

Storm King 151

Chapter 151: Jean's Promise

"I'm sorry, Sir," the knight said to Jean. The archers he'd brought to the fort to reinforce the Legion soldiers hadn't managed to kill the two Valemen who had ventured out to retrieve the corpse of the werewolf.

Jean had to restrain his fury and frustration at missing such a golden opportunity.

'We almost had Hakon Fire-Beard himself! If these shitty archers had killed him, that Valeman army would've disintegrated!' Jean thought to himself. *'If these were my men, we'd have gotten him!'*

However, with the knight waiting for his response and the archers also casting their eyes toward him, Jean clamped down on his emotions. "It's all right," he said. "We can kill him later. For now, we just need to focus on working together to prevent the Valemen from breaching the wall and ravaging the Northern Territories..."

The knight and his archers smiled and nodded, while Jean had to turn around and walk away, so as not to let his anger get the better of him. He ended up walking back to the first-aid tent, where the medics had just finished with Hugh's treatment.

"How is he?" Jean asked the lead medic.

"He's... actually going to be fine. Those healing spells we got from that other knight worked perfectly! In fact, Sir Hugh had contracted lycanthropy from his wounds, but with the healing spells, we managed to lift the curse before it became irreversible!" the lead medic said excitedly.

"That's great!" Jean said, his excitement rapidly matching the lead medic's own. "Wait a minute, what knight did you get those spells from? I thought they were from Leon Ursus..."

"He was a third-tier mage, Sir, I just assumed he was a knight," the lead medic said with a shrug.

Jean could understand the confusion. There were over five hundred men at the fort on a normal day, and the lead medic couldn't be expected to know everybody, especially not someone who only transferred in the week before.

"Thank you," Jean said, clapping the medic on the shoulder. "When do you think Sir Hugh will be fit for battle?"

"He could be back on his feet by tomorrow night," the lead medic replied.

"Wonderful! Keep me informed if anything changes!" Jean said as he turned and left the tent.

Outside of the tent, Jean was alone; everyone in the fort who wasn't critical for logistics was on the wall, which made the rows of tents quiet, dark, and devoid of human life. Jean took a deep breath to steady himself. He hadn't gotten more than an hour of rest at a time ever since he received word that the first watchtower had lit its flare. He was exhausted, but he couldn't let himself rest for more than a minute or two, given the situation the fort was now in.

He yawned, stretched, then started making his way to the tower he'd assigned Leon to.

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Leon had only been sleeping for about half an hour when Jean knocked and entered his and Alix's room, but he was a light sleeper and woke up immediately.

"Sir!" he said in greeting as he groggily sat up.

"Please, stay comfortable!" Jean said as Leon rose and Alix stopped meditating.

"What brings you here, Sir?" Leon asked after shaking himself awake a little.

"Just to thank you for those healing spells. I've been told that Sir Hugh will live thanks to them."

"That's good to hear," Leon said, glancing over at Alix and seeing her face light up in happiness.

"I was wondering," Jean continued, "did you make those spells yourself?"

Leon nodded.

"I see. I don't suppose you have anymore?" Jean asked tentatively.

Leon nodded again.

"Well, if you have any spare spells, I'd like to ask you to give them to the medics in the first-aid tent. The coming battle will leave a great many of us injured or dead, and even one spell can make the difference for a soldier on death's door. I hate to seem pushy, but it is literally a matter of life and death..."

"... I understand," Leon said slowly. "I have a few extras that I don't think I'll need, so I'll run them out to the medics first thing in the morning..."

"Thank you," Jean said. "Moving on, you've done damn fine work these past few days. With your performance in mind, I've decided to have you knighted once this situation blows over."

Leon's eyes widened in shock. The Knight Academy required every trainee to serve a squireship for no less than two years before they could graduate, but technically, any knight or lord can knight someone if they feel like it.

"Sir... I appreciate it, but I don't think the Knight Academy would look too kindly on—" Leon began before being interrupted by Jean.

"To hell with them!" Jean said. "They sent you here, so you're my guy. You've been acting as a knight, so I'm going to hold a knighting ceremony for you when we fight off the Valemens! It's not like the Knight Academy can actually *do* anything to me! They just won't like it. The only deterrence they have is denying their high-quality squires to any knight that breaks their regulations, and I never would've gotten any of their squires anyway! I'm still confused as to why they sent you all the way up here! Whoever made that decision must be blind or something..."

Leon fought back a smile. He very much wanted to be a knight, and Jean's promise greatly excited him. But, he only had to remember that there were thousands of Valemens outside ready to kill everyone in the fort for his smile to die back down.

'It's an empty promise,' Leon thought to himself. *'It's not likely that anyone's going to get out of here alive, so his promise to knight me when this is all over doesn't actually mean much.'*

"Thank you, Sir," Leon said out loud.

Jean nodded, then said, "I'll let you two get back to it," and left.

When he closed the door, Alix said excitedly, "You're going to be a knight!"

Leon lay back on his cot and frowned. "Maybe," he said.

"You're doubting the commander?" she asked.

"No, but we have thousands of Valemens to carve through, first," Leon answered. "Better to get some rest than worry about what will come next, assuming we survive. Rest will help us a lot more than worry."

Alix frowned at Leon's lack of excitement at Jean's promise, but he closed his eyes and quickly went to sleep, so she returned to meditating. After all, she didn't intend on dying; she wanted to be a knight as well.

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The entire fort was awake by noon. No one woke them up, but there was a deafening blast of a horn that disturbed the rest of everyone still sleeping.

"Hmm? What's going on?" Leon asked, hauling himself out of bed and grabbing his sword.

"Uuugh," Alix grumbled as she rubbed her eyes. "That's the signal for someone approaching from the south side... It's not a Valemans attack..."

She turned over and went back to sleep; she'd only gotten a few hours and needed a lot more. Leon, however, had gotten plenty, so he walked outside onto ramparts to see what was happening. He took a deep breath of the cool northern air, then cast his gaze to the south of the fort, where he saw about half a dozen riders bearing a noble banner. If he recalled from the old book of noble heraldry Artorias had taught him correctly, it was the banner of Count Whitefield.

'Are reinforcements on the way?' he thought hopefully.

He didn't have to wait long for an answer, as Jean sent a messenger to summon him and the rest of the fort's leadership and other high-tiered mages.

They assembled around the conference table in Jean's cabin. Jean sat at one end of the table, while the six Whitefield knights sat at the other. Most of the fort's knights sat at the table, but a few soldiers—such as Leon—had to stand so that room could be made for their guests.

Said guests were dusty from the ride, but their clothes were still colorful and obviously expensive. The knight in charge even wore a blue tunic that Leon recognized was made from silkgrass! That one garment cost more silver than an average family made in a year! The rest of the Whitefield knights wore clothes that were all over the spectrum but were all just as bright and eye-catching.

"You received our message, so how soon could we expect reinforcements?" Jean asked the lead Whitefield knight as politely as he could.

The knight didn't answer right away, instead leisurely brushing a long strand of rich brown hair away from his perfectly chiseled face. "My Lord... has confidence in your garrison to deal with a few pathetic barbarians..." he finally said, his words dripping with scorn and derision.

"So he won't be sending any warriors to help man the wall?!" Jean asked, attempting to restrain his rapidly-mounting anger.

"It is my Lord's understanding that you have already received reinforcements?" the knight said with a mocking smile. "My Lord's vassal Barons were kind enough to send you their personal warriors, were they not?"

"Two hundred men are hardly enough to call reinforcements!" Arrius said angrily.

Jean glared at Arrius, shutting him up, then said, "We're eternally grateful to the local Barons for recognizing the threat we're now under, but the men they were able to send are not sufficient to deal with the thousands of Valemens on our doorstep!"

"Thousands?" the knight asked rhetorically. "I doubt they number *that* many. The men of the Legion are the hardest and most skillful soldiers His Majesty possesses, surely you all can handle a few unwashed savages?"

Jean merely frowned, but most of the fort knights grew furious and almost lunged forward at the Whitefield knights. The naked arrogance and dismissiveness they were displaying were too much for many of these battle-hardened men. But, Jean slammed his fist into the table and forced them to restrain themselves.

"We only number *five hundred*! Seven hundred with the warriors from the local Barons! And we have *two miles* of wall to defend! When the Valemens attack, the wall *will* be breached, and then Count Whitefield will have to deal with the Valemens in the open. They will raid his villages, rape and enslave his people, and burn his land. If you don't come to our aid, your Lord will be, at the very least, ruined," Jean explained as calmly as he could.

"Unlike *you*," the Whitefield knight said while sneering at Jean, "*we* can handle the savages. If they, *somehow*, push south, they will break themselves upon our swords and spears!"

"When they push south, your lord will have allowed thousands of Valemens into the kingdom. What's more, he will have allowed the destruction of a Legion fort and the massacre of its garrison. If I make it out, I will make it my personal duty to ensure he's arrested and executed for treason," Jean threatened. He glared at the knight, but the knight seemed unperturbed.

In fact, his derisive smile only grew wider as he said, "*If*."

Another Whitefield knight next to their leader added, "Make all the threats you want, but at the end of the day, you're only a disgraced Tribune exiled to the fringes of the kingdom. You have no power to follow through with your big talk."

"I think we're done here," the lead Whitefield knight stated, and he and his entourage stood up and made for the door, shoving their way past a few of the Legion knights in their way.

Noticing the expressions of said Legion knights and knowing a fight was about to break out, Jean rose from his seat and shouted, "Let them go!"

The Legion knights glared, but they allowed the Whitefield knights to pass. However, the last Whitefield knight to leave the cabin glanced back over his shoulder at Jean, then spat on the floor. Jean scowled, but he still let them go.

"Those cocky bastards ought to be strung up by their entrails," muttered Arrius.

"They want us dead," Jean said.

"Why in all the fucks aren't they going to help us?!" Edmond angrily wondered.

"Count Whitefield fought hard to stop the Bull King from building a Legion fort on his land," Jean answered. "Now, he sees an opportunity to get rid of us, namely by letting the Valemens overrun the fort."

"But he'll lose the support of his outlying Barons as well as thousands of his own peasants," Gaston remarked.

"I'm sure he considers it a small price to pay to get the Legion out of his land," a cynical third-tier knight replied.

"His motivations don't matter," Jean said. "What matters is that he won't be bringing his army to help us. We're on our own, at least until the Consul of the North arrives."

"When might that be?" Edmond asked.

"A week," Jean guessed. "He'll probably have to wait for permission from Count Whitefield to enter his lands, and the Count will no doubt stall."

"So then, we're fucked," another third-tier mage muttered. "We can't hold the wall against thousands of Valemens! They'll breach our fort and kill us all! We have to run!"

"We're not deserting our posts!" Jean forcefully shouted. "To do so would be to abandon the Legion itself, and for such a crime, we'd be sent straight to the headsman's block! Besides, without Count Whitefield, there are thousands of peasants in the surrounding villages that would be left to the mercy of the Valemens if we were to run!"

The rest of the knights stared at the man who advocated running away. Leon, too, stared. He had never once considered running; to do so would be to abandon any chance he could begin his investigation into his family's downfall from within the Bull Kingdom. He had committed to his path, and a small thing like a Valemens army wouldn't make him alter course.

Plus, he still had his invisibility ring. If things were to truly go to shit, Leon was confident he could find a place to hide and activate it, then escape. But, that was only an option if everyone else—Alix and Jean specifically, along with most of the garrison—were dead, and the walls had been breached. Until then, at least, he was still a Legion soldier.

Chapter 152: The Valemen Charge

Leon returned to his and Alix's room in their assigned tower after Jean dismissed everyone.

"Any news?" Alix asked once he pushed the door open and strolled in.

"We're on our own," Leon said, "Count Whitefield won't be coming to help."

"That bastard," Alix whispered.

"It's certainly disappointing, but not out of anyone's expectations, I think," Leon said. "I haven't heard anyone here say a single good thing about Count Whitefield, so I doubt anyone really thought he'd march his forces up here to defend the wall, though it does put his own lands and holdings at risk."

"Has there been any word from the Consul of the North?" Alix inquired.

"None that I know about," Leon answered.

Alix controlled her expression, but she stumbled a bit from where she had been training and almost collapsed onto her cot. "... Then we're all dead," she muttered. "Seven hundred people can't defend this wall against thousands of Valemen..."

"Hey," Leon said, "don't think about that. That's not guaranteed. It doesn't look good for us, but technically, we don't have to prevent the Valemen from breaching the wall."

Alix looked over at him in confusion. "What do you mean?" she asked in a slightly suspicious tone.

"Just that the Valemen have to defeat us here, or their supplies would be cut off and they'd be trapped between us on the wall and whatever army comes to stop them. That means that even if they get through the wall, they still have to defeat all of us here. And that won't be easy, so long as we control the towers."

"Is that why you don't seem so concerned?" Alix asked, pointing out Leon's seeming lack of worry.

Leon was silent for a moment, debating with himself whether or not he wanted to say anything to her.

"And speaking of concerning things," Alix continued while Leon deliberated, "why are you able to use elemental magic? Have you been concealing your magical tier?"

"... I have not been concealing my power," Leon finally said. "But, I do have my own secrets which I'm under no obligation to reveal..."

Alix frowned, but she nodded in understanding. "And it's because of those secrets that you're not worried?" she asked.

"I wouldn't say I'm not *worried*," Leon replied, "just that I'm confident that I can escape even if the worst comes to pass."

"Well aren't you lucky," Alix said sarcastically. "Some of us don't have the luxury of being able to run away..."

"I never said I was going to run, just that I can escape *if* the situation were to require such a thing. I have every intention of staying here until the end," Leon defended himself.

Alix didn't seem to buy it, though, as her expression turned bitter and her frown grew deeper. "That doesn't make you not an asshole," she muttered.

An awkward silence followed their exchange. Upon looking back at his statements, Leon felt like he could understand why Alix would be mad. He had essentially bragged about being able to leave at any time and not being in any real danger.

Of course, that wasn't the case, but that was what Leon had indicated.

"You know," Leon tentatively began, "any of us could leave if we wanted to. There isn't anyone watching to keep any potential deserters from running, and most of the soldiers on the wall very much don't want to be here. Any of us could leave right now if we really wanted. But none of us are."

"What's your point?" Alix demanded.

"I *could* leave if I wanted, but I don't want to, just like anyone else here could leave if they wanted, but they aren't."

"Mmhmm?"

"I'm not going anywhere," Leon said reassuringly. "I've made the choice to stay here to the end, and I will. I'm not going to take the initiative to go anywhere, at least not without you."

"Me?" Alix asked out of shock.

"You're my squire, at least unofficially. And, in the future I hope, a friend."

Alix stared at Leon. They'd known each other for barely two weeks, and here he was talking about not leaving without her and saying he hoped they could be friends. The sheer ridiculousness and naivety of it actually caused her to burst out laughing, releasing her mounting tension.

"... You... You're... not going to... ask me to... marry you now... are you?" Alix asked while gasping for breath in between rounds of laughter.

Leon's face reddened a little, but after his interactions with Elise his tolerance for such teasing questions was a lot higher than it used to be; he kept a straight face and said, "I wasn't planning on it..."

"... Good," Alix said as she recovered from her laughing fit, "because you're not really my type. But, I suppose we can start at friends."

The two smiled at each other. Two weeks wasn't enough time for them to get to know each other well, but they had been through a couple life and death situations with each other. They could at least call each other friends.

They spent the rest of the day meditating and doing some light training. Late in the afternoon, a messenger arrived at the tower, telling Leon that if the Valemens hadn't attacked by midnight, then Jean would order another attack on their camps. They couldn't afford to waste the entire night waiting for the Valemens to attack, after all.

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“Are we ready to attack tonight?” Hakon asked his thanes. When he had ordered the war party to move south, his thanes numbered seven, but now they were only five, and his war party hadn’t even gotten past the first Southern obstacle in their path. Hakon was in a bad mood, to put it mildly, and his anger and sadness blended into his aura and put all of the watching Valemén on edge.

“We’re ready,” Hrorekr replied. “The Black Valley tribe was our biggest concern, but they have received replacement supplies, though it’s put us on something of a time constraint. If we don’t get past that wall in the next few days, we’re going to have some problems feeding everyone...”

“We’re going to break through them,” Hakon growled, “there’s no way they have the numbers to fully defend that wall. If they had, they would’ve launched more than just a single raid against us... No, we’ll break through that wall tonight, and tomorrow morning, we’ll burn every Southerner and raise our honored dead to the Sky Mother!” As he said this, Hakon’s eyes drifted over to a back corner of his tent, where Eirik and Ulfr’s bodies could be seen.

“They’ll pay for the deaths of our friends,” Hjalmar stated with a confident smile.

“They will,” Hakon agreed. “Tonight, they die. Tomorrow, we build a pyre.”

“Speaking of killing the Southerners...” Hrorekr said.

“Right,” Hakon said quietly. “It’s time to decide which section of the wall each tribe will attack...”

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The pass was quiet once the sun set behind the mountains. It was an eerie calm, one that no man atop the wall wanted to disturb. The sky was cloudy, the wind was silent and gentle, and the only light in the fort came from torches, candles, and the few magic lanterns in the towers.

Within his tower, Leon grew restless. There was a storm coming, and it was preventing him from getting comfortable. With every gust of wind that came in through the arrow loops, he smelt the damp air and knew that rain wasn’t that far off.

Ever since he experienced his first storm post-Bloodline awakening back in the Knight Academy, he had experienced half a dozen more. None of them provoked a reaction as strong as the first one did, with each successive storm having weaker and weaker effects. By the last storm, Leon was so used to the feeling that he could’ve easily ignored it if it wasn’t so beneficial to his training.

But his current restlessness couldn’t be ignored. Eventually, about two hours before midnight, Leon rose from his cot as silently as he could and made his way out of the tower and onto the wall. Most of the men guarding the wall did so from the numerous towers, so he actually felt more privacy out there on the ramparts than he did in the room with Alix.

Leon slowly breathed the night air, relishing the chill as it entered his lungs; it reminded him of the air in the Forest of Black and White. He leaned against the timber battlements and entered an almost meditative trance as he enjoyed the rush the oncoming storm was giving him.

He breathed deep.

[Leon,] said Xaphan.

[What is it?] Leon lazily asked.

[I think you might-]

[What was that?!] Leon suddenly interrupted.

[Hmm?] asked a startled Xaphan.

Leon's eyes snapped open and he stared out into the pass. It was still quiet and seemingly peaceful, but Leon could hear footsteps, the snapping of twigs and branches, and the rustling of leaves coming from the forest in the pass.

[I think... the Valemén are moving,] Leon said.

[Shit...] whispered Xaphan. [I'm going to prepare myself to aid you in this fight. I don't think you'll get out of it otherwise...]

[You're probably not wrong about that...] Leon grimly replied.

He darted back inside the tower and made his way to the top, where the guards who normally staffed the tower were. Under the usual conditions, they'd be playing cards, joking around, or otherwise trying to stay awake. However, with the Valemén so close, all of the men were at least wide-awake, if not alert.

"What's up?" the lead guard asked.

"Can any of you hear that? That sound coming from the forest?" Leon asked.

The lead guard strained his ears for a moment, then asked, "What should we be hearing?"

"The sound of marching Valemén," Leon answered.

The other guards at the top of the tower paled, then readied their weapons. They may be disdainful of the Valemén among them, but the story of Leon using his personal healing spells to save a Legion knight had spread. That, plus his third-tier strength, meant that when Leon said something, the guards treated it seriously.

"I think... I might hear something," one of the guards said apprehensively.

"Me too," added another.

Leon glanced at the lead guard. "Sound the alarm. Better to be safe than sorry," he said.

The lead guard still couldn't hear anything, so he hesitated.

Seeing this, Leon added, "I'll take responsibility for it if it's wrong, but for now, *sound the alarm.*"

The lead guard went pale, but he nodded and touched a runic circle on the battlements. A deep rumble resounded through the fort, which repeated itself after five seconds. It was enough to wake every Legion soldier, and the metallic sounds of men as they dressed and armed themselves rang out from every tower.

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Hakon heard the alarm from within the forest and he knew the war party had lost the element of surprise. He swore under his breath, then shouted, “FORWARD!”

His thanes and the third-tier warriors passed his order down to every one of his warriors and to every subordinate tribe. In minutes, the forest shook from the footsteps of more than twenty thousand Valemen who no longer cared about keeping quiet. They shouted war cries, they bellowed insults at the soldiers on the wall, and those with shields banged them. To the soldiers on the wall, it must have seemed like all the Northern Vales were about to crash down upon them.

Hakon smiled at the enthusiasm of his warriors. He could see the tree line in front of him, and just past it, the wall. There were a few hundred feet to clear between him and it, but that was nothing to a fifth-tier mage. He fully expected thousands of his warriors to die in those few hundred feet, though.

As he stepped out from the shadows of the trees, he saw the light shining from the fort towers. At the bottom of the biggest tower at the center of the wall was a dark spot that he knew to be the door. That was the target of the men at the side. His target, however, was the tower itself.

Hakon looked to his right, then to his left. His thanes emerged from the forest seconds after him, each leading their own group of warriors. Further down the line were the subordinate tribes, each one baying for blood. On his far right, the Black Valley Tribe didn’t wait for his order and started sprinting for the wall.

‘Morons,’ Hakon thought, but he couldn’t blame them. They had taken the most casualties in the previous night’s raid and had to suffer the indignity of being given food from the other tribes. Their honor had been gravely insulted to the point that they didn’t wait for their Great Chief to order the attack.

“Fuck it,” Hakon muttered, then he raised his voice and bellowed, “CHAAAARGGEEEE!!!”

Chapter 153: Battle for the Fort I

Hundreds of Valemen came pouring out from the trees and charged at the wall.

“ARCHERS, FIRE AT WILL!” Jean shouted. Only the few towers closest to him could hear his voice, but all the knights repeated his order down the wall. In seconds, arrows began raining down upon the charging Valemen.

“Guess they finally got tired of waiting around,” Jean muttered as he raced to the main tower from where he had been standing on the wall. He’d heard the alarm Leon had raised and ran to the tower with his sword, bow, and armor, so he and all the rest of the soldiers were ready.

The main tower had been built directly over the doors, to function as a sort of gatehouse—though the doors weren’t quite big enough to be considered a gate. Within, there was a small console of runic circles and a glowing diamond the size of his head locked within a cage. Jean hurriedly fished out a couple keys from his pocket, then he slammed his palm into several of the runic circles once the cage was open.

‘Hopefully the enchantments in the wall will work...’ Jean thought to himself. He’d activated the enchantments several times in the past few days, but they had never been tested in battle before, so he had no idea if they would function as they should. Compounding his worry was the state of the diamond

that powered the enchantments; it was glowing a dull red, rather than the orange it should've been if it were full of magic.

After a few tense seconds, he could feel the wall almost start humming with magic power, while the light emanating from the diamond flickered a few times. *'These damned things had better hold up; the wall was the only thing that was built here with any kind of care...'* Jean worriedly thought. He then turned around and made for the top of the tower, locking the cage behind him.

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'Six,' Leon silently counted as he nocked and drew another arrow. There were so many Valemen that he could shoot blindly and still hit an enemy, but he took a brief moment to find the strongest warriors. He fired his arrow at a second-tier Valeman who had managed to sprint so close to the wall that Leon barely needed to aim. Leon's aim was true, and the arrow pierced the Valeman at the base of his neck. The Valeman warrior crumpled, while Leon counted, 'Seven,' as he drew yet another arrow and searched for his next target.

Beside Leon was Alix and the ten-man squad that had been assigned to guard the tower.

"There!" shouted the squad leader, pointing at a large cluster of Valemen huddling behind their shields advancing up the hill their tower had been built upon. The squad targeted them and rapidly shot arrows, hitting the Valemen in their exposed legs and shoulders. The Valemen fell, and a second round of arrows finished them off.

Alix tried to follow along with them, but her skills with the bows were lacking. Fortunately, if there was one thing the fort had in abundance, it was arrows, so even though she missed frequently, the supply of projectiles didn't suffer.

In fact, every tower had been stocked with thousands of arrows that had been accumulated in the years since the fort had been built. This let every soldier in every tower shoot with almost reckless abandon, and Valemen fell in droves to this nonstop fire.

"They've made it to the foot of the wall!" shouted the squad leader in Leon's tower.

This shout redirected everyone to target those huddling down by the wall rather than those still climbing the hill. Unfortunately, the towers were rather limited in their fortifications and lacked machicolations, so to fire down at such a low angle, the soldiers had to lean out over the battlements. What made this problem worse was that some of the Valemen had bows, and they hid behind those with shields, so the soldiers had to endure counter-fire when leaning out.

But, this was less of a problem for Leon, who had his full suit of metal armor on. He glanced over the edge, located the strongest Valeman at the foot of the wall, then popped out from behind the battlements and shot him.

"Shoot at those who're charging! I'll take these assholes below us!" Leon shouted to the squad leader. He'd noticed that the other soldiers were wary of exposing themselves to Valeman arrows, so he went about trying to pick up the slack and let them go back to shooting those Valemen farther from the wall.

The squad leader nodded to Leon in thanks, then shouted at his men, "Fire at those closer to the tree line!"

Arrows kept flying out from their tower and striking Valemen. The twelve of them in the tower alone had already killed over a hundred Valemen, but more kept coming.

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From the tree line, Hakon could see hundreds of Valemen fall to the Southern arrow fire. He didn't react in the slightest, as he couldn't care less about the warriors from subordinate tribes.

Hakon glanced back over his shoulder at the hundreds of warriors from his own tribe waiting in reserve. They were quiet, but he could tell from the way they fidgeted about most of them wanted to get into the fight. He guessed that those he left with his thanes were equally restless, but he trusted his thanes to keep them in check.

"Patience," he whispered to those closest to him, "patience. Wait for those worthless dogs to deplete the Southern arrows before we attack..."

Hakon's eyes scanned over the length of wall that he could see. By his reckoning, several hundred second-tier and a few dozen third-tier warriors had made it to the foot of the wall. According to the plan, they would now try to jump over.

This was a difficult task with the men in the towers shooting at them, but there were too many targets for the Southerners to stop them.

"Get ready..." he called out, signaling his own warriors to prepare to charge. He was waiting for the Valemen to leap atop the wall to distract the Southerners enough for Hakon's men to attack in relative safety.

He saw one third-tier warrior, a chief of a small tribe of barely three thousand, jump up and reach out his hand for the edge of the wall. The wall was built high, but not so high that third-tier mages couldn't reach the edge. But, the chief couldn't reach it. His fingers just barely missed the battlements, and the chief fell back to the ground.

Hakon could see the look of disbelief on the Valeman's face as he stared up at the wall. The chief squatted down, then jumped again, putting far more strength into his legs than he had before. Yet, again, the chief didn't reach the wall. Hakon watched him closely that time and saw that the chief had seemed to slow down near the top, as if he had run into sludge. The chief loudly cursed and the warriors around him stared as more arrows from the towers fell upon them.

"Damned wall's enchanted," Hakon muttered. Looking to his right and left, he could see that all the second and third-tier warriors that attempted to scale the wall were running into the same problem. The Valemen couldn't get over the wall! A few warriors with climbing picks and a few more with axes tried to climb over or chop their way through the timber of the wall, but the picks couldn't pierce the wood and the axes bounced off.

Hakon scowled, then angrily growled to the man at his side, "Sound the fucking horn!"

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'Twenty-nine,' Leon counted as he fired arrow after arrow. The hill beneath the tower was littered with the bodies of dead and injured Valemen, but there were thousands out in the clear zone swarming

around the feet of the towers. Those that had shields had raised them to block the arrows, but from their positions, the soldiers could kill the Valemen with near-impunity while only having to worry about the few Valemen armed with bows.

The battle had only been going on for about fifteen minutes, but it already seemed like the Legion soldiers could win, despite the catastrophic difference in numbers.

“Hold out!” the squad leader shouted. “Just hold out and keep whittling their numbers down! We’ll get through this, just keep shooting!”

Leon stuck his body out over the edge of the tower battlements and fired another arrow, hitting his thirtieth target in chest. The Valeman dropped, but another Valeman fired an arrow back at Leon. The arrow bounced off Leon’s helmet, having no more effect than giving Leon his thirty-first target.

‘This isn’t so bad,’ Leon thought as he brought the archer who shot at him down with a well-placed arrow. *‘Not nearly as bad as I thought it would be...’*

Just then, Leon felt a shock run down his spine, and a tremendous clap of thunder roared over the wall. Or maybe it was just in his head, as when he stumbled back from the battlements, slightly dazed, none of the others looked even the slightest bit perturbed.

“Hey, are you alright?” Alix asked as she rushed forward to steady Leon.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine,” Leon said with some surprise. He shook himself a little, then got back to shooting, as he didn’t have the luxury of time to stop and think about what had just happened.

Leon seemed fine, so Alix, too, went back to shooting at the Valemen, though with markedly less effect than most of the other soldiers. But, with so much practice, she was getting better.

Suddenly, they heard the sound of a horn blast.

“That isn’t a Legion horn,” someone said.

“Get ready!” the squad leader shouted. “They’re probably getting ready for another charge!”

The men quickly got back to shooting, but something drew Leon’s eye: a small group of several hundred Valemen had emerged from the forest, and leading them was a man whose power he couldn’t see through.

Without a word, Leon stopped shooting at the Valemen below the tower and aimed at the leader of the newcomers.

“What’s up?” the squad leader asked. The others had already targeted that group, so it was surprising to see Leon stop what he was doing and turn his attention to them.

“Their leader is athane,” Leon answered, “looks to be fourth-tier.”

The squad leader paled, and there was a pause in the arrow fire from the others as they alternatively stared at Leon or the thane.

After a moment, the squad leader glared at the others and growled, “Get back to shooting! They still can’t get over the wall!”

[That one can,] murmured Xaphan.

[What was that?] Leon asked.

[The enchantments on this little wall look like it creates a kind of cushion of compressed air that keeps anyone from just jumping clean over,] Xaphan explained. [However, it seems to me like they've either decayed from lack of use and maintenance, or were rather haphazardly inscribed to begin with. Knowing the skills—or more accurately, the lack thereof—of the enchanters in this corner of the universe, it's probably both. A fourth-tier mage should be able to get past this air pocket.]

[Shit...] Leon muttered.

[If you don't just stand there like a slack-jawed idiot, maybe you can kill that bastard before he makes it to the wall!] Xaphan forcefully said, almost shouting at Leon to get him back to the task at hand.

[Right!] Leon said as he pulled out a few more arrows.

The thane raised his sword, shouted a few words that couldn't be heard over the sounds of battle, and led the Valemens at his back in a slow march to the wall. These few hundred Valemens all had shields and had raised them into a crude shield wall, causing the arrows fired at them to, more often than not, bounce off harmlessly. The shields were made of thin wood and weren't enchanted, though, so a few lucky shots fired at the right angle allowed arrows to pierce through.

Leon breathed deeply, then fired off a shot at the thane. However, the thane seemed ready for it, and easily sidestepped the arrow. Leon stared in shock, then fired another arrow. Again, the thane dodged, then smugly smiled at the tower.

[He's mocking us,] Xaphan said angrily.

[I know...] Leon replied. He could feel the demon's quiet rage, and it started to affect him as well. He glared at the thane confidently walking toward the wall, smiling at the tower as if none of the soldiers atop it could do anything to harm him.

Leon was determined to prove the thane wrong. He fired half a dozen arrows as fast as he could at the thane, but all of the shots were dodged with the same ease as before.

To the squad's frustration and fear, the new group of Valemens climbed the hill and made it to the base of the tower with negligible casualties.

"Kill that one!" the squad leader shouted, pointing at the thane. He had trusted Leon to kill the Valemans, but now he had made it to the wall. The rest of the squad aimed and fired at the thane, but after hearing the shout, the Valemans ducked behind a shield of his own, and the arrows failed to harm him.

Then he laughed as loudly as he could and jumped with all of his might. The Valemans rocketed into the air, then slowed when he hit the air pocket. He didn't stop, though; his hand reached out for the battlements and found purchase, and the thane hauled himself up onto the ramparts. He had made it atop the wall.

"Shoot him! Kill him!" the squad leader insistently shouted. Seeing the thane get past the defensive enchantment terrified him, and he was almost hysterical.

The thane grinned at the soldier at the top of the tower, then started to menacingly walk to the tower door on the rampart.

"I'm going to come up there and kill every single one of you!" the thane shouted with glee. "If you're smart, you'd lay down your weapons and wait for your death, for I'm going to make the last man's death long and painful!" The thane cackled and blocked the next volley of arrows with his shield.

Leon frowned. "I'm going downstairs. He won't get past me," he said with determination.

The squad leader glanced at Leon like he was insane. "If you... Good luck," he said apprehensively. He was going to try and argue for Leon to stay, but he saw the look in Leon's eye and knew that Leon wasn't going to listen. "Target the rest of the Valemens! Kill them all!" the squad leader yelled, redirecting fire away from the thane and back to the hundreds of Valemens below them.

Leon, meanwhile, darted down the stairs of the tower. Alix made to follow, but Leon shook his head at her. "Stay here and keep shooting, I've got this," he said. Alix wasn't happy, but she stayed.

Once he was alone, Leon took another deep breath. Now that he was inside, he could feel the oncoming storm all the more intensely. The distant rumblings of thunder echoed in his ears as if lightning had struck the ground next to him, and he felt the urge to go back outside, back to the top of the tower.

However, Leon resisted that temptation. Instead, he crouched down in a corner of the room with his sword drawn and the emerald in his invisibility ring gleaming.

Outside, the thane bashed his shoulder against the door. With every shoulder bash, the wood around the hinges splintered and broke, and the door sagged in its frame.

"I'm coming in, and this shitty door isn't stopping me!" he shouted. "Get ready, because here I come!"

With a bash synced to his last shout, the door burst open with the lock and hinges torn from the frame, and the thane rushed inside. He expected several of the soldiers to be down there waiting for him, but instead he saw an empty room. He almost couldn't believe his good fortune, so he smiled and made his way for the stairs.

Invisible, Leon silently crept up behind the thane, and lunged forward with his sword as soon as the Valemans' back was turned. The thane's defenses were lowered, so the sword sank in deep, sliding between his ribs.

The thane let loose an ear-splitting scream and tried to turn, but Leon just twisted his hips and sliced the Valemans' chest open. The thane fell to the floor, mortally wounded. He glared at Leon, who had reappeared as soon as his sword touched the Valemans. The thane struggled to push himself up, but Leon didn't give him the time; he raised his sword and plunged it down into the thane's neck, separating the thane's head from his shoulders.

[HAHAHA! He wasn't expecting *that*, now was he?! Maybe he might've sensed something if he was paying more attention and wasn't so arrogant!] Xaphan shouted in glee from Leon's soul realm.

For his part, Leon remained quiet. He could barely hear Xaphan over the roar of the thunder in his ears. He only took a brief moment to stare down at the dead thane before he sprinted back up to get back to the fight.

Chapter 154: Battle for the Fort II

Leon rushed back up the stairs to the top of the tower, returning his sword to its sheath as he went. When he made it to the top, he was confronted by the squad leader and two of the other soldiers brandishing their spears at him until they realized who it was.

"That thane's..." the squad leader began hesitantly.

"He's dead," Leon confirmed. "But, the door was torn off. I'd recommend sending some of the guys here to fix it."

The squad leader stared at him for a moment in disbelief before Leon's words sunk in. "Right!" he said a moment later. "You two, go take care of the door!" he directed to the two men at his side.

"Back to shooting," Leon muttered as he took his bow off his shoulder and returned to the battlements.

—

Arrows whizzed past Hakon's head and feet, and more bounced off his shield. He'd led his men to the base of the tower overlooking the door and endured withering fire from the most heavily fortified place on the wall. Fortunately, though, he'd only lost a handful of men. When they reached the locked doors, the rate of fire his group had to take was greatly reduced, as the Legion soldiers were firing at a disadvantageous angle and there were a few Valemens with bows shooting back.

"Why is this damned door not open?" Hakon demanded of the handful of third-tier warriors standing before the door with greataxes.

"The thing's magicked shut!" the warrior in charge, a chief of a subordinate tribe, answered. "Our axes bounce right off!"

Hakon frowned. He didn't want to jump over the wall, as he'd be left alone surrounded by at least forty Legion soldiers. He trusted his thanes to take the other towers they'd targeted, but he wanted to bust down the door.

"Move," he said, shoving past the tribal chief. "And give me your ax!"

The chief frowned, but Hakon wasn't going to let him say no; the Great Chief grabbed the ax out of the lesser chief's hands and approached the door. Hakon had his own ax strapped to his back, of course, but he wasn't about to let his blade be dulled upon a Legion door, and neither was he going to subject his hatchet to the same indignity.

Hakon took a deep breath to focus his mind and channel his magic. He could feel the wind around him pick up slightly, and the air around the ax-head compress itself into a sharp blade. Hakon then wound himself up, then brought the ax down upon the door with terrific might...

... and it rebounded right off the door, to the dismay of the watching Valemens. But, Hakon wasn't deterred. He saw the splinters that came from the door, and he knew that despite the enchantments, he could get through. He heaved the ax above his head and smashed it into the door again. Then he did this a third time, and a fourth. He kept swinging, and even started to more actively use his magic, causing the air blade he covered the ax with to explode on impact with the door.

The door started to shake with every chop, and the Valemen started to take heart, as they could see it was only a matter of time before their Great Chief brought the door down.

In the tower above Hakon, Jean could see the Valeman breaking down the door. He'd directed some of the archers to shoot at him, but the other Valemen were covering him with their shields.

"This bastard..." Jean muttered. "Squad Three! Get down to the secondary wall!"

Immediately, ten men were led by a third-tier mage down from the tower and to the crude walls constructed around the door. Even if the Valemen broke the door down, the hole they'd create would be small enough that a single squad could keep them from coming through—especially once the bodies started piling up.

Only, Jean was hoping it wouldn't come to that.

"Get the rocks," he ordered another third-tier mage. The soldier in question then disappeared down the stairs, returning a minute later with a bag of large heavy stones. Four other soldiers had followed him, bringing enough stones for every man on the tower to start throwing and dropping them with impunity.

Meanwhile, Hakon kept chopping his way through the door. He was making slow but steady progress, chipping splinters away from the door with every strike and shaking the hinges loose. But then, stones began to fall upon the shields of the Valemen.

Those shields had been enough to protect the Valemen from the rain of arrows, but the stones were far weightier, and smashed right through the shields. Valemen started to drop like flies, despite their shields. In just a few seconds, four men around Hakon fell from trying to block the falling stones.

"DAMNIT!" Hakon shouted as another man rushed forward to protect him, only to shatter his arm blocking another stone.

Hakon clenched his jaw and just kept chopping through the door, even as the stones fell around him. But then, finally, with one last mighty blow, the door gave way and was blasted off the wall.

"FOLLOW ME!" Hakon roared as he stormed through the doorway. The enormous crowd of Valemen surged forward to follow him, but they couldn't get through in any kind of hurry.

What greeted them on the inside were another set of walls. They weren't enchanted and had been clearly made in a hurry, but the men in the crude towers at the far corners started shooting at the Valemen immediately, so there wasn't any time for them to exploit the walls' weakness.

His wind barrier caused the first arrow to slide past Hakon's cheek instead of into his eye, leaving a bloody cut just below his right eye. The handful of Valemen directly behind the Great Chief weren't so lucky, and were hit in the chest, stomach, or thighs. They were down for the count.

"AAARGH!" Hakon howled in rage. He channeled his wind magic into four blades and fired them into the towers with all the force he could muster. The soldiers in the towers could only watch in horror as three of their comrades were ripped apart by Hakon's magic. The fourth blade Hakon had slung at one of the thin wooden columns that supported one of the towers, slicing it clean through. The tower began to slowly tilt before, seconds later, collapsing entirely.

The Legion soldiers within the other tower panicked, while their squad leader bellowed, "SHOOT HIM! SHOOT HIM!" Eventually, the squad leader's three remaining men got a hold of themselves and fired their arrows at Hakon, who was slowly advancing toward them.

"Not going to happen!" Hakon shouted as he activated his wind magic again. The arrows wobbled in flight and were deflected away from him, harmlessly impacting the wall behind the Valeman chief.

Hakon calmly walked to the tower, then hacked away at the columns with his borrowed ax. They splintered before his strength, and he quickly stepped back as the tower came crashing down. From behind him, the Valemen came sprinting forward, slashing and stabbing at the Legion soldiers as they tried to extricate themselves from the rubble.

Hakon, however, left them alone. Instead, he stared at the wall, then called forth as much of his power as he could. Just getting through the door and dealing with those towers had cost him much of his mana reserves, but he knew he still had more within him. He unleashed this power with a great swing of his ax, and a wind blade over ten feet long smashed through the flimsy inner wall.

The Valemen gave a great cry of victory as they spilled out into the fort, and Hakon tossed the borrowed ax back to its owner.

Above, Jean watched with a grim expression as the Valemen started to make their way through the tents, searching for soldiers to kill or loot to plunder.

"Second Squad!" he yelled. "Fire on those in the fort!"

Ten of the thirty-five men left in the tower turned around to fire at their new targets, but as they did so, a lucky arrow from a Valeman bow struck one in the eye, killing him instantly.

As the men next to him began to lose their cool, both from their fallen comrade and from their breached wall, Jean shouted, "Keep calm! Drag him to the side and do your jobs!"

His shout brought the soldiers back to reality, and they quickly followed his orders. This was no time to mourn.

Moving on, Jean quickly shouted, "Fourth Squad! Get downstairs and head off any Valemen who try to break through the tower doors!"

With those orders, only about twenty men remained at the top of the tower to shoot down at the Valemen. Making matters worse, the Valemen could now use what was left of the inner walls as cover from the arrow fire, and since they were moving through the doors, they weren't stuck at the foot of the tower—though there were still a considerable number bunched up at the door, waiting to squeeze through.

Hakon turned his eyes to the tower. He allowed the subordinate tribesmen to set about looting the camp, as there were plenty of warriors from his own tribe dutifully standing at his back, with many more slowly filtering through the door.

"Let's go kill them," Hakon said with a brutal smile. The Valemen behind him raised their weapons and shouted a war cry, then sprinted for the stairs. The doors to the tower were on the wall; there had been

other entrances down at ground level, but they had been in the way of the inner wall, and so had been covered up.

Suddenly, Hakon heard a shout from somewhere further down the wall. It wasn't distinguishable, but it was repeated a few seconds later louder and clearer. Hakon smiled, as he recognized it as Hrorekr's voice.

"Over here!" he called out.

"Chief!" Hrorekr shouted. Hakon was a little startled at his appearance when he finally came into sight; he was covered in blood, most of which came from his numerous injuries, and his shirt was in tatters.

"What happened? Are you alright?" Hakon asked once Hrorekr ran up to him.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just ran into another fourth-tier mage, is all. We fought, and though he did a number on me, I still won..." Hrorekr smiled reassuringly at Hakon. "I might not be able to continue fighting for the time being, but the Southerners have lost a powerful mage!"

Hakon laughed and clapped his thane on the shoulder. "Well done!" he praised. "Well done! Now, I'm going to go finish this. Have the horn sounded; we may not be able to get through at other points, but we *can* get through here!"

"Got it," Hrorekr said, and he raced off to find a hornsman.

Hakon, meanwhile, turned his attention back to Jean's tower. The Great Chief breathed deep for a few seconds, giving his soul realm and heart time enough to infuse more magic into his blood, then he started walking toward the tower doors up on the wall. The Valemén who got there before him were having trouble opening them, which he guessed meant the soldiers had barricaded themselves within.

'That won't work for me, though,' Hakon thought. As he walked, he regained enough power for one more wind blade, and he prepped just such an attack as he pushed past the crowd of Valemén on the wall. He paid no mind to the occasional arrow that hit the shields around him; his attention never wavered from the door.

The Valemén in his way parted, giving him an open shot at the door, which he took. He extended his fist, then opened his hand, firing his prepared wind blade into the door. It sliced clean through the door and most of the frame, and Hakon heard shouts of pain from the other side.

Without missing a beat, Hakon walked right up to the door and kicked it with all of his fifth-tier strength. The broken door almost exploded inward, and Hakon darted in with his hatchet flashing. In an instant, the three soldiers holding the door were killed, though they had already been injured by his wind blade.

The other ten Legion soldiers in the room stared at him in shock, before three of them attacked Hakon with spears. Hakon nimbly dodged them, then swept them aside with his hatchet, ripping them out of the hands of the soldiers and breaking their fingers. They didn't have the time to process what just happened, though, as in a flash, Hakon's hatchet opened all of their throats in one swift motion.

As he did this, more Valemén poured into the tower, and the remaining soldiers were quickly overwhelmed. The Valemén were merciless, and all were stabbed, hacked, or bludgeoned to death.

Hakon started making his way upstairs. He moved at a slow, confident walk, as he didn't think there were any soldiers around who could stop him. His thoughts were confirmed when he arrived at the top of the tower and saw the stunned faces of the soldiers still there. The strongest man there was Jean, a fourth-tier mage, but the soldiers could still threaten him with their numbers.

Well, they could've if Hakon's Valemen weren't following him. They rushed out and engaged the soldiers in combat while Hakon and Jean stared each other down. Hakon towered over Jean, and he sneered at the soldier.

"You're done, now, Southerner," Hakon said hatefully, practically spitting the words out.

"Not yet," Jean said while raising his sword.

Hakon smiled, then charged at the soldier. Jean was fast and strong, certainly more so than Hakon was expecting, and Jean had the training and experience to be genuinely threatening. Jean blocked every strike and dodged every shield bash Hakon threw his way. He even threw in a few counter-moves, but Hakon pressed forward, pushing Jean to the edge of the tower.

As strong as Jean was, as strong as a fourth-tier mage with the proper training was compared to a fifth-tier who had more or less muddled his way through the magical tiers, Jean simply couldn't get past Hakon's shield. Every counter-attack Jean threw his way bounced harmlessly off the shield, and when Jean found his back pressed against the stone battlements, he knew that it was all but over.

Still, he didn't give up. He kept swinging his sword at Hakon, even as the Valeman's hatchet bit into his thigh. Jean still didn't give in; he swung his fist at Hakon after the Valemen parried with his shield and knocked Jean's sword from his hand.

Hakon's next move was vicious. He brought his hatchet down on Jean's outstretched fist as he dodged, chopping Jean's hand off at the wrist.

Jean screamed in pain, but this still wasn't going to make him stop resisting the Valeman chief that had led an army to his fort. Every second he could keep the Valemen at the fort was another second his men might be saved, and it was another second that the people in the surrounding villages would be safe.

So, the fourth-tier soldier fought through the pain in his injured leg and threw himself at Hakon's waist, trying to tackle the larger Valeman to the ground. Hakon, however, remained standing, and after tossing away his hatchet and shield, he wrapped his arms around Jean and lifted the soldier into the air. Then, with some difficulty from the struggling Jean, he lifted the soldier high above his head, and he threw him from the top of the tower.

Under normal conditions, such a fall would hardly be anything to Jean. But, with his injuries, he couldn't properly brace himself with his magic, and he hit the ground with a gut-wrenching crunch.

From the top of the tower, a slightly-winded Hakon stared down at the motionless Jean and smiled.

"THIS FORT IS OURS!" he roared. As he did, he heard the sound of a Valeman sounding a horn. Hrorekr had found a hornsman, and now the entire Valeman army began to converge on the breach.

There were still a few towers to deal with, but the Valemen had made it through the wall.

Chapter 155: Battle for the Fort III

Hakon Fire-Beard triumphantly walked down the stairs and left the tower. He didn't want to move quickly as his magic was almost depleted, so he walked as dramatically as he could, strutting down the steps of the wall and standing over Jean as heroically as he could. The Valemen around him looked to their Great Chief with shining eyes, as they could barely believe that he had led them into the South.

Hrorekr met Hakon where Jean fell.

"This one is still alive," Hrorekr said after a moment, noticing the bubbles in the blood around Jean's nose.

"Well we're just going to have to fix that," Hakon said as he raised his hatchet and brought it down on Jean's head. "These Southerners are tough," he said as he straightened up, "I think any of us would've been killed had we suffered this fall."

"Fortunately, we didn't," Hrorekr said with a smile.

From a little to the east, a voice said, "You did it! You breached the gate!"

The two Valemen turned and saw Hjalmar, who had also made it over the wall. He, however, wasn't quite so battered and bloody as Hrorekr.

"You look like shit," he said to Hrorekr.

"I'm alive, though, which is more than can be said for the bastard that fought me," Hrorekr responded.

The three Valemen had a little chuckle, but then they got to work. They had to coordinate the rest of their army coming through the doors, which Hrorekr took care of, and they had to get the men looting the fort under control, which Hjalmar went to deal with. Hakon, however, went back up to the wall and took a seat where he could look out over the fort. He was exhausted, and he needed some rest.

—

Following the second blast of their horn, all of the Valemen around Leon's tower began to retreat back down the hill.

"SHOOT THEM!" the squad leader cried. "SHOOT THEM NOW, WHILE THEY'RE EXPOSED!"

All twelve of the soldiers atop the tower began to fire arrows as fast as they possibly could. It took the thousand or so Valemen that were around their tower almost ten minutes to cross the distance between the tower and the forest, but they left another hundred or hundred and fifty behind, dead or bleeding on the ground.

"Is that it?" one of the soldiers asked. "Did we win?"

"If we managed to fight them off, we'd have gotten a signal from the center," the squad leader said. "A horn blast, or a signal flare. This can't be a retreat..."

"Maybe they got in somewhere else," Alix theorized. "They couldn't get in here due to the wall's enchantments, and the only one of their people who could was killed by Leon. Maybe another one of the thanes got through in a different place, so that's where all the Valemen are going..."

Leon and the squad leader glanced at each other. They both suspected the same thing, since the Valeman horn had sounded from a direction that seemed disturbingly too far south.

"Maybe..." the squad leader said quietly.

"For now, we don't need so many people up here. Maybe we should focus on barricading the entrances to the tower?" Leon suggested.

"That's a good idea," the squad leader agreed. He quickly took eight of the men downstairs to do just that, leaving Leon, Alix, and one other soldier up on top of the tower to keep watch.

The three stayed up there in tense silence. If the Valemens attacked again, they'd immediately raise the alarm, but it didn't seem like that was going to happen. After their attackers left, there had been no sign of movement from the forest hundreds of feet away. But, they couldn't let down their guard—not until they received word from Jean that the danger had passed, anyway.

"Hey, someone's coming!" Alix suddenly cried, pointing to the wall.

Leon hurried over and checked it out. A man was running along the ramparts of the wall, and it seemed like he was injured as one of his arms was held close to his chest.

"It looks like he's a fourth-tier mage," Leon said with some trepidation.

"Should we raise the alarm?" Alix asked nervously.

"... No," Leon said after a moment of thought. Then, he shouted down at the rapidly-approaching man, "STOP! OR WE'LL SHOOT YOU!"

To Leon's surprise, the man actually stopped. After a short moment of silence, he shouted, "I'm Edmond, a knight of the Legion!"

The three of them breathed a sigh of relief, and Leon called out, "Sorry, just have to make sure!"

Edmond ran up to the door while Leon went down to meet him. Fortunately, the squad was still working on the ground-level doors and hadn't yet started on the wall-level doors, so Leon could let Edmond in.

"You're injured," Leon remarked once Edmond entered the tower.

"I am. A fourth-tier Valeman tried to jump over the wall and attack my tower. I came out on top, but many of my men can't say the same..." Edmond answered, wincing at both the pain of the wound on his chest and from losing his soldiers.

Leon pulled out one of his healing spells and handed it to the knight. "This should help," Leon said.

"Thanks," Edmond replied as he applied the spell.

"So, did all the Valemens around your tower leave, too?" Leon asked.

"They did, and I was going to find Jean to see what was happening. I can't believe the Valemens would just leave like that, after barely an hour of fighting..." Edmond explained.

"It is strange," Leon replied.

“How’re things here?” Edmond inquired.

“We’re good,” Leon answered. “Another fourth-tier thane attacked, but I surprised him after he opened the door. Managed to kill him. All of my guys are doing fine.”

“That’s good to hear,” Edmond said with a smile.

As they spoke, the healing spell was exhausted and, though Edmond had to move gingerly, he no longer needed to try to keep himself from spilling out through his wound.

“Anyway,” the knight said, “I’m going to the main fort encampment. You should come with, to see what’s happening.”

Leon frowned, but after a moment of thought, nodded. “Hang on,” he said, “let me tell the others here.”

“Don’t take too long,” Edmond said.

Leon quickly informed the squad leader of what he and Edmond were doing—though he referred to it as a ‘scouting the encampment’ rather than looking for Jean—and then he went and did the same with Alix.

“What should I do?” Alix asked.

“Stay here,” Leon answered. “I have a very bad feeling about where those Valemén went, and it would be best for you to stay in the most defensible place you can. A first-tier mage won’t survive long outside if the Valemén have indeed gotten inside the fort...”

Alix frowned, but she understood her own power and the need to stay behind, so she agreed to stay.

Leon went back downstairs to where Edmond was waiting and said, “Let’s go.”

Edmond nodded, and the two left the tower. They ran along the wall in silence for a few seconds, long enough to escape earshot of the people in Leon’s tower.

“So...” Edmond began, his voice wavering slightly, “the main encampment has probably fallen...”

“I figured as much,” Leon said grimly.

“Good. I didn’t want to say so back in your tower, though it seemed you were taking some precautions...”

“Even if the Valemén found a way through the fort, they still need to take the rest of the towers so that we don’t re-fortify the wall and prevent them from going home,” Leon said matter-of-factly.

“Indeed, they can’t afford to leave us behind,” Edmond agreed.

“How many towers are between us and the center?” Leon asked.

“Five,” Edmond answered.

“Let’s hope they’re intact...” Leon said.

Fortunately, when the two arrived at the closest tower, they found a squad of soldiers who, despite being worried and confused, were all fine. The next tower, however, wasn't so lucky; all the soldiers stationed there were dead. The third tower was the same, only with twenty soldiers instead of only ten.

Leon and Edmond glanced at each other on the way out of the tower. With only two more towers to go, they could see the top of the central tower over the hills and hear a loud commotion from the main encampment, a commotion that those who were left to defend the center couldn't make by themselves.

"No doubt anymore," Edmond said, "the Valemén are in."

"Should we fall back and try to barricade ourselves in a tower, try to wait until reinforcements arrive? Or should we run?" Leon asked.

Edmond's eyes narrowed as he thought. "Let's get a little closer to see the situation first..." he muttered.

Leon clenched his jaw, but he nodded. He also subtly started to twist the invisibility ring on his finger and hoped he wouldn't need to use it.

—

The Valemén rampaged through the fort's tents, but given the size of the place, the looting was over less than an hour after Hakon broke through the door.

"So, what now?" Hrorekr asked Hakon.

"We wait for everyone else to assemble, then we crush the rest of the towers," Hakon growled.

"How long will that take?" Hjalmar asked.

"As long as it needs to," Hakon said.

In the time he had been sitting and waiting on the wall, one more of his thanes had arrived—the man whose clothes were covered in bells—and most of the Valemén that had been sent to other parts of the wall were lining up to come through the relatively small doors. It was a slow process, moving so many Valemén through, but they were essentially in control of the fort, so they weren't in too big of a hurry.

"I want a count of how many warriors we still have," Hakon ordered. "I also want scouts sent out so we know what's nearby. We're going to need to find food in the next couple of days, and I want to know where that food is."

"What about our missing thanes?" Hjalmar asked.

Hakon grimaced. "They... might not have made it," he said quietly.

"Speaking of which, should I get started on building Eirik and Ulfr's pyre?" Hrorekr asked. "There's a few cabins nearby that we can tear down..."

"Do it," Hakon said bitterly. "We'll burn them tonight. Use the men who guarded this tower as kindling. Tomorrow, we finish our job here, and destroy the last remaining towers!"

—

"We need to get back to the towers," Leon whispered, seeing the thousands of Valemens down in the encampment. He was quietly thankful that he moved all of his irreplaceable items out of Sam's squad's tent while he was able, though he felt like he wasn't going to see most of his clothes ever again, which had been left behind.

"No, Sir Jean may still be around here," Edmond whispered back.

Leon frowned, but he didn't press the issue. The two were up on the wall, hiding within the shadows. As they waited, Leon felt a familiar itch as thunder roared in his ears and lightning flashed miles to the south.

"Shit," muttered Edmond. "If this storm hits us, it will affect our archers, assuming the Valemens don't wait until it's over..."

"That storm is coming for us," Leon said with certainty.

"With the way this battle has gone for us, I wouldn't be surprised if you're right," Edmond said.

"Hey, look at that pyre!" Leon said, pointing to the enormous wooden platforms that the Valemens were building from the ruins of the cabins.

"What am I looking for?" Edmond asked. The only thing of note he could see were the Valemens celebrating the seizure of all the spare weapons from the supply cabin.

"Look at the bodies that are being stacked," Leon directed, pointing to the area beneath the main platforms where the spare wood had been piled.

Edmond followed Leon's directions and saw that the bodies being piled on top of the wood were men he recognized. In the center of the pile was a figure he recognized as Jean, though it was only by his clothing that Edmond could identify his commander as his skull had been pulverized beyond recognition.

The knight stared in shock, horror, and grief, his mouth agape and his eyes wide and teary.

After giving him a few moments to process, Leon gently said, "We need to get back to the towers we still control. We need to prepare for the Valemens."

Edmond didn't respond.

"This funeral will give us some time," Leon continued, "but we have to use it! We need to leave!"

"I can't leave him here," Edmond said quietly. He slowly turned to look at Leon and said remorsefully, "I'm not going back with you, Leon. I have to get to my commander."

Leon looked back at Edmond in disbelief. His expression alone demanded 'why?'

"I can't let him go out like that," Edmond said, turning his attention back to the pyre.

"... I'm not going with you, if you do this," Leon said slowly.

"And I'm not asking you to," Edmond said with a smile. "Go back to the towers, get everyone ready for what's going to come for them. I'm going to get Jean, and I'll meet you back there."

"I think you're being overly optimistic," Leon replied.

“Optimism is a good thing,” Edmond said. He was still smiling, but his eyes seemed hollow and hopeless, and they didn’t leave Jean’s body.

“Good luck,” Leon whispered, then he vanished back into the darkness and started making his way back to his tower.

Edmond stared down at the pyre and thought to himself, *‘I’m sorry for wasting your healing spell...’*

Then, disregarding all caution, he jumped down from the wall. He walked right up to the encampment, which was still chaotic enough that it took the Valemens a moment to notice when he walked out into the light.

Those around him stared in shock at the Legion soldier that just waltzed out of the darkness. So shocked were they that they barely had the time to react before Edmond had drawn his sword and killed three of them with a single slash.

“A SOUTHERNER IS ATTACKING!” another Valemans bellowed, then he and his comrades fell back and spread out into a circle around Edmond.

“You made a big mistake coming here, moron,” another Valemans said derisively to Edmond.

Edmond, however, just smiled back at the man and lunged forward. Almost faster than the Valemans could blink, Edmond had skewered him upon his sword. The knight then twisted, slicing clean through the Valemans and biting into the flank of the next Valemans in the line.

The rest of the Valemens weren’t going to just stand there, though, and several of them stabbed toward Edmond with their spears and axes, but Edmond twisted out of the way and counter-attacked. The Valemens around him were only of the first and second-tier, so his fourth-tier strength and speed nearly overwhelmed them, and after killing fifteen in less than two minutes, only three were left.

There were far more Valemens among the tents watching, however, and as soon as Edmond finished off the last three of the initial group, more Valemens rushed in to take their place. There were even a few with vicious smiles on their faces as they anticipated the entertainment they’d get from watching the soldier face hundreds of Valemens a handful at a time.

However, before Edmond could move to finish his last three opponents, a wind blade came ripping out of the darkness and sliced his sword arm clean off.

Edmond fell to the ground with a blood-curdling scream, and Hakon stepped out into the light, closely followed by Hjalmar and Hrorekr. They paid no mind to the dead Valemens, as they were from a subordinate tribe—which was another reason why the other Valemens didn’t come in to help, as those watching were all from different tribes.

“You’re brave to come here alone,” Hakon said with cold fury. He didn’t wait for Edmond to reply before he brought his hatchet down upon the knight’s head, just as he’d done to Jean’s. “But it was still a mistake,” Hakon finished.

Chapter 156: Battle for the Fort IV

Leon sprinted back west along the wall, over the hills and through the towers filled with dead soldiers, until he reached the closest tower to his own.

"What happened? Where's Sir Edmond?" asked the squad leader in charge of the tower once Leon entered.

"... He stayed behind, to attack the Valemen," Leon hesitantly said.

The squad leader stared at Leon and his subordinates had to hold in their panic at the loss of one of the only fourth-tier soldiers in the fort.

"Why... why would he do that? Did *you* do something?!" the squad leader asked accusingly.

Leon didn't take the question too seriously, as he could see how affected the soldiers were at the news. "I didn't do anything to warrant him staying behind to let me escape, if that's what you're asking," Leon stated in an even tone. "Sir Jean was killed, and I think Sir Edmond lost all hope when he saw that. It wasn't until he saw Sir Jean's body that Sir Edmond made the decision to stay and attack the Valemen."

"Sir Jean..." the squad leader whispered in horror. He staggered back a step and had to lean against a table to stay upright. "What... what do we do now?" he asked quietly, his accusatory tone directed at Leon long gone.

Leon took a deep breath and looked around at the hopeless and dejected faces of the ten soldiers in the tower. "We keep doing what we've been doing," Leon said simply.

"We're going to be killed if we do that!" shouted one of the soldiers.

"If you're telling us to stay here, you can fuck yourself! I'm not going to stay here and wait for the Valemen to come and kill us all!" shouted another as he made for the door.

[If you don't stop that one, you're going to have a serious problem,] Xaphan observed.

[I know,] Leon responded. [If I let one go, none will stay...]

Leon released his killing intent and halted the soldier in his tracks. However, the tone he struck was conciliatory and reassuring, or rather, as conciliatory and reassuring as Leon could be. "I'm not saying we stay here. The soldiers were spread out among every tower along the wall to try and keep the Valemen from breaching it at any point. Well, the wall has been breached and the Valemen are in, so we don't need to spread ourselves so thin."

"What are you saying?" the squad leader asked. He was only of the second-tier, so he wasn't going to argue with Leon much even if the news Leon had brought back weren't so crushing.

"I'm saying we should gather as many of the soldiers that are left alive into one tower," Leon said passionately. "We take as many supplies as we can, bar the doors, and prepare for a siege. The Valemen won't leave us here to patch the breach and dig in while they're off raiding; if they do that, they'd only be caught between us and whatever force is assembled to fight them. No, they're going to come for us, so we need to prepare!"

"How many men do you think are left?" one soldier asked.

"Not sure, but as many as a couple hundred," Leon answered. "Potentially everyone to the west of my tower!" The fort had been built to be staffed by thousands of soldiers, even though Count Whitefield

only allowed five hundred to be stationed there, so there had been plenty of towers for the small garrison to spread into.

"A couple hundred might be a bit of a squeeze," one soldier mentioned as he glanced around at the tower. It could comfortably hold dozens of people if need be, but two hundred was definitely pushing it.

"We'll make do," Leon said with a shrug. "If we need to hold two or three towers, then so be it. But, we need to link up with other units if we're going to survive."

"... Makes sense," the squad leader said quietly. "All right! Then we'll follow you to your tower! Everyone, pack up any arrows, food, and water that you can find!"

Leon patiently waited for a few minutes while the soldiers scrambled to collect all the critical supplies they'd need, then found ways to carry them. He even offered to carry some of it.

"We can always come back later," Leon said, looking at one soldier who was carrying so much he was practically hunched over.

"I guess, but I'd personally rather to get this done in one trip so we don't have to," the squad leader admitted.

Leon shrugged. "Everyone ready?" he asked. They all were, but he only asked out of politeness. When they all nodded back to him, he smiled and said, "Then let's go!"

Leon picked up his own pack of supplies and left the tower, leading everyone west.

The people in his tower were a little surprised to see a squad of soldiers appear on the wall, but with Leon in the lead with his unmistakable armor, no one was shot, and Alix came downstairs to meet them. Leon filled her in on what happened as he put down the supplies he was carrying. As he spoke, both squad leaders came over and listened in.

"... so it would be ideal if someone could go to the other towers and have them come back here," Leon said. "And, it would be probably be most ideal if that person were myself."

"I agree," said the squad leader who followed Leon from his tower.

"As do I," agreed the other squad leader.

"If you're leaving again, I'm going with," Alix said with determination.

Leon thought for a moment, then nodded. "I doubt there's going to be any Valemen in our way, but if any appear that are third-tier or above, you are to retreat to the nearest inhabited tower."

Alix nodded her agreement.

"Good, then we should get going right now. We don't know when the Valemen might attack, after all."

—

"Our numbers are around nineteen-thousand," Hjalmar reported to Hakon.

The great chief was silent for a moment, letting that number sink in. "So we lost almost ten thousand warriors in our assault?" he asked solemnly.

"Hmmm, you're not wrong, but I'd guess only six or seven thousand were actually killed or wounded. The rest of our missing warriors just deserted after witnessing the massacre, I'm sure," Hrorekr added.

"Their loss is our gain, once we move on to the proper raid," Hjalmar said with a smile.

Hrorekr let out a deep contented sigh as he leaned back in the cot he was laying in. "What are you two going to do with your loot once we get home?" he asked.

Hjalmar smiled and said, "I'm going to present my wife with slaves that can do her work for her. She spends all day weaving silkgrass, so her hands are more callused than a carpenter's."

"Not a bad idea," said Hakon. "Personally, I will make a tribute to the Sky Mother and her Thunderbirds."

"You would give away a portion of your silver and slaves to the priests?" Hjalmar asked.

"We must honor her, and our fallen friends," Hakon replied. "We must show her why we had to send so many into her embrace, to show her that their sacrifice wasn't in vain, that we accomplished what we set out to do."

Hjalmar frowned, but Hrorekr said, "I'm not so sure about paying the priests that didn't want to accompany us south, but Hakon is right, the Sky Mother must be honored. She is more even-tempered than our wrathful Mountain Father, but he will only kill you; she will damn you for eternity."

"What about the families of our fallen?" Hjalmar asked. "Will they get a portion?"

"Yes," Hakon answered. "Even if I must give up all of my treasures, those who gave us their sons, daughters, fathers, and mothers so we could come south, and will never see them again, shall at least see Southern silver."

"Well, then," said Hjalmar as his frown turned into a smile, "maybe we ought to get started on getting that silver?"

"What are you suggesting?" asked Hrorekr.

Hjalmar sat up from his own cot and paced a little as he thought. "There are only, what, a hundred Southerners left here? We don't need nineteen-thousand warriors to stamp them out! Let's have half of our warriors kill the remaining Southerners, and then have the other half raid the closest villages! We can seize food, silver, and slaves all while we secure our way back home!"

Hakon frowned. "Stamping out the rest of the people here is the priority but send out a few thousand raiders. Make sure they know to bring back food above all else. Beyond that, we're going to have one hell of a time taking those towers tomorrow, so we're going to need most of our warriors to concentrate on that."

"What's the plan?" Hjalmar asked.

"Start in the east, then work our way west."

"Why in the east?" Hrorekr asked.

“Flatter terrain, which means more towers with Southerners. Less Southerners in the west, so we can safely ignore them for the time being.”

With their strategy set, Hakon and his two thanes relaxed and went to sleep. Hakon’s last surviving thane finished funneling the Valemen through the open doors of the wall an hour later and joined them. All nineteen thousand Valemen were now south of the wall.

—

“Only fifty soldiers...” Alix muttered as she and Leon watched a squad of soldiers barricade the doors and another squad fortify other parts of their tower.

Leon frowned. He’d hoped that the other towers would’ve had more soldiers to assemble, but it seemed that several of the towers to the west were considered so low risk that they weren’t even staffed; given that only fourth-tier mages and up could get over the wall, he understood assigning the soldiers to places where they were more needed, but he couldn’t help lamenting Jean’s distribution of manpower in his current situation.

Making matters worse, many of the towers to the west were attacked by hunting tribes that were more used to the rougher terrain, and which had a higher than usual number of archers. This led to the soldiers in the western towers taking significantly more casualties to Valeman counter-fire than Leon’s group had.

“It is what it is,” Leon said with resignation. “Now, we can only do what we can with what we have. Our tower is on a hill and has four floors, including the roof. All but the ground floor has arrow loops and all of our doors are being barricaded. We can hold out for a long time.”

“We only have enough supplies to last three days,” Alix countered.

“Then we’re going to have to ration,” Leon replied. “Jean’s estimation yesterday was that the Consul of the North would be able to bring three Legions to reinforce us within a week. We’re going to have to make those supplies last.”

“That’s a *long* time to wait with thousands of Valemen out there and only fifty of us in here,” Alix mentioned.

Leon frowned again. He slowly started walking up the spiral stairs leading to the roof, as he could still feel the storm coming. “We will hold out as long as we can,” he said quietly. “Not much else we can do. Fifty soldiers will be slaughtered out in the open. This tower will be our only hope of survival.”

“I...” Alix began, but then she caught herself. She could hear the pessimism and argument in her voice with only a single syllable, so she waited a moment before speaking again. “I understand,” she said.

“Let’s get some rest. It’s been a long night, and I doubt the Valemen will wait for tomorrow night to attack us again, not with their advantage in numbers,” Leon said, stopping at the room he and Alix used to train in. The two collapsed into their cots, as had about a couple dozen other soldiers. There was only enough room for two squads to work on fortifications at a time, and with a third squad keeping watch on the roof, that let two squads rest at a time.

—

It was dark the next morning. Storm clouds still covered the sky and lightning was striking the surrounding mountains with increasing frequency. The clouds were so thick that it was almost impossible to tell that the sun had risen.

Leon and Alix slept in a little, but suddenly, Leon was awoken by Xaphan's voice resounding from his soul realm.

[Wake up! Leon! Wake up!] the demon shouted.

Leon shot up and wildly looked around the tower room, his hand reaching for his sword. [What is it?] he asked groggily.

[It's the storm. It's coming now, you need to get up to the roof!]

Leon was disturbed by the sudden awakening that he didn't even question how Xaphan knew the storm was coming, but he trusted his partner. He bolted up the stairs, waking Alix up at the same time.

"What is it?" she asked with some panic, but Leon didn't answer.

Instead, he startled the squad on the roof when he burst out onto the roof and whipped his helmet off.

"What's wrong?!" the startled squad leader asked.

"... It's raining," Leon said calmly as a few drops of rain fell upon his cheek.

Chapter 157: Battle for the Fort V

The rain started as a gentle drizzle, but in minutes, it hammered the tower in torrential sheets, while the wind howled in the ears of the soldiers, and the sky lit up with frequent flashes of lightning.

Leon kneeled at the top of the tower and closed his eyes to meditate, seeming to not care about the rain that soaked through his charcoal Skyflax armor. Compounding this strange sight was the fact that the soldiers had rigged up numerous pieces of wooden furniture above the battlements to serve as cover from arrows, which the soldiers on top of the tower were now huddled behind to get cover from the rain.

"What the fuck is he doing?!" one soldier wondered aloud, giving Leon a strange look.

"Who cares?" asked the squad leader. "Let him be weird, you just get back keeping watch!"

The soldiers had to shout to be heard over the rain, wind, and thunder, so there wasn't much talking once the storm started.

"Leon, what are you doing?" Alix asked with some concern. She lay her hand on his shoulder, but a sharp shock of static caused her to jerk her hand away. She was a little annoyed, but it wasn't until she reached out again and had the exact same reaction that she started looking genuinely worried.

"Answer me, what are you doing?!" she demanded.

"I don't think he's going to tell you anything," the squad leader said.

"Just so long as he responds, in any way," Alix responded. She tried to shake Leon's shoulder one more time, but again, she had to jerk her hand back due to a painful static shock.

Alix frowned and stood there in the pouring rain watching Leon, waiting for anything that might show he was alright.

—

Hakon smiled when the rain started. He opened his arms and welcomed it, relishing every drop that fell upon the roof of the central tower. He watched the blood on the wooden timbers of the roof wash away under the relentless rain, to run down the side of the tower and onto the ground, where the ruins of the inner walls lay.

'The rain washes away the blood, consecrating this land of our victory with the life force of our enemies,' Hakon thought to himself as he smiled wider.

"Do you see this, my friends?" he asked of the Valemén in the fort below him. "Do you see how the Thunderbirds bless our actions?"

"How is *this* a blessing?" a second-tier Valemén bitterly asked as he struggled to stand up straight in the slippery mud. Unfortunately for him, the Great Chief heard him.

"You doubt my words?!" he thundered at the hapless Valemén, who shrunk back like a scared kitten in the face of the wrathful Hakon Fire-Beard.

"N-No," he squeaked.

"Which would you rather have, a slippery bit of ground or a Southern arrow in your chest?" Hakon demanded to know.

"The... the first one," the Valemén whispered meekly.

"The Thunderbirds of the Sky Mother have blessed our attack, there's no other reason for this storm! Those who rule the Sky, those who boiled the oceans and killed the Great Horned Serpents have granted us cover from the Southern arrows! We will be upon them before they have any idea we are even there!"

"YEEAH!" shouted one encouraged Valemén.

"WE ARE BLESSED!" bellowed another.

"BURN THE SOUTHERNERS!" called yet another.

"Yes!" Hakon Fire-Beard shouted in agreement. "Burn the Southerners! Stab the Southerners! Shoot them! Slash them! Kill them!"

The crowd of Valemén were roaring their agreement in between each one of Hakon's shouts. They bayed for blood so loudly that even the deafening sound of the rain and thunder were momentarily drowned out.

"Find those who live! Cast them from their stone towers! Light their wall aflame! FIND THEM!" With this last shout, Hakon gestured with his hatchet, 'follow me', then he charged eastward from the central tower. Like crazed beasts, the Valemén followed their Great Chief to the east.

They broke into every tower and ransacked the rooms, checking and rechecking to make sure no Legion soldiers remained within. It wasn't until they had gone nearly half a mile that they encountered their first inhabited tower.

—

Gaston stood atop his tower and stared out into the distance—or at least, as far as he could, given the rain and the darkness. There were two Legion squads behind him, huddled over and trying to keep warm and dry despite the lack of shelter from the rain.

“Endure it,” Gaston said to them. “This rain won't last forever, and I doubt the Valemen will attack in this weather. So for now, just try to deal with it. After all, isn't it better to be rained on than to have to endure a Valeman at—”

At that moment, a wind blade sliced through the battlements Gaston was leaning against and cleaved him in half. He had been taken so completely by surprise that he hadn't even the opportunity to summon his magic power to defend himself.

The rest of the soldiers stared in shock at Gaston's body as it collapsed into a bloody pile, with his eyes still frozen open in shock. There was a tremendous crash as the Valemen broke through the shoddy barricades they'd managed to set up, followed by the sounds of battle, but only a few of the soldiers were able to react.

“GET UP!” a squad leader shouted. “GET UP! WE'RE UNDER ATTACK! GET UP AND FIGHT!”

But for most of the soldiers, the sight of Gaston's body, the body of their only fourth-tier mage in the area, in pieces was too much. A few men dropped their weapons. A few more stared at Gaston's body, unmoving even as Valeman arrows fired almost from the base of the tower arced up and fell upon them. Several more fell to their knees or collapsed in despair as their squad mates were shot around them.

Finally, a gigantic Valeman with a blood-red beard and a blood-red hatchet appeared at the top of the stairs. He was followed by a short and physically unremarkable brown-haired thane who wore a sadistic smile, another thane with shining white hair and a grin of triumph, and one more thane with long black hair and a sash adorned with small bells.

“Kill them,” the leading Valeman growled in a deep voice that seemed to shake the foundations of the tower.

—

The remaining eastern towers fell before noon. They were unable to stand against the full might of the Valemen once the latter had reached the southern side of the wall. But, that wasn't to say the Valemen didn't take casualties—they in fact took many, about twice as many as the soldiers did—but when the Valemen turned their attention west, they still numbered more than eighteen thousand strong.

And all of these thousands of Valeman that hadn't been sent on a supply raid were marching on Leon's tower, where the last fifty soldiers of the fort that still breathed were taking shelter. The rain and thunder were loud, blocking the sounds of their marching through the southern hills and forests. The soldiers were also distracted by Leon's odd behavior, as he continued to kneel in the middle of the tower platform with his face turned upwards and his eyes closed.

Xaphan stared at Leon within the latter's soul realm. The pseudo-magic body created by the Thunderbird still sat upon Leon's throne, and it was surrounded by the same lightning cage that Xaphan had come to expect whenever a thunder storm appeared.

But, the demon was anxious; he stared intensely at Leon, keeping watch for anything that might seem strange or out of the ordinary. The Thunderbird itself hadn't made an appearance since the first time this phenomenon had happened, so Xaphan couldn't ask it what was happening. He could only stare at his partner attentively, waiting for the storm to pass.

But, something happened that caused Xaphan's bright orange flames to burn even brighter, and his red eyes to flicker in anger.

[LEON!] he shouted. [WAKE UP! THE VALEMEN HAVE ARRIVED OUTSIDE THE TOWER! WAKE UP!]

Of course, Xaphan had his magic senses tuned to outside Leon's soul realm, to keep an eye on what was happening outside. If Leon died, so did he, so he had to protect Leon as best as he could.

[WAKE UP!] Xaphan bellowed again as his fiery body burned even more intensely.

Leon remained quiet and unmoving. Xaphan groaned in frustration as he saw the Valemene come closer, creeping through the dark and the rain closer toward the unsuspecting soldiers in the tower.

So, the demon decided to try something drastic. He raised his hand and began to concentrate his magic power into his palm. There, the fire he conjured burned dark red, then began to brighten to orange, then to yellow. Xaphan pulled his arm back to wind himself up.

[HRRUAGH!] the demon shouted as he thrust his arm forward, and the bright yellow flame sped across Leon's tiny soul realm and hit the lightning cage, exploding into a great gout of flame that engulfed the throne as well as the marble slab it was built upon.

The fire died down almost immediately, and Xaphan saw that it had had no noticeable effect; the lightning cage kept sparking and arcing as it had before, and Leon still knelt motionless at the top of the tower.

[If you don't wake up, you're going to be killed,] Xaphan said quietly. He didn't even mention the result it would have upon him if Leon were to be killed while in this state. Xaphan conjured more fire, holding it until it burned a solar gold. However, as he prepared to launch it at the lightning cage again, a lightning bolt streaked out of the mists surrounding Leon's island and struck the demon, dissipating his fire and driving him to his knees.

Storm clouds gathered in Leon's soul realm and encompassed the island in an instant, while an eagle-like cry resounded in Xaphan's ears.

[Why are you attacking my descendant, demon?] the Thunderbird furiously demanded of Xaphan as it flew from the mists.

"If he doesn't wake up, he'll die!" Xaphan shouted in response. The Thunderbird landed atop the throne and looked down at Leon. There it stayed, quietly staring, and Xaphan awaited its response.

—

"There they are," whispered Hakon as he stared at the vague outline of the tower barely visible in the rain. He and the rest of his army had managed to get close using the forest and weather as cover, but once they emerged from the tree line and assaulted the doors, he felt they would be showered in arrows.

"Same plan as last time?" Hjalmar asked.

"No," answered Hakon. "This time, after I deal with those on top, Bragi will take the lead."

The dark-haired thane wearing the bells smiled and said, "I will break down those doors myself and bring death to the Southerners cowardly hiding within!"

"We still haven't found that 'Dark Warrior' who killed Eirik. If we had killed him, I'm sure we'd have heard about it by now," Hrorekr said.

"Your point?" Bragi asked.

"He's probably in that tower, and he's already demonstrated the capability to kill thanes," Hrorekr replied.

"But he hasn't fought *me* yet," Bragi responded with a confident smile.

"Cut the dick measuring," Hakon said sharply. "He may not even be in that tower, but if he is, I want him brought in alive. I want to burn him alive on the same pyre that we burned Eirik and Ulfr upon."

With the Great Chief's order, the thanes straightened up and waited for the assault to begin.

Hakon waited for a few minutes until his third-tier warriors and lesser chiefs reported in, telling him that the other towers in the west were empty.

'That black-armored bastard may have fled, but I'd wager he's in that tower,' Hakon thought to himself. Then, with all the hate and power he could muster, he began to channel his magic into his personal greatax. The ax head glowed a soft white from the wind magic, and Hakon held it for almost half a minute. As soon as he felt that it was enough, he swung his ax in a horizontal arc, chopping right through the trees to his right and left and sending a sharp wind blade rocketing toward the battlements at the top of the tower.

Hakon and his Valemén expected the same would happen to this tower as had happened to all the rest, that the wind blade would slice the battlements and leave those at the top of the tower defenseless. Then, they would attack the tower almost as they pleased. However, just as the wind blade was about to come into contact with the stone of the tower, the battlements seemed to erupt in dark red flame. Hakon Fire-Beard's wind blade wavered within the heat, and when it hit the tower, it did no more damage than the wind of the surrounding storm.

Time seemed to slow for Hakon in that moment. He felt frustration, rage, and a little bit of fear that his attack failed, but those were all forgotten as the fire dissipated. In the dim glow of the last remaining embers, Hakon could see standing at the battlements a soldier dressed in black armor staring back at him through his visor.

And then the embers went out, and the battlements returned to darkness.

“CHAAARGE!” Hakon furiously bellowed, and the Valemens rushed out of the forest and started to sprint up the hill toward the tower, with Bragi leading the way, all the while arrows fell upon them from the tower.

Chapter 158: Battle for the Fort VI

Leon felt incredible. It was like he knew exactly where every speck of power within him was, and as if he could direct it with perfect control. It wasn't that he was stronger or more powerful, but that his magic flowed through him with such ease as to be startling.

'Is this... the fourth-tier?' he wondered.

However, before he could really do anything to experiment, he heard Xaphan shout, [The Valemens are here! One of them is preparing to launch a wind blade at the tower!]

Leon's eyes widened in alarm as he stood up from where he was kneeling and drew his sword. He cut an imposing figure, standing in the center of the tower with his armor on and sword drawn, and he drew the eyes of every soldier standing guard.

“We're under attack!” he shouted, making his voice heard above the rain and wind.

There was a moment of silence as the soldiers processed what he had just said, and then they all scrambled to rise and arm themselves.

“Alix, go downstairs and raise the alarm!” Leon continued. Alix quickly nodded and ran downstairs, her relief that Leon seemed to be back to normal vanishing into the panic of another Valemens attack.

Then, Leon turned his attention to Xaphan. [Where is the attack coming from? The south?]

[Of course it's coming from the south!] the demon responded, with a slightly irritated tone at being asked such a question.

Leon wheeled around to face the south and stuck his head over the battlements. He couldn't see a thing for the dark and the rain, and channeling magic into his eyes did little to help. He could, however, feel the magic in the air swirling around and being sucked away into the gloom, giving an idea about where the attack was going to come from.

[Will I be able to use your fire to counter?] Leon asked Xaphan.

[Yes,] Xaphan replied instantly.

Leon smiled. He was ecstatic at the thought of finally ascending to the fourth-tier, but he had to suppress those feelings of elation until the current crisis was dealt with. He was facing down a fifth-tier mage, after all, and simply being fourth-tier wasn't going to deliver victory to him and the rest of the soldiers in the tower.

Suddenly, what looked to be a wave came streaking out of the darkness and straight toward him. In that moment, Leon summoned as much of Xaphan's power as he could, and let loose with a huge blast of fire, into which the wind blade careened.

[You stopped it,] Xaphan remarked.

Leon heard the demon, but he didn't respond. Instead, he glared back at the Valeman who had shot the wind blade, who he could now see from the light of the demon fire and from the wind blade cutting through the rain. They stared at each other until the rain extinguished the demonfire, with Leon's stoic face hidden behind his black helmet and Hakon's face twisting in rage.

"CHAAARGE!" Hakon bellowed from below, and hundreds of Valemen sprinted out from the cover of the trees.

"Fire," Leon said just loud enough for those around him to hear.

The soldiers at the top of the tower fired first, as they had the greatest range. Dozens of Valemen fell in the charge, but it was only a small drop in the bucket compared to how many were bearing down on the tower.

Alix sprinted back up the stairs, drawing Leon's attention. She nodded to him, indicating that everything was ready. To confirm it, arrows began flying out of the arrow loops on the second and third floors, fired by two of the other three squads in the tower. But, even with their casualty rate doubled, the Valemen kept charging.

[There's another wind blade coming,] Xaphan warned.

Leon looked out into the rain and sensed the same gusts of magic in the air indicating a strong magical attack on its way. [Yes,] he said to Xaphan, [I can see it...]

[Good,] the demon responded.

After several seconds, another wind blade, much bigger than the last swept over the Valemen struggling up the muddy hill and toward the tower, and again, Leon channeled as much of Xaphan's strength as he could. Fire burst out of his outstretched hand and met the wind blade, warping the air and dissipating the magic. However, it wasn't enough to stop the attack; the wind blade slammed into the tower and left a light scar across the stone battlements.

Leon was hurled back from where he had been standing, but the wind blade hadn't managed to penetrate his armor, so he picked himself up and ran back to the battlements, sheathing his sword and drawing his bow as he went. Several of the soldiers—including Alix—almost abandoned the battlements to rush over to him, but his immediate rise let them breathe a sigh of relief and get back to shooting.

[Please make sure to warn me if another wind blade is incoming,] Leon asked Xaphan. [I'll be too busy to notice.]

[No problem, but there may not be another,] Xaphan responded.

Leon would've asked why, but there were Valemen who had made it to the top of the hill and were taking shelter at the foot of the tower, so he focused on his bow. He drew a handful of arrows, took a quick moment to locate suitable targets, then started shooting. In a mere two to three seconds, Leon killed four second-tier warriors and one third-tier warrior, and he was only getting started.

—

Hjalmar and Hrorekr stared at Hakon as he panted from the exertion of the two large wind blades. Neither said a word, as they had seen Hakon use his magic enough times to know how draining it was—and after a day of killing Southerners, Hakon was getting tired indeed.

Plus, there were still hundreds of Valemens running past them to start climbing the hill, and implying any weakness on the part of the Great Chief wouldn't do with so many of them around.

"... Get... moving..." Hakon sputtered, waving his hand toward the tower.

Hjalmar made a few hesitant steps in the direction of the tower, but Hrorekr shook his head in refusal, so Hjalmar came to a quick halt.

"We're not going anywhere just yet," Hrorekr said, allowing a look of concern to appear on his face for a split second, just long enough for Hakon to see it.

The Great Chief was a little angered, but a lot more happy, as he clapped Hrorekr on the shoulder with a huge smile on his face. "I'll... be fine," he said. "You two... goo and... break down those... doors!"

"... I think Bragi can handle himself, but if you want me to reinforce him, I can do it myself," Hjalmar said, nodding to Hrorekr.

As he heard this, Hakon straightened up, took a deep breath, and forcefully said, "Get into the damned tower!"

Hjalmar took off toward the hill, leaving Hrorekr to keep an eye on the exhausted Hakon.

—

Leon fired arrow after arrow, felling more than two dozen Valemens in less than five minutes. A few intrepid Valemens tried to shoot back at the soldiers, but the rain and the incline of the hill made that nearly impossible. Making matters worse for the Valemens were the growing piles of bodies that were accumulating all over the hill.

But then, as he was searching for his next target, he saw one particular Valemans near the foot of the tower. What struck Leon about this man was his aura, which he was able to identify as fourth-tier! It wasn't a shapeless and formless mass that blended almost seamlessly into the magic in his surroundings, but could be clearly distinguished!

Leon smiled and prepared more arrows—including one he was saving for just such an occasion—targeting this Valemans.

Bragi, the Valemans in question, had struggled to get up the hill; the rain seemed like it was only growing more intense, and the mass of Valemens trying to get up the hill behind him was only resulting in small mudslides. The thunder and howling wind made it prohibitively difficult for the third-tier Valemens to assert control, so by the time he made it to the tower, Bragi was left with less than a hundred Valemens at his side.

And that group was only growing smaller, as the soldiers on the roof shot downward to pester him and his warriors, while those in the middle floors of the tower fired out into the sea of Valemens. Bragi himself had to rely on a shield to make it through the withering fire.

He ran straight to the door on the ground floor and rammed into it with his shoulder, hurling himself into it with as much of his strength and weight as he could. He didn't expect the door to burst open, but he did hope for some give. However, he was disappointed and slightly dismayed to see that the door held firm, without a single tremor shaking the hinges from the force of his blow.

Bragi grit his teeth and tried again, slamming his shoulder into the door, but the second blow did no more than the first.

Behind him, above the rain and the wind and the thunder, he could hear the sounds of Valemen falling, cursing, and screaming in pain. He howled in frustration, then threw away his shield so he could reach for the ax on his back. However, as soon as he wound himself up to try and chop through the thick wooden door, an arrow appeared from above and sank deep into his shoulder.

Bragi stumbled back from the shock and pain, dropping his ax as his main weapon arm lost all strength. For a moment, all he could do was stare at the arrow sticking out of his shoulder and try to raise his arm. The Valemen around him stared in fear; seeing an injured thane was a rare thing and seeing it before their eyes filled them with dread.

"BRAGI!" came a shout from the crowd of Valemen.

The Valeman in question turned around, disregarding his defenses and situational awareness in the shock of his injury.

Above him, Leon wasn't going to give the Valeman an opportunity to recover, so he nocked his special arrow, one that had a spell attached to it. He held the arrow by his cheek for a split second to confirm his shot, then released. In an instant, the arrow pierced Bragi between his shoulder blades and struck Bragi's heart.

One of Hakon Fire-Beard's last remaining thanes fell face-first to the ground, mortally wounded. As Bragi fell, Hjalmar burst forward, freeing himself from the crowd of Valemen stuck on the muddy hill behind the bodies of their kith and kin.

From above, Leon could see the thane running to his fallen comrade, but he didn't prepare another arrow. Instead, he watched and waited.

"Bragi! Get up!" Hjalmar shouted as he sprinted to the side of his fallen friend, who the other warriors had pulled away from the door and behind a small shield wall. Seeing the arrows in Bragi, Hjalmar turned to the other Valemen near the tower and shouted, "Get over here and help me with hi-"

As Hjalmar shouted for help, the spell attached to Leon's arrow activated, detonating in a spectacular pillar of bright orange flame.

From the trees, Hakon and Hrorekr watched in horror as the fire enveloped Bragi, Hjalmar, and the half dozen shield-bearing Valemen who had rushed over to help.

Without someone there to sustain it, the fire died down in seconds, but the damage had been done. Hjalmar and Bragi had been incinerated, and the Valemen who tried to help them were horrifically burned.

Hakon and Hrorekr silently watched the last embers of the spell die in the rain, while Leon merely clenched his teeth and got back to shooting his arrows.

“That man...” Hakon growled, staring up at the top of the tower. He couldn’t see through the rain and darkness, but he knew that’s where Leon was.

“We’ll kill him...” Hrorekr said with a vicious look in his eyes.

The two Valemen started walking forward with a slow, deliberate gait. Hakon was still recovering some of his magic power, but Hrorekr was fresh and ready for battle. Their combined auras and killing intent were towering, so much so that Leon could feel it from the tower.

[I think you’ve pissed off that wind mage,] Xaphan said, unable to hide his slight anxiety.

Leon frowned, then replied, [I defended against him twice, now. Doing so again shouldn’t be too difficult...]

[Fighting at range is very different than fighting in close quarters,] Xaphan mused, [but I hope you’re right...]

Down below, Hakon and Hrorekr’s advance seemed to part the Valemen in front of them. The hardened warriors made way for their Great Chief and his last remaining thane. With those two going forward, many thought, they might have the chance to scale the hill and join them in razing the tower.

As they came into his sight, Leon targeted the two leading Valemen with his arrows. His first arrow missed. It had been aimed at Hakon’s unarmored chest, but a seeming random gust of wind knocked it off course. Fortunately, it veered into the arm of a nearby first-tier Valeman, but Leon was hardly satisfied with that. He quickly drew and fired another arrow at Hakon, but again, it was blown off course, this time to land in the mud at Hakon’s feet.

[He’s using a wind barrier to deflect your arrows...] Xaphan analyzed.

“Shit...” Leon muttered out loud. “They’re going to get to the door...”

Chapter 159: Battle for the Fort VII

Hakon and Hrorekr walked slowly, making sure that their steps were taken with care. This ensured that, despite their slower walking speed, they reached the top of the hill much faster than any of the other Valemen that had tried.

As they slowly, inexorably approached the door of the tower, more and more soldiers started shooting at them. However, Hakon’s wind barrier was robust, and every arrow was harmlessly deflected away.

Seeing the lack of effect their arrows were having, Leon shouted to the soldiers, “Shoot at the other Valemen!” Then, he turned and ran downstairs, with Alix right behind him. He repeated his order on every floor, and to his slight surprise, none of the soldiers so much as batted an eye; they all simply followed his command and started shooting the more vulnerable Valemen.

[I think maybe they’re starting to respect you a little...] Xaphan remarked.

[*Maybe* is the key word, I think...] Leon replied as he came to a stop on the ground floor.

The squad leader approached Leon when the latter arrived, breathing a subtle sigh of relief and saying, "I'm glad you're here. I wasn't looking forward to my squad defending the door on our own..."

"Just stand back with your spears out, kill any of them that get past me," Leon said as he approached the door.

"Will do!" the squad leader acknowledged. He quickly started getting his people organized into a loose spear wall between Leon and the stairs.

As Leon stood there and waited, he glanced at Alix standing next to him.

"A fifth-tier mage is about to break down that door and standing next to me isn't going to be the best place when he does," he said.

"I'm not leaving," Alix said firmly as she drew the sword that used to be Sam's.

Leon was silent for a moment, then said, "I could very well be killed in a matter of seconds. It would be safer for you and better for everyone if you were to join the spear wall."

Alix glared at him, then slowly shook her head.

[This girl is *stubborn*,] Xaphan observed. [I don't think she's going to back down, young mage.]

"You're still in the first-tier," Leon continued, speaking bluntly, "I don't want you to get hurt or to get in the way."

Alix frowned for a moment, before deciding that her own pride could be set aside and her duties as Leon's squire took more precedence. "I'll be right behind you," she said as she took a few steps further into the room to join the squad at their backs.

"Good, because I think it's going to get heated in here..." Leon said as the door suddenly shuddered from a tremendous impact. The chairs, tables, and other wooden barricades securing the door shook and loosened.

Outside, Hakon chopped and hacked away at the door with his ax. He was in such a rage that he barely even stopped to breathe. Hrorekr stood off to the side, waiting for the door to swing open. Both Valemen were furious in ways that words couldn't describe, having just seen Hjalmar and Bragi die.

After a few minutes, the door to the tower was barely more than a few splinters, and Hakon began to fire small wind blades into the mass of furniture on the other side. These wind blades sliced through much of the barricade but didn't penetrate all the way through. Despite this, the barricade swiftly began to crumble.

With one last great swing of his ax, Hakon rocketed another wind blade into the barricade, and it collapsed. Hakon took a step back to catch his breath while Hrorekr charged in through the opening.

And he was faced with Leon, suited up in his black armor with his sword drawn, and a dozen other soldiers with their spears at the ready. Still, Hrorekr didn't hesitate; he barreled into the room with a pair of seax shortswords in hand.

However, he barely made it into the room before Leon raised his left hand and engulfed Hrorekr in a blast of fire. Hrorekr had prepared for something like this and channeled as much of his magic as he could into his skin, to protect himself from the heat and the flames. When the fire died down, he was left horribly burned, but still charging at Leon.

“You’re going to die, Southerner!” he roared as he stabbed toward Leon, hoping his speed and ferocity would carry him through to the win, or at least would distract Leon long enough for Hakon to come in and finish him off.

But, Leon wasn’t so easily shocked or intimidated. Instead, he slightly twisted his waist, allowing Hrorekr’s strike to connect, but slide off his armor. This put him in a prime position to slice through Hrorekr’s left heel, which he eagerly took advantage of. With a quick flick of his wrist, Hrorekr was sent stumbling down onto the floor.

Leon couldn’t follow-up, though, because Hakon came barging into the tower with his hatchet and shield at the ready. Leon immediately used another fire blast, but Hakon crouched behind his shield and countered with a gust of wind. The two magics clashed in between Leon and Hakon, letting only a few sharp slivers of wind through to bounce off Leon’s armor and a couple lonely embers to be extinguished on contact with Hakon’s shield.

Hakon rushed forward, intent on not letting Leon get another blast in. He went shield first, keeping his vitals as protected as he could. As a wind mage, he moved incredibly quickly, and closed on Leon before the younger mage could react. Hakon slammed his shield into Leon’s chest, lifting him off his feet and hurling him backward.

Leon hit the ground hard; the impact pushed all the air out of his lungs. Hakon raised his hatchet to bring it down on Leon’s helmet, but Leon snuck his left hand out from under the shield that kept him pinned and let loose with a third gout of flame.

Hakon was caught completely off-guard and jerked his head back, raising a wind barrier as he did. The fire twisted into this wind barrier like a tornado centered on Hakon. If Leon had been able to sustain it, he could’ve kept Hakon pinned, but unfortunately for him, the fire was gone almost as quickly as he summoned it.

While Hakon was distracted, one of the first-tier soldiers lunged forward with his spear, trying to stab the Great Chief in the knee. However, Hakon sensed his approach and sent the man flying into the wall with a burst of wind. It was only a minor setback, but it gave Leon the time he needed to recover, though the soldier’s ribs were almost certainly broken.

Leon quickly analyzed his options. The brief struggle with Hakon already had him convinced he wasn’t going to beat the Valeman in a straight fight, but if the rest of the squad got involved, he might be able to win. On the other hand, that would also open them up to being injured or killed and leave the ground floor defenseless. To make matters worse, his left arm was starting to burn. He’d ascended to the fourth-tier, which helped to protect him from the demonfire, but it was still taking its toll.

In an instant, Leon made up his mind. Instead of staying and fighting, they’d rely on the second floor’s defenses.

“FALL BACK TO THE SECOND FLOOR!” Leon shouted. Some of the soldiers hesitated for a moment, as they were only facing two enemies, but those two Valemen also happened to be the strongest Valemen left alive. Leon had also left Hrorekr badly injured, but no one had finished him off, so the thane was struggling to his feet with one of his seax’s in hand, ready to start killing the soldiers.

“You heard him, fall back!” the squad leader shouted, and the rest of the soldiers stopped hesitating and sprang into action. They sprinted for the stairs, while Leon darted backward, placing himself between the squad and Hakon.

Hakon glared at them but didn’t pursue. Despite these few setbacks, he didn’t think they’d manage to escape the thousands of Valemen outside. So, Hakon took the opportunity to help Hrorekr to his feet.

“Get back outside and rest,” Hakon said to his thane with a worried look. Hrorekr looked like he wanted to argue, but he kept his mouth shut and limped back out of the door.

Alix, too, looked like she didn’t want to leave, but Leon insisted. “Close the hatch,” he’d said, and Alix frowned, but sprinted up the stairs after the squad.

“So, then, Dark Warrior, what is your name?” Hakon asked. His tone was light and casual, but his killing intent soared, and he stared daggers at Leon.

Leon’s own killing intent had spiked, resisting Hakon’s and keeping Leon from feeling any weakness.

“If you do not identify yourself, you will die nameless!” Hakon shouted as he lunged forward, swinging his hatchet while keeping his shield up.

Leon dodged to the side and countered, targeting Hakon’s wrist. However, the Valeman was faster, and Hakon stepped just out of danger before turning and charging at Leon again. Leon had to stay on his toes to keep ahead of Hakon, but he couldn’t get a good hit with the Valeman’s shield up, so he raised his left arm and let off another blast of fire, scorching his arm and filling his nose with the stench of his own burning arm.

As expected, Hakon huddled behind his shield to prevent himself from being burned, and Leon took the opportunity to strike low, aiming for Hakon’s exposed shins. But, just as his blade was about to connect, Hakon raised his leg, letting Leon’s sword taste nothing but air.

“Nice try,” Hakon said with an enormous smile. He may hate Leon, but he was clearly enjoying the fight immensely.

Leon himself couldn’t help but smile through the pain of his burned arm, though it couldn’t be seen due to his helmet. He was in great danger, but his perceptions were as high as they could be, and his body was filled with enough adrenaline that his now-useless left arm barely stung; he wasn’t really having fun, but he was certainly excited.

Their exchange of blows only lasted a few seconds, just long enough for the soldiers to finish filing through into the second floor. Alix glanced back down at Hakon with a look of disgust, then to Leon with a look of worry, then reached over to the hatch that would block the top of the stairs and slammed it shut. The surrounding soldiers then immediately began to pile prepared bits of other furniture atop it as a crude barricade.

Hearing the hatch slam shut, Hakon briefly looked up, only to see a glyph painted onto the hatch. It was a light rune with half a dozen amplification runes surrounding it. It instantly flashed with a brightness that momentarily turned the entire first floor of the tower white, and left Hakon temporarily blind.

Hakon growled in frustration, then said, "That's a good trick," but Leon didn't answer. He was looking to the walls in dismay; specifically, there were three large sheets of cloth that were stuck to the walls covering a number of fire runes that Leon arranged to be drawn. The fire runes weren't activating.

[Looks like they're not going to activate, someone must have drawn them wrong!] Xaphan shouted in indignation.

[No time to dwell,] Leon responded. Leon hurriedly began to activate his invisibility ring. His original back-up plan if the fire runes didn't work was to blast those on the ground floor with demonfire or attack with his sword while they were blinded, but the Valeman chief kept his shield raised and kept turning to face Leon despite squeezing his eyes closed. So, Leon had to improvise.

[He's a fifth-tier mage, he can use magic senses to find you,] Xaphan said.

[Will my ring work?] Leon asked in slight panic.

[Maybe. Try to keep your aura retracted,] Xaphan answered, panic seeping into his voice as well.

By the time Hakon opened his eyes, Leon was nowhere to be seen.

"I know you didn't leave, little boy," Hakon taunted as he spun around, his eyes taking in every detail within the tower. "If you don't come out, I'm going to burn everyone in this tower alive, including that girl you were with... though I may have some *fun* with her first..."

When he didn't get a response, he shouted, "Block the door!" and one of the Valemen waiting outside for Hakon to finish stepped in front of the broken door, preventing anyone from escaping.

Hakon licked his lips; once he killed Leon, he could take whatever made the boy invisible for himself!

The Great Chief then stopped turning around and lowered his shield, presenting the perfect target. It was a risk, but one he was more than willing to take. He also closed his eyes and held his breath, straining his ears for any sound he might be able to hear over the rain and thunder.

Suddenly, his eyes snapped open and he slammed the butt of his hatchet into the air. There was a metallic clang, despite not seeming to hit anything, but an instant later Leon materialized and was thrown across the room. He hit the wall hard enough to drive the air from his lungs again and he dropped to the ground.

"You're just full of surprises," Hakon said with a hint of both admiration and hatred, "but this is where you die..."

As Hakon strode over to Leon, the latter tried to grasp his sword and rise, but Hakon arrived at his side first and stomped down on his right forearm. Something snapped, and Leon screamed in pain. Hakon then dropped his shield, crouched down, and grabbed Leon by the neck with his now free hand, lifting him into the air and slamming him against the wall of the tower.

Turning his head toward the door, Hakon shouted, "Get in here!"

Now that they were confident that Hakon was done with the wind blades, the Valemen waiting outside rushed into the tower.

“Deal with that door,” Hakon said, nodding up toward the hatch at the top of the stairs, and the Valemen charged toward the second floor.

“Now, what should I do with you?” Hakon asked himself as he faced Leon again. His grip was tight enough that Leon wasn’t going anywhere, but not so tight that Leon hadn’t been able to regain his breath in these few seconds.

“Should I burn you alive?” Hakon continued. “Or maybe I should have your ribs torn from your chest, *then* burn you... Hmm, yeah that second one sounds *much* better...”

Hakon began to squeeze, and Leon found himself no longer able to breathe. Leon’s vision slowly began to dim, and his mind became muddled.

[Stay with me!] shouted Xaphan. [Use my fire! Do something! Don’t just let this happen!]

But Leon couldn’t process what Xaphan was saying. In fact, he was so close to passing out that he thought he began to hallucinate, for he heard the deep blast of a Legion horn in the distance...

Chapter 160: Battle for the Fort VIII

Leon was not hallucinating when he heard the blast of a Legion horn. It was so loud as to be heard by every Valeman surrounding the last tower even over the storm.

The Valemen weren’t the only ones to hear the horn, and the soldiers in the tower paused for a moment in disbelief as they looked around at each other, trying to confirm what they had just heard.

“KEEP SHOOTING!” shouted one squad leader. “THAT WAS A LEGION HORN! REINFORCEMENTS HAVE ARRIVED! KEEP SHOOTING!”

The soldiers gave a great cry of relief and jubilation, then got right back to shooting arrows into the sea of Valemen still on the hill.

The Valemen on the edge of the massed war party were the first to see the distinctive red armor of the Royal Legions. As the companies and battalions appeared, the rain lessened and the storm clouds began to break, almost as if the newcomers were bringing the light with them.

The forest was thick enough that the Legion shield walls had to break into their companies, but that was hardly a troubling matter for their leaders, the fifth-tier Tribunes and sixth-tier Legates who led the way. It was from these leaders that wind blades appeared to rip apart the closest Valemen, that spikes of ice and rock thrust forward to impale them, that great gouts of flame and even the odd bolt of golden lightning tore through their ranks.

The unprepared, severely under-equipped, and extremely undisciplined Valemen fell before the advancing line of soldiers like wheat before a scythe, with all Valemen missed by the leading mages falling to the blades in the shield wall behind them. There was no mercy for the Valemen, and certainly no quarter. The Legions pressed inward, surrounding the hordes of Valemen and squeezing them in between their ranks and the tower.

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Just as Hakon was choking Leon into unconsciousness, the horn sounded, signaling the appearance and advance of the Royal Legions. For a moment, he turned his attention away from Leon to stare out of the broken door, and his grip on Leon's neck loosened just enough to allow Leon to take a shallow breath. That one breath was all he needed to regain a measure of clarity to his mind, and Leon painfully raised his broken, but unburnt, right arm—he'd started to feel like he had overused his left arm, as it hurt far more than his broken arm.

Seeing the motion out of the corner of his eye, Hakon turned back to face Leon, only to find himself staring directly into the younger mage's palm just as deep red fire erupted from the latter's fingers. Hakon instinctively dropped Leon and turned his head away, but it was too late, the fire touched his skin and immediately began to scorch his face. Hakon Fire-Beard's epithet became more literal than intended as his facial hair caught aflame as well.

The Valeman chief bellowed in pain and rage. He conjured his wind magic and extinguished the demonfire, but the damage had been done; his beard had almost entirely been burned away, leaving the acrid stench of burnt hair to permeate the tower, while the skin on the left side of his face had been horrifically melted. Additionally, his left eye had begun to boil in the heat of the flame, and though Hakon managed to put out the fire quick enough to save his eye, it had filled with blood and he could only see red.

"You... BASTARD!" Hakon roared as he kicked at Leon, who was doubled over on the ground where he had been dropped, trying to regain his breath and struggle to his feet. Fortunately, without his eye Hakon's aim was a little off, and Leon was able to roll out of the way while grabbing his dropped sword with both hands at the same time.

Leon sprang to his feet and darted to his right as quickly as he could; he could see Hakon's red eye was probably blind, so that was the side of the Valeman chief that he wanted to stay in. Plus, Hakon had dropped his shield when he had grabbed Leon, leaving him open for retaliation.

Just after he darted to the right, Leon lunged forward. Hakon had a split-second delay in his reaction from having to turn his head to keep up, and that moment was enough for Leon's strike to land. Hakon was forced to raise his left arm to block the attack, and Leon's sword impaled his forearm.

Hakon grit his teeth and twisted his arm, ripping Leon's sword from his hands and aggravating both of Leon's severely injured arms. The Great Chief then raised his other arm and let loose with a wind blast. It wasn't as directed as a wind blade, but it wasn't designed to slice. Instead, it hit Leon square in the chest and threw him backward. Hakon was running low on magic power and pushing Leon back was about all he could manage. In fact, his wind blast was so weak that Leon wasn't even thrown back into the wall and was able to land on his feet.

Then, rather than try to keep his distance, Leon surged forward, preparing his right arm for one more blast of fire. He'd mostly used his left arm for magical attacks, but by now it was starting to throb with pain, and Leon knew that he was close to his physical limit with regard to using that arm for Xaphan's fire, which left him with no other choice but to continue using his comparatively less-injured right arm.

Hakon chopped at the charging Leon with his hatchet, extending the range of the relatively small weapon with wind magic. Leon ducked out of the way and threw himself to the right, back into Hakon's blind spot. Hakon turned to face Leon, and saw the young man extending his right arm again. Knowing he wasn't going to be able to react in time, Hakon conjured a wind barrier to protect himself from the coming fire.

But, that fire didn't come. Instead, Leon stopped and cheekily smiled at the Valeman chief. Hakon, of course, knew exactly why. Leon was obviously aware—probably based on Hakon's wavering aura—that the wind mage was close to running out of power and wasting a wind barrier like that was something he couldn't afford to do again.

Hakon felt desperation entering his mind, and he roared in anger as he charged forward, reaching for Leon's throat. Leon, however, ducked underneath Hakon's arms and let loose with demonfire upon the Valeman's left leg while he rolled out of the way.

With a shout of exertion, Hakon conjured even more wind, using it to again hurl Leon back and extinguish the fire.

But with that, Hakon was effectively out of magic power. His blood lacked mana, and he sucked down every breath of air like it was his last.

Leon wasn't doing much better, with the pain of using his broken arm for Xaphan's fire growing with every second, and his body feeling far too heavy to keep dodging as he had been. If the situation weren't so desperate, he would've probably collapsed due to exhaustion.

And yet, the two started to stagger closer to each other, intent on finishing the fight. So intent were they that they had forgotten about the other Valemen on the stairs. Of course, these other warriors were far too terrified to jump into the middle of a magic fight; plus, they too had heard the Legion horn, inspiring even more fear and dread among their ranks.

But, just as Leon and Hakon almost came close enough to resume their battle, a third-tier Valeman sprinted into the tower with a wild look in his eyes.

"Great Chief!" he shouted. "The Southern army has—"

Before the Valeman could finish his panicked report, a stone the size of his fist smashed into the back of his skull, shattering it into pieces and killing him instantly.

Leon stared at the doorway, realizing only now that the rain had slowed to only a gentle drizzle and sunlight was starting to peak through the clouds. A figure appeared in the doorway with his back to this sunlight, casting his face and any defining features in shadow.

"Look at all these whore children..." he whispered as a small boulder the size of his modest torso gently floated through the doorway behind him. "... I should probably take care of you, to keep you from fucking your close relatives or eating animals raw or whatever else it is you barbarians do..."

Once he was done speaking, the boulder exploded outward, peppering the Valemen on the stairs with thousands of sharp, tiny pebbles. There were about one hundred Valemen on the stairs, and more than seventy were killed with that one attack, and all of the rest were injured.

Seeing this, Hakon screamed in fury, and he sprang toward the dark figure.

The figure clicked his tongue in disgust, then, almost casually, backhanded Hakon and threw him across the room. The Great Chief of the Valemén hit the ground and didn't move again.

After a moment of silence, the dark figure glanced over at Leon. "Are you in charge here?" he asked, his disgusted tone softening before Leon—who, based simply on what he was wearing, the newcomer could tell clearly wasn't allied with Hakon.

"... Who's... asking?" Leon asked while his tired legs struggled to keep him upright.

The dark figure seemed to chuckle silently, and then he stepped forward into better light, revealing his custom-made armor, made to look nearly identical to the standard crimson Legion armor. It's differences lay in the details; it was decorated with a golden bull emblazoned across the chest and he wore a purple sash across his waist, signifying his extremely high rank, while much of the rest of the armor was gilded with glowing enchanted silver. "I am the fuckin' Consul of the North, in command of all the Legion soldiers of the Northern Territories," he said with the pride of a noble and the tongue of a commoner. "Now I'll ask one more time, and *one* more time only: are you in charge? And if not, where can I find the fuckin' commander?"

Leon was quiet for a moment. He was only a squire, and there were several squad leaders still upstairs who technically outranked him. However, he was easily the strongest mage among the fort survivors, and the squad leaders had deferred to him when it came to the defense of the tower.

"I am in charge... of the survivors here..." he finally hesitantly said.

"There, that wasn't so fuckin' hard, was it?" the Consul said, the curse word rolling so naturally off his tongue that Leon barely noticed it. "Your men are safe, I've led three Legions here from Cyrenaica, and they're busy dealing with the remains of these barbarian shits outside."

Leon could hardly believe his ears or eyes. "Are... you really here?" he asked.

"HAHAHA!" the Consul boomed. "Yes, we're really here! You must truly be tired to be so doubtful of what's before your eyes!"

The Consul started walking toward Leon while more Legion soldiers started to flood into the tower. These soldiers made their way through the fallen Valemén, killing any who still breathed. One of these men, a fifth-tier Tribune with a vicious-looking halberd, started moving toward Hakon, who had been knocked unconscious by the Consul's dismissive slap.

"Don't kill that one," the Consul said, "that one will be brought back to the fort and executed publicly."

"Yes, Sir," the Tribune responded. He then picked Hakon up by the scruff of his shirt and dragged him out of the tower.

"Now, then," the Consul said, turning his attention back to Leon, "what's your name?"

"... Leon Ursus..."

"'Ursus'? Oh, you're from the east? One of Torfinn's people?" the Consul asked with a look of pleasant surprise.

Leon nodded.

“Well, that’s a hell of a thing, isn’t it? How did you get here?”

“Came south, joined the Knight Academy,” Leon answered. His legs were close to giving out on him, and he could barely think straight with everything going on.

But, once he said where he was from, an odd look appeared on the Consul’s face. He suddenly remembered receiving a letter from the capital inquiring as to a ‘Leon Ursus’ from the Knight Academy.

“... You should get some rest,” the Consul said, clapping Leon on the shoulder, “we can talk more later. For now, just rest, and know that you’re still alive.”

“Yes, Sir,” Leon responded. He felt like he could lay down right there and pass out from exhaustion, but instead he forced his legs to carry himself up the stairs to the closed hatch. “Open up! All the Valemens are dead!” he shouted.

He could already hear the barricades on the other side being removed, but he also wanted to confirm with the rest of the soldiers that everything was fine.

Once the hatch was opened, he saw the worried and ecstatic faces of Alix and the other two squads on the second floor.

“Is that it?” asked one of the squad leaders.

“We’re still alive?” the other asked.

“Are you injured at all?” Alix asked.

Leon looked from one, to the other, to the last. “That’s it. It’s over, we’re all still alive. And I need some sleep...”