them an hour to find another unit, and they weren't about to let them off with only two knocked out trainees. They advanced silently, pausing only to eliminate two more scouts who were just as inattentive as the previous Legionary team was. After several hundred feet, they approached the edge of the clearing where the Silver Legionaries had stopped.

The Tigresses didn't get too close, sticking to the shadows of the forest. Their caution was warranted, as the Legionaries in the center of the clearing weren't so lax as their scouts, the second-tier mages in the unit made sure of that. The unit was arranged so the first-tier trainees were facing outwards in all directions, with the second-tier trainees just behind them and the four third-tier trainees in the very center, waiting for any signal from the scouts.

"Where are they..." mumbled one of the first-tier Legionaries. "Those damn scouts are taking too long, the sooner they get back here the sooner we can leave..."

"Shut your mouth!" shouted a second-tier noble from behind the first-tier commoner, but before the commoner could respond with a frustrated complaint, an arrow fired by Valeria flew right past less than an inch from his face and hit one of the third-tier trainees in the back. Thirty-two more arrows followed an instant later, raining down upon the center of the Legionaries' formation.

The cry of "SHIELDS UP!" came from second-tier Legionaries around the formation, but it was too late for the two third-tier and half dozen second-tier Legionaries who had already been knocked unconscious by the volley. The Legionaries raised their shields and waited for the next volley.

They held that position for almost a minute while straining their eyes and ears to try and locate their enemy. It was only when that minute was over that they realized no follow-up volley was coming.

"Push out! Find who did this!" shouted the only third-tier Legionary who hadn't been hit. The second-tier trainees immediately took charge of their squads and scattered into the trees, moving out a couple hundred feet. None of them found the slightest trace of the Tigresses who had been there only a minute or two before.

But, even though they weren't found didn't mean the Tigresses were gone.

After ten minutes, the Legionaries returned to the clearing to tend to their wounded, but one squad failed to return. Picking up on the obvious danger, the rest of the Legionaries cautiously went to look for the missing squad and quickly found it. The ten-man squad was unconscious alongside the four scouts the Tigresses had taken out before.

The Legionaries rushed forward to investigate, but as soon as they arrived at the side of their fallen comrades, arrows fell upon them again. And this time, the Tigresses who fired them targeted the main body of the Legionaries rather than the leaders. Twenty-three Legionaries fell to the Tigresses' arrows.

Again, Valeria's group melted back into the forest without taking a second shot, and the Legionaries were too busy trying to protect themselves to immediately follow. And this made them vulnerable to continued harassment by the Crimson Tigresses' merciless arrow fire. Before long, the Legionaries had been whittled down to nothing, with the final handful falling to Valeria's glaive or to the blades of her second-tier trainees.

All one hundred and five Silver Legionaries had fallen to only thirty-three Crimson Tigresses, and the Tigresses hadn't taken a single casualty.

Three miles to the north-east, Asiya's group met with similar success. It took her a little longer as she only had twenty-four Tigresses with her, but she still led them with the same tactics to victory over the Warriors of the Naga.

—

The Crimson Tigresses regrouped on a hill about a quarter mile from their camp. Valeria and Asiya told each other of their victories, and the ladies made their way back to the camp ecstatic from defeating three full-strength units over the course of the day. Asiya and Valeria were a little apprehensive about spending the night in their camp rather than hidden in the forest somewhere, but they decided that it was better to sleep in a place with fortifications rather than one without.

Besides, they were confident enough from the day's events that they actually rather hoped someone would attack during the night, if only to liven things up.

But then, just as they were about to enter visual range of their camp, the Tigresses noticed a small fire burning in the forest. Out of curiosity, Valeria took her squad to investigate. To her extreme surprise, she discovered Leon sitting there, appearing as if he didn't have a single care in the world, slowly turning a fat rabbit on a spit over the fire.

The sun was setting and the forest had already grown very dark; despite this, Valeria had no trouble seeing and, as far as she could tell, Leon was completely alone. Still, she sensed a trap, and she signaled for Asiya to come and join her. They silently crept up on Leon, who didn't bat an eye once they had completely surrounded him and walked out into the firelight.

"What are you doing here?!" demanded Valeria in disbelief, her incredulousness only growing when she saw that Leon wasn't even wearing armor.

"Waiting," Leon answered in a matter-of-fact tone, as if what he was doing should've been obvious.

"For what?" asked Asiya. For all her cheerfulness, she wasn't a person who was quick to trust, especially not with such a suspicious scene; her hand had come to rest upon the hilt of her sword, ready to draw at a moment's notice. All around her, the Crimson Tigresses were doing the same, as well as raising their shields and casting their eyes outward just in case an unseen foe struck at them from the depths of the forest.

"I'm waiting for you," Leon responded, only looking up at Asiya and Valeria once he had.

"What are you playing at?!" asked Valeria as she assumed an aggressive position and raised her glaive threateningly.

"I'm playing at being a decoy," said Leon completely honestly. His words had barely entered their ears before a storm of arrows fell upon the Tigresses; they had been looking in the wrong direction, the Snow Lions weren't around them, they were above them, hidden in the dense canopies of the trees.

Over one hundred arrows were fired at the Tigresses, then another hundred mere seconds later, which was followed by another hundred. Six volleys in total were fired before it came to an end, and all the Tigresses save for Valeria, Asiya, and three second-tier trainees had been stunned. Those five only made it through by virtue of their own stellar reflexes in raising their shields or dodging the arrow fire.

Dozens of Snow Lions scampered down from the trees to surround the remaining Tigresses, but Valeria didn't care. She knew they had already lost to the Snow Lion ambush, so she struck out with her glaive and slashed Leon across the chest. He fell back off the log he had been sitting on, as unconscious as the majority of the Tigresses.

Seeing this, Castor and Alphonsus only smiled. They slowly walked forward and, after several minutes of searching, found all three banners the Tigresses had.

"We'll be taking these," Castor said, handing the banners off to Aemilius.

Valeria only glared at him, and Asiya's face held none of its usual cheer. Two second-tier Snow Lions walked forward to pick up Leon, but they hesitated when it seemed like Valeria was going to try and stop them, as she tightened the grip on her glaive and took a step toward them. However, as she looked around at the numerous Snow Lions staring back at her, then down to the trainees in her unit lying on the ground, she loosened her grip and let the Snow Lions take Leon. They had stopped attacking her so she could take care of her trainees, so she decided to show them the same respect. This wasn't an actual battlefield, after all, so she could take a defeat gracefully.

Once the Snow Lions grabbed Leon, they disappeared, off to their own camp in the gorge. As she watched them vanish into the darkness, a terrifyingly resolute look appeared on Valeria's face, and she thought, *'We're going to get those banners back! We will find where you hide yourselves, and we will retrieve what's ours!'*

Then, she smiled. The day had gone almost too well for her, and she felt the rush of a new challenge: finding and defeating the Snow Lions, then taking all nine banners they now held.