

Storm King 131

Chapter 131: Intimacy

Before Leon and Elise left the private room in the Heaven's Eye Tower, they had to take a few minutes to fix themselves up a little. Their clothes were a mess from their mutual groping, and their faces were flushed from both the embarrassment of their confessions and the excitement of their subsequent actions. Once they had smoothed out their clothes and calmed down a little, the two wasted no more time and left the room, with Elise taking Leon's arm and impatiently steering him toward the lift.

To Leon, it seemed like Elise had reverted back to her extremely flirty behavior from the first time they met, as she was pressing her body into his and taking advantage of being arm-in-arm to take his hand and bring it up to her breasts. However, unlike when they met in Teira, Leon wasn't so embarrassed and awkward that he froze up. Rather, he eagerly responded, with Elise not having to put in much strength to move his hand.

However, before Leon could move on from her waist and hips, the magic lift arrived at the ground floor.

"Where are we going?" Leon asked as he made sure he picked up his armor box from the floor of the lift—his armor had cost far too much for him to ever leave it behind, even with Elise all over him.

"Around to the back," Elise said as she led Leon away from the front door. There was a back door that she led Leon to that opened into a luxurious garden filled with all kinds of plants and flowers of both the magical and mundane variety, but neither of them stopped long enough to really take in the sight. Instead, Elise almost pulled Leon through the garden to a palatial estate just on the other side.

Elise didn't stop once they had entered the estate; she led Leon through more than a dozen hallways and courtyards until they had reached a private wing. This was Elise's personal quarters, with her bathroom, lounges, private library, and of course, her bedroom, the latter of which Leon was brought to.

Once they finally entered Elise's bedroom, she slammed the door shut and threw herself at Leon, sealing his lips with her own so quickly that he didn't even have time to look around. She was so forceful, in fact, that Leon's back was almost pressed up against the door. Leon quickly embraced Elise, wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her in closer.

After more than a minute, the two separated and Elise led Leon by the hand straight to her bed. As she went, she kicked off her shoes and started loosening the silk straps of her dress with her free hand. Leon followed suit, removing his shoes and letting go of Elise's hand long enough to take off his shirt. Both of them were increasingly nervous in inverse proportion to how clothed they were, but they tried to cover those feelings by moving so fast that they didn't have time to hesitate.

Before long, Elise had removed her dress, and Leon had lost his shirt and pants, revealing to each other almost their entire bodies. Only a few tiny articles of clothing remained.

Still, they parted for a moment to drink in the sight of each other's bodies. Leon was captivated by Elise's abundant chest, slim waist, and toned thighs. Elise, meanwhile, admired Leon's built muscles. When she had first seen him, he was fit to be sure, but quite skinny; his life spent hunting and training had made him lean and dense, leaving him with little 'show' muscle and even less fat. After a year eating

the far more nutritious food in the south, though, Leon had filled out considerably, and Elise was immensely pleased with what she saw.

Needless to say, both of them were more than ready to continue. They quickly stripped down completely, and Elise laid down on her bed while Leon crawled over on top of her. For another few seconds, they didn't do anything more than kiss; they were so enraptured with each other and caught up in the moment that they completely forgot what they had been taught about the opposite sex. Everything Elise's mother had taught her disappeared in their passion, as did what Leon had picked up from Charles and Alain.

But, both were so ready and excited that foreplay was hardly necessary. Instead, after more kissing and mutual groping, they got right down to business.

As with his previous actions up to that point, Leon moved quickly to avoid any hesitation. His heart beat furiously, but he channeled all of his anxiety into action. He felt that if he didn't, his nervousness would soften him and end things before he'd finished.

As it was the first time for the both, neither lasted more than a minute or so, but after a few moments of silence in the wake of their first experience, they were ready to go for round two.

Round two lasted much longer, and they both relaxed enough to remember a few simple moves that brought each to a simultaneous climax. And, with another few minutes of rest, they went right for round three.

For the first two rounds, Leon had been on top, but with the third, Elise pushed him down and mounted him. Leon wasn't too upset with this, as it freed up both of his hands to explore her, which she happily encouraged with a dazzling smile. She even brought her own hands up to guide his along the curves of her body.

They were exhausted after the third round, but some magic applied to the proper areas made them good to go for one more time. Elise tried to take charge again, but Leon twisted his body and brought her crashing down onto her mattress, after which he went after her like an animal.

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When Leon and Elise were finally finished, they lay in each other's arms breathing heavily and sweating only a little.

"So, how was that for 'no uncertain terms'? I wasn't too ambiguous, was I?" Elise asked as she snuggled even closer to Leon and rested her head on his shoulder.

"No, you were *very* clear," Leon responded, gently squeezing her into his arms with a smile.

"Ooh! You're not going for *another*, are you?" she asked with a surprised chuckle. "I'm down for it, but I need some rest..."

"I think I'm done for the time being," Leon responded. "You've quite exhausted me."

"Was I that good?" Elise asked teasingly.

"You were," Leon affirmed, as he smiled again and gently pressed his forehead into hers.

"That's good to hear. You were wonderful as well," she said as she drew closer for a kiss. Then, as she pulled away, she said, "But, there's still some room for improvement..."

"Well do tell, my lady, how can I satisfy you better?" Leon asked with a laugh.

"Hmmm, we're going to need a lot of practice, when do you leave the city?" she inquired.

"Two weeks from now, I'll be taking a Legion galley northward," he answered.

"Where are you going and who are you squiring for?" Elise asked.

"... I don't know yet," Leon replied.

"You don't know? How can you not know?!"

"They didn't give me any specifics. All I know is that I have to report to the citadel in Cyrene in the Northern Territories, and I'll get further instructions about where I'm going from there."

"That's an odd way to go about things," Elise said with a frown.

"I thought so too, especially given that everyone else knows exactly who they're going to be squiring for. I asked about it, but I was assured that despite its oddity, all my paperwork is in order, so... yeah. I guess I'll see when I get to Cyrene."

"You just be sure to send me a letter or something, I want to know where you're going to be," Elise sternly ordered.

"You got it," Leon said.

"Good. Now, where are you going to stay for the next two weeks?" Elise asked.

"Probably an inn somewhere. I need to get out of the Academy dorms by the end of tomorrow, so I'll be looking for a place when I leave here."

"You should just stay here. That way, we'll have plenty of time for that practice I mentioned," Elise suggested with a lustful smile.

"... Works for me," Leon answered, matching her smile with one of his own. "With that settled, I should probably go get my stuff."

"Do you need any help? I can have some of the servants here accompany you to carry your things if you need it..."

"No I-" Leon began, before he remembered the large pile of silver coins he had yet to take care of. At that point, the pile had grown to over eighty thousand coins; he'd have to make four or five trips to transport just the coins to the Heaven's Eye Tower.

"Actually, yes I could use some help," Leon said. He explained the situation to Elise, who, after intently watching Leon get dressed, quickly followed suit before organizing half a dozen servants to carry Leon's silver coins to the Tower. At the same time, Leon packed all of his things and left the Snow Lions tower behind. He had more clothing than he did when he moved in, so he needed more than just the one pack he had originally, but he made it work.

Leon wasn't too worried about seeing his friends again, as he knew where they were staying, and he could stop by to say goodbye whenever he wanted to. So, he happily returned to Elise's estate with all of his stuff packed and everything else taken care of.

"Took you long enough," Elise playfully chastised when Leon finally returned to her rooms. The servant who guided him respectfully bowed and left.

"I think I did that rather quickly, though," Leon said as he put all of his things down in the corner, as out of the way as he could.

"Well, I guess we're just going to have to work on your speed, then," Elise said as she sat down on her bed and gave Leon a suggestive smile. Leon smiled back and moved to join her, pulling his clothes off as he went.

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"So, why a lion?" Elise asked as she admired Leon's new armor, with the stylized silver lion on the chest drawing most of her attention.

"Apart from my name?" Leon jokingly asked. "I was placed in the Snow Lions unit when in training, and the biggest beast I've ever brought down was an actual snow lion in the Vales. Plus, I like lions."

"But I would've figured you'd have taken some kind of bird motif," Elise said. For a moment, Leon was a little confused, until he remembered that Elise knew his real identity; she had been there when Ajax, the Heaven's Eye Tower Lord in Teira identified him.

"I did," Leon said, indicating the wings off his helmet. Such decorations were so commonplace that Elise hardly even noticed until Leon pointed it out.

"Hmmm," Elise hummed. A long silence followed, until she turned to Leon with a serious expression and asked, "Why did it take you so long to make a move on me?"

Leon matched her serious expression and said, "Do you remember how strongly you came onto me when we first met? You made me second-guess your later actions, because if you would be so forward with someone you just met, then how could your subsequent displays of affection mean anything?"

Elise frowned at the realization. She had been following her mother's teachings to make Leon hers as soon as she saw his power and his gold card, but her behavior toned down considerably when she learned more about him and how such forwardness might drive him away. Then, she started to actually like him, far more than just the initial attraction to power that she had to begin with.

But, it seemed that her forwardness had the unintended side-effect of making Leon insecure in their relationship until they finally confessed to each other. Elise clenched her teeth in frustration. Her mother had taught her that those techniques were guaranteed to make any man fall for her, but instead, they had nearly made it so that Leon left without speaking with her.

She was going to have some words with her mother later, but for now she turned back to Leon and said, "Well I'm glad you finally made your move. I was getting a little tired of always taking the lead..."

"Well, you don't have to worry about that anymore. I'm certainly intending to be more proactive than I have been," Leon said as he rose from the bed and embraced Elise.

“We’ve only got two weeks until you leave,” she said sadly. She then pushed herself deeper into his arms and continued, “We should make the most of this brief time...”

Chapter 132: Decimius

While Leon and Elise were confirming their relationship, Tiberias had an important meeting to attend. He was to be the squire for the Legate of the Twelfth Legion, which was stationed in the Western Territories conveniently close to the Duchy of Aurelianorum, which his father ruled. In celebration of his completion of the Knight Academy’s training cycle, both Tiberias’ father and the Legate Tiberias would soon squire for had arrived in the capital and were staying in the Duke of Aurelianorum’s private estate.

“Ah, Tiberias! It’s good to see you, boy! You’ve grown quite a bit!” shouted the Legate as soon as he saw Tiberias. He was an immense man, over seven feet tall and built like a brick wall.

“It’s good to see you, too, Lord Aurius,” Tiberias said, giving the Legate a polite greeting. “I’ll be in your care for the next couple years, I hope you’ll forgive and correct any incompetence on my part.”

“Nonsense! No son of House Decimius could ever be so terrible in the knightly ways as to be incompetent, especially not the son of Euphemius!” the Legate boomed as he clapped the shoulder of the slight and unassuming man beside him, who was the patriarch of House Decimius and the Duke of Aurelianorum.

“Father,” Tiberias said in greeting, to which Euphemius Decimius gruffly and silently nodded back.

Despite his reserved nature and modest stature, Duke Decimius was easily one of the five most powerful people in the entire Bull Kingdom. In fact, his power was eclipsed only the Duke of Nicaea, the capital city’s Tower Lord, and the Bull King himself. His lands were vast, his personal army was mighty, and his wealth was tremendous.

And it wasn’t enough. He had the reputation for being a fair, kind, and pleasant man, one who was content with what he had, but he was a man of great ambition. His reputation was earned through calculated deeds done specifically to cultivate the renown needed to mask his secret power plays.

“Come, let’s find a place to sit down; the hallway is no place for a proper greeting,” Duke Decimius said.

The three men went to an octagonal patio in the expansive estate’s gardens surrounded by tall trees and colorful flowers. Each side of the patio had a marble arch that supported a small dome, and within each archway were white silk curtains that had been subtly enchanted to prevent noise from escaping when all were drawn. It was the perfect place not only to receive distinguished guests, but also to have conversations that the Duke didn’t want overheard, a feature the Duke frequently made use of.

“So, Tiberias, how did you find the Knight Academy?” asked Aurius once the three had taken their seats.

“It was an invaluable experience,” Tiberias replied.

“It still couldn’t have been that challenging, though, given the skills I’ve seen you use,” said Aurius.

“There was plenty of challenge,” Tiberias countered, “my unit managed to hold on to our banner for the entire training cycle despite everything we were faced with. One unit, the Snow Lions, managed to acquire nine of the other banners at one point, then left to hide out in the mountains. Three other units ventured out to lay siege to their camp, while the other five dedicated themselves to trying to seize my

banner. My Black Vipers had to hold out against the combined efforts of *five* other company-sized units for almost two months!”

“I find it impressive you were able to hold out for so long without losing,” Euphemius praised, showing his son a rare smile before brushing his long pitch-black hair out of his matching eyes and returning to his usual noble stoicism.

“Indeed. I’ve heard it only takes two to three times as many soldiers to take a fortified location, assuming a realistic level of fortification. To hold against five times as many means you must truly be gifted,” Aurius said. It was in his interest to praise the Duke’s son, so he didn’t hesitate to do so, but he cut it short before it became too excessive. However, he didn’t realize that his statement also betrayed his lack of practical military experience.

“To receive such praise from the man I will serve for the next two years is an honor,” Tiberias responded, putting on a courteous smile as he did to try and cover up his contempt.

The conversation continued on like this for another ten minutes, with Tiberias explaining some event of the training cycle and having Aurius praise him for it. But, the Legate couldn’t stay long, so he only stayed for another couple of minutes to discuss the details for him and Tiberias to head west in several days. Once he was gone and the father-son pair were left alone, Duke Decimius’ expression darkened.

“An imbecilic man,” he growled, his sunken eyes subtly glaring at the back of the Legate as he made his way out of the garden.

“If he’s so lacking in brains, why did you send me to squire for him?” Tiberias asked with bitterness creeping into his voice. He’d heard that the Second Prince and two Paladins were requesting squires, and given his social rank, he’d expected to be sent to one of those three. Instead, Gaius was sent to the Prince and he was being given to a lowly Legate.

“The Twelfth Legion is close enough to our borders that it pays to have them on our side. Plus, you’ll be there for every important meeting that Legate has. You can be our eyes within the Legion, and once you gain rank and power, you can sway the soldiers in the Legion to be more sympathetic to our family.”

“Would it not have been more advantageous to have me squire for a higher-ranked officer, though? A Paladin, or even one of the Consuls would’ve sufficed.”

“Probably. Hard to say for certain. The actual benefits of having you serve a Paladin is debatable, and none of the seven Consuls are headquartered near our lands. The Twelfth Legion, on the other hand, is thus more valuable, and more easily influenced. And we need that influence, given what’s coming.”

“What do you mean?” Tiberias stared at his father, whose sharp features took on a pensive expression. He was clearly debating with himself whether to let Tiberias in on what he was thinking.

Eventually, he decided for it, and explained, “The Bull King is in a coma.”

“What?!” Tiberias almost shouted. The Bull King had been in seclusion as far as most anyone knew, and it was generally taken as a given that it was to observe how his sons handled real power. Most in the nobility assumed that the Bull King still ruled by issuing orders through the Bronze and Penitent Paladins, and that it was only a matter of time before he emerged and selected either Prince Octavius or Prince August for the rank of Crown Prince, thus designating them as his heir.

The implications of the Bull King not only not being in control of the kingdom but also so severely enfeebled were not lost on Tiberias.

“So, if he dies without designating an heir...” he began.

“... Then the kingdom will likely plunge into civil war upon his death, which is looking more likely by the day,” Duke Decimius finished. “Prince Octavius has already visited me, asking me for support. He believes that Prince August will try to seize the throne once the Bull King dies, so Prince Octavius has been raising support in the Western and Southern Territories.”

“What did you tell him?” Tiberias asked.

“I eventually pledged my support to him. He’s *going* to be the next king, no doubt in my mind, so pledging support early on will yield great benefits to the family, in addition to the rights His Highness plans on returning to the nobility.” Duke Decimius allowed his passive expression to slip for a moment, revealing a hungry look that only Tiberias and his younger sisters had ever seen. Tiberias knew from that look alone that his father was planning on exploiting that favor he accrued with Prince Octavius to acquire more land and titles at the very least. After all, there are always huge shake-ups in the noble classes after civil wars, and once they won, any nobles who might support Prince August would undoubtedly be purged and vast tracts of confiscated land and their accompanying noble titles would be open for the taking.

“Then for now, I should be working on bringing the Twelfth Legion over to Prince Octavius’ side, to further our rewards?” Tiberias inquired with a devious smile.

“Yes, but I also want you to focus on keeping Aurius out of our lands. He’s been having his soldiers patrolling far too close to the border between our duchy and the royal demesne, and it’s been making it quite difficult to grow Silverleaf. Even if we don’t particularly need the income it brings in, I still enjoy having the extra silver in our treasury that growing it provides.”

“I’ll do what I can. I’ll only be a squire, though, so don’t expect instant results,” Tiberias said calmly. Growing Silverleaf was incredibly illegal, as it was the primary ingredient in Gray Dust, a drug that could increase the potency of wind magic, though at the cost of severe mental damage with repeated use. If their family was caught growing it, their punishment would be fines heavy enough to ruin them. They’d probably be forced to sell off land and other properties, assuming the Royal Family didn’t cut out the middleman and directly seize their land.

Knowing this, Tiberias didn’t resolve to prevent the growth of Silverleaf; rather, he resolved to keep the Twelfth Legion from ever finding out. That would be easier after being knighted and becoming an officer in said Legion, but as Aurius’ squire he’d still have some borrowed authority to use.

“One of these days,” Duke Decimius began, but he immediately cut himself off. He was in as private a place as he could be, with no one but his own son around, but he still let his guard down enough to almost utter words that would send him directly to the headsman’s block if they ever got out.

“One of these days... what?” Tiberias asked curiously.

“Never mind,” the Duke replied.

'One of these days, I'll be a king in my own right, just as my ancestors were! I won't be enslaved to these calves, to these descendants of a dead beast!' he finished in his mind.

"Anyway," he said, changing the subject, "is there anything you want to tell me, anything that you couldn't mention in front of Aurius that you need taking care of?"

"Why yes there is," Tiberias said with a vicious smile. His father had given him a leading question, but Tiberias had already insinuated that there was something he needed taking care of when he last sent a letter to Duke Decimius.

"Well, I brought a couple of our Shadow Guards, I'm sure they can handle any tasks you give them," the Duke said, mirroring Tiberias' sadistic look.

"Well, this particular task ought to be fairly easy. There's a third-tier mage, a Valeman by the name of Leon Ursus, that crawled his way south. He then joined the Knight Academy and has been doing nothing but offend everyone's nobility with every fetid breath he's taken. So, it's time to stop him from breathing."

"That's not a good enough reason. Simply being an annoyance wouldn't cause you to send out assassins after the boy."

Tiberias leaned back in his chair, smiling. Then, as if right on cue, a cloud cast a shadow over his face as he began to emit killing intent.

"That vulgar savage dared to lay on hand on what's *mine*! I would have him strung up by his entrails if I could!"

"HAHAHA! That's my boy!" the Duke laughed uproariously. "Just remember..."

"Discretion?"

"Discretion. We have a reputation to maintain, and it must *not* be tarnished. Act with dignity, act with nobility, and, above all, don't be caught when you don't."

"I remember, Father. I'll make sure this cretin's death won't be traced back to us. My own personal gratification comes second to the advancement of the family."

"So long as you understand that, then everything's alright."

With everything said that they wanted to say, the two rose from their seats and left the patio to go about the rest of their business. The Duke had meetings, meals, and parties to attend with many of the other nobles whose children had either been in the Knight Academy with Tiberias or were about to join the following training cycle. Tiberias, meanwhile, decided to spend some time in the Heaven's Eye Tower, with the hope that he would be able to spend some time with Elise.

He would end up disappointed, though, because Elise was far too busy spending her day in bed with Leon to go to the Heaven's Eye Tower.

Chapter 133: Departure

It was a titanic effort to rise out of bed the morning after Leon and Elise's first night together, and it weren't for his insistence on not missing a single day of training, Leon wouldn't have bothered to try. Elise pouted a little when her attempts to get him to stick around for a little while longer failed, but Leon was still intent on gaining enough power to find whoever had attacked his family and gain his vengeance.

Plus, he could feel himself growing closer to the edge of the fourth-tier, and promise of gaining magical strength was too attractive to ignore. His thoughts were noticeably faster than they were only a year before, and his control of magic had reached such a degree that he could almost start practicing some of his family's magical techniques. Every time he tried to start, however, his magic would always fly out of his control before he could complete the steps a technique required.

While Leon trained, Elise contented herself with watching him for a while. It was exciting watching him practice his fighting skills, but when he sat down to meditate and flood his body with magic it grew much more tedious. Consequently, Elise then began her own training. She didn't practice fighting skills, but she kept herself fit with various other kinds of physical exercise—usually dancing.

Physical condition was an important part in advancing through the magical tiers, as mana can't circulate through an unfit body nearly so well as a fit one. So, Elise may have been a little unhappy that Leon left her bed to train, but she understood the necessity of it and didn't slack off in her own training. She still made Leon pay by taking a bath with her, though he hardly considered that a punishment.

When they left Elise's bath—without bothering to put their clothes back on—they returned to her bedroom where they found that the estate's servants had swapped out her dirty sheets for clean ones, which the two young mages immediately went about dirtying.

Across the estate in another private wing, Elise's mother, Emilie, watched her daughter with a smile on her lips. She didn't watch for long, but she was just so excited that Elise had finally found herself a partner that she couldn't help but take a quick peek. Emilie was a little disappointed that it wasn't one of the young men she had picked out for her daughter, though.

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Leon and Elise couldn't spend the last two weeks Leon had in the capital in Elise's bedroom, though they certainly tried. After three days, Leon had to leave to spend some time with and say goodbye to Charles, Henry, and Alain, so Elise went to her private garden. That was where Leon found her when he returned four hours later.

Elise had personally planted and grown every plant and flower in her garden, and every single one had flourished under her careful attention. This left the garden in a state of extreme beauty, so awash with color that when Leon walked through the door into it, he almost felt like he had been transported back to the Forest of Black and White.

Leaning over a planting bed a couple dozen feet away he saw Elise, dressed in drab brown pants and a tight matching shirt, with her bright red hair pulled back in a loose bun. She was so enthralled with what she was doing, staring at a tiny sprout barely poking above the soil with her emerald eyes narrowed and her lips pursed in thought, that she didn't notice him enter. Leon smiled and silently snuck up on her, then wrapped his arms around her waist from behind and pulled her into a hug.

“I’m back,” he whispered into her ear. She had been surprised when his arms suddenly appeared and enveloped her, but as soon as she heard his voice she relaxed and leaned back into Leon’s chest.

“It’s about time,” she said with a cute pout.

“So what are you doing, that you’re too distracted to notice someone’s arrival?” Leon asked with a smile.

Elise responded with a wide smile of her own, and eagerly explained, “I’m trying to get this medicinal herb to grow here. It’s called Meligaent’s Obsession, after Meligaent the Fair-Minded’s fixation on proving its existence.”

“Seems like he succeeded,” Leon commented.

“He didn’t. Someone else did, a decade after Meligaent’s death. Anyway, it supposedly has extreme healing capabilities, to the point of being capable of regenerating lost limbs!” Elise passionately said.

“Is that true?” Leon asked with an amazed look.

“I... don’t know,” Elise admitted. “I bought the seed for almost half a million silvers five months ago, but the thing has only grown this much.” She indicated the tiny sprout not even an inch long in her garden.

Elise continued, “I’ve been trying find a nature spell that will help to accelerate the herb’s growth, but nothing has worked so far...”

“Mind if I have a look?” Leon asked. Nature magic was just a specialized use of earth, light, and water enchantments, so he figured he could provide some small help to Elise. Unfortunately, when Elise showed him the nature enchantment she had been working on, Leon didn’t have anything to say. The complexity of the enchantments and the way the runes spiraled into each other were beyond anything he had learned over the past year.

“Oh well,” Elise said good-naturedly when Leon admitted he couldn’t make heads or tails of the enchantment, “that can wait, the herb isn’t in any danger of dying—it’s just not *growing*! I can come back to it. In the meantime...” A wicked grin appeared on her face and she turned around in Leon’s arms and kissed him.

“Come with me,” she said after separating. Over the next hour, she led Leon around her garden, showing him all the fruit of her labors. There were over a hundred different plants in her garden, each with a specific alchemical use from simple healing to extreme combustion, from aiding relaxation to inducing a state of hyper-awareness. Her garden was truly diverse, with extraordinarily expensive plants and flowers from all over Aeterna, and her grasp of nature magic greatly aided her efforts to help them thrive.

“That was incredibly impressive,” Leon said when the tour was over, and they began walking back to Elise’s bedroom hand-in-hand.

“A plant will grow if you stick it in the ground and give it enough water, generally speaking, so what I’ve done isn’t that great,” Elise said with a grateful chuckle. “Instead, what I want to do is to splice some of those plants together with nature magic, to combine or amplify their effects!”

“That can be done?” Leon asked in wonder. Elise was revealing to him that his knowledge of nature magic was truly lacking. He figured it was probably because he had been focusing almost exclusively on fire and lightning in his studies, as opposed to the elements crucial for plant manipulation.

“It can,” Elise affirmed.

The two continued their discussion of plants, alchemy, and nature magic for another few minutes until they arrived at Elise’s bedroom. They immediately threw off all of their clothes and jumped onto the bed. They had loved each other for months, and it was only their anxiety about confession that prevented their relationship from advancing. Now that it had, they were making up not only for those months they had lost, but also for the two years they were about to lose with Leon leaving the capital.

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That night, as both Elise and Leon were lying in bed, Elise turned over to Leon and, after resting her arms on his chest and her chin on her arms, she asked, “Can I ask you something?”

Leon opened his eyes and with a smile of amusement at Elise asking if she could ask something, he nodded.

“Why did you sign up at the Knight Academy? Did you just want to be a knight or join the Royal Legions that badly?”

Leon’s smile faltered a little.

“The reasons why aren’t happy...” he said quietly.

“You can tell me, can’t you?” Elise inquired.

“I...” Leon hesitantly began. Elise’s eyes were bright and comforting, and Leon certainly trusted her, but it was also a sensitive topic for him. He’d never spoken about these things to anyone else after he’d had the time to fully process everything. Torfinn knew, but Leon was still in shock when he told the Brown Bear chief, and Xaphan knew, but the connection between him and Leon made talking—even about sensitive matters—quite easy.

“My father always told me stories about knights as I was growing up. I fantasized a lot about being one. Now that I’m a little older, I had the opportunity to fulfill those fantasies, while also working towards another goal.”

“What other goal is that?” Elise asked curiously.

Leon hesitated again, but he knew that Elise was aware that Artorias had died, so he took a deep breath and said, “I want to find those who killed my father. To do that, I need to gain both political rank and magical power. I can do both of those things in the Royal Legions, though it will take a while before I can start in earnest.”

“... What about your mother?” Elise asked after a moment of thought.

Her question threw Leon for a loop. He hadn’t put much thought into what happened with Serana, despite naming her in his Mana Glyph.

“... I want to find her too... But, I never knew her. It’s hard to be emotional about someone I’ve never met. On an intellectual level, knowing the reasons *why* I’ve never seen her makes me angry, but as for my feelings about my mother herself, I’ve never known her, and I could probably go the rest of my life without our meeting.

“That being said, I’ve decided that I want to find her as well, if only to satisfy my own curiosity. Though, the details behind her disappearance make me think that might not be possible...”

“Why do you say that?”

Leon averted his eyes from Elise. He hesitated for a third time, but this time was a little different. He had no real fear of talking about what his father had relayed to him about Serana, but the look of utter grief on his father’s face was still vivid in Leon’s mind. Remembering that sight made Leon shut his mouth, but when he looked back to his girlfriend, smiling at him and waiting patiently for his answer, he couldn’t stay silent.

He slowly, with several hesitant pauses, told her what Artorias told him had happened, about Ryker and Fain, about the men who attacked the villa, and about how Serana was taken away by her cousins. When he was done, Elise was stunned into silence. She had no idea how to respond.

Finally, she said, “Thank you for trusting me with this information, my love.”

“Anything for you,” Leon whispered back to her.

“Well, if you mean *anything*...” she said suggestively as she got on top of him. She traced the center of his chest with her finger, then leaned down to whisper into his ear, “There is *something* I want to ask...”

“Wh-what is it?” Leon asked, stuttering a little over his words from both the residual anger he had when remembering Artorias’ death, and from arousal at Elise’s actions.

“What you said you wanted from the Royal Legions—magical strength and political power—can both be gained in Heaven’s Eye, too. Why don’t you join us? You’ll be well compensated for time, and we’d help you find your enemies...”

“That’s... certainly a tempting offer,” Leon answered with a thoughtful look.

Elise smiled at him in response and pushed away the sheets covering their lower halves, making sure that Leon could see all of her.

“... And only getting more tempting all the time,” Leon said as he put his hands on Elise’s hips.

“However, I’m going to have to decline. For now, at least.”

“For now’?”

“I don’t want to be dependent on you, just as I’m sure you wouldn’t want to be dependent on me. So, for the time being, I’ll stay with the Royal Legions. If your offer stands in a few years, then I think I’d find it a lot harder to decline again.”

“How many years are ‘a few’?”

“My father said that most people stay with the Legions for ten years, though that doesn’t include knights...”

“That’s only a traditional time limit. You could technically quit right now if you wanted...”

“I only just joined, I’d rather stay a little longer than a single year in the Knight Academy,” Leon said. Elise wasn’t happy with his decision, but she was at least content. So, to change topics, she began to move her hips on top of Leon, eliciting moans of pleasure from both.

—

The day Leon had to leave came quickly, far quicker than either he or Elise wanted. Charles, Henry, Alain, and all the other Snow Lions had already left for their posts in the Eastern and Central Territories. In fact, apart from a few other select trainees who had been sent to serve knights in the capital, Leon was the only member of his training cycle still in the city.

Those select few other members included Valeria and Asiya, who had been assigned to the Princess’ Guard, a subunit of the Bull King’s Praetorian Guard. The ladies who were assigned to this unit had the job of protecting the wives, concubines, daughters, and other young female relatives of the reigning Bull King. Because of that duty, the unit was entirely made up of noblewomen—which also meant they typically didn’t have the number of members as they needed. Every second and third-tier noblewoman who went through the Knight Academy was assigned to this unit.

As for Leon, he still had no idea where he was going other than some fort in the Northern Territories. He had to make his way down to the military port on the central lake and take a galley that was heading north along the Naga River. He would be joined by over two hundred other men of the Royal Legion, but they would stop at Cyrene whereas he would merely be stopping long enough to get some directions to Fort 127, wherever that was.

Elise walked with him down to the port. Unlike the previous two weeks, Leon tried to keep a certain distance from her, as he was still uncomfortable with public displays of affection. Elise, however, wasn’t so bothered by them, so she clung to his arm and gave him a hug and a kiss at the gates to the Legion port. The gates were as far as she could go.

“Two years, then you come back to me. You will *not* stay in the Northern Territories!” she whispered into Leon’s ear. For his part, Leon had all but frozen in embarrassment from the looks people were giving the two of them, but he managed to smile and nod.

“Good,” Elise continued, “and don’t forget to write to me once you reach your destination. I want to know where you are...”

“I’ll make sure to do that,” Leon replied.

With that, the two of them said their goodbyes and Leon turned to enter the Legion port while Elise started making her way back to her family’s estate. As she walked, the gentle smile she had with Leon disappeared, to be replaced with a noble seriousness that masked the profound sense of loss that Leon’s departure filled her with.

‘Two years,’ she thought to herself. ‘Two years, and he’ll be back...’

She decided to throw herself into her work with nature magic as well as her personal training. She was at the edge of the third-tier, she could feel it, so she at least felt confident that she could pass the time until Leon returned.

Chapter 134: The Galley

The galley Leon had to take north was slow and cramped. Two hundred fresh soldiers were being taken to Cyrene, a fortress city in the royal demesne situated along the Naga River, and they were packed into the hold as tightly as possible; they had to share space with dozens of the galley's crew members, too. Leon, however, as both a third-tier mage and someone associated with the Knight Academy, was given a tiny cabin all to himself that was separated from the main hold.

Leon was grateful for the small amount of privacy this afforded him, but it still did little to mitigate the unpleasantness of the journey. This was the first time he had ever been on a ship of any size, and even on the calm waters of the Naga River, the galley rocked and shook enough to make him feel nauseous. As an irritating addition, the galley was old and made disquieting creaking noises that kept Leon on edge for the entire first day—he knew the ship was fine, but he still had an irrational fear that every creak meant the ship was about to sink.

Consequently, Leon spent most of the next day on the deck, where he could get plenty of fresh air and he could easily swim to the riverbank if the need arose.

“Ugggh, I hate boats. *Fuck boats,*” he quietly groaned as he leaned over the edge of the galley's railing. He hadn't vomited since he was a young child, but he felt closer to breaking that streak than he had in years.

[You're certainly having fun,] said Xaphan amusedly.

[Shush, demon, I don't want to hear it from someone that doesn't have to experience it...]

[Well, alright then. I *was* going to tell you a little trick to dealing with motion sickness, but I guess I'll just 'shush' now.]

[... Please tell me...] Leon asked quietly.

[That's a hell of an apology. Truly, you are the picture of repentance. A symbol of penitence and purity for all the world to marvel at,] Xaphan said, his words dripping with as much sarcasm as he could pack into them.

[I'm sorry, partner. I shouldn't have snapped at you. Please tell me the secret to surviving this nightmare!]

[That's better. I've heard better, but it's a far sight better than it was.]

While Xaphan was speaking, Leon felt his stomach churn and saliva fill his mouth. He was about to chunder, he could feel it.

[Just circulate your mana around your stomach. Do it slowly, like one revolution every two seconds,] Xaphan quickly said.

Leon immediately did as Xaphan said and, apart from a few little chunks, managed to hold in his breakfast.

[Hey, proud of you,] the demon said with a hint of mockery. [Now, have your magic power ‘massage’ your stomach. You should start feeling better in a few minutes...]

After a few minutes of silence, color started to return to Leon’s face and his strength returned to his jittery legs.

[This is overwhelmingly awful,] he moaned.

[That particular technique helps you to hold onto your food, but if you perform the same technique around your ears, then it ought to help your issues with nausea and balance,] Xaphan stated.

As Leon tried out the technique, circulating his mana and magic power around his ear canals, he rapidly recovered.

After a few deep breaths, he said, [Thank you, Xaphan. That helps immensely.]

[No problem. I can hardly be associated with someone who empties his stomach from such light travel.]

[Where did you learn these techniques, anyway?]

[This tub’s swaying is *nothing*; a demon’s summoning ritual, from the demon’s perspective at least, is a thousand times worse, and it can last for up to an hour. So, there have been techniques invented to assist with the accompanying nausea, and as a Lord of Flame, these techniques have naturally fallen into my hands.]

[A ‘Lord of Flame’, huh? You know, I’ve heard you mention that title before, but you’ve never really explained what exactly it means.]

[What do you think it means?]

[That you’re good at fire? I don’t know, that’s why I’m asking you!]

There was a long few moments of silence while Xaphan thought of a response. Finally, he decided to be as impersonal as possible. He didn’t want to talk about his own Lordship, but he could at least answer Leon’s question.

[... In demon society, there are seven Princes, one for each magical element. They are invariably the strongest demons in existence, and each Prince is acknowledged to be the most powerful in their respective element. A Lord, meanwhile, is one that is appointed by a Prince, and there are up to seven per element at a time,] Xaphan explained.

[Are there any power requirements to being made a Lord?] Leon asked.

[Not *technically*, but it is considered poor form to elevate someone considered weak or undeserving of the title, even though the ritual that accompanies the title’s bestowment grants the demon in question all the power of a Lord.]

[So demons have a ritual that can grant power? How does it work?]

[With a *lot* of blood sacrifices,] Xaphan said. Leon could hear the disgust in his voice plain as day.

[Oh...]

[Fortunately, I earned my Lordship through strength, the Prince of Flame had no need to bestow such tainted power upon me.]

[About that, is there some reason that you don't like blood sacrifices?]

[Why, young mage, are you considering sacrificing to me? Aren't you afraid of turning into some blood-crazed vampire?]

[I am not considering that, I'm just curious!]

[Well, it's probably the same reason you wouldn't want to rely upon my power. To receive a blood sacrifice is to take someone else's power into yourself. For a demon, this isn't so bad; we can make that power into our own easily enough. However, I would never consider that strength to be my own. I want to gain my own power using my own means, not by relying upon the worship and sacrifices of fanatical mages.]

[Makes sense to me,] Leon responded.

As the two were talking, Leon finally fully fought off the effects of his motion sickness, and as a result, he remembered just how little he had eaten that morning and the day before. He had been running almost entirely on the breakfast he had eaten with Elise before setting out, as he didn't think he'd have been able to hold down a large lunch or dinner. However, with Xaphan's technique in hand, Leon figured he was now able to keep food down. Consequently, he made for the mess hall, a tiny and crowded room where sea rations were handed out.

Leon wasn't given any rations that were different than the rest of the soldiers aboard, despite his status, so he had to content himself with a bit of stew and a few pieces of bread. As he was eating, he attracted quite a few stares. He was the young mage who was of sufficient rank to be afforded his own cabin, after all.

As he was eating, Xaphan said with a wary tone, [Hey, Leon... Do you-]

[Yes, I can feel it,] Leon responded. There was an undercurrent of killing intent in the air. No one else in the mess hall was sensitive or powerful enough to pick up on it—or at least, no one else seemed to care. But Leon certainly cared, as the killing intent seemed to be directed toward him.

Leon continued to eat, but he surreptitiously took a few more minutes than he needed to, so he could look around. There were about fifty soldiers in the mess hall, and there were more than a few who seemed to be staring at him. Too many, in fact, for him to really identify who was emitting the killing intent at him, especially since none of them seemed to be staring intently enough to be suspicious.

With that in mind, Leon hurriedly finished after a few more minutes and quickly made his way back to his cabin. He didn't want to be wandering around the galley with someone who clearly wanted to do him harm walking around as well.

When he returned to the cabin, he immediately started putting on his armor. It would take him about fifteen minutes to do so by himself, and that would be infinitely too long if someone were to try and

attack him during the night. Once he'd donned everything save for his helmet and gauntlets, he started checking the rest of his gear, namely his weapons. His family's sword was at his hip, as always, so he really only needed to check his bow. Fortunately, nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

[After you're done checking your stuff, maybe look around and see if someone was in here while you were on deck,] Xaphan suggested.

[You think someone might have broken in?] Leon asked.

[You never know, and it pays to be both thorough and cautious.]

[Good point.]

Leon didn't have that much stuff and the cabin was barely large enough for his bed and a small desk, so it didn't take long to search. He found no sign of any break-ins, or that anyone had been in the cabin while he was gone.

[That's only *slightly* comforting,] Xaphan mumbled.

[Indeed,] agreed Leon. He quickly made sure his cabin door was locked, then continued, [I'm going to get some shut-eye right now. I have a bad feeling that I'll be in for a long night...]

[You're probably right about that,] said Xaphan. [My power will be ready, should you have need of it.]

[Hopefully I won't,] Leon replied. He started smiling, despite the shady circumstances he found himself in. After Xaphan's statement, he actually rather hoped someone *would* try and attack him, if only so he could have an excuse to use his demon fire.

—

By midnight, nearly everyone on the galley was asleep. Since it was designed as a riverboat, it only had a single sail. That meant that it was primarily driven with several dozen oars, but with all the oarsmen asleep, the galley had stopped at a tiny port town for the night.

Out of the three hundred or so people on board, all but a dozen were asleep. Those crew members who weren't amounted to a mere eight guards watching the deck. The rest of those awake consisted of Leon waiting patiently in his room, and the three men he was waiting for who were silently creeping through the interior of the galley toward his cabin.

These three didn't say a word. They understood the need to be quiet; they had done this sort of thing far too many times to count. They were former pirates based out of the Serpentine Isles, but the subjugation of the isles by the Bull Kingdom brought an end to their piratical lifestyle. Instead, they became freelance sailors, and took to robbing people who were on the same ship as them.

This time, however, was no robbery. Just before the galley had set out from the capital, they were approached by a man in nondescript clothes who had a lot of money. They had each received ten thousand silver coins and would receive another forty thousand upon the completion of their job. And for that money, all they had to do was kill Leon.

The man had made no stipulations about how to do the deed. There weren't any requests for torture, or to draw out Leon's death; rather, the man simply wanted Leon dead as quickly and cleanly as possible.

As the men were all of the third-tier—despite pretending to only be of the second-tier—they were extraordinarily confident in the imminent completion of their task.

Finally, they reached the end of the passengers' quarters and entered the section of the galley set aside for a dozen private cabins. Here, they stepped even lighter than they had been, as this was where the officers slept. The three cutthroats had faith in their ability to kill a sleeping Leon, but they had no desire to face all the ship's officers at once.

Slowly, silently, they crept up to Leon's door and twisted the handle...

Chapter 135: Blood on the Naga

[They're here,] said Xaphan. It was much easier for him to use his magic senses outside of his body since regaining a small portion of his power, and he made sure to keep an eye out during the night for the men who intended to harm Leon.

Leon looked up from his work. He was fully armored and had been working on the enchantments he intended to place on his armor to pass the time.

[How much time?] he asked Xaphan.

[About five minutes. They're currently sneaking through the halls of the ship, which is slowing them down.]

[Thanks.]

Leon immediately rolled up the spell paper he was writing on and slipped it underneath his bed, right next to the rest of his stuff, then he drew his sword, sat down on the bed facing the door, and waited.

He didn't have to wait long, as Xaphan's estimate was a little off; Leon heard the handle twist ever so slightly. It was just enough that, if Leon were asleep he never would've heard, but the assassins also figured out the door was locked. Then came the muffled clinking of someone with a lockpick getting to work.

[I don't suppose there's the possibility that these people only want to rob me, rather than killing me?] Leon wondered to Xaphan.

[They're far too heavily armed for that, and they passed by all the other cabins on the ship to come straight to yours. There's no way they're not here for violence,] Xaphan answered.

[That's a shame. I thought I might get away with not killing them,] Leon replied, his face twisting into a vicious smile.

[You might want to try to keep one of them alive, assuming that's even feasible,] Xaphan said. [They don't seem particularly powerful, so you shouldn't have any trouble with them, but still, they might pose enough of a threat that you'll have no choice but to kill all of them.]

[I'll see what I can do. It's not like I don't want to know who sent them, after all...]

With a near-silent ping, Leon's door was unlocked. He quietly stood up and slid into a strong offensive position.

On the other side of the door, the man who had been picking the lock shuffled away, then nodded to the assassin in charge. That man then cautiously tapped the third man on the shoulder, telling him to open the door. There had been one time when, as part of a raiding party attacking a noble's transport ship under the last Serpentine King, he had been in this same position. He had opened the door and been almost instantly killed with a wind blade from a fifth-tier mage hiding within the cabin. He'd obviously survived, but the memory still haunted him, so he had someone else open the door.

His caution turned out to be well-founded, because as soon as the door swung inward, Leon lunged forward and skewered the unprepared assassin in the doorway upon his sword, killing him instantly.

The other two assassins were caught completely off-guard; they had assumed that Leon would be sleeping, that he would be easy prey. But, the intense burst of killing intent that now emanated from him showed them exactly how wrong they were.

Leon glanced to the assassins at his right and left. This cursory look was all he needed to decide on his next target, the man to his left. He was a third-tier mage, while the other man's aura was harder to make out, but Leon could still tell he was also of the third-tier. Leon didn't want to be caught in between two assassins, even if one of them seemed far weaker than he was, so he went for the surer kill.

His killing intent nearly paralyzed the weaker assassin from fear, but he was still barely able to raise his dagger to meet Leon's sword. Unfortunately for him, Leon's strength overpowered his own, and Leon's blade was hardly hampered by the cheap dagger the assassin brought to bear. The sword Leon inherited from Artorias sank deep into the assassin's shoulder, not killing him immediately, but it was most certainly a mortal wound if the assassin didn't receive intense healing in the next couple of minutes.

Regardless, the assassin was out of the fight, so Leon spun to face the last man.

The stronger assassin had been so surprised by Leon's actions that he hadn't been able to move at all during Leon's attacks; it had been a long time since he had tried to kill anyone who had the capacity to fight back, after all. However, by the time Leon finished off both of his underlings, the assassin had fought off Leon's killing intent and lunged forward with his dagger.

Leon easily side-stepped and brought his sword down on the assassin's outstretched hand, severing it at the wrist in an instant.

"GRAAHH!" the assassin bellowed in pain, his voice carrying through the entire back section of the galley.

Leon lunged forward and knocked the man to the ground, then with his sword at the assassin's throat, he demanded, "Who are you?! Why did you try to attack me?!"

He expected the rest of the cabin doors to spring open in only a few seconds, at which point the assassin would be taken to the brig and he would lose any chance to interrogate him himself, so he wanted answers right that very second.

However, the assassin remained silent, and the doors remained closed. In fact, Leon couldn't hear a single creak coming from the neighboring cabins, even after the assassin's painful roar.

"Speak, damn you!" Leon demanded again. The assassin opened his mouth to say something, to which Leon leaned forward a little to hear better, but a red rune suddenly illuminate itself on the assassin's

clothes. Recognizing it as a fire rune, Leon immediately took his foot off the assassin and hurried back a few steps, watching as the assassin was engulfed in flame.

The fire didn't spread, fortunately, but the assassin was killed instantly.

[Looks like someone didn't want him to speak,] Xaphan observed.

[I guess this wasn't just a simple robbery after all,] Leon added, the last of his doubts vanishing. A brigand might try to steal from wealthy passengers if they share a ship, but they would never set themselves on fire if caught. That was a terrible way to die, after all, and even though he didn't scream, the assassin's face had contorted in obvious pain as the rune had activated.

[There's still one more...] reminded Xaphan.

Leon turned to the last remaining assassin, the man he had mortally wounded. The man was still alive, but he was unconscious and rapidly bleeding out.

[He won't live long enough for me to question him,] Leon said, noticing that his blade had sliced one of the man's lungs in half. He had no healing spells capable of saving the man's life at that point.

Despite this, another fire rune lit up on both of the fallen assassins' bodies, rendering them nothing but ash in seconds right before Leon's eyes.

Leon sighed, then said, [I doubt they would've had any useful information, anyway. They didn't seem the sort to be anything more than hired thugs...]

[Indeed,] Xaphan agreed.

[Now, then, what in the hell is wrong with the crew?] Leon wondered, glancing around at the rest of the cabins. He didn't hear a single member of the galley's crew stirring, not even the guards up on deck. He was sure they would've heard that commotion and come to investigate, but no one came. Leon still stood alone.

He quickly rose to bang on the nearest door and yell, "HEY! SOMEONE TRIED TO ATTACK ME! SOMEONE HELP!"

But nothing changed; he didn't hear a peep from any of the other cabins.

[Something is very wrong,] Leon said to Xaphan.

[Keep your wits about you, young mage, those who arranged this might still be around...] the demon replied.

—

In an abandoned building just down the street from the port Leon's galley was anchored at, a man waited for news of the assassination. He was the one who had paid the thugs to attack Leon and had gone out of his way to do everything he could to ensure their job was a success. He had bribed the kitchen staff to drug the crew's evening meal—a meal which Leon hadn't eaten—and had surreptitiously carved a few enchantments into the hull only a few hours before to keep everyone asleep. He'd even

tossed a few small pouches of herbs onto the deck that, once the pouch's enchantments activated, knocked out the entire guard detail with sleeping gas.

He was cautious by nature, and the failures in his early career had only made him more so, which was why he had wanted some local thugs to kill Leon rather than do it personally. He had done what he could to guarantee the success of their job, then stepped back to let them commit the actual murder.

Then, once the thugs finished the job, they would've been permanently silenced via the hidden fire enchantments on their clothes. For all intents and purposes, it would've appeared they had killed Leon in the course of robbing him, then disappeared, and the guard detail would've only looked incompetent for letting them escape. It wasn't uncommon for the entire guard shift to fall asleep, after all, as it was unheard of for a ship carrying hundreds of Legion soldiers to be attacked—especially while in port, where the local militia could be called up if need be.

While this man was waiting, the door to the building opened, then seemingly closed by itself a couple seconds later. He didn't bat an eye at the strange sight. Neither did he react when, mere feet in front of him, light bent and wavered, until another man appeared as if from nowhere. This newcomer had in his possession a ring that, when enough magic was channeled into it, turned the wearer almost completely invisible.

The effect wasn't perfect, the man couldn't move quickly or attack anyone while the effect was active without becoming visible, but it still gave him an enormous advantage in his job as a spy.

"Is it done?" the waiting man asked. He had a slightly worried tone as he knew that the thugs would've come to the building if Leon were dead, rather than the spy.

"No. The boy is still alive, and all the cutthroats are dead."

"All of them?" the waiting man asked, wondering if he misheard the newcomer.

"All of them," the newcomer confirmed.

The waiting man sighed. Even though his assassins failed, he couldn't give up.

"What happened?" he inquired. The newcomer quickly filled him in. "Well," he continued, "since everyone else on that boat is still sleeping, we should be able to finish the job. Our target is only a single third-tier mage, after all."

"But, wasn't the whole point of getting those brigands to do the dirty work so we wouldn't have to do it ourselves?" the newcomer asked.

"No, it was so if anything went wrong, we wouldn't implicate the House. We've already sterilized ourselves of—or at least I've sterilized myself of anything incriminating..." the waiting man said, glaring at the newcomer.

"A-as have I!" the newcomer hurriedly answered.

"Good. Then we can move out. We'll get this done and be gone by the time anyone wakes up. It's not like we can return and simply tell the Young Lord that a few thugs failed to kill the boy; he ordered *us* to take care of it, after all."

The waiting man made for the door.

“Wait! I need at least five minutes for my ring to turn me invisible again!”

The waiting man scowled; he wanted to get this done, but he also didn’t want to rush and botch the job. He glared at the newcomer and waited for the man to turn invisible again.

—

[Leon,] began Xaphan.

[What is it?]

[Someone else just boarded the ship. They don’t seem surprised at the unconscious guards, so get ready for a fight.]

[Shit... Thanks for the heads up.]

After dealing with the three assassins, Leon had searched the galley as quickly as he could, and none of the people he came across could be woken. He’d even investigated the deck and found all eight guards unconscious and unresponsive. So, he’d taken to resting in the galley’s small common room in the center of the ship. From there, Xaphan could spread his magic senses over the entire galley, to keep an eye out for anyone who woke up.

But instead, he saw a new interloper.

[Do you have any idea what magical tier they are?] Leon asked.

[Looks like the fourth-tier,] Xaphan said grimly.

‘*Damnit,*’ Leon thought. His face turned grim and he drew his sword again, then moved to the shadows of the lounge and froze, melting into the darkness. The galley wasn’t even close to a forest—Leon’s preferred terrain—but Leon could still make use of some of his hunting skills.

[He’s coming down the main stairs. Hmm, looks like his destination is your room because he’s coming this way...] Xaphan said, keeping Leon updated on the interloper’s movements.

Leon took a few deep, silent breaths.

‘A fourth-tier mage... My surprise attack can’t miss, or else I’ll probably lose once this devolves into a direct fight... I’d definitely need Xaphan’s fire in that case...’

As Leon thought about how he was going to get out of this, the door to the lounge opened without a sound, and Leon saw the interloper. He was dressed all in black, had a drawn dagger, and moved with a grace that suggested a noble upbringing. His footsteps were slow, silent, and measured. His head turned on a swivel, with every detail of his surroundings falling into his view.

But, Leon had hidden in a dark corner behind the door, which gave him a few seconds of time before the man saw him. And Leon wasn’t about to let that advantage go to waste. He lunged forward and stabbed with all of his power, trying to end things in one blow.

“Watch out!” came a shout from seemingly nowhere, and Leon’s sword halted in mid-air. Then, right before his eyes, a second man materialized, with his arm raised and his hand grasped firmly on the blade of Leon’s sword.

Leon’s eyes widened in surprise and he jerked himself back, slicing clean through all of the invisible man’s fingers in the process.

The invisible man grimaced in pain, but he drew a dagger and lunged forward at Leon. The first interloper took this ambush completely in stride; he showed no surprise or hesitation as he wheeled around a table on Leon’s left and tried to flank him.

With one man attacking from the front and one from the side, Leon did the only thing he could do in that situation: he called forth Xaphan’s power. If he did anything else, such as try to block one of the incoming attacks, the other would certainly connect and do catastrophic damage to him. Plus, with the knowledge that the first man was a fourth-tier mage, Leon was already nervous enough to resort to his borrowed demonic power.

Leon raised his left hand to the first interloper and felt a scorching power flowing through his arm. It built up in his palm, then after a split second, exploded outward in a gout of flame that caught the man completely by surprise. The fourth-tier mage tried to stop his attack, but he had been too confident and rushed in to attack Leon; he took the full force of Xaphan’s demon fire and was hurled backward.

Leon didn’t have time to follow through, as he had to block the invisible man’s attack at the same time. However, the invisible man was so taken aback by a third-tier mage wielding elemental magic that his attack lost all power. In fact, he tried to take a few steps back to get out of range of a likely second blast of flame.

He moved quickly, but he didn’t move fast enough; Leon had deflected his first attack and lunged forward to stab him in the chest. The invisible man managed to block with his dagger, but Leon raised his left hand and, to the horror of the invisible man, conjured another burst of fire.

As the demon fire washed over his torso, the man gave a horrifying scream, fell to the ground, and began to writhe in pain. He was desperate to put out the fire, but demon flame wasn’t so easily extinguished.

While he was doing that, Leon turned back to the first man. Despite being hit by the same fire attack, he hadn’t made a sound. His tolerance for pain prevented him from making noise, but nevertheless, the first interloper had already succumbed to the unexpected elemental attack. He was lying motionless on the ground, everything above his navel blackened and only vaguely recognizable as human.

Leon turned back to the invisible man, whose cries of pain had ended startlingly quickly. He, too, was left dead on the floor, his body horribly burned.

Despite both assailants being quite obviously dead, Leon moved forward and gave their corpses a few kicks, just to make sure. Then, as his adrenaline from the brief fight wore off and the pain from using Xaphan’s fire settled in, Leon collapsed backward into the waiting cushions of a nearby couch.

Chapter 136: Cyrene

After taking a few minutes to catch his breath and to press some healing spells onto his left arm, Leon pushed himself back onto his feet. There wasn't much left of the two men who he had just killed with demon fire, but he had to search them regardless.

Fortunately, the demon fire had dissipated mere seconds after its creation, since Leon didn't continuously supply it with magic power—not that he was strong enough to do so. However, it soon became clear that if the two men were carrying anything incriminating, anything that might give a clue as to who they were or why they had made moves against him, then they were probably burned. But, Leon wasn't too regretful. He believed that if he hadn't used the demon fire, then he would've been in a terrible position. Plus, he suspected that neither of the men would've been carrying anything that could identify them or incriminate their boss to begin with.

But, just because Leon didn't find any documents or other identifying materials didn't mean he didn't find anything at all. Both daggers used by the men were fairly generic, though of fine quality. Leon estimated that each would've sold for more than ten thousand silvers, even though they weren't enchanted and lacked ornamentation. However, what really caught his eye wasn't the weaponry; rather, it was a ring on the hand of the man who had been invisible.

After prying it off the man's body, Leon gave it a good look. It was a simple gold band, set with a bright green emerald about half the size of his fingernail. The ring had been obviously enchanted, with the shining gem powering the enchantment, but Leon didn't have the time to fully inspect the runes. Regardless, he felt it was obvious that the ring was what had made the man invisible, and he couldn't help but smile as he slid the ring into his pocket.

Unfortunately, Leon's harvest ended there. Apart from the two daggers and the ring, the men weren't carrying anything of note. They weren't even carrying any money.

[Hmm. They were professional,] Xaphan said. [I doubt local thugs would be so thorough in removing identifying documents and clothing, especially in *this* place...]

[I agree,] Leon said as he glanced out of a window at the tiny harbor town outside. He didn't think that the town had more than a thousand residents, far too small a number to harbor professional assassins—especially not one that was of the fourth-tier.

[Thugs from such a small town wouldn't attack a Legion galley, particularly not one with hundreds of soldiers aboard. And they certainly wouldn't have the capability of putting the entire crew to sleep...] Leon muttered.

[It might be best to dispose of those bodies,] Xaphan suggested.

[Why?] asked Leon. [It's possible a Blood Priest from Lineage Hall could identify them and get the noble House they served in a spot of hot water. Might even be public enough for me to hear about it and learn who sent them.]

[That's something to consider,] admitted Xaphan, [but, any expert in demonology—such as any kind of blood mage—would be able to tell they were killed with demonic flame, which could out you as someone allied with me, a demon.]

Leon frowned. If that were to happen, he'd most certainly be executed without trial.

[So what are you suggesting?] he asked Xaphan.

[Destroy the bodies. Use a little more of my fire, but not so intense.]

Leon sighed. He wanted to know who sent these assassins—so he could add them to the list of people who wanted him dead and deal with them in a permanent fashion when he had the requisite power—but mitigating the risks to himself was far more important. After a few seconds of hesitation, he held out his right hand and conjured a small flame, barely bigger than a large candle, and set about burning the bodies.

Xaphan's dark red demon fire was quite potent, and both bodies disappeared into piles of ash and bone fragments in a few minutes. Leon was left a little drained, as he had to continuously supply his magic power to keep them burning until the job was done, but it wasn't nearly so tiring or damaging as using the fire for combat purposes. Plus, the demon fire wasn't in any danger of spreading without additional supplied power from Leon, which was quite fortunate since he was below deck of a wooden ship—even more so for the sleeping crew and the two hundred soldiers, who wouldn't have been able to evacuate had the ship caught fire.

When he was done, Leon kicked the ash around to try and cover up the obvious signs of a cremated body, which didn't work very well at all. However, he found a broom after a little searching and did a much better job several minutes later, which he repeated for the ash piles of the first three thugs outside of his room.

Finally, he returned to his room and sat down on his bed, exhausted and in pain from the still unhealed burns, for which he immediately broke out a couple more healing spells. With Xaphan keeping an eye out for any more uninvited guests, Leon was able to relax for a little while.

He wasn't quite able to sleep yet, though; he was still riding the high of surviving multiple attempts on his life and he didn't think he'd be getting much, if any, sleep that night. To pass the time, he examined the spoils of his victory once more. He turned both daggers over in his hands a few times, but he didn't discover anything new about them that he'd missed before. Instead, it was the ring he was most fascinated with, and consequently spent the most time examining.

[Hey Xaphan,] Leon began.

[What is it?] asked the demon.

[Have you ever heard of an enchantment that can track objects? Should I be worried about having this ring on me at all?]

[I think you're fine. Tracking enchantments exist, but they take away power from the main enchantment, so they're rarely placed on anything as small and single-purpose as that ring. Plus, they'd take away the limited space upon which to place that main enchantment. At least, that's the way they work in my experience.]

[Thanks,] Leon said. He didn't really think the ring was going to be tracked, but it suddenly occurred to him and he wanted to make sure. With his fears allayed—for the time being, at least—he began his examination in earnest.

The runes making up the enchantment on the ring were so tiny he had to squint if he was to make them out. To help himself, he dug out a few sheets of spell paper and began copying the enchantment down so he could see it without straining his eyes. This also made him vow to himself to redouble his efforts when it came to training; he felt that ascending to the fourth-tier would undoubtedly make his eyesight sharp enough to not have to bother copying down enchantments like that in the future.

It took Leon almost to the crack of dawn to finish copying. Upon being able to sit back and look at the entire enchantment, though, Leon was able to comprehend just a little bit more how far he had to go to truly be considered an enchanter; he couldn't make much of the enchantment other than that the three core runic circles were made up entirely of light runes, which made sense to him.

However, around the same time as he finished his work, the galley's crew began to stir. Leon was actually a little relieved when the ship's alarms started going off, as he had been concerned that some of the sleeping crew wouldn't wake up. But, after an exhaustive search of the ship that kept it in harbor for the entire day, the only Legion soldiers or crew members that were missing or dead were the three thugs who attacked Leon the night before.

Fortunately, no one asked Leon any questions that weren't asked of anyone else, so he wasn't bothered about the matter after the ship got moving again. There were still a couple knights who came aboard the ship to continue the investigation, but without bodies, it didn't go very far. One of the cooks did end up being arrested, but he had no tangible information to give the knights, other than being paid a few thousand silvers to put an herb into the evening meal that put everyone to sleep.

So, Leon eventually arrived in Cyrene two days later. It wasn't that remarkable of a city, with little in the way of things to do; no large parks, no historical monuments, and no arenas. The only thing of note was the enormous citadel in the center of the city, which was so big as to house an entire combat Legion of twenty thousand soldiers, plus another forty thousand soldiers involved in administration and logistics.

Leon's business in Cyrene was with these latter soldiers. After disembarking the galley, Leon followed the other two hundred soldiers who had joined him on the ship and were also in need of station assignments. What followed was a mind-numbing six hours of paperwork, waiting in lines, and enduring odd looks from the people handling his forms. Bring a third-tier mage associated with the Knight Academy may have been enough to get him his own small cabin on the galley, but it wasn't enough to skip the lines.

Compounding issues for him was the general confusion among the Legion bureaucrats about why such a promising young mage was only passing through on his way north. It would have been one thing if he had been sent to Cyrene to squire for the Legate commanding the local Legion, but instead they were to arrange transport for him to go to Fort 127. Many were baffled as to the orders, and Leon had been asked to wait more than once while some of the administrators debated amongst themselves about what to do.

Finally, Leon was called into a small cramped office by a fourth-tier Tribune who ran the processing battalion.

After a long few minutes of silence while the Tribune looked over Leon's orders again and again, looking for any discrepancy he could use to avoid sending Leon where he had to go, the Tribune finally said,

“You must have made some enemies, Ursus. Fort 127 is not exactly a prestigious post. It’s a tiny outpost on the northern frontier, watching over a pass into the Northern Vales.”

“Wouldn’t somewhere like that be an important position?” Leon asked, thinking of Clear Ice Fortress several hundred miles east on the Great Plateau.

“Normally, it would be. However, the land the outpost is built on is in the Whitefield County. The local Count and his ancestors have been incredibly stubborn with the Bull King’s attempts to secure the northern passes, saying that the Royal Family’s requests to build a fortress at the mouth of the pass is meant solely to station thousands of Royal soldiers in his lands for the purposes of extortion. The Royal Legions are only allowed to send five hundred soldiers, essentially a half-strength battalion, into the area, and even then, we’ve only been allowed to build a single wall.”

Leon frowned. If what this Tribune was saying was true, then he had been assigned to what was quite possibly the worst possible place, a fort so out of the way that he’d never gain the combat experience or political rank he had signed up for at the Knight Academy. He tried to keep an open mind, but if the posting was truly that bad, he figured he’d quit before his squireship was over and return to the capital to take Elise up on her offer to join Heaven’s Eye.

Eventually, the Tribune had to sigh and give up, putting Leon’s orders down. He could find no fault or loophole to exploit to keep Leon in Cyrene. For the time being, he had to send Leon off to Fort 127, but he certainly intended to take the matter up with the Legate in command of the citadel later. He figured that a seventeen-year-old third-tier mage from the Knight Academy was far too valuable to waste on some backwater fort, politics and noble machinations be damned.

Leon wasn’t aware of this, though, and he rode out of Cyrene on a large pony—the only mount that could be spared—with a first-tier mage acting as his escort. Neither of them spoke much over the following four-day journey, and the escort had to turn back at the last Legion posthouse on the ‘road’—more like a narrow dirt path on a barren rocky plain—and take Leon’s pony as well.

Leon was forced to walk the remaining twenty-four miles to Fort 127, alone and on foot.

Chapter 137: Fort 127

Traveling between Cyrene and Fort 127 was long and boring, but it gave Leon more time to experiment with his new ring and to study its enchantment—especially after his escort returned to Cyrene with his pony. It took him a couple days to actually put the ring on, as he used that time to study the copied enchantment and ensure there weren’t going to be any magical shenanigans with him using a piece of magical gear he pillaged from a fallen enemy.

After two days of not finding anything, he finally put the ring on and held his breath. Nothing happened, so what few minutes of rest he managed to get over the next few days were devoted to experimentation. He couldn’t wait to test out the limits of the ring, as he could think of a great many uses for even limited invisibility.

Through this experimentation, he found a few limitations the ring had. First, he needed five minutes of channeling his magic power into the ring before the invisibility enchantment would work. After that, it required a relatively enormous amount of magic power to continue functioning; he wouldn’t be using the ring for very long, or at least, not until he gained a couple more tiers.

Secondly, and perhaps far more importantly, he couldn't come into contact with anything magical he wasn't already in contact with when the enchantment activated. This meant that though he could still hold his sword while invisible, if it wasn't on his person when he activated the ring and he grabbed it, he would become visible again. In fact, doing such a thing was exactly how he came to the discovery in the first place.

Taking this discovery further, he guessed that even a casual brush against the clothes of another mage—even if they were only of the first-tier—would be enough to break the effect. If he were to try to use the ring for combat purposes, he would need to activate it before the fight began, and then he'd only have one surprise attack before he'd be revealed.

Still, Leon smiled when he thought of the possibilities. If he were to be chased or attacked, he could simply disappear. If he ever needed to spy on someone, he had the perfect tool for the job. And, with his heavily hunting-dependent background, Leon knew the advantages of gaining the first hit in a fight, especially if that attack were to come as a surprise.

But, for all the use he could envision the ring having, it was still just a distraction for Leon on the road to Fort 127. He doubted he would find much use for it in a backwater Legion fort, but like Xaphan's fire, it was still a useful and comforting tool to have in his wheelhouse should he ever have an unexpected need for it. Thus, after his escort left, Leon started the habit of wearing the ring at all times—but underneath a glove. He didn't want to draw any unnecessary attention with the shiny gold band and the bright, lustrous, and prominent emerald set into it.

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Finally, Leon arrived at Fort 127 in the early afternoon, five days after leaving Cyrene. When he saw it for the first time, he was hardly impressed. The 'fort' consisted of a single wall, not even twenty feet tall, behind which were dozens of tents, and only three single-story wooden structures.

The wall was made of heavy timber and reinforced with enchanted stone. It stretched over two miles of hills, completely blocking the gap between two of the largest mountains in the entire Frozen Mountain Range. The gap the fort was meant to protect formed a pathway north, into the wilder and significantly more violent world of the Valemen.

Leon sighed, then proceeded onward. The fort had few actual fortifications apart from the one wall and accompanying towers, but it did have a small checkpoint on the road just in case someone came along. Leon didn't think people often came along, because he saw the two sentries on duty hurriedly get up from the table they had been playing cards at and take their positions, glaring at him menacingly.

Leon hardly felt threatened by a pair of first-tier soldiers and glared right back. Besides, given that it took them until he had almost walked past them to notice his arrival, he didn't think they would pose much of a threat even if they were stronger.

"Who the fuck are you?!" one of them rudely demanded. The other didn't say a word, he only cautiously took a defensive stance and slightly raised his spear.

"I'm a new transfer. I was sent to squire for a knight assigned to this fort," Leon calmly answered.

“Bullshit! This ain’t transfer day! We ain’t supposed t’ get new fuckers for least ‘nother few months!” the sentry shouted.

“My paperwork is in order,” said Leon, “I was sent here by the brass in the capital, and it was confirmed by the guys in Cyrene. Now how about you tell me who I should be speaking to? Unless you plan to use that spear you’re grasping so tightly...” He spoke with a hint of killing intent backed by his third-tier aura that was clearly felt by both guards, as their faces went slightly pale—though they at least didn’t flinch or start shaking.

The three stood there for a few seconds, while the sentries thought this over and Leon waited for their answer. Of course, he intended to enter the fort and find someone with authority to speak with; it was down to the sentries themselves to decide if he would be knocking them senseless first.

Eventually, the sentry who had been speaking said, “Fine, go on through. Head to the main building at the end of the road.”

Leon nodded, then silently walked right past the two sentries. For a moment, it seemed like the silent sentry was about to stop him, but Leon gave the man a petrifying glare, and the man abandoned any thought of getting in his way.

The building at the end of the dirt road looked terrible when Leon got up close. Much of the timber was rotting and the roof seemed like it was one gentle breeze away from collapsing. Frowning, Leon approached the door. He didn’t have any idea what the standard for etiquette was in this situation, whether he should simply walk right in or not. He hesitated at the door for a few seconds before loudly knocking several times then slowly opening the door.

The door hadn’t even been opened halfway before it was wrenched open from the inside, revealing a half-confused and half-angry man standing just beyond the door frame. He was dirty, smelled terrible, and appeared as if he hadn’t shaved or washed in weeks. But, judging from his aura, Leon could tell he was solidly in the third-tier.

“Who the fuck are you, and why are you bangin’ on my door?!” he growled, glaring down at the slightly shorter Leon.

“I was transferred here from the Knight Academy, the sentries told me to come here,” Leon responded, not bothered at all by the man’s extremely disheveled appearance and apparent disregard for hygiene; he’d seen much worse in Valetown and had even personally been worse on some of the longer hunting trips he’d taken with Artorias.

For a moment, the man stared at him in bewilderment. *‘No fuckin’ way some fancy shit-eating noble is going to send their cherry kid to the Knight Academy, only for that kid to be sent here of all places!’* he thought.

But, before he could say anything, Leon pulled out his transfer papers and showed them to the man. He had started to think the sentries were screwing with him, but then the man rolled his eyes and waved him into the building.

“Sit down,” he said gruffly, pointing to a chair in front of a desk. “I’m fetchin’ the commander, you don’t move.”

Leon nodded, took a seat, then started looking around the room. The entire building was a one-room armory, with about a dozen locked wooden cages filled with spears, arrows, and all sorts of other necessary equipment for the fort. Other than the cages, the desk and handful of chairs that surrounded it were the only other features of the room; there wasn't even a window to air the place out, and even after only a few seconds with the door closed, the stench of mold was starting to get to Leon.

After about fifteen minutes, the man returned with another Legion officer who appeared far more presentable. He was clean, didn't stink, and stared at Leon as if the young mage was a specimen to be studied rather than a Legion squire.

After a few moments of silence, the knight asked, "How about those transfer papers?"

Leon immediately handed them over. The knight took a few minutes to look them over, then said, "You must have pissed someone important off real bad to be sent all the way out here." He walked over to the seat next to Leon and gracefully sat down, while the other man went to the other side of the desk, spat on the floor, scratched his balls, then threw himself into his chair and propped his feet up on the desk.

Leon watched this strange juxtaposition of behaviors, but he didn't say a word. He simply waited for the officer to speak again.

"So here's the thing," the officer said after a few minutes of thought, "your paperwork is in order, but it still seems like some kind of mistake to me—one that's probably going to get fixed sometime soon. I can't possibly believe that a seventeen-year-old third-tier mage would be assigned all the way up here, even if their last name is 'Ursus'. I wouldn't be surprised if a messenger comes running here in a few months to take you away somewhere else. However, until that time, I'll have you join one of my knights leading a patrol squad. They're short-staffed—as are most of our squads, if I'm being honest—and I'm not in a position to let any Legion soldier stationed here go to waste."

The officer waited a moment for Leon's response, proceeding once Leon nodded in acknowledgment of what he had said so far.

"This knight I'm going to send you to is only a third-tier mage, the same as you, but I don't want to hear a single damned word from him about insubordination, got it?" the officer asked.

"Yes, Sir," Leon responded.

"Good. You and he may be the same magical tier, but he's older and has far more experience. You *will* defer to him, and if I hear that you haven't, I will personally see to it that your life becomes a living hell. Now come with me."

The officer rose from his chair and made for the door, with Leon doing likewise just behind him. The other man didn't bother to follow, choosing to stay seated behind his desk and settle in for a nap.

"Sir, may I ask the name of the knight you're assigning me to?" asked Leon.

"Sir Samuel," the officer replied, "one of the finest men I've had the pleasure of fighting with. I knighted him myself once he ascended to the third-tier."

“... And may I ask your name, Sir?” Leon asked hesitantly. He could tell this officer was probably in charge of the entire battalion stationed at the fort and was undoubtedly much stronger than he was.

“I’m called Jean, I’m the Tribune in command here. Everyone in this fort is my responsibility, and that includes you, now. If you have any specific questions, though, you can save them for Sam.”

Leon nodded, then proceeded to follow Jean in silence.

Eventually, they arrived at one of the larger tents and walked right on in.

“Hey, Sam!” Jean called out.

“Sir Jean!” responded a tall and lean man with blonde hair and a short, well-trimmed beard.

“Good news! You’re getting a squire today!” Jean said.

“I already have a squire, Sir!” Samuel responded.

“Well this one won’t be needing much attention, I’d wager. You can treat him like any other guy in your squad. Put him to good use, for as long as we’re able to keep him.”

With that said, Jean turned around and left the tent. Leon stood alone in front of Sir Samuel, as well as seven other men and one young woman, obviously Samuel’s squad.

“Well, this ought to be interesting,” Samuel said after inspecting Leon’s aura.

Chapter 138: Samuel

“Well this ought to be interesting,” said Samuel after examining Leon’s aura. He clearly saw the newcomer’s third-tier aura—and how stable it was, indicating both how long he had been at that tier and how close he was to ascending to the fourth-tier.

‘What the fuck are they giving me this guy for?! He’s probably stronger than I am!’ he thought with a slightly worried smile.

Leon and Samuel stood there in silence for several moments, staring at each other. With Leon’s quiet nature, it was Samuel that was the first to crack.

“So what brings you this far north?” he asked.

“Orders,” Leon stoically replied. He was in a new and strange place, and that didn’t put him in a talkative mood.

“Orders, huh? From who?” Samuel shot back.

“Don’t know,” Leon admitted.

“Where are you coming from?”

“Knight Academy.”

“You’re from the *Knight Academy*?! What the double-fuck are you doing here?!”

“Don’t know.”

“... Anything else you might need to fill us in on?” Sam asked after a moment’s pause.

Leon thought that over a little. He didn’t know what to say, and he hardly enjoyed talking about himself to begin with. There was one thing that did occur to him, though.

“My name is Leon Ursus. I’m from the Brown Bear Tribe from the easternmost inhabited Northern Vale.”

That statement got the entire tent’s attention. They had barely glanced at Leon when he arrived before returning to their duties, but when he said he was a Valeman, they all turned to look at him with only slightly disguised hostility.

“You’re a Valeman?” Sam asked slowly. “A Valeman from the Knight Academy?”

Samuel sighed and took a few steps back to sit down in a nearby chair. “Get back to work, guys,” he said to the others. Then he turned his eyes back to Leon. He sat there in silent thought for a long while, then finally said, “Well, let’s focus on getting you settled in first. Everything else can wait.”

The entire squad was housed in that tent. All nine—ten now—slept on cots that were piled up in a corner during the day, and all their belongings were secured in crates in the back of the tent. This also meant that no one had much in the way of personal items. Maybe a half a dozen changes of clothes, and little more. In fact, Leon with his twelve or thirteen changes of clothes, personal armor and weapons, enchantment supplies, and handful of books probably had more things than two or three of the other men in the squad put together.

But that was hardly a problem; there was plenty of space left for Leon’s stuff. The other nine had taken their limited space to heart and kept themselves tight and lean, so there were half a dozen crates available for Leon to use—though, he only needed two.

While Leon was packing, Sam walked over to chat for a while. The other eight people in the squad didn’t seem that keen on talking, and three had even left the tent. The young woman, about nineteen or twenty if Leon were to make a guess, did look Leon over once or twice. If her subtle smile was anything to go by, Samuel could guess that she liked what she saw.

“So,” Sam began, “you like enchanting?”

“Mhmm,” Leon affirmed as he packed away his spell paper and ink.

“Do you know how to make healing spells?” Sam asked.

“Yes,” Leon said.

“That’s wonderful! We don’t get very many supply caravans up here, so we typically have to rely on more mundane medical tools if there are any injuries. Bandages, tourniquets, and the like. If you want to get on the guys’ good side, giving each a few healing spells would work wonders.”

“That so?” Leon asked disinterestedly. He could pick up on the hints that the rest of Sam’s squad were none too pleased to have someone with his last name around.

“That is indeed so!” Sam said. “So, anyway, when you’re done packing, let’s go for a walk.”

“Sure thing,” Leon agreed. He had been assigned to Sam’s squad—as his squire, no less—so he could hardly turn the knight’s offer down. Thus, he quickly wrapped up his packing. The crates could all be securely locked, and with the keys to his crates in his possession, Leon wasn’t worried about the rest of the squad messing with his things while he was gone.

He still carried his most prized valuables with him, though, including his gold card, sword, bow, and armor.

“Hey, we’re stepping out for a while, gonna show the new guy around the fort!” Sam said as he and Leon made for the exit of the tent. The woman was about to join them, but Sam said, “Don’t worry, Alix, no need to act like my shadow.”

Leon didn’t say anything, but Samuel noticed his curious glance.

“She’s my other squire. Or rather, my *actual* squire, I think I should say. I doubt you’re going to be squiring for me in the traditional sense. Can’t have a third-tier mage squiring for another third-tier mage, haha!”

Leon nodded, but kept silent, which only brought a slight frown to Sam’s face.

“So, hey,” Samuel began again, trying to get Leon to be a little more talkative, “I’m sorry about those guys back there. They’re good people, honestly, but we’ve been fighting back Valeman raids for years now. They’re going to need a little while to adjust to having one around.”

This finally got Leon to start talking.

“How often are the raids?” he asked Samuel. It wasn’t much, but he had asked a question, which was far more than a simple one or two syllable acknowledgment of something. Samuel smiled; he could work with that.

“Well, I don’t suppose you’re familiar with the politics—or rather, the ‘politics’—of these westernmost vales?”

“I’m reasonably familiar, at least until last year when I came south. I spent some time in Torfinn Ice-Eyes’ longhouse and overheard him and his thanes talking about it. Hakon Fire-Beard has taken over the Northern Vales nearest here, hasn’t he?”

“He has, and ever since he nabbed the one on the other side of the pass this fort guards, we’ve had to defend against at least one large raid of one thousand or more Valemens every year, and countless smaller probing attacks.”

“How long ago was that? Hakon taking over the neighboring vale, I mean.”

“About ten years.”

There was a slight pause while Samuel tried to work himself up to asking a delicate question. Now that Leon was talking, he didn’t want to give the young man a reason to stop, but he also wasn’t sure what kind of answer Leon would give, so he hesitated. But only for a moment.

“... So, Leon, are you going to have any problems with fighting other Valemens?” Sam asked.

“No,” Leon responded without any hesitation.

“Really? You’re so certain?”

“I am. Don’t make the mistake of thinking all Valemens think themselves a part of some greater whole. They’re loyal to their tribes, and that’s about it. If this were Clear Ice, and Torfinn Ice-Eyes were trying to bust down the gates, then I admit I might be a little conflicted. However, I have no love for Hakon or those who follow him. I don’t know them, and I won’t show any mercy to them if they try to kill me, even if they worship the Mountain Father and the Sky Mother.”

“Well that’s quite... emphatic,” Sam said, though he was reassured by Leon’s definitive answer.

“Honestly, I was expecting something a little more vacillating, or at least some hesitation...”

Leon just glanced at Sam, but his face remained stoic, so Sam had no idea what the glance was supposed to mean.

“Moving on,” said Sam, “let’s just check out the wall and head on back, yeah? Not much else to see up here, and you hardly look like you need to take a trip to the armory...”

“Speaking of,” Leon started, “I’ve noticed that most of the soldiers around here have spears instead of swords, and no shields. There a reason for that?”

While the two had been talking, Leon had been taking a good look at every man they passed, and several things stood out to him. First, none were particularly clean. He guessed that the fort didn’t have much in the way of sanitation facilities. Second, few of the soldiers seemed to have even the most basic equipment. He hadn’t seen a single man with the standard Legion armor, shields, or shortswords. Instead, they all used eight to ten foot long spears. As for protection, the knights at least had gambeson armor—dozens of layers of cloth or linen that was effective and cheap armor, especially against the poorly-armed Valemens—but the rest of the soldiers had to make due with skill and luck if they were ever in battle.

“As I said, we don’t get many supplies this far north. That’s why I was happy to learn you could make healing spells. We don’t have any gear, save for extremely cheap spears and a few pieces of gambeson to give knights. Plus bows and arrows for those in the towers.”

Leon started to frown. Fort 127 was utterly failing to impress him.

“So what’s the problem, then?” he asked. “Why can’t supply caravans come this far north?”

“Count Whitefield is paranoid that if there’s a large and well-supplied force of Royal soldiers in his backyard, then he’ll lose his autonomy, or so everyone has been led to believe. Though, the Count has been rather transparent in how he views the presence of the fort. So, we only get five hundred men to guard the pass even though we probably need two or three times that, minimum, and supply caravans are few and far between.”

Sam looked and sounded to Leon resigned to the miserable state of affairs at the fort, and Leon couldn’t blame him. The Legion had basically sent five hundred men to the fort, ordered them to guard the pass, and given them nothing but sharp sticks to do it with.

By this time, Sam and Leon had made it to the wall blocking the pass. This was perhaps the only faintly impressive part of the fort. It was primarily made of timber, with a thick walkway that could accommodate four men walking side-by-side. It wasn't built high enough to stop determined mages, but that was also what the stone towers and men atop the wall were for.

Sam led Leon to a staircase and took him to the top of the wall. There wasn't much to see, thanks to the hills and forest on the other side, but it was a good place to talk a little more, given that the only soldiers on the wall were in the towers rather than the ramparts.

"Got any questions about this place?" he asked.

"What will I be expected to do?" Leon inquired.

"Well, I don't need you to squire for me, so you're going to act as the tenth man in my squad. We don't guard the wall, rather we range out past the wall on scouting and supply missions. The Legion has built a few small watchtowers further out in the pass, and we check up on the men assigned there and bring back reports to the fort."

"Being sent to those towers is an enviable task," Leon said sarcastically.

"Yeah, those soldiers who're sent out there are hardly happy about it," Sam admitted. "But that's what we do. We might be attacked by a few Valemens in the pass, but at least we're not watching the wall twelve hours a day."

"I suppose," Leon whispered. The few soldiers he could see in the nearest tower certainly looked bored. "How long do these rangings usually last?"

"A few hours at the quickest, a couple of days at the longest. The farthest watchtower we have out there is only five miles or so into the pass, so we can easily head out there and bring back updates in a single day," Sam answered.

"Sounds like an easy gig," Leon observed.

"To be frank, someone like you is probably wasted on us," Sam admitted. "You must have really pissed someone off to be sent all the way out here."

"So I've heard..."

"Hey, let's head back. Get you a better introduction to the others. Can't have you watching our backs if you don't know us, right?"

With that, Sam led Leon back to his squad's tent. Along the way, he talked a little about himself. He was from the Northern Territories and had joined the Royal Legions as a way to get away from the mines that made up more than half of the Northern Territories' economy. He admitted to Leon that if he hadn't advanced to the first-tier when he did and signed on with the local Legion, then he probably would have died trying to dig some low-quality iron out of the ground, then buried in the very mine he would've died in.

Sam didn't have any immediate family to speak of, so him joining the Legion wasn't that inconvenient for anyone except himself.

“I’m actually not doing too bad,” he’d said to Leon, “I’ve been made a knight, and have had the opportunity to train and ascend to the third-tier! Sure, I’ve been sent to the very edge of civilization, but that just means my account at Heaven’s Eye will be quite large when I get out of here!”

Leon only stoically nodded at him. Not a lot of good that money was doing him up there, though. Leon had to take a deep breath. Fort 127 was incredibly depressing; it was even worse than Valetown! And he was going to be here for two years!

Elise’s offer to join Heaven’s Eye was looking more and more attractive with every passing second. Leon wasn’t about to stay at a place like this for long; it went against the very reasons he’d joined the Knight Academy to begin with: to gain both political and magical power. He doubted he’d find either here.

Chapter 139: Supply Mission

After showing him around a little more, Samuel led Leon back to the squad’s tent. It was starting to get dark by that point, so the rest of the squad was busy cleaning up and getting out the cots. None of the others were in any particular hurry to introduce themselves to Leon, and Leon was in just as much of a rush to introduce himself to them. Instead, after helping out a little with organizing all ten cots, Leon laid down and began to quietly read.

He was largely left alone over the next few days. As Sam’s squad were scouts, they didn’t have to man the walls, and when they weren’t north of the wall, they were allowed to chill in their tent and rest. And rest was exactly what they did, and little else. Leon took the downtime as an opportunity to train, usually in the form of meditation or practice with his sword behind the tent, the others would laze around all day, chatting or playing card games, except when they had to do maintenance on their spears or clean the tent.

Sam was a little different. He was a third-tier knight, and one of the Tribune’s more trusted men, so he was around Jean’s cabin most of the time. Alix, his squire—the squire he was focusing on, at least, given that he’d already judged Leon to not need his education—was oftentimes with him. The two of them would usually take Leon’s place behind the tent and train when they returned to the tent in the evening.

Leon was more often than not done with his own training by then and would either return to reading or practice his enchanting skills. He focused on healing spells, since Sam had indicated that healing spells were hard to come by at Fort 127, but he also devoted much of his time to learning about fire enchantments from Xaphan. His armor was still unenchanted, after all, and Leon wanted to fix that problem as soon as he could. He was already starting to formulate some gauntlet enchantments that would help amplify his use of Xaphan’s demon fire, while also protecting his arms from being burned in the process.

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[This place is quite the dump,] Xaphan said casually.

[You’ll hear no arguments from me,] Leon answered disinterestedly as he wrote a few fire runes down on spell paper.

[How long do you plan on staying?], the demon asked.

[Sir Jean said someone might arrive in a few months to transfer me somewhere else. If things last beyond that, I will take action so I don't have to stay here wasting my time for years,] Leon replied.

[What do you mean by 'take action'?] Xaphan asked curiously.

[I'm going to go to Sir Jean and formally quit,] Leon responded.

[... Oh...] Xaphan said with some disappointment.

Leon stopped writing his spells for a moment. [What did you think I was going to do? Or rather, what did you *hope* I was going to do?]

[I don't know, but just quitting seemed boring,] Xaphan answered truthfully.

[Well, something boring would fit a backwater fort like this quite nicely...] Leon said with resignation before turning back to his enchantment practice.

—

Sam's squad went out beyond the wall every two weeks. Depending on how the watchtowers in the pass were doing, this mission could take anywhere from twelve hours to two or three days. They also had to bring some supplies with them, enough to keep the handful of men in each watchtower alive for a week until another squad made the same run.

The squad would also help the men at the watchtowers if they had any jobs that needed a lot of physical labor, which usually meant the occasional helping hand with maintenance on the watchtowers themselves.

By the morning the supply run was to begin, Leon had been at the fort for about a week. He'd barely spoken to the others in his squad, but that was as much their fault as it was his. He wasn't particularly friendly to begin with, and they weren't about to take the initiative to get closer to a Valeman.

The only real exceptions to this were Sam and Alix. Sam liked to talk and didn't much care who it was with or what they talked about. Alix didn't talk much with Leon, but she also didn't go out of her way to ignore him. She gave him a few polite greetings when they happened to train at the same time, and would even exchange a few words, though they weren't exactly best friends yet.

"Relax, Alix, you'll be fine. This isn't our first rodeo, you know, and we almost always come back fine. Almost," Sam said to a nervous Alix. Leon had found out pretty quickly during the week that Alix hadn't been at the fort for much longer than he had—only about two weeks longer, in fact. This was only her second mission, and her nervousness was obvious.

He, on the other hand, was quite calm. Valemen rarely broke the first-tier, and it was even rarer for them to have actual training. Given his familiarity with Valeman tactics, Leon wasn't worried at all.

"You seem to be alright," Sam said, looking at Leon, whose only response was to shrug noncommittally.

"Of course he's alright! If we get attacked once we're past the wall, he'll probably embrace our attackers as brothers rather than fight them and leave the rest of us to fight them off!" said one of the other men in the squad, who didn't even try to hide the hate and bitterness in his voice.

“Watch it,” Sam said, glaring at the man who spoke. The man looked a little cowed, but the presence of the others at his side only emboldened him and he stood up a little straighter. But, just as he was about to speak again, Sam said, “Another word about this, and I’ll make you the point man.”

The guy quickly shut his mouth after that. The squad typically marches single-file, and in more than ninety percent of Valem attacks, the man in front is the one who’s killed first. Sam, being the strongest in the squad—at least until Leon arrived—took it upon himself to lead from the front and take the biggest risk, but he also reserved the right to put anyone else up front if he so chose.

“Sorry about that,” he whispered to Leon, who shrugged again.

Leon was fully decked out in his black and dark grey armor, making a stark contrast between himself and the rest of the squad, who only had about three cloth gambesons between them; everyone else was unarmored. Sam was the only one apart from Leon with a sword, the rest all had cheap spears. None of them had shields. They were essentially equipped like light cavalry, only without the horses.

There were only three watchtowers in the pass, each with five men assigned to guard them. The squad carried enough food for all fifteen of these men to last at least another week with them, most of which was piled onto Alix as the most junior member of the squad. She was only a first-tier mage, though, and she struggled a little with so much weight.

Watching her sway and rock on her feet from the weight of the supplies on her back seemed to amuse several others in the squad; Leon guessed this was some form of hazing for the squire. She bore the weight with a bright smile, though, and the chuckles at her expense from the squad.

Leon, however, found it rather distasteful for most of the supplies to be dumped onto someone who was one of the weakest members of the squad. Alix’s magical power was quite lacking and didn’t provide her with much added strength.

So, Leon walked over to her and said, “Take off that pack. Put it down for a moment.” She looked at him in confusion for a moment, but his tone and expression brokered no argument; she took off the pack and set it on the ground.

“What do you think you’re doing?” demanded one of the squad’s second-tier mages, who was now both offended that Leon would dare to interfere in their hazing and elated that he had a chance in front of him to yell at the newcomer.

Leon ignored the man, much to his anger and frustration, and simply picked up the pack Alix had set down and swung it over his shoulders with such ease that the second-tier mage was stunned into silence. The pack was probably about as heavy as Alix herself, and Leon swung it around like it was packed with pillows.

Leon didn’t say a word, but he did send a brief derisive look at the second-tier mage. Sam, who had been about to intervene, only watched with a smile on his face.

[Hehehe, look at that dickhead’s face,] Xaphan said while giggling like a spoiled child.

[If he didn’t stop there, I would’ve gladly bloodied it,] Leon said back.

[Uggh, I would’ve loved to see that,] Xaphan replied wistfully.

“Thanks...” muttered Alix. She didn’t have anything personal in the pack, so she wasn’t unhappy to see someone else take it, but she was also conflicted in that it had been hers to carry. “I can help with some of that if it’s too heavy,” she then said.

“It’s fine,” Leon replied.

“Thanks,” Alix repeated with a smile.

While they were talking, the second-tier mage who had almost tried to start something with Leon walked over to Sam and asked, “Sir, how strong is that guy?”

“Leon’s a third-tier mage,” Samuel responded, greatly enjoying the sudden look of terror on the other man’s face at the realization of what he had almost done. “Leon could’ve torn you apart if he wanted to,” Sam added. The second-tier mage resolved to keep his mouth shut about Leon from then on.

With the rest of the squad sufficiently cowed, the remaining few minutes before they could depart north went by quickly. Leon was actually a little frustrated; if he had known simply tossing around something heavy would get the other seven men in the squad—excluding Alix and Sam—to stop glaring at him, he would’ve done so much sooner.

Regardless, it was done, and it was time to get on with their mission. In the center of the wall were a pair of small doors, barely big enough to fit a cart through. The doors had been fortified as much as they could be without adding a second wall, which the men at the fort were specifically forbidden to do by Count Whitefield, who technically owned the land the fort was built on. It took several minutes for the locking enchantments on the doors to open, but once they were, Leon and the squad passed through and ventured out into the wild pass.

All the trees for about a quarter mile on the northern side of the wall had been cut down, leaving a rough grassy plain to the east and hills to the west, but after that point the squad would enter a moderately dense forest. It was cold in the pass—not surprising to Leon, given that they were in the middle of the Frozen Mountain Range—and most of the trees were evergreens, with little in the way of underbrush. That said, the terrain was hard and broken, and the travel speed wasn’t even close to Leon’s limit.

From the moment they left the fort behind and ventured out into the hilly forest, Leon had a subtle smile on his face, contrasting with the stoicism that had been his usual expression over the past week. It also contrasted with Alix, who seemed so nervous that she almost jumped at her own shadow once they started walking among the trees. She, as Sam’s squire, was walking directly behind him as the second person in the marching line, so the entire rest of the squad could see her anxiety.

“What’s the matter, little Alix?” asked one of the biggest guys in the squad teasingly. “You’re not scared, are you? A soldier in the Royal Legions shouldn’t be frightened of some hairy unwashed barbarians!” He also pointedly glanced at Leon, though he wisely didn’t say anything more.

“Of course I’m not scared of them!” Alix shouted back at him. “I’m just keeping alert for any ambushes!”

None of the rest of the squad bought her explanation, and continued to tease her, but fortunately for Alix, Sam was there to help her out a little.

“Don’t listen to Lothar, Alix. With the way he acted last year, when he was first sent out into the pass, he has *no* right to start picking on a nervous newbie.”

Sam flashed Lothar, the big guy, a cheeky grin, and Lothar immediately shut his mouth. He absolutely didn’t want Sam to say anything more, which he mercifully didn’t. Instead, it was one of the more senior men in the squad who spoke up.

“Indeed, it was then that we learned that if Lothar was going to survive in the pass, he would need dark pants. No barbarian would ever feel fear if he saw this guy walking around with a wet stain on his pants!”

With that, the focus shifted from Alix onto Lothar, allowing the young squire to relax a little. She still maintained her vigilance, though, with her head constantly swiveling around and trying to catch any ambushes before they happened.

Then, from behind her, came a reassuring voice. It said, “Valemen rarely attack during the day. They much prefer nighttime raids. Little need to be so nervous right now.”

She turned around and saw that it was Leon who had spoken, with a slight smile on his face.

“Leon’s right,” added Sam, “I’d say more than nineteen out of twenty battles out here happen at night. We’ll either be in a watchtower or back south of the wall come nightfall, so there’s not much to worry about.”

“But there’s still that one in twenty chance...” muttered Alix.

“Even if we are attacked, we have two third-tier mages with us! We might not be able to fight off a group of more than three dozen or so, but any Valemen we’re attacked by won’t be able to do much more than injure a few of us before being forced to retreat!”

Alix wasn’t particularly reassured by Sam’s answer, but she gave a quick nod back to Leon for trying to calm her down a little before getting back to watching their surroundings. Neither Leon nor Sam thought she was in the wrong for being so vigilant, so they held their tongues. She wasn’t looking around so frantically, at least, though she still quite tightly gripped her spear.

Within two hours of leaving the fort, the squad arrived at the first watchtower. It was a small place, barely big enough for the five men manning it. If they saw anything, they would activate a flare enchantment similar to what Leon learned from Xaphan, then immediately run back to the wall. They’d likely be killed on the way if the Valemen ever truly attacked in force, but at least they’d give the fort hours of preparation time.

Once they had arrived, Sam’s squad got to work handing out supplies and inquiring about any repairs to the watchtower they could help with. There were quite a few repairs and other maintenance things that had to be addressed, so the squad was forced to resign itself to a night spent in the pass.

Chapter 140: Trouble Moving South

It was cold in the pass. Leon was a third-tier mage, so he wasn’t particularly uncomfortable, but he still didn’t like the chill coming off the mountains. He resolved to bring his coat made from the snow lion he

killed to awaken his bloodline on any return adventures north of the fort. He at least had his armor and accompanying clothing, the rest of the squad he now found himself a part of didn't even have that.

But, the cold was banished from his mind as he helped the rest of the squad with some routine maintenance on the first watchtower. Most of the men were allowed to slack off, but Leon and Sam—as the only third-tier mages around—had some heavy labor to do. The five men stationed at the watchtower were more than willing to help, though, while the rest of the squad organized one-third of the supplies they had brought and rested.

The first point of order they had was to replace the door of the watchtower. It was thick, heavy, very sturdy, and falling apart from rot; replacing it wouldn't be easy. Fortunately, they had an ax and plenty of trees in the forest. Leon took care of cutting down a suitable tree, then he and Sam dragged it up a hill to the watchtower where the five men got to work making a new door.

Then, it was up to the second level. The watchtower had two levels stacked on top of each other, each with only a single room. The second level had a balcony on all four sides, and three of the balconies needed new guardrails; the second level was over thirty feet high, which was high enough to leave any of the five first-tier soldiers injured if they fell.

Sam and Leon got to work, with the rest of the squad ferrying materials upstairs after resting got too boring. While the two third-tier mages were working, Sam decided to get to know Leon a little more and tried to start a conversation.

“So, Leon, tell me about the Knight Academy.”

“What do you want to know?” Leon asked disinterestedly. He was focused on tearing out the old guardrail—and didn't particularly want to talk besides.

“... Well, I'm just curious as to how they operate. People say a lot of things about the place, and I kinda want to know if they're true...” Sam said, a little put off with Leon's attitude.

“What kind of things do people say?” Leon asked. After ripping out the guardrail and letting it fall to the ground, he gave the balcony a quick inspection while Sam readied the replacement guardrail.

“The Knight Academy is the most prestigious training program for aspiring knights, and that leads to just about everyone who can't get in to say it's just a place for rich elitist pricks to funnel their kids into cushy positions in the Royal Legion. Before being stationed at Fort 127, though, I met a few graduates at Clear Ice Fortress, and they couldn't stop raving about the place. I have to admit that I'm intrigued by the place, and I was hoping to get your opinion on it.”

“Hold on,” said Leon with a frown. He got down onto his belly so he could see the underside of the balcony better. “We might need to replace this whole thing, not just the guardrail. The supports are rotting.”

Sam got down just like Leon and gave it a look, but he couldn't really see anything of note. Then again, Leon had learned some construction techniques living in the Forest of Black and White, where the only structures around were built and maintained by him and his father. Sam didn't have that same acquired skill.

“Whatever you say,” Sam said as he stepped back from the edge, while Leon started prying apart the balcony. After a few minutes, Leon finally decided to answer Sam’s previous question.

“The Knight Academy is a good place to learn how to be a knight—just not for nobility. To a degree, those who said it was a place for noble kids to have respectable positions serving their King and Kingdom bought for them by their parents aren’t wrong. But, all the people who attend the Academy aren’t rich or noble. For them, it’s a valuable experience that gives them a chance to gain strength that they never would’ve had if they hadn’t enrolled.”

“Hmm,” Sam hummed.

For a little while, Sam asked more detailed questions about the Academy, which Leon did his best to answer. Some of the things he said angered Sam somewhat, like how much say the noble trainees had in how their units were run. Some other things, however, made him burst out into laughing fits.

One of the latter things happened to be the names given to each unit.

“Are you fuckin’ kidding me?!” he almost shouted. “Blood Eagles?! *Deathbringers*?! Who the fuck came up with those names?!”

Leon could only shrug, while Sam laughed uproariously.

“I get the need for strong names for units, but those are just too over the top! It’s ridiculous, who can take those fuckin’ names seriously?!”

As he shrieked with laughter, Leon just kept working. He actually agreed with Sam about the names, but he wasn’t as passionate about it that Sam seemed to be.

“Listen, Leon,” Sam said in between gasps of air—laughing so much had led to some heavy breathing on his part, “every Ancestors damned unit in the Royal Legions call themselves some shit like that. Most of the names are just to feed the egos of the nobles who came up with them, but as you get further down to smaller units, we’re always given names with a little more class and dignity to them. Like the Bottom-Feeding Tadpoles, or the Rabid Bunnies!”

He descended into another laughing fit, while Leon looked back at him in confusion.

“Are those real names?” he asked.

Sam quickly ran out of breaths to laugh with, which allowed him to recover. He used that recovery to look at Leon with some amusement, and said when he regained his breath, “No, those were just joke names. But, the concept is still accurate. To a degree, all of us on the lowest rung of the ladder like to have fun with the names of our units. All of the enemies we have to fight expect to get killed by guys called the Black Rangers, or the Wings of Death, or some other such nonsense as that. On the other hand, they don’t expect to get killed by the Gibbering Geckos.”

“Huh. So having a silly name is like an insult to our enemies?” Leon asked.

“I guess. It also embarrasses the hell out of the nobles we’re commanded by. They can’t do anything about it, though, as the units are named by the men who comprise them.”

The two third-tier mages continued talking like that for a while, while fixing up the watchtower at the same time. Sam enjoyed their conversation, even if some more of what Leon told him about the Knight Academy were things he found baffling or hilarious. Plus, he was happy he had gotten Leon to talk, even if most of it was a single terse sentence between his own lengthier spiels.

There was enough work to do around the watchtower that the squad ran out of time to head back out into the forest, forcing them to settle in for the night. Normally, there wasn't so much for them to help out with, and they could've been back at the fort by nightfall. But, sometimes work that has been pushed back due to laziness just has to get done, and this was one of those times.

As the squad started moving north again the following morning, continuing on their journey to bring supplies to the other two watchtowers, another group at the other end of the pass was preparing to head south.

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Hakon Fire-Beard was a great beast of a man. He was over seven feet tall, had enough blood-red hair to weave a decent sized rope, and was built like a bear. He now stood before the pass leading south with thousands of Valemens at his back.

'This is it,' he thought to himself. 'This is the moment that will make my name live on forever. This is when I cement my legacy as the greatest of my people. This is when I bring unimaginable wealth back home!'

For a moment, he reflected on how he had gotten there, from his first accomplishments to becoming the most powerful man in the Northern Vales. He had been a strong if unimportant warrior for most of his life, until he first came to prominence thirty years ago, when he challenged the chief of his tribe to a duel, with the title of chief on the line.

Hakon had only just ascended to the fourth-tier mage at the time, and the chief was of the fifth-tier. However, on the day of the duel, the chief moved sluggishly and didn't use any elemental magic, which led to Hakon's easy victory. The next day, the former chief's cook was found murdered in his home. A few tribesmen were able to connect the dots and realize that Hakon had probably bribed the cook to poison the previous chief, then killed him to permanently silence him, but those who were smart enough to realize this were also smart enough to keep quiet.

Over the following few years, Hakon consolidated power within his vale. His tribe had more than a few enemies, and he viciously massacred them, burning many alive as sacrifices to one of the gods of the Valemens, the Mountain Father. However, he never managed to completely conquer his home vale.

That changed upon his ascension to the fifth-tier, making him one of only two Valemens with that level of strength. Only Torfinn Ice-Eyes was as strong as he was, and Hakon quickly set out on a campaign to flaunt his new power. His home vale was conquered within a year, with the other tribes either massacred, sacrificed, or driven out. Then, he moved on to the neighboring vales.

Most of the Valemens in the rest of the vales were too divided or dispersed to form a coalition strong enough to resist Hakon, and more vales fell to his tribe. By the time Leon arrived at Fort 127, nearly all of the inhabited vales fell under Hakon Fire-Beard's vicious rule. Torfinn Ice-Eyes had been worried that Hakon would turn his attention to the east, to the Brown Bear's vale, but that wasn't Hakon's goal.

At the entrance to the pass guarded by Fort 127 on the Valemen's side, Hakon had assembled his army, massive in size compared to anything the Valemen had ever managed to field before. There were almost thirty-thousand warriors, made up of warriors from over a dozen different tribes that had submitted to Hakon Fire-Beard rather than suffer extermination.

Upon a large boulder near the entrance to the pass stood Hakon himself, surrounded by a dozen of his thanes.

"There it is, my friends," he said, "on the other side of this pass lies more plunder than any of us can imagine. Silver, jewels, slaves, tools of enchanted iron, we can find all of these treasures, and more, at the end of this pass."

Most of Hakon's thanes stared into the mountain pass with greedy and hungry looks on their faces. The rest didn't share in their comrades' desire for loot and treasure. Instead, they looked into the pass with the hope that a worthy enemy was looking back at them from the other side. They followed Hakon not because he promised luxury, but because he promised battle.

"Let's get moving; those treasures won't make themselves ours of their own accord," Hakon said with a chuckle and a smile.

His thanes immediately sprang into action, leaping down from the boulder and getting the horde of Valemen moving south. For such a large force, it would take them a few days to reach the end of the pass, but when they did, all hell would break loose. All that was between them and Fort 127 were three watchtowers staffed with five men each, and a single ten-man squad. If Hakon knew what was in front of him, he would laugh and not give it another thought; his army was far too large for so few men to get in his way.

Fort 127, on the other hand, would be a tougher nut to crack. But Hakon wasn't worried. He had ordered a few probing attacks over the past few years, looking for weaknesses in the Bull Kingdom's defenses, and he found one in Fort 127. He knew the fort was understaffed and undersupplied; few of the men on the wall wore armor, and they all fought with spears. None of the other forts that blocked mountain paths were so undersupplied.

When he arrived at Fort 127, Hakon knew that his numbers would carry the day. The wall of the fort was sturdy enough, but it wouldn't allow five hundred men to stop an army of almost thirty thousand.

Hakon smiled, then led his army into the pass.