



The Lion's Den

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PROLOGUE

“Ready?” the curt inquiry rang out across the training space. Lieutenant Honro Eis shifted the haft of the large battle axe for better balance in his broad, armored hands. He stared down the red and yellow dragon who held his blade at the ready and assumed a martial stance.

“Yes, sir!”

Ethdian wasted no time, leaping forward with a surprising amount of height and bringing down an overhead strike upon the towering Arctic Wolf. Honro moved his weapon to deflect, a sharp *CLANG!* ringing in his ears. The blow was a solid one, enough to make most people crumble in a heap, but Honro took a deep breath and let the force travel down his body before returning it with a mighty shove. Ethdian hopped back onto his feet while simultaneously lashing out with his tail to wrap it around the Lieutenant’s right ankle.

The subsequent pull caused the mountainous canine to stumble forward, but a quick adjustment allowed him to plant the axehead into the ground and stabilize. He reached down for the restraining tail, which the dragon wisely withdrew. Time to go on the offensive!

Ethidian let out a surprised snort as hundreds of pounds of muscle and armor barreled towards him with alarming speed. Honro brought down his axe, which the general sidestepped. The blades were appropriately blunted for training purposes, but Honro knew his general was expertly conserving his stamina by dodging. The Arctic Wolf quickly shifted his axe, which most soldiers in the Gaothan army would have difficulty even getting off the ground, into a one-handed strike while also attempting to grab hold of his opponent. For a moment it looked like the maneuver would be successful, but Ethidian calmly deflected his weapon while turning lithely to avoid the meaty paw attempting to grapple him.

“Good adjustment. I see you’ve been practicing the integration of your wrestling style with heavy blade combat,” he smiled in approval, causing a brief, happy wag in the wolf’s tail.

“But that is meant to be a *two-handed* weapon: defensive as much as offensive!” Ethidian reminded and sent a rapid series of strikes at his helmet. Honro held the axe upwards, trying to withstand the assault. The first few hits caused a dull ache in his arms, but he grit his teeth and endured it. Having acquired his opening the dragon was relentless, slamming his sword down like a blacksmith on the anvil. After a few more hits the Lieutenant fell backwards onto the ground sounding like a full armor rack had given out and spilled everything onto the ground.

The wolf scrambled to regain his footing, seeing his general already moving in for the match-ending blow. With a defiant shout he leaned back and hefted his massive boots into the air, bracing them hard against the dragon’s abdomen.

“OHHHHH HELLLLLL!!!” Ethidian swore as he suddenly found himself unwillingly airborne. It was a less-than-graceful landing and even the soft sand of the arena was a minimal mercy.

Honro winced. “You okay, sir?!”

“Gods above! I hear my ancestors used to fly . . . Can’t say I see the appeal!” the dragon shook his head with a smirk and got back on his feet. “Marvelous counter, though.”

“I have been practicing!” Honro said proudly, rolling onto all fours, before leaning back onto his feet and lifting up like he was squatting a set of weights back at his quarters.

Ethidian blinked at him. “Okay. *Now* you’re just showing off!” he chuckled dryly. “Ugh. I feel like there’s about a pound of sand up my ass . . .” he grumbled before looking up at the ring of the castle bell tower. “Wow. We’ve been at this an hour already? Let’s call that good for training today.”

Honro shook his body and sent a shower of sand all over. “But I’m just getting warmed up, sir!” he teased with a playful pout.

His commanding officer rolled his eyes. “Well if you’re *that* eager, you can continue loading up the caravan with supplies. We have that goodwill mission coming up soon to the West. Harvest times have been hard for them this year.”

The wolf nodded in remembrance. “I might just go and see if they need any help.”

His general walked up and put a hand gently on his cheek, which he affectionately nuzzled. “You always work so hard, Honro. Be sure you don’t overdo it.” The dragon’s normally fierce face softened with concern.

The Lieutenant scuffed his boot against the sand. “I won’t. I just . . . the spirits gave me this body and connection to them. I want it to do good for people. I can handle it . . .”

Ethidian squeezed his shoulder firmly. “You may be built like a mountain, but don’t feel like you have to be solitary like one. I know your approach to life has always been to endure, and it has made you incredibly strong, but we’re here for you now too, okay? I will not be the one who tells Bostwick that his ‘SnowWalf’ suffered a tragic end crushed under sacks of grain.”

“Hahaha! Tragic end indeed! I will briefly check and then go home. Promise!” Honro said with a sharp salute.

After the two cleaned up and put away their gear they parted ways, Honro making his way towards the courtyard occupied by a large gathering of wagons and supplies. It was getting later in the evening and work overall appeared to be done for the day. Maybe he could get in an hour or so and then go home to his boyfriend and—

“Lieutenant?”

Honro looked up in surprise to see three men, two tigers and a husky all quite muscular and dressed in his squad's armor, approaching him. "Ja?"

"Sorry to bother you, but the boss was wondering if you could check something with us? He said you would be coming this way," the taller of the tigers explained.

"Oh! Certainly!" Honro agreed with a slight tilt of his head.. It seemed strange that Ethidian hadn't mentioned something at the training ground, maybe he had just forgotten? He followed the three soldiers past the caravan towards one of the gatehouses connecting to the main wall of the castle. Following along Honro peered down at his guides, there was something strange about the armor they were wearing, lifting up in odd places as if it had been hastily put on.

"Surprised Ethidian did not give you a talking to about uniforms! He is serious about presentation!" he chuckled.

"Oh yeah . . . Ha ha! Guess he figured we'd get a pass for all the work we've done getting these supplies together," the husky laughed before opening the door. "Right this way, sir."

The large wolf had to lean forward a bit to get inside and as soon as he crossed to the inside there was a sudden flash of light followed by an unsettling chill that gripped his entire body.

"Wh-What?!" he grunted as coils of oily black energy crawled like snakes across his limbs from a blood-red symbol on the floor. Snarling he whipped around to face the three smirking men who quickly closed the door and surrounded him. With a roar of challenge he slugged the husky as hard as he could in the stomach, knocking him back but Honro found himself alarmingly weakened.

"Shit! Shut him up before he alerts the guards!" the canine grunted, scrambling back up and retrieving a heavy rope net. The tigers closed in, one pinning Honro's arms to his side while the other retrieved a heavy leather muzzle and stuffed the Lieutenant's face roughly inside of it.

"Hmmmphhhhhh!!! Mmmmmpphhhh!" the wolf let out a muffled growl and thrashed his head about, feeling the thick straps buckling behind his head and also robbing him the use of his jaws in the fight he was quickly losing. Leaning forward he dug his shoulder into the jaw of the feline holding his arms and body checked him into the wall. The move threw him off balance, however, and the net was quickly tossed over him. There were heavy weights on the ends that, paired with the sudden piling on of the husky and the other tiger, made him sink to the floor.

“GRROFF MRRR!!” Honro roared wildly, pushing and flailing against the expertly-woven cords that were slowly being wrapped around his body. Tightly bundled up he squirmed and writhed on the floor. He shouldn’t be having this trouble! Something had been done to him. Some sort of magic!?

“Fuhker brok muh tooth!” the tiger he’d hit stalked forward, claws at the ready to tear into his flesh.

The other large cat held him at bay. “You know he is *not* to be touched, dumbass! We bring him hurt in any way and you will be missing *a lot* more than a tooth!”

“That’s enough, you two! If we want to make this work we need to get him out of the castle and fast!” the husky hissed. The three positioned Honro onto a sturdy board of wood, using leather straps on his chest, biceps, thighs and ankles so that he was tightly restrained. The huge wolf fought every second of it, but the accursed weakness and flexible net continued to rob his muscles of their effectiveness. Now completely bound, he was carried by his captors to the top of the wall.

“Not a sound, you understand? Unless you want your general to drown in his own blood...” the husky growled threateningly. Honro’s eyes went wide. What had these bastards done to Ethidian? Was he captured too?! The group finally arrived outside again, where a simple pulley system had been set up. A few more ropes were added and Honro’s body was slid over the edge of the wall. His stomach momentarily heaved at the sudden dropping sensation, but the plank he was strapped to supported his weight. Slowly he was lowered down the wall, his heart pounding with each lazily rock and sway in the night air.

At last his body touched the ground, the surprise causing him to let out a muffled yelp. New sets of hands began rummaging across his bound form, undoing the ropes and lifting him up into a covered wagon. His eyes scanned around as best they could from his strapped-down state to see if his General was also there.

“Efffidrrrn?” he called out but heard nothing. Could it have all been a trick? Or was the dragon being held elsewhere? Before he could start to struggle, a wet cloth was held over his face, his exposed nose assaulted with a sickly sweet smell. He tried pushing the rag away but it remained firmly in place. The need for oxygen finally won out and the world started to grow shaky and dark.

“That’s right, we want to have you nice and rested for your delivery to Lord Seth . . .” a low voice chuckled ominously before Honro sank into unconsciousness.