

Storm King 121

Chapter 121: FTX V

The Crimson Tigresses recovered from the Snow Lions' ambush quickly; they were already pursuing the latter a mere two hours after the Lions had seized their banners. They didn't get very far before being forced to turn around and return to their own camp due to lack of clues to follow, though.

"That *sucked*," said Asiya as she slid into a chair in the tent she shared with Valeria.

"We didn't exactly come out ahead, did we..." Valeria muttered. "It was a good day, though, all things considered. We lost the banners in the end, but we defeated *three* other units!"

"That's worthy of celebration, I guess, but it hardly feels good without the banners we worked so hard to hold on to..." Asiya responded dejectedly, her usual cheerfulness dampened by the loss the Tigresses had just suffered.

"It will feel better when we find the Snow Lions and pay them back for this ambush," Valeria said with a smile. "We didn't find anything after helping our trainees to wake up, but tomorrow morning we start our search in earnest. We're *going* to find them, and when we do, all nine of their banners will be ours!"

Valeria spoke with such uncharacteristic passion that Asiya couldn't help but wonder if Valeria felt any sadness at the defeat at all; she had rarely seen her silver-haired friend so intense about anything since their childhood. And Asiya couldn't help but be affected by the fighting spirit that lit up Valeria's eyes. Her heart started to race in anticipation and her fatigue melted away as the two spoke further about their plans for the morning and how exactly they would go about their search.

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"Still nothing?" Marcus asked.

"Not a single trace," answered the Steel Century scout reporting to him.

"That rules out *this* area," Alcander whispered, indicating a small valley in the south of the western mountains.

"This will take *forever* at our current pace," complained one of the Century's other two third-tier mages once the scout finished his report and left.

"We're not exactly burdened with an abundance of options. If we want to find the Snow Lions, we're going to have to manually search. They've spent months out here, they know the terrain far better than we do," said Marcus. "But that doesn't matter. We'll find them, even if we have to spend the entire FTX exploring the mountains."

"We could just fight another unit," said the last third-tier trainee. "If I recall correctly, the Black Vipers and Crimson Tigresses still have banners we could seize..."

"And what? Let the Snow Lions get away with attacking us?! Tuck our tails between our legs and slink away from that challenge like whipped dogs?!" Alcander asked, barely able to contain his fury at the suggestion of attacking other units.

The third-tier noble who made the suggestion wilted before Alcander's gaze like a dry flower and didn't say another word.

"I agree with Alcander," Marcus said, to the surprise of no one, "we can't just ignore the *six* banners that the Snow Lions have! Whoever defeats the Snow Lions will win the FTX! It's that simple. And we will win, I assure you."

"Well, it's not like beating the Snow Lions will instantly grant us victory, we'd have to hold on to the banners we seize, but we can cross that bridge when we come to it," said Alcander as he turned his gaze back to the map. He stared so intently at the paper that it almost seemed like he expected it to spring to life, take him by the hand, and lead him to where the Snow Lions were hiding. That obviously didn't happen, but he did select a few places for the scouts to search the following day.

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Both the Crimson Tigresses and the Steel Century were in for a surprise on the morning of the fourth day: they ran into each other just outside of the western mountains. The best place to enter the mountains was at the very center of the border between the mountains and the forest. The hills there were steep but allowed for better access than the tall cliffs to the north and south.

The Century arrived there first since their camp was closer to the hills. The Tigresses, however, left earlier than they had, leading to them emerging from the tree line behind the Century mere minutes after the latter had.

"TURN AROUND! GET IN FORMATION!" bellowed Marcus as soon as he saw the Tigresses. The Century had been about to disband into scouting groups and spread out into the mountains, but they quickly formed back up and got into a shield wall to face the Tigresses, who responded in kind.

For several minutes, the two formations stared at each other and didn't make a single move. The Century held a complete tactical advantage, being on higher elevation and possessing greater numbers, so the Tigresses didn't attack. However, Marcus didn't want to fight, he wanted his people to venture out into the mountains to find the Snow Lions, not tied down with fighting and the subsequent recovery. A battle here would cost a ton of valuable time.

After those few minutes, Marcus shouted "HOLD POSITION!" to the Century, then slowly walked out from the formation. He made a show of returning his sword to its sheath and slinging his shield onto his back so that the Tigresses knew he wasn't attacking them. Seeing what he was doing, Valeria did the same, leaving her formation and meeting Marcus halfway between their formations to talk.

There was another moment of silence as the two waited for the other to speak, but Valeria was a quiet person to begin with, so it was Marcus who broke the silence.

"... We're not looking for a fight. We don't have any banners, and... you don't appear to, either..." Marcus' sentence trailed off at the end, as it took him a moment to notice that the Tigresses didn't have the three banners he thought they had with them. He narrowed his eyes and stared at Valeria.

"We don't have our banners, either. They were taken by the Snow Lions. We're going to find them," she said, her face remaining stony and impassive.

"Well... that just so happens to be exactly what we're doing..." Marcus responded.

The two stared at each other in silence for a moment before they decided to, if not work together, then at least to stay out of each other's way. As a sign of good faith, Marcus had the Steel Century leave first, actually turning their backs to the Crimson Tigresses as they ventured out into the mountains. And his good faith was well-placed, as Valeria honored their agreement and let them leave—though it wasn't as if she had much reason to attack them in the first place.

The two units spent the entire day spread out among the mountains, with small teams occasionally running into each other. Everyone was civil, though, and none of the teams came to blows. When the sun started to set, everyone returned to the foothills where they had entered the mountains.

Once there, Marcus, Alcander, and the other two third-tier nobles in the Century held a meeting with Valeria and Asiya. Neither side had found any traces of the Snow Lions, and the idea had been raised among the lower-tiered trainees about possibly teaming up to find the Lions. That possibility was exactly what the third-tier nobles convened to discuss.

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"We're not getting very far alone, are we?" asked Alcander.

"No, but that doesn't mean we *have* to join forces, does it?" rebutted Asiya.

"It would make things a hell of a lot easier, though," Marcus countered.

"It might," Valeria mused, "and it would be nice to have some backup when attacking the Snow Lions in their own territory. They undoubtedly know these mountains better than we do..."

"But we don't need them," Asiya said with a slight frown.

"No we don't," Valeria conceded, "but that doesn't mean we can't all work together to make this easier on ourselves."

"If their actions thus far have shown anything, it's that they won't go down without a fight," added Marcus. "We're going to need all the people to join us in this fight as we can."

"... What are you getting at?" asked Valeria suspiciously.

"Only that even the two of our units together might not be enough to successfully assault the Snow Lions if they've fortified their positions enough. The more allies we have, the better."

"Do you have any other units in mind?" Alcander inquired.

"Maybe..."

"Then perhaps you should ask them; we haven't agreed to anything, after all," said Asiya with an impish grin.

"Then what would you need to get this alliance off the ground?" Marcus asked.

"Our own banner back. That much is non-negotiable," said Valeria.

"Then we would make the same demand, they have our banner too," responded Alcander.

“They also have quite a few others, and if we beat them, we’d have to find a way to split the other seven banners two ways,” Asiya reminded the group.

“We’ll take care of that when the time comes,” said Marcus. “Although, having another unit with us would make that particular issue easier to deal with as well, as we’d only have to split the nine total banners into equal thirds...”

“We still have to actually *seize* the banners, though,” Alcander said.

“Right. So, then, can we do this? As long as we get our unit’s banners back and an equal share of the rest, we can work together?” Marcus asked the group. Valeria nodded silently, and Asiya deferred to her. Alcander and the other two Century nobles nodded their heads as well.

“Wonderful! Let’s meet back here tomorrow morning and plan out our next move!” Marcus said enthusiastically.

The units left for their respective camps, then returned the following morning. Again, the Tigresses arrived just after the Century, and when Valeria saw who was waiting for them, she hesitated for a long few minutes before taking a deep breath and leading her unit out to meet the Century.

The cause for her hesitation was the presence of another unit: the Deathbringers.

“What are *they* doing here?” Asiya wondered out loud with a faintly disgusted tone as she stared at the Deathbringers.

“Don’t know, but I would appreciate an explanation,” Valeria said, glaring at Marcus as he approached with a genial smile. When he arrived before the two ladies, Marcus didn’t even wait for them to ask before he launched into his explanation.

“I invited Gaius’ unit into our little ‘alliance’, of sorts, and I’m happy to say that he accepted! The Deathbringers will join our search for the Snow Lions, and our assault on their camp when we find it!” Marcus said eagerly.

“And you didn’t ask *us* first?” Asiya asked, her icy voice sending a chill down Marcus’ spine despite her bright and sunny expression.

“... I figured you’d be fine with it, I mean it always seems to me that you—or Valeria, at least—are on good terms with Gaius. Plus, this means that we won’t have to fight each other over a spare banner until we return to our own camps!”

Valeria frowned. She wasn’t too happy to see Gaius’ unit, but he’d been leaving her alone for the past several months, so she wasn’t as repulsed by the thought of working with his unit as she thought she would’ve been. In fact, only a few minutes later, Gaius joined the three of them to hash out a plan, and he was nothing but polite and cordial with her. He didn’t try to get too close, he didn’t stick around when the plan was decided on, he didn’t stare, and most importantly, he didn’t try to talk to her more than was necessary.

In the end, the three-unit alliance went forward without any objections, but Valeria made it abundantly clear to Marcus that any more invitations without her knowledge would end with the Crimson Tigresses leaving and going their own way.

As the three units pooled their resources, they debated the most likely locations for the Snow Lions to be hiding, and it was decided that they would focus their efforts on the northern parts of the mountains. When Leon and the other Snow Lions counter-ambushed the Century and Tigresses' attempt to capture him, he and his unit showcased a great knowledge of the stone maze on the northern edge of the Academy's training grounds. The third-tier nobles in the alliance felt that this came from a familiarity with the terrain that only living near the maze would provide.

And they were right; it took only a week of searching to find the gorge that the Snow Lions had encamped in. The alliance scouts discovered this was well before the Snow Lions' camp had even entered view, as one scout triggered a hidden enchantment and a bright red flare was fired up into the sky, where it made an incredibly loud popping sound. The entire gorge heard that flare, and it was bright enough that it guided all the rest of the three-unit alliance's trainees to it.

It wasn't long before the walls of the Snow Lions' camp came into view.

Chapter 122: FTX VI

The Snow Lions' camp had been built into the face of the cliff. The primary defensive feature that the leaders of the three units could see were two layers of concentric palisades, each with four watchtowers. Looking farther up the cliff face, they could see a few caves with fortified platforms jutting out, providing enough space for two or three archers per platform to rain down arrow fire on any attackers.

"Hold fast," whispered Marcus. "Stay back!"

"What?! That's their camp! Let's go get them!" said Alcander.

"I agree, this is what we came for," added Actaeon.

"I'm with Marcus on this one," said Gaius. "That flare has already alerted the Snow Lions. You can see them in their towers already. We can't just blindly try and take those walls, we need a plan."

Gaius' statement shocked most of the others; they had assumed he would be blinded by rage and immediately sprint for the palisade as soon as he saw it. Instead, he was advocating caution.

"Your opinion?" Marcus asked Valeria.

"... Fall back," Valeria replied.

With the leaders of all three units in agreement, no one else said a word. The allied units fell back. However, the forest in the gorge wasn't nearly so thick as the central forest of the training grounds, and the units were perfectly visible to the Snow Lions who manned the towers and archer platforms. Even after they fell back from the gorge, the Snow Lions had hidden scouts that kept them in sight the entire time.

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During their search over the previous week, the three allied units had moved their tents out of their camps and into the mountains, to save time on their search. With the Snow Lions' camp found, the third-tier trainees had the new allied camp moved almost to the Snow Lions' doorstep. Since they no

longer held the element of surprise, they wanted to put some pressure on the Snow Lions while they planned their assault.

"They have some serious fortifications," said an impressed Marcus in the command tent of the allied camp.

"Yeah, one set of walls wouldn't be too much to handle, we could just jump over them. With nine third-tier mages suddenly in the center of their camp, the Snow Lions would be effectively finished," added Alcander. "With that second palisade layer, though, we can't just jump in, otherwise we'd be caught between both layers and immediately shot by every archer in range."

"We *do* have more trainees than they do, but to launch a frontal attack would lead to massive casualties," added Gaius while he stared at the crudely drawn map in the center of the small wooden table they were gathered around. "Those archer platforms on the cliff will also be very hard to deal with; we can't just assault them, and they're too high up for effective counter-fire. Any attack we launch will be in range of those platforms long before their towers on the ground will be in range of our own bows."

"We're going to have to launch a night attack," said Valeria, "but we're also going to need to watch out for those flare mines they have. If even one of those were to go off, we'd be screwed. They'd know we were coming and have plenty of time to man their towers."

"Why don't we just *try* a frontal assault?" suggested Actaeon. "We don't exactly know for sure that it would fail. A shield wall could cover us from the arrow fire and get us right to the walls."

"Perhaps..." muttered Marcus, closing his eyes in thought.

Before anything else could be said, the nine third-tier mages in the tent heard a shout from outside, "WE'RE UNDER ATTACK!"

Instantly, everyone drew their weapons and hurried outside. There hadn't been much noise before, but the shout had been like a shot in the arm for the resting trainees. Several hundred trainees were running around trying to locate the source of the attack and to find their leaders.

"Hey! What's going on?!" demanded Gaius from a passing Deathbringer.

"Arrow fire from the north-western pass!" the young first-tier mage responded.

In order to make camp, the allied units had followed the river that ran through the gorge to what seemed like a good defensive position: a valley that only had two entrances, a narrow pass to the north-west, and another pass to the south-east. The north-western pass led right back to the Snow Lions' gorge.

The third-tier trainees wasted no more time and sprinted for the pass in question, only pausing to order their second-tier subordinates to get the rest of the trainees to meet them there. They had left their shields and bows behind in their individual tents, but they still had their armor and primary weapons, so they didn't stop again on their way to reinforce the pass.

When they arrived, they found an ad-hoc shield wall made up of individuals from all three units blocking the pass. About twenty feet behind them lay five unconscious trainees and more than a dozen arrows

on the ground. There were three more trainees that had only been partially stunned taking cover behind a few short trees.

As soon as the third-tier trainees showed up, another volley of arrows rained down on the shield wall. The nine leaders ran forward, most of them picking up discarded shields on the way; Alcander and Valeria were the only two that didn't as their weapons—the glaive and greatax—were most effective when wielded with two hands.

The third-tier nobles hurriedly joined their trainees in the shield wall. The rain of arrows ended after only three volleys. Marcus stared forward into the darkness of the evening mountains. There were enough trees and bushes in the pass that even when he channeled magic into his eyes to see in the dark, there still wasn't anything of note to see. The enemies, Snow Lions in all likelihood, had hidden in more than just darkness.

'There can't be that many of them, maybe twenty or thirty,' Marcus thought after having experienced the volley. However, he hesitated to make his guess out loud, as he could only estimate the number of archers they might be facing. Instead, he glanced to his right and left to check on the shield wall. While he did so, he locked eyes with Valeria. She made a 'move forward' gesture at him, and he shook his head. It wasn't quite time to start moving.

About five minutes later, when the shield wall had swollen in size with dozens more trainees who had assembled at the pass, Marcus shouted, "Let's move forward!" and the shield wall began to slowly move forward. They had to move carefully and very slowly in order to maintain their formation's cohesion in the broken and rocky ground.

The other eight third-tier trainees willingly deferred to Marcus as he was the only one of them to have any experience on a real battlefield, even if that experience was only in fighting the stone giants in the east. Plus, he was a son of House Aeneas, a noble family renowned for their skill in the various arts of war.

As the shield wall moved forward, another volley of arrows forced it to stop in its tracks. However, this volley was the last, and the shield wall pushed into the trees of the mountain pass without another incident. But, this absence of attack only put the trainees in the shield wall on edge. Their eyes darted to every little leaf and shadow that moved, certain that arrows would come falling down upon them at any time.

"They're out there, I know it..." muttered Marcus. He pushed the formation forward, though he remained wary of any potential ambushes. But it wasn't an ambush that his enemy had planned...

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"They're moving. The camp is almost entirely deserted save for a few stragglers," said Charles as he returned to Leon. "Alphonsus and the archers managed to draw them away."

"Good. Then let's make this quick," Leon responded. He, Charles, and the other eight trainees in Leon's squad began to climb the cliff in front of them. It was only about thirty feet high, something which wasn't clear when they looked back down from the top. The short evergreen trees were densely packed and blocked the view of the ground. From anywhere else along the cliff, the ground was much farther down, up to several hundred feet.

Once they had reached the top, they quickly moved along the ridge for about thirty seconds before finding themselves at the edge of another cliff, looking down upon the allied units' new camp. Leon quickly located the two largest tents, one of which undoubtedly housed the allies' supplies.

Leon's squad silently climbed down the twenty-foot-tall rock face and infiltrated the camp. The allies had left about twenty-five trainees behind to guard the camp while they chased the archers who had already fallen back to the Snow Lions' caves. These guards were concentrating on the mountain passes, though, which gave Leon's squad almost completely unfettered access to the entirety of the camp. In fact, none of them ever noticed Leon's squad within their midst, even though the second-tier trainees left behind to command the guards were competent enough to make sure to watch both passes.

So, without any interruptions, Leon's squad checked out the two largest tents. The first they checked wound up being the command tent, with nothing in it save for a few chairs, a table, and a crudely drawn map of the part of the gorge that the Snow Lions had fortified. There wasn't anything to be gained from taking it—or anything else in the tent—so the squad quickly moved on.

They found what they were looking for in the second tent: the allies' supplies of food and spare arrows. Even with the aid of magic, there was no way for the squad of ten to take everything, so they loaded themselves up with as many of the arrows as they could reasonably carry and fight with, then Leon started throwing scrolls of spell paper at what was left. As soon as the scrolls unfurled, they began to burn white, disintegrating everything within a radius of six feet with magical fire.

This particular spell had been taught to Leon by Xaphan, and after both rigorous testing and the assurances of the demon, Leon had determined that the fire conjured by the spells wouldn't spread, a determination that was proven when even the tent remained untouched despite everything within quickly becoming ash.

With a quick hand gesture, Leon signaled his squad to leave. They departed the same way they had arrived, by climbing a cliff face, then scaling down the other side. It was then easy enough to return to the caves through one of many hidden entrances that the Snow Lions had fortified.

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"Well *that* was a pain in the ass," Actaeon complained as he sat down in a chair in the allies' command tent. Marcus had pushed the shield wall to scour almost the entirety of the pass, only to find nothing. In the end, the allies were forced to return to their camp having failed to find any of the Snow Lions who had attacked their camp.

"That pass was narrow enough that they could've fought us if they had really wanted to. To not do so was cowardly beyond words," said one of the Steel Century's third-tier nobles.

"You're wrong," Marcus immediately snapped back. "This wasn't a cowardly act. It just seems that a direct confrontation wasn't their goal..."

At that moment, a second-tier Deathbringer arrived at the command tent with a panicked expression. He quickly whispered a message to Gaius, then stood off to the side. Gaius' eyes widened in panic of his own, then he ran out of the tent while yelling, "They burned our supplies!"

The rest of the leaders hurriedly followed him to the piles of ash that had been their food and arrows only an hour before. Since the tent was still intact, it likely would've taken until the next day for them to notice if it hadn't been about time for dinner.

"All our food..." muttered Linus in disbelief.

"So *this* was their goal," murmured Marcus. "Well played, Snow Lions, well played."

Chapter 123: FTX VII

With their supplies incinerated, the allied units had a lot of trouble staying in their position. Those supplies had been meant to last them for several weeks, but with them gone they'd either have to send runners back to their old camps and ferry replacement food and arrows back to the new camp or they would have to abandon the new camp temporarily until they worked out a new logistical solution.

While it came with a high risk of ambush, the nine third-tier nobles decided on the first option, and more than sixty runners and guards were sent out early the next morning. The runners safely returned with the needed supplies around noon, but the allies were quite nerve-wracked for the hours they were gone. The entire camp had been alert for any sign of a Snow Lion attack and both passes were watched by no less than twenty trainees each.

However, once the runners came back and the allies had a good meal, morale improved, and everyone managed to relax. Plus, with their return, the allies had the numbers to begin scouting. The leaders wanted to know everything about the gorge and the surrounding mountains, so they sent out just as many scouts as they had runners. However, the scouts didn't find anything worth noting the entire day. None of the hidden entrances to the Snow Lions' caves were found, and even if they had been, they had all been blocked and fortified anyway.

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"There isn't going to be any fancy tactics that will let us take that fort without casualties!" Actaeon almost shouted. "We should just resign ourselves to the fact that we're going to have to take it by a frontal assault!"

"We haven't explored the entire area, yet! We shouldn't try something so reckless until we've gotten a good understanding of the surrounding area!" argued Linus.

Actaeon was too impatient for that, and he shot back, "Why should we wait?! I'm sure we could take that fort right now if we tried! We might have one hundred and fifty or maybe even two hundred of our trainees fall in the attempt, but we outnumber the Snow Lions two and a half to one! What do we have to lose?!"

"Since the Snow Lions are only using training weapons, we really don't have that much to lose if we tried to assault their walls tomorrow..." said Valeria quietly.

"Still, we ought to train the way we are going to fight," Marcus said. "We would explore all of our options before a frontal assault under normal conditions."

"We could at least try and probe their defenses," suggested Gaius. "If we see an opening, then we can order a full attack."

“What do you have in mind when you say, ‘probe their defenses’?” asked Asiya.

“We split up into three shield walls and attack the palisade from all three sides. Actually, moving in a turtle formation would be better, since they have those archer platforms. We also ought to have several units of archers behind a single-layer shield wall covering our attack. We can keep casualties to a minimum that way.”

“That sounds more like an assault than a probing action,” said Marcus with a frown.

“We can always turn around and retreat if things go poorly,” Gaius responded.

“Hmm... Maybe we can do that... but before, we should try a proper probing action. I have something in mind.” Marcus looked around at the nine leaders with a serious look. “We can try it tonight if you’re all up for it...”

The others were all onboard and were ready to go by nightfall.

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Marcus and the other eight third-tier mages assembled near the north-western pass. With them were an equal number of second-tier mages. They didn’t carry shields, though they had their armor and weapons. As soon as they were ready, they ventured out into the dark pass.

The going was slow, as the second-tier trainees couldn’t see in the dark as well as the third-tier mages could. It took them nearly three hours just to walk the half mile they needed to approach the Snow Lions’ camp, a journey that had been made much longer when Marcus, Actaeon, and Asiya had all discovered flare spells surreptitiously hidden in bushes, tall grass, and tree roots that they had to avoid.

The group managed to come within one hundred feet of the tree line before they stopped, while Marcus, Gaius, and Valeria silently moved forward to get a closer look at the Snow Lions’ nighttime defenses. They saw one Lion in each of the towers, plus one on each archery platform. This was a total of twelve Snow Lions on guard. The three unit leaders could tell that the sentries’ vigilance wasn’t high, but with how many of them there were and the limited number of approach vectors and large amount of cleared land between the walls and the tree line, they didn’t need to be particularly vigilant.

‘This is not going to be easy,’ thought Marcus, a frown appearing on his face. In contrast, Valeria was smiling in obvious anticipation, despite seeing the same bad tactical position as Marcus. Gaius’ expression was of a more neutral determination, with only a slight pursing of the lips and narrowing of the eyes to break his impassivity.

The three returned to the others, then silently prepared themselves for the fight.

Fifteen minutes later, they opened up with a short barrage on all four of the towers in the outer wall. They had had to sneak up as close as they could, but they had gone so far that the tree cover wasn’t enough to shield them from any counter-attacks from the archer platforms. Fortunately for them, they had the element of surprise, and all four of the Snow Lions in the towers on the outer wall were stunned into unconsciousness.

The rest of the Snow Lions weren’t so inattentive that they’d miss such an attack, and immediately a shrill alarm spell was activated by one of the Lions guarding the inner wall.

“Let’s go!” shouted Marcus as he sprinted for the wall. The only cover his group would find from the archer platforms was right up against the front of the palisade. But, to get there, they’d have to sprint across two hundred feet of relatively open ground. A short distance for the third-tier mages, but still more than enough time for the archers to get off a couple shots apiece. And the Snow Lions had trained enough that their shots were well aimed.

When Marcus arrived at the palisade, only six others had made it with him: Valeria, Gaius, Alcander, Asiya, and two second-tier trainees from the Deathbringers. The other eleven had been shot down as they ran, and their fallen forms littered the open area between the palisade and the tree line. A few of them still moved, but another few arrows from the Snow Lions quickly put a stop to that.

Marcus sighed in dejection. They still had enough people to inflict serious harm on the Snow Lions, but that was dependent on making it over the second wall. They’d be turned into pincushions after leaping over the first, he doubted they’d have the time to make it over the second. To make things worse, the Snow Lions reacted much faster than he thought they would; he could hear dozens of them pouring into the gap between the two palisades.

“Fall back!” he shouted. The tactical situation wasn’t lost on anyone else, so they all nodded and scattered. Marcus, Valeria, Asiya, and Gaius made it to the tree line, but Alcander and the two second-tier Deathbringers were felled by Snow Lion archers.

“Hold fire!” came a shout from one of the outer towers. “Whoever’s out there, if you come out and admit defeat, we’ll let you come take your fallen back to your camp!”

Marcus glanced back and saw that it was Castor who had called out to them. His offer was a common courtesy among the trainees, there was no need to suspect it for a trap. Marcus turned and walked back into the open area with his hands far away from his weapons.

“I’ll take that offer! You’ve beaten us! We’ll take our people and go!” Marcus called out with a good-natured smile.

“Then be quick about it! It’s late!” Castor shouted back. He returned Marcus’ smile, but neither he nor any of the Snow Lions left the towers. They barely moved an inch until Marcus and the other three had dragged their fallen comrades to the edge of the tree line, where they were revived with healing spells—though it took about ten minutes for their eyes to open, and another five or so for them to regain enough mobility to leave.

When they returned to their camp, they made for the command tent to talk about what they had learned from their attack. However, just about as soon as they had begun their discussion, they heard their trainees running around outside and yelling coming from the pass to the Snow Lions’ gorge.

Castor hadn’t waited to launch a retaliatory strike. When the nine allied leaders arrived at the pass, they found all twenty guards unconscious.

“FORM A SHIELD WALL!” Alcander bellowed, summoning all nearby trainees to the pass. A few more token arrows were fired at their formation, and then... nothing. With the memory of what happened the last time they pushed out into the pass after an attack, Marcus and the others elected to not do the same thing and make their camp vulnerable again. The allied shield wall just stayed put, waiting for more arrows come flying out from the trees.

After about ten seconds of waiting, three young men stepped out from the dark mountain pass: Castor, Alphonsus, and Leon.

They stayed in the open just long enough to show themselves, smile at the shield wall, then melt back into the shadows. No more arrows were shot after that.

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“Cocky bastards,” growled Actaeon when they returned to the command tent again.

“I guess this was only retaliation for our own attack, rather than an earnest assault on our position,” Gaius said.

“We should still make sure all of our trainees are alert for anything,” Alcander mentioned. “They may have made a show of leaving, but I don’t trust those guys to leave things here.”

“We’ll certainly do that,” said Marcus, “but I think our priority is planning the assault on their camp. We can let our second-tier trainees take care of security for now.”

“That response time was incredible,” Linus said, saying what was on everyone else’s mind. They had known that the Snow Lions had become great archers, so the stellar performance of those on the platforms high up the cliff wasn’t surprising. How quickly the Snow Lions had responded and reinforced their palisades, however, was quite unexpected. Their attack hadn’t even been going on for two minutes before they heard the Lions’ footsteps on the other side of the first wall.

“It was, and I don’t think we’d be any faster in an assault,” Marcus said, then he turned to their map on the table. “To make things worse, their gate is over here on the south side, but I’d be willing to bet the inner gate is all the way over here on the north side. We would have no cover from their arrow fire when we try to open them, and we’d have to fight through the entire length of the palisade to get from the outer gate to the inner gate.”

“So we’re going to have to cover someone with shields from all directions while they work on opening the gate,” Valeria said. “Our second-tier mages will have a hard time getting over the spikes on top of the palisade, but it should be possible to get thirty or forty trainees over it.”

“*Possible*, but they’re going to be under fire from all directions and probably have Snow Lions attacking them on the ground all at the same time,” Asiya stated.

“We *could* try to knock down the gate. If we get close enough to set up a good shield wall to protect ourselves from the archer platforms, we might be able to buy ourselves enough time to tear it down,” Alcander put forward.

“I *like* that idea,” responded Actaeon as he sat forward with an enormous smile. He even cracked a few knuckles as if he were readying himself to go and rip the gate off the palisade right then and there.

“That might just be our best bet. We’re still going to have to deal with those archers in the towers and prepare ourselves to deal with a Snow Lion shield wall between the walls,” said Marcus.

“We might have to resign ourselves to the fact that we’re going to take some casualties doing this, but I think we have the numbers to pull it off. We can get those banners, I *know* it,” said Gaius.

"Might it be possible to recruit some of the other units to help us out?" asked Linus.

"Hmm, doubtful," Marcus replied. "As far as I know, they're all busy fighting amongst themselves trying to seize the Black Viper's banner. And besides, why would we *want* to share those banners with anyone else? We already have a perfectly even split here, to introduce another unit would be to invite needless conflict into this alliance, no? Once we get those banners, we'll pass them out and then return to our own camps. Nice, clean, simple. We won't fight against each other until the alliance has fulfilled its purpose and been subsequently disbanded."

A short silence filled the tent after Marcus finished. It was unbelievable that the Black Vipers had held onto their own banner despite having five units constantly trying to seize it. However, Tiberias had been leading his unit around and purposefully stoking violence among said units, preventing them from forming a cohesive alliance like the one against the Snow Lions. It wasn't so much that the Black Vipers had been holding the other units off by force of arms, but rather that Tiberias had been luring the other units into depleting themselves attacking each other rather than his unit.

"Anyway," Marcus continued, "We can try this plan about assaulting the walls with a shield wall and trying to bash down the gates. That's probably our best chance for success. Anyone disagree?"

No one spoke up, so Marcus said, "Well then, no reason not to do this as soon as we can. How about tomorrow night, just after sundown?"

Again, no one said anything. Their plan was set, so they left the command tent to get some rest. They had a long day ahead of them when they woke up.

Chapter 124: FTX VIII

"They're going to attack tonight," Castor stated.

"You say that as if it were ever a question," Leon responded with a smile. "That attack last night was only a probe. They wanted to see how we would react. No doubt that they'll use what they learned to plan for their attack."

"Then we should attack them first! They won't attack us if they take serious casualties!" said Alphonsus.

"Hmm, I'm certainly tempted to attack as well," Castor agreed.

"That might not be the best option," said Leon.

"What do you mean?" asked Alphonsus.

"Only that we know where they'll come from and we know where they're going," Leon answered. "That gives us... options..."

"You're saying we should spring an ambush?" asked Castor.

"Yes," Leon responded instantly. "We shouldn't just wait around for the attack like a turtle hiding in its shell. We can hit them before they attack, or even after their attack has started. A couple of squads can be pulled from defending the palisades without seriously compromising its security; we need only to hide them in the forest and hit them in the flank when they present an opportunity."

“That also doesn’t preclude us from hitting them a few times during the day,” reminded Alphonsus.

“No, it doesn’t...” said Castor while he lost himself in thought.

“Both ideas are not necessarily different,” said Leon. “In fact, they’re essentially the same, only taking place at different locations. I think we can do both at the same time...”

“What are you thinking?” asked Castor.

Leon smiled at him, moved over to their map, then began to speak.

—

Alphonsus readied half a dozen arrows. He and the rest of his squad had taken three bundles of arrows each, ninety per person, and set out not long after the third-tier strategy meeting finished. It had taken them all day to reach their destination, one of the small ridgelines that flanked the pass between the allied units’ camp and the Snow Lions’ gorge. Across the pass, he could see another similarly-equipped archer squad led by Obellius. They had posted up just beyond the narrowest part of the pass.

It had taken all day for both squads to finish climbing to these locations, but it put them in positions that were not only nearly untouchable from the ground, but also gave them a commanding view of the pass. Their job now was to wait.

After about half an hour, the sun set behind the mountains and both squads began to hear increased movement coming from the allied camps’ direction. An hour or so later, after darkness had completely fallen, they saw the first of the allied units appear.

The Steel Century had taken point, with Marcus and Alcander at the head of the formation. Behind them came the Deathbringers, led by Gaius. Bringing up the rear were the Crimson Tigresses, led by Valeria. At the very back of the formation was Asiya, Actaeon, and Linus.

“Looks like they’re afraid of being hit from behind,” whispered Alphonsus with a smile. *‘They should’ve worried more about what was above them than what might be behind...’*

All twenty Snow Lions archers over both ridges made their final preparations while the allied formation slowly moved through the pass. They readied a handful of arrows and waited for the exact time to fire. That moment came when the allies had moved about two-thirds of the way through the pass. They were spread out enough that Marcus and Alcander had disappeared into the forest on the other side.

Silently, Alphonsus raised his bow and waited for a single heartbeat, just long enough for the rest of the Snow Lions to do likewise, then he loosed his first arrow. Everyone else did the same, and then just kept shooting with the arrows already in their hands. In less than five seconds, eighty arrows had fallen upon the unsuspecting allies, leaving fifty of them unconscious or too paralyzed to fight.

—

Several hundred feet ahead, Marcus and Alcander were leading the allies through the forest when Marcus suddenly called the formation to a stop. He could hear shouting coming from behind them, though he couldn’t quite make out what was being said.

“What’s going on back there?” he asked quietly. When he had explained the plan to the second-tier trainees, he had emphasized keeping the units silent and undetected for as long as possible—right up until they launched their attack if they could manage it—but the noise coming from further back in the marching column was throwing a wrench into that plan.

Suddenly, one of his second-tier noble followers came sprinting up from further back and explained what had just happened.

“Shit,” Marcus muttered under his breath. He quickly ordered the trainees to turn around and head for the pass, to support those under fire. *‘The Snow Lions obviously figured out what we were going to do... though this isn’t unsalvageable, we just need to get back to the units under fire’* he thought.

However, the trainees had only taken a few steps back, just enough to completely turn around, when dozens of arrows came whizzing through the trees and into their exposed backs and flanks. This happened along almost the entire length of the marching column that had entered the forest, and the allied trainees fell in droves. Even Marcus himself was hit by no less than three arrows, but each one had hit him directly in his back plates, where his armor was thickest. He was knocked to the ground, but he wasn’t out of the fight just yet.

“TURN BACK AROUND!” he roared while struggling back to his feet. “GET IN A SHIELD WALL!”

Alcander had been stunned, as had more than thirty men in the Steel Century, but those still standing charged forward into a tight formation and covered themselves with their shields.

“ADVANCE! BUT KEEP YOUR SHIELD UP!” Marcus bellowed. The shield wall quickly broke, but the trainees stayed in tight groups and kept their shields up. However, the arrow fire didn’t abate, and the Snow Lions’ targets quickly changed; those who had been firing on the right flank then targeted the left, who had their backs and flanks exposed, while the same happened on the left.

“KEEP MOVING FORWARD!” Marcus ordered, keeping his trainees charging into the trees, ignoring those who fell while they frantically searched for the Snow Lions shooting at them.

And his tactic seemed to work, as after they had run forward for about one hundred and fifty feet, the arrows ceased to fall. In the distance, Marcus could see a few brief glimpses of the retreating Snow Lions. He almost ordered his trainees to keep pushing forward, but there were more than fifty of his men either partially paralyzed or completely stunned. Besides, he still didn’t know the situation back in the pass, so he could only grit his teeth and order a retreat.

—

The situation in the pass wasn’t much better than in the forest for the allies; the Snow Lions kept up a heavy barrage, but Valeria had managed to get the trainees behind their shields, so the casualty rate they suffered plummeted. After that, she organized a few archers to take cover behind the shields while they returned fire, but the angle they were firing back at limited their effectiveness.

However, Asiya who had run forward and Gaius who had run back had both managed to take a few Snow Lions out with well-placed arrows. Valeria herself, meanwhile, ran forward and jumped with all the strength she could muster. The cliff was only about thirty feet tall, just low enough for her to jump, grab ahold of the cliff’s edge, then pull herself up. As soon as she did, she made quick work of the two

closest Snow Lions. Another quickly fired the arrow he had been about to shoot into the allies down below at her, but she raised her arm and blocked it with her bracer. The arrow's stunning effect badly stung; her arm went numb, but she could still move it.

While Valeria began tearing through the Snow Lions on the ridge, Marcus and his men came charging out from the trees. Marcus left twenty trainees with their shields raised at the tree line while he and eighty men from the Steel Century and Deathbringers came to support the fifty remaining Deathbringers and Crimson Tigresses in the rear.

Up on the other ridge, Alphonsus could see Obellius' squad being torn apart by Valeria. He had been about to order his archers to shoot her, but then he saw Marcus' charge and instead ordered a retreat. He trusted that Obellius and the other two second-tier trainees in his squad could hold Valeria long enough for them to get away, but he fired a few arrows at her anyway to help them out. All of his arrows hit her in the armor, so she wasn't stunned, but he did knock her down long enough for Obellius and his squad to grab their stunned comrades and pull back. Alphonsus' squad then did likewise before Marcus or any of the other allied third-tier mages could follow Valeria's example and take the fight directly to them on the ridge.

—

"What's the final casualty count?" Marcus asked as the stunned trainees were gathered back in the camp.

"One hundred and nine either unconscious or otherwise unable to fight," answered Gaius.

"An entire unit, taken out," Asiya whispered in both awe and disbelief.

Marcus paced a few times in the command tent and thought, resting his chin in his hand as he did so.

"... We can still launch our attack," he said after several long seconds.

"What?!" Linus almost shouted. "We just had more than a third of our people stunned!"

"They'll recover before the night's over, and I have a few second-tier nobles from the Steel Century keeping an eye on those ridgelines, so we won't be ambushed from there again," Marcus calmly responded. "We can't attack now, because the Snow Lions are likely on guard and waiting for us to keep up with our attack. However, if we take this opportunity to rest and attack again just before dawn, we might be able to pull this off."

The allied units spent the next several hours recovering, making sure all of their stunned trainees woke up and had some time to collect themselves. Then, barely more than an hour before dawn, they set out again. The units moved with extreme caution, keeping their eyes on the ridgelines and their weapons drawn. They even had sixty trainees with bows and arrows in hand ready to return any fire they might receive.

But, for all their caution, they didn't encounter a single setback on their way to the Snow Lions' camp. There wasn't a single arrow that flew at them from the darkness, and they didn't trip a single flare spell.

Finally, they arrived at their destination: the bank of the river that flowed through the gorge. It was only another five hundred feet to the Snow Lions' palisade, but the units stopped to get in a few last minutes

of rest before the attack began. In that time, Marcus, Valeria, and Gaius snuck forward to the tree line to see how the Lion's defenses looked. The watchtowers were still manned, as were the archer towers. In fact, it seemed like the Snow Lion sentries were just as alert as they would have been if they hadn't ambushed the allies earlier that night.

The three unit leaders quietly snuck back to their waiting trainees with smiles on their faces.

—

Leon walked out of the cave and into the camp's courtyard. He had led four squads into the forest to ambush the allies' front, and when Marcus pushed his men forward, Leon had his trainees retreat. They had done their job and inflicted heavy casualties, so they didn't need to stick around and get dragged into a fight with an enemy with far superior numbers.

All-in-all, the ambush was a success, the three allied units had been turned back. But, something didn't quite sit right with Leon, and it kept him from sleeping. After hours of tossing and turning, he had decided to call it quits and resign himself to sleeplessness. He had then left the cave to get some fresh air, though that restless feeling in him didn't die down, so he had taken the extra time to put his armor on.

He couldn't pin down what felt wrong, but there was just something about the ambush that didn't feel right. Had it been anyone else leading the allies other than Marcus, he probably would've gone to bed with a satisfied heart, but from what he knew of Marcus, he didn't think the noble would end things so easily.

Leon walked a few laps around the inside of the palisade to loosen up, then he climbed one of the watchtowers to get a look out into the forest.

"Everything going all right here?" he asked the first-tier trainee in the tower. The trainee tiredly nodded in response.

And then, as if mocking the young trainee, dozens of arrows began to fly out from the forest and straight into the towers.

Chapter 125: FTX IX

Several arrows whizzed past Leon's head as he ducked down behind the watchtower's waist-high wooden wall. He didn't stop to think about what was happening or who was responsible, he slammed his hand into the runic circle on the pinned sheet of spell paper on the wall and activated the alarm enchantment. The trainee who had been manning the tower had been hit by several arrows and immediately stunned, so Leon then grabbed his bow and arrows and stood back up to return fire.

He took a quick look around before shooting his first arrow; he wanted to understand the situation before he began. Three of the trainees in the eight watchtowers had been stunned, but the other five were still up and ready to fight. None of the archers up on the cliff platforms had been hit, so they, too, began shooting down into the forest.

Leon then channeled magic into his eyes and stared out into the forest. He saw dozens of enemy archers firing back at the camp, though a few were falling here and there from the Snow Lions' return fire. Leon

quickly fired three arrows at the archers at the tree line, stunning two and paralyzing one of the last man's arms.

And then, from the darkness, came the sounds of hundreds of advancing footsteps. All the remaining allied trainees appeared, advancing toward the palisade's gate in the south in one giant shield wall. Everyone behind the front line had raised their shields above their heads in a turtle formation, so most arrows fired at them bounced off. There were, however, a few unavoidable gaps that Leon was able to exploit and stun a few of the trainees in the formation.

"FIRE AT THE ARCHERS!" came a shout from one of the archer platforms. Leon turned his head to see who it was and saw Castor gesturing at the tree line. From the mouth of the cave, Snow Lions had started trickling out, some still pulling on armor or readying their weapons, and twenty Snow Lions had already arrived at the platforms while Leon wasn't paying attention.

In response to Castor's order, the trainees redirected their fire back to the tree line, eliminating the allied archers one after the other. Leon, however, judged the advancing shield wall to be the greater threat. Castor had redirected the arrow fire because that's where it would be the most effective, but Leon was accurate enough with the bow that he could still hit the trainees in the shield wall through the unavoidable gaps between the shields.

Besides, Leon was eagerly waiting for the third-tier allied nobles to jump over the palisade, where they would make themselves vulnerable to his arrow fire, so it was with the advancing turtle formation that he kept his attention.

'Come on,' he thought, 'You're going to make that jump, you have to in order to open the gate...'

But, the shield wall made it all the way to the gate—only taking minor casualties along the way—and no one attempted to jump over the palisade. Instead, the trainees in the front ranks of the shield wall split up to allow three men to come forward under the cover of their shields and begin attacking the sealed gate, one of these men being Alcander. The third-tier noble swung his greatax with all of his prodigious strength and weight behind it, but it hardly put a dent into the gate. Neither of the other two third-tier trainees had any more effect than he did.

But Leon couldn't see what was happening on the other side of the gate. He only heard the sounds of something hitting the gate incredibly hard, shaking the entire palisade. And the gate held, or rather, the enchantments he carved into it held.

Behind him, in the palisade's courtyard, fifty Snow Lions had assembled, with Alphonsus at the front. Turning his attention away from the allies at the first gate, Leon jumped down from the watchtower to join this assembled force, leaving three first-tier trainees to take his place in the tower. If the allied third-tier nobles weren't going to come to him, he'd go to them.

"We put a lot of work into our defenses. Let's see how well they're holding up," Leon said to Alphonsus.

"Let's," agreed Alphonsus. The two third-tier trainees led the other fifty Snow Lions out of the inner gate into the zone between the two palisades. There, Alphonsus set up a strong shield wall ten men long and five men deep while Leon darted up the closest outer watchtower to the gate. From his new position, Leon was in greater danger from the allied archers in the forest, but he was able to inflict higher casualties on their friends in the attacking shield wall.

—

“RARRGH!” Alcander shouted and he swung his ax into the gate again. It had taken him and two third-tier nobles from the Steel Century a great many strikes, but they were finally beginning to make some headway; the gate had started to splinter and bend.

Then, arrows began to hit those in the shield wall through tiny gaps at the edges of the shield wall. Marcus, a little further back than Alcander but still in the few front ranks, noticed the sudden increase in casualty rate. The allies had barely taken any casualties since taking cover at the foot of the palisade since only a single archer platform and the closest watchtower could even see them from there. Plus, Marcus hadn’t thought that the shield wall would still be targeted after hearing Castor order the Snow Lions to shoot at the allied archers instead.

But, when he saw Leon in the watchtower with a bow and a sly grin, Marcus wondered no longer about where the increase in casualties had come from. Leon was in the tower firing arrows exceptionally rapidly, and from a distance of barely twenty-five feet, he couldn’t miss.

Marcus grabbed several of the second-tier trainees around him and pointed directly to Leon.

“Over there!” he said, “Shoot him!”

The second-tier trainees quickly set their shields down and reached for their bows. Marcus did the same thing, but as soon as he unlimbered his bow and turned his eyes back to the tower, he saw Leon staring right back at him, with an arrow nocked, drawn, and aimed his way. Marcus didn’t even have time to curse before the arrow hit him in the weakest part of his armor, the area directly below the shoulder plates.

Marcus was knocked to the ground and thoroughly discombobulated, but still conscious. Leon’s next two arrows that hit the same place changed that, stunning the third-tier noble and removing him from play.

By then, the second-tier trainees had started to shoot back at Leon, forcing him to take cover in the tower. However, with their shields no longer a part of their formation, they had made themselves vulnerable. Castor, seeing this from his archer platform, quickly ordered the Snow Lions around him to take advantage.

Arrows rained down upon the allied shield wall, stunning the trainees who had pinned Leon and opening up others in the shield wall to more arrow fire. But just as the shield wall was starting to disintegrate from that hole, Alcander finally managed to bash down the gate, the enchantments Leon had made that held the gate together losing the last of their power with one last mighty swing of Alcander’s ax.

“WE’RE IN!” the third-tier noble roared as he charged into the opening, stepping on the fallen gate as he did so.

And as soon as he turned to charge to the next gate, he came face-to-face with the Snow Lion shield wall. But that didn’t slow him down in the slightest; he only grinned like a battle-hungry madman and ran forward, winding up a terrifying blow from his ax as he did so. Just as he was about to bring his ax down upon the Snow Lions in the front line, an arrow fired by Leon in the tower hit him in the thigh, paralyzing his entire left leg and bringing his charge to a premature end.

Alcander still tried to limp forward and attack, but a quick swing of Alphonsus' sword put a stop to that and knocked the nobleman unconscious.

But, there were other third-tier trainees able to take control of the allies; Gaius moved up into the front ranks and led them in their assault on the assembled Snow Lions. Both shield walls crashed into each other, pushing and shoving and trying everything they could to break the other's formation. The problem the allies had, though, was that the Snow Lions only had to brace themselves and hold against the assault while the archers in the towers and platforms slowly cleaned up the allies.

And that's exactly what happened. There were remarkably few casualties at the battle line where the two front ranks of the formations met, as both shield walls were well put together; instead, the majority of casualties sustained were from archers exploiting gaps in the shields.

The allies couldn't get the Snow Lions to move, and with their mounting losses, they finally reached their breaking point. Valeria had kept an eye on their archers at the tree line and noticed that they had all either been pinned down or otherwise incapacitated. The shield formation was without support and losing trainees at a faster and faster rate as gaps in the shields widened with every casualty sustained.

Eventually, she forced her way through the formation to Gaius and shouted, "We're not going to win! We need to retreat!"

Gaius took her completely seriously, but he still didn't like the idea of running away. Despite this, he clenched his teeth and nodded to her. Then, he shouted, "PULL BACK! RETURN TO THE TREE LINE!"

Gaius had to repeat himself several times, but he and Valeria managed to keep their people from breaking formation completely and made an orderly retreat.

The Snow Lions shot a few more token arrows after them once they had left the palisade, but Castor ordered his unit to let them go. He didn't see a lot of point in being so vindictive toward his fellow nobles and countrymen. Had this been an actual battlefield, though, it would've been much different.

After several minutes, Gaius came forward alone.

"Wait!" Castor shouted as the archers prepared to shoot him. "Let's hear him out!"

Gaius nodded to Castor, acknowledging the respect he was shown, as well as shocking Castor with his significantly more noble bearing than he had the last time the two units had much interaction.

"We..." began Gaius, but the words he had to say next caught in his throat. He took a deep breath, straightened himself up with all the dignity he could muster, and continued, "... acknowledge our defeat. We request permission to collect our fallen!"

It hurt Gaius to say those words, but he kept himself calm. For all of his attempts to mend his reputation and act with more nobility than he had at the beginning of the training cycle, he still hated losing.

Castor granted his request. There really wasn't any reason not to, but sometimes a unit would try to take prisoners. They'd quickly find their supplies strained if they took too many, so most units would decide to show their opponent the courtesy of taking their stunned trainees back with them instead.

While the allies began to collect their comrades, Gaius walked back to where the rest of the third-tier nobles were. He, Valeria, Asiya, and Linus were the only unit leaders who remained on their feet. One of

Actaeon's legs had been paralyzed, while all four of the Steel Century's third-tier trainees had been stunned.

"Thanks for doing that," said Linus.

"Yeah, it's never easy to admit defeat, even if it's to get our people back," added Asiya.

"Don't mention it," Gaius responded evenly. "I think I'm actually getting used to it, anyway."

—

That battle was the beginning of a month-long stalemate between the three allied units and the Snow Lions. The Snow Lions couldn't permanently drive off the allies, while the allies couldn't penetrate the Lions' defenses.

Marcus tried to lead attacks on the Snow Lions' supplies that came in every week, but the Snow Lions managed to either fight him off or steal the allies' supplies in revenge. The allies started learning more about the mountains' layout during that month, but they still couldn't locate the hidden paths the Snow Lions knew about to constantly ambush them when they tried to launch sneak attacks on the camp.

This state of affairs was grueling for the allies, especially with the end of the FTX approaching and not a single banner had been seized or reclaimed. It was subtle, but desperation had started to set in, with trainees that were a little harder to control than usual.

The mood in the Snow Lions' camp, however, was exactly the opposite. Most of the Lions felt exhausted from the constant battling with an enemy with superior numbers, yet energized from their constant victories—or at least, their constant avoidance of loss.

But, all that changed when, with only two weeks left until the FTX came to an end, the allies picked up some new friends.

Chapter 126: FTX X

"Coming here alone was quite bold," Marcus said to Tiberias. The leader of the Black Vipers had shown up at the south-eastern pass without a single other member of his unit and asked to speak with the nine third-tier leaders of the allied units. He was consequently shown into their command tent.

"Was it really so bold?" Tiberias asked in response. "I'm merely trying to show my trust in all of you not to take me hostage, as well as my commitment to what I want to propose."

Marcus frowned. Tiberias had sounded completely sincere, and he had a pleasant enough expression, but it seemed fake to him. He couldn't imagine that the leader of the Black Vipers, who had spent the previous month and a half skillfully fending off the other four units to keep their banner in hand, would show up in their camp without some kind of ulterior motive.

"What is it you propose?" Gaius inquired.

"Only that my unit join this alliance you all have built."

"Why?" Valeria bluntly asked.

"Because it's my understanding that your three units aren't quite enough to cut through the Snow Lions' defenses, and neither have you found an alternate entrance into their caves. Well, I just so happen to have..." Tiberias reached into one of his pockets and pulled out a piece of paper, folded many times to fit. "... a map of their cave system, including the system's hidden entrances."

"Let me see that," said Alcander as he stepped forward and reached for the map, but Marcus stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

"Hang on," Marcus said.

"You only explained why allowing you to join our alliance would help us," Valeria stated, picking up on the same thing Marcus had. "You failed to explain why you want to join us in the first place. Surely, if your map is accurate, you could just infiltrate their camp yourself, yet you're here. *Why?*"

Tiberias' smile didn't shift in the slightest from Valeria's questioning, which only served to put both her and Marcus further on edge. It was incredibly disconcerting for them how completely unfazed Tiberias was, with his easy-going smile that barely even twitched coming across more like a mask to the two of them than as actual amicability.

Tiberias was silent for a long moment after Valeria's question; he only stared at her unblinkingly. Finally, he said, "I want the same thing all of you want: banners. However, three other strong units have been unable to penetrate the Snow Lions' defenses and accomplish their goal. Makes me *very* apprehensive. So, even if my unit only gains one or two banners by joining up with all of you, it's far better than the none I think we'd likely get if we tried this on our own."

With his fake-seeming smile, Marcus had a hard time believing him, but his reasoning was sound. The Snow Lions had resisted for a month and a half against the alliance, so it was quite understandable that the Black Vipers would seek out support rather than attack on their own.

"Aren't you afraid that we'd just stun you, take your map, then attack the Snow Lions without your unit?" Alcander asked, while his hand started to wrap around the handle of his greatax in an obvious threat.

Tiberias' answer was a simple "No," but his demeanor was so confident that Alcander unconsciously hesitated to attack. Plus, Tiberias' eyes had narrowed, as if to turn his smile into a direct challenge for Alcander.

"Why don't you let us see that map, and we'll think about it? You know, a little show of good faith?" asked Gaius. Tiberias happily handed the map over to him without any fear; he had a good relationship with Gaius and trusted him not to try anything deceitful.

Gaius opened the map and spread it out on their table. It was incredibly detailed, with every cave within a half mile of the allied camp marked in red. Marked in green was a series of lines that emanated from the region protected by the Snow Lions' palisade, which Gaius guessed to be the cave system.

"So, how about it? Are you all interested in my offer?" asked Tiberias.

Gaius, Valeria, and Marcus exchanged glances. Marcus and Valeria were still a little apprehensive, but with only a single week left in the FTX, they weren't in a position to casually turn down help. All three nodded, and the Black Vipers joined the alliance.

—

For four more days, the allies were quiet. They didn't attack the Snow Lions, few scouts were sent out, and the Snow Lions' own scouts reported that not enough trainees left their camp to signal an attack.

Suffice it to say, Castor, Leon, and Alphonsus were extremely suspicious.

"What are they doing?" Castor wondered aloud as he stared out into the forest from one of the inner watchtowers along the palisade.

"They're definitely planning something," said Alphonsus.

"Maybe we should go and attack them before they can try it," Leon suggested. "No real use waiting around for them to do what they're planning to."

"We hardly have the numbers to beat them in an assault," Castor reminded.

"I'm not saying we have to run them out of the mountains, just disturb them a little. Put them on the defensive, maybe force them to take enough casualties that they have to delay whatever they're planning," Leon said.

Castor frowned in hesitation. There were only three days left until the FTX came to an end, and the tension was making him anxious.

"For now," he said, "we'll keep an eye on them. I want to know everything they're doing, so let's have scouts watching them around the clock."

"They've learned a lot about the terrain around here, our scouts will have a hard time getting close enough for that kind of monitoring," Alphonsus said.

"Hmm, well, let's have them do their best. For now, we'll remain—" In the middle of his sentence, Castor was interrupted by three flare enchantments flying into the sky and illuminating the entire forest.

"Looks like we won't have to wait to see what they're planning!" Alphonsus remarked while Castor activated the alarm enchantment for the cave. By the time the first few allied trainees came into view, all of the Snow Lions were in place.

But, they didn't advance toward the gate like they always had in past assaults. Instead, the shield walls took up a position to cover the archers in the tree line. Both sides exchanged fire, but the allies remained motionless, even when their archers were occasionally hit.

'What is this?' Leon wondered. 'Why aren't they attacking?! Staying in range of our archers without moving will only bring them needless casualties, what are they thinking?!'

And then, something occurred to him. He scanned the shield walls and the archers behind them for the third-tier trainees. They were a little too far for him to see their faces, but he could still see their auras, and a quick count only brought him to seven. Two of their third-tier nobles were missing.

Leon stopped firing his arrows and fell back from the watchtowers into the caves, where he sprinted straight to the highest archer platform.

"What are you doing here?" Castor asked when Leon arrived.

“Some of them are missing,” Leon answered. “We need to make sure the banners are secured, because they may have found one of our secondary entrances.”

Castor thought for a moment, then nodded to Leon. “Do what you need to do,” he said.

Leon nodded back, then ran back into the caves. The banners had been hung on the wall in the main cavern, though Leon had only placed light enchantments upon them to keep them secure. He quickly went to work removing them from the wall.

—

“It’s impressive that they’ve managed to do so much,” Gaius marveled as he, Alcander, Tiberias, and the other three third-tier Black Vipers stared at a wooden wall with an incredibly secure-looking door. Several second-tier Black Vipers were working on opening the door while the other hundred trainees of their unit waited behind the six third-tier nobles. As soon as the door was open, they’d charge into the tunnel it was blocking and hit the Snow Lions from behind.

“They’ve had months to fortify these caves. They clearly put that time to good use,” Alcander said with a smile. He was almost bouncing with excitement at the prospect of finally rooting the Snow Lions out of the caves they had been hunkered down in.

“That’s it, it’s open!” said one of the second-tier Vipers. He pushed the door open, and the third-tier leaders took point.

But, they were so preoccupied with rushing into the Snow Lions’ camp that they didn’t notice a glyph on the back of the door flash, then blink out.

—

Leon had gotten six of the nine banners undone and rolled up for transport when he heard the deep rumbling alarm of someone penetrating one of the secondary entrances.

“Shit,” he whispered, knowing that he had been right to be suspicious. The allies had found another way in, and their attack outside was only a diversion while they came in a different way. Fortunately, they hadn’t noticed the alarm, and soon after, Castor and Alphonsus sprinted back into the caves.

“They’re in,” Leon said, confirming what they already knew.

“What do we do now?! We can’t fight them off if they’re already *in* the caves! The only reason we could hold out was because of the palisade!” Alphonsus shouted in hysteria. They were only three days away from ending the FTX with nine of the banners! But now they were almost certainly going to lose all of them.

“Help us with these,” Castor said calmly as he joined Leon in removing the last three banners from the wall.

“What’re you planning?” Alphonsus asked.

“Probably the same thing Leon had in mind. We’re going to move these banners while most of the unit stays behind and buys enough time for one of us to escape,” Castor said, to which Leon nodded.

“Then who’s going to go?!” Alphonsus shouted.

Castor glanced over at Leon. He had made his own decision, but he wanted to know Leon’s opinion.

“I’m staying,” Leon said. “And I’ll be keeping three of the banners.”

“What?!” Alphonsus asked in confusion.

“I won’t be enough to keep the invaders from pursuing whoever escapes, I’ll need some kind of bait. The unit banners will do.”

“Do it,” agreed Castor. “And Al, take these other banners and go!”

“Where to?”

“Anywhere! Wherever you can lay low until the FTX is over!”

Alphonsus couldn’t help but hesitate. All nine banners were quickly rolled up and distributed, with three hung over Leon’s shoulder and the other six given to him. But, he still couldn’t bring himself to leave Leon or Castor.

“I... I won’t leave! We can fight them off! I’m not going to leave you two behind!” he said, remembering all of his behavior earlier in the training cycle. His face now burned in shame at how Leon and Castor were now so willing to stay and buy him time to leave.

“You *are*!” shouted Castor. “They’re in the caves! They have the numbers to beat us! So you’re going to win this for us! Go!”

“He’s not going anywhere,” came a voice from a nearby tunnel. Emerging into the light of the main cavern came dozens of Black Vipers, led by Alcander, Gaius, and Tiberias, the latter of whom had been the one to speak.

“Go and open the gates,” Tiberias said to the unit at his back and, led by one of the other three Vipers, the rest of the unit sprinted to the cave entrance and spilled out into the courtyard.

“Hand over those banners!” Alcander shouted.

Leon, Alphonsus, and Castor glanced at each other. There was no arguing it now, they had lost the camp. In an instant, they all came to the same conclusion and immediately turned to run down a tunnel behind them.

“Oh, you’re not getting away that easily,” Tiberias said with a smile as he, Alcander, Gaius, and the other two Vipers gave chase.

The three Snow Lions knew the caves better, but they still couldn’t gain much ground. The caves were winding enough that running at full speed was impossible. So, knowing there wasn’t an abundance of choice, Castor shouted to the other two Lions, “Keep going! I’ll give you a few seconds!”

With that, he stopped and turned around to face the five pursuers in the narrow tunnel.

Alphonsus grimaced, but he kept going, as did Leon. So long as those banners remained in their hands, the Snow Lions hadn’t completely lost quite yet.

Chapter 127: FTX XI

After standing at the tree line for about ten minutes, Marcus judged that they had bought enough time for the infiltration team and ordered the shield walls to slowly advance. He didn't like having them simply stand there and take fire, but the plan didn't hinge on these units getting too close, so he had decided to wait for a while. By the time he ordered his shield walls forward, the Snow Lions had used most of their arrows, so their advance didn't face nearly so withering of arrow fire as they had during their previous assaults.

In fact, their march to the gate came without sustaining a single casualty.

Once they arrived at the gate, Valeria immediately got to work undoing the enchantments Leon had placed upon it. Everyone was eager to get inside, as they could hear the sounds of battle coming from within, which Marcus knew meant their infiltration team had succeeded in gaining access to the caves.

It only took Valeria another three minutes or so of slapping sheets of spell paper onto the gate for Leon's enchantments to fail, at which point she, Asiya, and Actaeon threw themselves against it. The gate utterly failed to stop the three third-tier mages and was ripped from the palisade after only that one battering.

The allied units swarmed into the palisade and hastily reformed their shield wall, as they had come face-to-face with the Snow Lions' own formation. Under normal circumstances, even if all nine of the original alliance's third-tier trainees worked together, they still wouldn't have been able to break through the shield wall before the Snow Lions had whittled their units down with arrow fire. Now, however, the Snow Lions were trapped between the main three allied units on one side and the Black Vipers on the other. With their archers running low on arrows, it was only a matter of time before they either surrendered or fell.

—

Leon and Alphonsus sprinted down a tunnel that led north, leaving Castor behind to hold off their pursuers.

"Three days! Only three days left, and we've lost the camp!" Alphonsus growled in frustration.

"Had to happen eventually, I think. In fact, I'm quite surprised those three units haven't been able to overrun us before now," Leon responded.

"Still pisses me off. What should we do now?" Alphonsus asked.

"Same thing we planned earlier," Leon said, "You head north, make for the stone maze. Stay there for a few days, until the end of the FTX. So long as you stay hidden and don't lose those banners, then we win. Simple as that."

Alphonsus truly hated that plan, mostly because it involved him hiding away like a cornered rat. But, he acknowledged that it was probably their best bet to win now that the camp was in the midst of falling to the allies.

"Fine, I'll go. But, if you get the chance to escape, you take it!" he said.

"... I will," Leon replied, a little surprised at Alphonsus' concern.

Finally, they arrived at a fork in the tunnel, and Alphonsus took off to the north while Leon slowed down to wait for their pursuers to catch up.

—

Outnumbered five to one, Castor knew he didn't have a chance of victory, but that didn't stop him from fighting with everything he had. In the end, he managed to buy Leon and Alphonsus three minutes, more than double what he had hoped for.

"You two," Tiberias said to the two third-tier Black Vipers that had accompanied him, Gaius, and Alcander, "spread out. Find the way to those archer platforms and clear them."

The two third-tier nobles in question nodded and left without hesitation. They followed Tiberias' orders so quickly, in fact, that Gaius and Alcander couldn't help but be taken aback.

'What in the hell did Tiberias do that made those two so loyal?' Gaius wondered. He felt a shiver run down his spine at the thought, given what he knew about Tiberias' twisted personality.

"Now, let's go catch those two runaways... and capture those banners," Tiberias said with a smile, though to Gaius, it seemed like he only added on the bit about the banners as an afterthought.

He had had a bad feeling about Tiberias since he had asked to join the alliance, but he couldn't quite put his finger on why. Now, he started getting an idea; Tiberias wanted to catch up to Leon. Tiberias had made a point to tell Gaius to be patient after the raid on the Snow Lions' tower, to wait until Leon had left the Knight Academy before attempting to take his revenge, but Gaius had since set his vengeance aside. It seemed to him, however, that Tiberias had not done likewise, and was taking advantage of the situation to go after Leon.

'But it won't be Tiberias who catches him,' Gaius thought, a determined look appearing on his face as he, Tiberias, and Alcander took off after Leon and Alphonsus, stepping over Castor's unconscious form as they did. *'I'll show everyone that I'm not just a hostage! I'll earn my place at the Second Prince's side!'* He almost ripped the bracer his father had sent him off his arm when he thought this, but he managed to restrain himself. Even if he was insulted by its presence, he still couldn't allow an object inscribed with his father's Mana Glyph to leave his person.

The group bolted down the tunnel, and in seconds, had caught sight of a decidedly not in a hurry Leon. The Snow Lion seemed to be waiting for them, standing with the Deathbringers', Steel Century's, and Crimson Tigress' banners on his back, his arms folded, and his eyes glaring back at them. He was daring them to keep walking down the tunnel.

The three third-tier nobles slowed down considerably, wary as they were of some kind of trap.

"If he runs," said Gaius, "One of us should go down the other tunnel, because that's probably where Alphonsus ran..."

The other two acknowledged this but neither volunteered. They all wanted to fight Leon, and none were willing to let him slip from their fingers when he was now so close.

"Took you three long enough," Leon said provocatively. He smiled confidently at them, baiting them closer.

"We had to crush your unit on the way, of course it would take a hot minute," Tiberias boasted, but his eyes narrowed when Leon only smiled wider.

"Hand over those banners, and tell us where Alphonsus went," Gaius ordered, though the three of them were under no illusions that Leon would tell them.

"Well if you're going to be silent on the matter, then you'll have to beat us in a contest of arms," said Alcander as he brandished his greatax. Then, without waiting for a response from either Leon or the other two at his side, Alcander lunged forward, bringing his ax down in an earth-shaking blow that even Leon with all his speed barely seemed able to dodge.

But Leon had expected Alcander's opening move to be big, flashy, and backed with all of his strength, so he had only side-stepped as far as he needed to. Alcander's ax was stuck into the floor of the rocky tunnel; it took the noble a split-second to recover and draw his ax back into position for another strike. Leon didn't waste that brief moment, as he drew and struck at the noble with his longsword in one smooth motion.

Alcander blocked by raising his arm, but the strength of Leon's blow was great enough that even though the blade hit his bracer, it still paralyzed his left arm.

Fortunately for Alcander, Leon wasn't able to follow through and finish him off, as Gaius and Tiberias surged forward and put him on the defense. Alcander had to grit his teeth and deal with his paralyzed arm, but he knew he was lucky that Leon was only able to do that much after exploiting the mistake he had made in overcommitting to a single attack. He couldn't continue to use his greatax without both arms, so he dropped the ax and drew the shortsword at his waist, then joined his two allies in their attack.

Their rain of blows was unrelenting and precise, with Gaius, Tiberias, and Alcander each filling in and keeping the pressure on Leon, preventing the Snow Lion from counter-attacking. Leon was pushed back, constantly having to block, dodge, and deflect, barely managing to keep up with his three attackers.

And then he unleashed all of his killing intent, letting it wash over all three nobles in an instant. For a brief moment, before they were able to bring forth their own auras to resist, the nobles without exception felt like nothing more than ants beneath a descending boot. But, Leon knew that they'd be able to fight off the fear his powerful killing intent brought in less than a second, and that he'd only get a single free strike, so he sent that strike at Alcander. The Century noble had already been partially paralyzed, which made him the only one Leon was confident in bringing down with that one attack.

Leon didn't hesitate, stabbing into Alcander's chest with all of his might. The stunning effect of his training sword broke through the noble's armor, and Alcander fell to the ground unconscious.

But that still left Gaius and Tiberias, who had been given more than enough time to recover in the space of that attack. Leon barely managed to bring his sword back around to block Gaius' strike, but Tiberias' got through, paralyzing his right arm from the elbow down and causing Leon to drop his training sword. Seeing that there wasn't any other option, Leon threw himself backward to avoid Gaius and Tiberias' follow up strikes, then sprinted down one of the tunnels at the fork.

With neither giving any thought to either Alphonsus or Alcander, both Gaius and Tiberias tore off after Leon. Gaius had a look of stern determination, whereas Tiberias was fighting back a sadistic smile. The

former wanted the banners and only thought of defeating Leon as a way to bring a measure of closure to his time at the Academy. The latter, in contrast, wanted to use this fight as an excuse to hurt Leon as badly as possible before sending his family's assassins after the Snow Lion when the training cycle ended.

The two nobles weren't able to catch up to Leon on their own, but the tunnel he had chosen to run down brought Leon around in a circle past other cave chambers and back to the main cavern, where Marcus and Valeria were busy arranging the unconscious bodies of all the fallen trainees, Snow Lions included. But all of that came to an awkward end when Leon arrived, almost literally running into Asiya as he burst into the cavern.

Valeria and Marcus could hardly believe their eyes when Leon showed himself, but they took action almost instantly, moving to block off his escape routes and preventing him from running any farther. Tiberias and Gaius followed a couple seconds after, blocking Leon off from retreating back the way he came.

"Well, I didn't expect to see you, Leon. I thought you'd have taken the banners and run off, given that they weren't hanging here..." Marcus said, glancing at the three banners rolled up on Leon's back.

"Who says we didn't do just that?" Leon asked with a slightly mocking smile.

Marcus frowned. "Did either of you find the other banners? And where's Alcander?!"

Finally realizing that he'd let Alphonsus escape, Gaius had to restrain himself from loudly swearing in front of the rest of his Deathbringers. Tiberias, meanwhile, ignored Marcus and attacked Leon when the Lion's back was turned. Leon pivoted on his back foot and deflected Tiberias' blade with his left arm, though it cost him the use of that arm as well.

In response, Valeria lunged forward and stunned Leon with a slash of her glaive. But, her attack wasn't done out of malice, and she immediately turned her weapon on Tiberias.

They wordlessly stared at each other for a moment before Tiberias smiled, shrugged, and put his weapons away. Sensing the tension, Marcus intervened before either of them could speak.

"What happened to the other banners?" he asked.

"Alphonsus has them," Gaius answered, "but we don't know where he went."

"Damnit," Marcus muttered. He wasted no time organizing the rest of the trainees in the alliance to search the caves. He planned on occupying the Snow Lions' camp, which would keep them 'dead' for the duration of the occupation. This meant that Alphonsus was effectively on his own.

However, the allied units failed to catch Alphonsus in the three days they had. They had barely managed to explore the entire breadth of the cave system before the rest of the time in the FTX had elapsed.

The Snow Lions had spent months in the mountains, and they knew just about every nook and cranny within. Even Alphonsus, who had hated every moment he had been forced to stay there during the early months of the training cycle, could navigate around the mountains far better and far faster than anyone else among the other units. Evading their scouts for three days was quite easy for him. And because of this, he managed to bring the Snow Lions victory over the other nine units.

The final banner count was six for the Snow Lions—The Silver Legionaries, Blood Eagles, Obsidian Cataphracts, Phantom Bulls, Warriors of the Naga, and their own. The Crimson Tigresses, Deathbringers, Steel Century, and Black Vipers had all retained or reclaimed their own banners, so all four wound up tied for second place.

Chapter 128: Post-FTX

The mood in the Snow Lions' tower was absolutely jubilant. It had been only a day and a half since the FTX came to an end, long enough for the unit to rest and sleep in, then begin to party, for they had come out of the FTX with six banners! There wasn't any official reward for victory in the FTX other than honor and glory, but they'd receive first consideration for any well-respected knights seeking squires. The chances of every trainee in the unit receiving an enviable squireship skyrocketed.

Contributing to the celebration in the first floor common room, Leon, Castor, and Alphonsus had moved a lot of their drinks downstairs. They hadn't had the opportunity to head into the city yet—there were still a few days of paperwork followed by the ceremony that officially ended the training cycle before they got any time off—so everyone had to content themselves with what little was available.

Perhaps the most central person in the celebrations was Alphonsus, as he had to hide out in the mountains with little food for three days, staying on the move to keep the remaining banners in the grasp of the Snow Lions. None of the other men in the unit could help, as the allied units had occupied their camp, thus keeping them 'dead' and unable to render assistance. So it came as no surprise to anyone that he was not only the most eager when it came to celebrating, but all the other trainees were perfectly willing to party with him. His selfish behavior early in the training cycle had been forgotten in light of his securing the unit's win.

"... and when our shield wall finally broke, it took three of those assholes to take me down!" bragged Charles while he gestured wildly to make his point.

"Ha! It only took three for you! They had to send a *third-tier* noble to stop my arrows!" Henry boasted.

"That noble wasn't sent for only you, it was for the entire archer platform! And you didn't even put up that notable of a fight against him, did you?!" asked Charles.

While those two started to fight about who was more valiant and courageous, Alain, Matthew, and Bohemond were talking about what to do in the capital once they had the chance. All of their wives and fiancés were in the city waiting for them, so they had planned on having a smaller party where everyone could meet everyone else's significant others. Alain was especially excited, as his three fiancés had all given birth, but he hadn't had a lot of time to spend with his kids.

And as for Leon, he just sat back and enjoyed the atmosphere. The other five, knowing his general demeanor, didn't bother him.

—

"Well, it is disappointing that you didn't win first place in the FTX, but I'd say that Father will have a hard time saying that you dishonored the family," Nicomedes said to Gaius. The two brothers had met back up in Nicomedes' office to discuss what was going to happen to Gaius next, namely his transfer to Prince Octavius' service.

"If all that can be said is that I 'didn't bring dishonor to the family', then I hardly did well enough to be proud, did I?" asked Gaius sullenly. He had fought as hard as he could, all to prove that he deserved to serve and learn from the Second Prince, but in the end, he couldn't surmount the obstacle that was the Snow Lions.

"Well, if you need some cheering up, Father said that he'd be stopping in Calabria for a day or so on his way north. The impression he gave me in his letter was that he would broach the topic of formally requesting Valeria be married to you while he was there," Nicomedes said in an attempt to cheer his brother up.

Instead, Gaius barely reacted. He only closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair.

After several long seconds of silence, Gaius finally said, "That... isn't necessary."

"What?" Nicomedes asked in confusion. "I thought you were crazy about that girl. I seem to remember you declaring—multiple times, even—that you would one day make her your wife. What changed?"

Gaius sighed, then said, "Those were the foolish dreams of a child. She doesn't love me. Or even like me, I think. Best to set that dream aside until I can earn it. *If* I can earn it."

Gaius' frankness rendered his older brother speechless. He'd never seen Gaius so resigned or lacking in confidence.

"By the way, you can send this back to Father," Gaius continued as he placed the bracer he'd been given on Nicomedes' desk.

"You didn't use it?" Nicomedes asked when he picked it up and examined it.

"Of course I didn't. If I did use it, and won, then it would've been Father who'd given me the win. If I lost with it, then it would've only been my punishment for cheating."

"Using outside equipment isn't cheating," Nicomedes replied.

"I would consider using the magic of someone not in the Academy to be cheating," Gaius answered, staring Nicomedes in the eye. "You said it yourself, my squireship under the Second Prince will be nothing but a cover for taking me as a hostage. But, it's still squiring for someone of royal blood; I only wanted to earn my place of honor. Instead, all I earned was a place as a hostage."

Nicomedes had no idea how to comfort his brother, and in the silence that followed, he didn't get the chance. Gaius rose to his feet, said his goodbyes, and left without waiting for his brother's response.

As he sat there alone, Nicomedes thought hard about what he could do, if anything. It probably wouldn't help Gaius much, but he had an initial idea, at least.

The FTX had been over for only two days, but already the Academy was swarmed with requests from hundreds of respected knights in the capital for squires. Most were for the trainees in the Snow Lions—the requests for Castor and Alphonsus alone were almost more than the other third-tier trainees combined. Leon didn't receive as many, probably due to his last name being 'Ursus', but he still received a great many requests.

And Nicomedes immediately threw away all of the requests for Leon. Then, he turned his attention to a detailed map on his wall with every Legion fort and fortress clearly marked.

'The Central Territories are too good for this barbarian who's caused my brother so much grief,' Nicomedes thought with a vicious smile. *'I'll send him to a place he can disappear in. Somewhere on the Eastern frontier perhaps? No, too much opportunity to face stone giants and gain merits in battle. Ah, I know! Yes, that's the perfect place for a northern barbarian...'*

—

"Straighten yourself up, Lu!" a young blonde noblewoman scolded. If Leon could see her, he would recognize her as Victoria, one of the squires who had accompanied Roland to the Northern Vales. The man she was scolding was Luke, Roland's squire, who had also accompanied the Paladin north.

"My clothes are fine!" Luke said glancing down at his sharp green military uniform. There wasn't a single golden ornament decorating his chest, giving him an attractive clean aesthetic.

"Fine?!" Victoria said scornfully. "You have dirt here and here! And your pants have wrinkles! No self-respecting knight has wrinkly pants!"

While Victoria pointed out the flaws in his uniform, Luke glanced over at hers, desperate to find some faults that he could point in her own dress uniform to distract her from his, but try as he might, he couldn't find a single flaw. He wasn't too surprised, as Victoria was the daughter of a Count in the Western Territories, so she knew exactly how to dress. In fact, her green uniform was much fancier than his, with golden trim and several medals and ribbons she had won during her time in Dame Sheira's service—medals and ribbons that he, too, had won, but had simply chosen not to wear. Such things weren't required, he figured, so he didn't want to bother putting them on.

The two knights accompanying them watched in amusement as Victoria took on the duty of personally fixing Luke's uniform, supervising him as he smoothened and brushed the dust off his pants.

"You two sure make a cute couple," the lady knight said. As soon as she said this, both Victoria and Luke went bright red, shut their mouths, and slightly shifted away from each other, pointedly looking in opposite directions.

She was Sheira Evensen, the knight Victoria had served for the past two years. The other knight was none other than the sixth Paladin of the Bull Kingdom, Sir Roland. Both had come to knight their newly-turned third-tier squires in the Knight Academy's graduation ceremony. Luke and Victoria had served both of them for the required minimum of two years and ascended to the third-tier, so the Academy's graduation requirements had been met.

"You shouldn't have teased them!" Roland said with a playful smile. "Now look at them, too embarrassed to speak!"

Both Roland and Dame Sheira burst out into laughter, further embarrassing their two squires.

"So," Dame Sheira said, moving them along and giving the squires some time to collect themselves, "what's the schedule like?"

"You don't know?" Roland asked.

"I only glanced at the schedule they sent out," Dame Sheira said with a shrug and an unapologetic smile.

Roland sighed, then said, "First comes the opening ceremonies. Honoring the Ancestors and the Sacred Bull and all that. Next comes the ceremony for the people who've just completed their training cycle and are about to go off to their own squireships. Then comes the knighting ceremony for graduating squires."

"Is that it?" Dame Sheira asked, her eyes already indicating that she was bored with the ceremony.

"For us, yes. Or at least, I have no intention of staying after the knighting ceremonies are over," Roland replied.

"Good," Dame Sheira said with a smile, "because neither do I."

—

The ceremony honoring the trainees who completed their training cycle was being held at the same place the enrollment test took place. An enormous stage had been assembled, with thousands of seats surrounding it, enough for all the families of the hundreds of trainees.

The trainees themselves had been gathered together into one of the three surrounding buildings to wait for the ceremony to begin. They had rehearsed it the day before, so they knew exactly what they had to do.

"It's about time," said Castor after checking the clock on the wall.

"We've still got ten minutes or so left, no need to be so impatient," Alphonsus said as Castor started making his way to the door. As the victorious unit, the Snow Lions would be placed right in the center of the stage, with all the other units off to the sides. All the knights in attendance would get a good look at them, especially at the three young men who led the unit.

Consequently, Castor was quite nervous, constantly checking and rechecking his brand new uniform and running through the entire ceremony in his head.

Finally, the thirty Instructors arrived and wrangled together the units to prepare to march out to the field, with the Snow Lions leading the way.

Leon breathed deeply, to quiet his own nerves. He wasn't that thrilled at being placed in the center of attention, barely more than ten steps to the left of the Legate himself, but he didn't have much of a choice in the matter; as one of the leading members of the Snow Lions, his place was at the head of his unit.

After a few more minutes of waiting where they could hear the distant roar of the Legate speaking into a voice amplifying stone, the training battalion began its march.

"... and these are the most promising young officers that will be the future of our Royal Legions!" the Legate said as soon as the battalion entered view, to which the entire watching crowd erupted into cheers.

The trainees were almost overwhelmed at the sight of over ten thousand cheering and waving family members, and all of them scanned the multitude of faces for their own loved ones. Leon found himself

scanning through the faces as well, if only to satisfy his own curiosity. He certainly wasn't looking for anyone in particular, though he did have a slight hope that Elise was in the crowd. He hadn't gotten a chance to talk to her since before the FTX, but he had made sure to tell her when the ceremony would be held.

But then, mere seconds after he started looking at the spectators, he saw something that almost made his blood freeze: sitting in the front row, in a place of honor, was the Paladin Roland.

Chapter 129: Old Acquaintances

Leon nearly stopped walking right in the middle of the marching formation, but fortunately for him, the next rank of second-tier Snow Lions was right behind him, pushing him onward. But, even though he kept moving, his brain felt like it had locked up. He didn't quite manage to process Roland's presence until he was already on the stage, standing next to Castor and Alphonsus next to the Legate.

Leon glanced back at the Paladin, hoping that against all odds, Roland hadn't seen him yet. And, it seemed like his hopes weren't unfounded, as Roland was staring at the Legate rather than him. But then, Leon's field of view widened a little to see the woman sitting next to Roland, a woman he recognized as well: Dame Sheira.

Leon didn't hear a single word of the Legate's speech, he was so nervous. He thought back on all the suspicions he had about Roland, about how it wasn't unlikely that Adrianos Isynos had been acting on the Paladin's orders rather than those of the noble house he had left. If that were the case, then the one who had ordered Artorias killed was either Roland himself, or connected to him.

The time when he and the rest of the Snow Lions could leave the stage couldn't come fast enough for him.

—

After honoring the training cycle's top unit, the knighting of the year's graduating squires commenced. Alongside Luke and Victoria, more than eight hundred other squires had managed to fulfill the Knight Academy's strict graduation requirements. All of these squires assembled into a loose formation upon the stage, while the knights they served tapped them on the shoulders with their swords. Then, the squires made their oaths, affirming their loyalties to the crown and to the common people.

The entire ceremony, from the beginning speeches, through the honoring of the Snow Lions and the other units, to the knighting ceremony, was over in less than an hour. It was a short, to-the-point affair, which Roland greatly appreciated. He had no love for the pomp and circumstance of most ceremonies that involved nobility, and the knighting ceremony was almost always one of the longest, being one of the most important.

But, the ceremony finally came to an end and Roland, Sheira, and the two newly-made knights, Sir Luke and Dame Victoria, made their way off the field.

"Hmm," Sheira mumbled.

"What's up?" Roland asked curiously.

“... Did you happen to get a good look at the third-tier mages who were leading the unit on stage?” Sheira inquired.

“Not really,” Roland stated, “I wasn’t paying that much attention to really look at them.”

“Well, one of them looked familiar, but I couldn’t quite figure out why,” Sheira said.

“Huh,” Roland said. In his duties as a Paladin, he met far more people than he cared to remember, so seeing someone who was somewhat familiar without being able to clearly remember them wasn’t that notable of an event. Consequently, he didn’t give the matter much thought. Sheira, too, didn’t spend too long thinking it over, as seeing Leon wasn’t that interesting for her.

This reaction might have been understandable and come as a relief to Leon if he knew about it, seeing as Roland and his knights had far more interaction with Artorias than they ever did with him, but he didn’t know about it. As a result, he ended ditching the Snow Lions after the ceremony had ended. It was customary—though not required—for the trainees to stick around and mingle with their families and the important knights who turned out to see the ceremony, but Leon wanted no part in that. Instead, he decided to get out of the public eye and make his way back to the Snow Lions’ tower.

However, he didn’t expect that Roland and his comrades had the same idea. This ended up with him walking less than a hundred feet ahead of Roland’s group, none the wiser about their close presence behind him.

“I’m finally a knight!” Luke said with a tone that suggested he never thought the day would come.

“Well then you should dress like one,” Victoria said, glancing at the uniform he wore with a scornful smile. Luke’s uniform was only made from cotton, while hers had been made with some of the silkgrass she had brought back from the Northern Vales.

“I *am* dressed like a knight, without any of those gaudy baubles that the overly proud or childish like to cover themselves in,” Luke responded with a mockingly derisive smile at Victoria, who pouted and punched him in the shoulder—though without putting much strength behind it.

As their good-natured bickering continued, Luke happened to glance ahead of them a ways, and noticed one of the trainees who had just made it through their training cycle. He didn’t think much of it at first, but only a few seconds later, a loud drunk was thrown out of a nearby restaurant, drawing the attention of everyone around, including both Luke and the trainee. Luke only gave the drunk a quick glance, then turned his eyes forward again, only to freeze in place from shock.

“Is... is that...” he whispered, but Leon—whose face he had just seen and recognized—had already turned back to facing ahead of himself, so Luke didn’t get a second look.

“What’s wrong?” asked Victoria. Sheira and Roland had both stopped behind Luke and were giving him curious looks while waiting for his response.

“I could have sworn I just saw Leon!” Luke answered.

“... Who?” asked Roland after it became clear that Luke wasn’t going to explain any further of his own accord.

“The son of that ‘Wraith’ guy from the Northern Vales we met last year! The man who guided us to the Heartwood Amber!”

Roland, remembering exactly who Luke was talking about, immediately whipped his head around and examined the crowd ahead of them, but Leon had already disappeared into the throngs of passing pedestrians. After more than a year with the far more nutritious food in the Bull Kingdom changing his body shape as well as his diligent training changing his aura, Leon had become unrecognizable enough that Roland wasn’t able to find him with only a quick cursory look at the surrounding crowds.

“Are you sure?” the Paladin asked Luke.

“Positive,” Luke answered.

Roland frowned. He was one of the few that knew Artorias’ true identity as one of the last survivors of House Raime. If his son had come south, Roland wanted to know about it and keep an eye on the young man. To that end, he quickly surged forward through the crowd, easily parting the throngs of people in his way with his sixth-tier strength, while projecting his magical senses.

But, he didn’t find Leon.

“I saw him, I know I did!” Luke insisted once Roland returned and mentioned his lack of findings.

“I believe you,” Roland said. He didn’t believe that Luke would deliberately lie, but he also didn’t think Luke was infallible.

“Do you remember what he was wearing?” asked Sheira.

“A dress uniform, just like us!”

“Really...” Roland mused. “Well then that should make things easy. Given the time frame, he would’ve just completed a training cycle at the Knight Academy, though I don’t know why he’d be down this far south. Regardless, I can just check the list of trainees that are about to head off for their squireships. He should be easy to find, assuming that was him.”

“I swear, it was him!” Luke insisted again.

“And like I said, I believe you,” Roland reminded.

As soon as Roland returned to his home later that evening, he dug out the list of trainees that the Knight Academy sent out to advertise to knights who might be looking for squires. He scanned the document several times, but he found no mention of any trainee named Leon in the first or second-tier. He did, however, find one ‘Leon Ursus’ listed as one of the third-tier Snow Lions.

‘Looks like I might have to pay a visit to the Knight Academy tomorrow morning,’ he thought.

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“Quiet down, all of you!” shouted the Snow Lions’ Senior Instructor. “I get that you’re all happy that you’ve passed in first place, but we’ve still got some business to deal with!”

“But we’ve already turned in all of our armor and training equipment, what else is there?” asked one particularly dull first-tier trainee.

“We have to announce where you will all serve as squires!” the Senior Instructor reminded, instantly quieting everyone down. They had come first in the FTX, so they were sure to get choice squireships. Most were hoping for somewhere in the mild and pleasant Central Territories, or the warm and luxurious Western Territories.

“Well, then let’s just jump right into it!” the Senior Instructor said as he started flipping through the hundred sheets of paper he had brought with him.

“Castor!” he said, handing Castor the sheet on top. Alphonsus was next, and then came Leon.

The papers were short memos that contained orders of where to report and when to report in by. Castor had to stifle a cry of joy as he had been taken as a squire by one of the Legates leading a Legion within the capital, an incredibly prestigious post. Likewise, Alphonsus was elated at his orders to squire for another Legate in command of a Legion about fifty miles south; not quite as prestigious as Castor’s squireship, but still more than enough to take pride in.

All throughout the Snow Lions’ tower, the young trainees were invariably overjoyed at their squireships, though there was some disappointment since only a small handful were staying in the Central Territories or were being sent to the Western Territories. In fact, most of the Snow Lions were going east, scattered around the largest and most important Legion strongholds of the Eastern Territories squiring for Legates and Tribunes. The East wasn’t nearly as attractive as the West, given how significantly less populated it was, but they could consider their future careers in the Royal Legions to be extraordinarily bright with these squireships.

The only exception to this jubilation was Leon. The location of his squireship wasn’t specified in any way he could understand on the paper, and neither was the knight he’d serve under. All that was listed under the location was somewhere in the Northern Territories called ‘Fort 127’, a place that Leon had never heard of before, though its remarkably generic name didn’t inspire much joy in him.

While the rest of the unit was celebrating, Leon approached the Senior Instructor and asked, “Sir, where exactly is this ‘Fort 127’, and why isn’t the knight I’m going to serve listed?”

“I’m not sure,” the Senior Instructor admitted. “I was assured that all the paperwork for you is in order, though, so you’re going to join a Legion caravan heading to the Northern Territories in a couple weeks. When you get to the largest fortress along the Naga River in the North, you’ll probably be given further instructions.”

“Thank you, Sir...” Leon said hesitantly. He couldn’t help but feel that something was wrong, despite the Senior Instructor’s claim that everything was fine.

“Leon!” Charles called out from the crowd, distracting him from his clearly unusual posting. “Come on, we’re going to head into town tomorrow to celebrate! You in?”

Charles threw his arm around Leon’s shoulders and pulled him into the circle of himself, Henry, Alain, Matthew, and Bohemond.

“Don’t flake out on us, this time!” Henry said in a mock-threatening voice. “These next few days are probably going to be the last time all of us are together—at least, for a long time.”

Leon smiled at the expectant eyes all around him. There wasn't much else for him to do over the next few weeks, so he agreed fairly quickly. But, he also thought of Elise. With this squireship, he'd be leaving the capital for two years at the very least, and he still hadn't spoken much with her about their relationship.

And, he got the bad feeling that if he were to leave without having that conversation, he and Elise would never be anything more than friends, if even that. So, he vowed to himself that he'd clear things up before leaving. He had to, otherwise he knew he'd always regret it.

Chapter 130: Lion Armor

Leon spent most of the following morning with Charles and the others. He had quite a bit of fun running around the capital talking about nothing in particular and looking for good food. But, in the end, he had other business to take care of. They still had more than a week to spend in the capital before they had to leave for their squireships, so there was time enough to hang out later.

Instead, Leon felt that he to take care of something that he had been putting off, that being to clarify his relationship with Elise. So, he made the excuse that he had to pick up the armor he'd commissioned from Heaven's Eye—which wasn't actually a lie, his armor was likely done after more than four months—and left the others after lunch.

Over the entire walk to the Heaven's Eye Tower, Leon couldn't help but stress over what he would say. His anxiety grew until it felt like his heart was in his throat and his hands had started shaking. But, he clenched his teeth and kept walking. He couldn't let a little nervousness stop him, not when he was about to leave the city for years.

Finally, after hundreds of agonizing steps, Leon found himself walking into the Heaven's Eye Tower. Elise wasn't there, but he only had to wait about ten minutes for her to arrive and make her way over to him with a glowing smile.

"Leon! I'm glad you finally stopped by, these past two months have been so boring without you! I didn't even have Valeria or Asiya here to help me deal with the boredom!" she said as she wrapped her arms around him in an intimate hug.

"It's good to see you, Elise," Leon warmly responded while returning the hug.

"So what brings you here today?" she asked. Then, she continued with her eyes mischievously narrowed, "Assuming you're not just here to see me..."

"Well," Leon answered with a smile, "Seeing you is actually the main reason I came here."

Elise's face lit up in happiness, while a hint of red came to her cheeks. "Here I am," she said.

"And you look amazing. Even just catching a glimpse of you makes coming here worthwhile," Leon praised.

That was a little much for Elise, who averted her eyes in embarrassment and brought her hand up to her face in as seductive a manner as she could in order to try and hide both her bashful smile and her rapidly reddening cheeks. In fact, she was so embarrassed and happy from Leon's compliments that she barely

even thought about how uncharacteristic it was of him to say so much. He'd certainly complimented her before, but never so unprompted or for more than a few neutral and dispassionate words.

Had it been anyone else who complimented like that, Elise would've simply laughed it off and proceeded with her business, but since it was Leon, she froze up. It took Leon saying, "I'm also here to check up on the armor I commissioned a few months ago," to bring her back to reality. With nothing more than a radiant smile, she took his arm and led him to the magic lifts.

The trip to the specific blacksmith Leon had commissioned was enough for Elise to recover her composure, though she still almost felt like skipping to the blacksmith's forge, such was her joy.

[Hey, that wasn't half-bad,] Xaphan said to Leon on the way.

[Thanks,] Leon responded, though he was barely able to hear the demon over the sound of his own frantic heartbeat. He hadn't planned on saying what he did, but he was glad it seemed to work out.

[Keep that up and you might walk away from this Tower with a girl who is unambiguously your girlfriend,] Xaphan continued.

[That's the plan. Just have to jump right in, don't think so hard, and all that,] Leon said, though it was more to hype himself up than to respond to Xaphan.

[That is the way to do it. Don't overthink things, just be yourself,] Xaphan encouraged.

When Leon and Elise arrived at the smith's forge, the blacksmith Leon had commissioned recognized him.

"Ah! Ya' must be here about your armor!" he said. When Leon nodded, the smith whispered a few things to one of his apprentices, who ran off to the nearby room where all the finished products were secured.

"I only just finished your order up a couple weeks ago! Came out lookin' real good, if you ask me," the smith continued. "Although, are ya' sure you don't want me to get some enchantments on the sucker? It took a lot of my time, I'd hate to see it fail in the face of a single enchanted blade..."

"No, thank you. I can take care of the enchantments myself," Leon said confidently.

"Suit yourself," the smith replied.

When Leon placed his order for the armor months before, he had specifically ordered it without enchantments. He only wanted the armor itself, as he intended to personally enchant it with all the knowledge he'd gained over the past year from the Knight Academy, Xaphan, and the books he'd brought from his family's archives in Teira.

Several moments later, the assistant returned with a large wooden box. He placed the box upon a table, unlatched it, then stepped back, allowing Leon to open it himself.

Leon approached the box with some trepidation. He had spent a lot of his money on ordering this armor to be made despite the armors' lack of enchantments, over seven hundred thousand silvers, and he was incredibly nervous about how it turned out. Even if it wasn't what he wanted, even if it looked terrible

or ridiculous, he wasn't sure if he would be able to convince himself to order another armor set to be made, given the price.

He slowly opened the box. It had been lined with black cushions to keep everything inside clean and free of any unsightly blemishes. As he laid his eyes on the armor within, he couldn't help but smile. At least visually, it was everything he had asked for: simple, and lacking in ostentatious decoration.

"The metal used is Magmic Steel, refined by fire mages from Mount Kazan in the Sakura Archipelago far to the east," the smith began. "It can hold any fire enchantments you can envision. And *only* fire enchantments; Magmic Steel isn't the most versatile material..."

"It's fine," Leon said as he ran his finger over the greaves, bracers, and cuirass. All were made of the same dull black metal. The armor itself resembled the standard equipment of a soldier in the Royal Legions, but the leather skirt was replaced with metal plates covering the legs, and the torso had added protection for the upper arms which would normally lack anything aside from light cloth gambeson.

The helmet, too, was different, with a closed off faceplate that left two slits for him to see out of. The forehead slightly protruded to keep the sun out of his eyes while he wore it, and there was a pair of stylized wings attached to the sides, like extended ears. The wings were the only consideration Leon made for aesthetics over practical design.

Additionally, the Magmic Steel cuirass had a slight impression of a heavily muscled torso, with a stylized silver lion decorating the center of the chest.

"How about the suit beneath the metal?" Leon asked, running his hands along the dark grey clothing meant to be worn under the armor, and the sashes for over the armor.

"Woven from several layers of Skyflax and the attached leather straps came from a mutated bull strong in lightning magic. The beast could've been a second Sacred Bull if I'm being honest, but its life was cut short by the Royal Legions at only the sixth-tier, one shy of potentially gaining sentience," the smith explained.

"Was the bull grey?" Elise asked with her eyes narrowing in suspicion. She doubted that any animal with lightning powers would be grey.

"No, my lady, it was bright gold, but the Skyflax was grey. I only dyed the completed clothing dark grey to compliment the armor plates, to match the leather strips to the flax, and to comply with Good Sir Leon's request for a more toned down design. Dark grey is far less ornate than gold, is it not?"

"It's fine," Leon said with a satisfied smile. He agreed with the smith that wearing that amount of gold would've been far too much, and since dying it grey wouldn't compromise the defensive strength of either the Skyflax or the leather, Leon was glad the smith had made that decision.

He shut the box and the deal was concluded. Leon had already paid for the armor when he commissioned it, so he and Elise turned around and made their way back to the magic lift.

"So..." Leon hesitantly began. He knew this would probably be his last chance to have any kind of meaningful conversation with Elise, so he steeled himself and jumped right in after a moment of silence. "Are you busy right now?"

"No, why?" Elise asked with a smile.

"I was wondering if we could talk somewhere private."

"Sure," Elise said, her smile flickering a little as they took the magic lift up to a private room rather than back down to the lounge.

"So, what's up?" Elise asked once they had closed the door and took their seats.

Again, Leon hesitated before beginning. His face grew red and he struggled to maintain his usual stoicism, with his face twisting out of embarrassment and anxiety.

"I... What do... What do you think about me?" he finally asked. He had to look away from her to choke out the words, but once they were out he turned his eyes back to hers.

"... What do you mean?" she inquired. She did a far better job than he did keeping a neutral expression, but inside her heart was racing. She was just as anxious about what Leon was asking as he was.

"We've gotten... close... over this past year. I just wanted to know where we stood. I-In no uncertain terms. Unambiguously."

"A-Ah," she said. She certainly liked Leon a lot, perhaps to the point of love, but she hesitated to say so out loud.

"Maybe it wasn't the best thing for me to ask you first," Leon said after seeing her hesitation. "Springing this on you out of the blue isn't quite fair. So, how about I start?"

Leon took a deep breath, then turned his body to face Elise. His eyes locked onto hers, and now that it was time for absolute seriousness, he managed to control his face to convey just how serious he was.

"I like you. I think I might love you. I want you to be my woman, just as I want to be your man."

He let that statement hang in the air. He had struggled mightily to muster the courage to admit it, so he understood her freezing up. After a long silence, his heart sank. He smiled sadly at her, taking her silence as evidence that she wasn't as serious about him as he was about her.

"I'm being sent north for my squireship, so we likely won't see each other for a couple years... I just wanted to get that out th-"

As Leon said this, Elise's heart nearly stopped. *'He's leaving?!'* she thought in a panic; she'd been confident that he'd get a squireship in the Central Territories, not far from the capital. Before he could finish his last sentence, she stopped hesitating. She leaned forward and cut him off with a kiss.

The kiss was fast and juvenile, done on instinct. It was all lip, in stark contrast to what Elise's mother had taught her about tongue-kissing. But, it did the job and effectively shut Leon up.

After parting with Leon, Elise leaned in even further, wrapping her arms around Leon's neck and pulling him in closer; he had pulled away from her out of surprise. Then, she whispered into his ear, "I like you too, Leon. A lot."

Once she said this, her mother's lessons came flooding back to her. She kissed Leon again before he could respond, which surprised him into inaction. But, that inaction didn't last long; not even half a second passed after Elise's tongue had entered his mouth before he began to respond in kind.

Their hands drifted all over each other's bodies. Leon's found their way to Elise's waist, then upward to her ample chest, while her hands did likewise, traveling all over his toned abs and well-built pecs. Eventually, both wrapped their arms around the other and pulled themselves in as close as they could feasibly to each other without being naked.

And Elise seemed quite willing to fix that last problem, as she mounted Leon and began pulling at his clothes. However, in the course of trying to take off his shirt, they had to stop kissing, and as soon as their lips separated, they each leaned back for a moment to stare at the other. Their gazes were feverish, and both of their faces were bright red from the rush of their confession and their subsequent actions.

Then, Elise got to work again trying to pull Leon's shirt over his head.

"Are we really going to do this here?" Leon asked in surprise and confusion.

"You said it yourself," Elise responded breathlessly, "We're not going to see each other again for two years, at least. I just told you how I feel, and I'm not going to wait that long to *show* you."

"I'm all for action over words, but are we really going to do this *here*?" Leon asked again.

Elise stopped and looked around. Their setting was hardly romantic. There was comfortable furniture, to be sure, but the private room was still one designed for financial transactions and was consequently cold and devoid of many personal comforts.

"You're right," she finally said. Then, she rose and shot him a look more seductive than any she had ever previously shown him, even during their initial meeting.

"Come with me," she continued, then she sashayed toward the door. Leon wasted no time jumping to his feet and eagerly following her.