

Trial by Darkness

As 13-year-old Kline Snowden and 14-year-old Emery Snowden face their most dangerous challenge yet; the Trial by Darkness, they encounter an unwelcome guest waiting for them in the depths of the cave system.



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Beginning of The Trial

Heavy rain droplets crash down onto the marshy soil like tiny cannonballs. The freezing-cold water soaks deep into every layer of clothing, sending shivers down to the bone. Kline and Emery take one last look at each other, nodding to show that they're ready to face what's coming, before having their blindfolds tied.

"Hey pops, are the blindfolds really necessary?" Emery asks his father.

"The trial would serve no purpose if you memorized your way out, the blindfolds are ABSOLUTELY necessary! And Emery... how many times do I have to tell you to address me as Master Conrad! Being my son does NOT excuse informality!"

"Roger that, master." Emery snarks.

As the two blindfolded cousins are led towards the entrance of the dark cave, they both get hit with a sudden feeling of unease, as if their gut was telling them not to enter. There's an ominous draft coming from within the cave.

"Remember our training, Emery, this won't be any different." Kline notes in a calm voice.

"I know, I know, this won't be any different." Emery responds in a slightly shaky tone, steeling his resolve as they enter the cave.

Royal Wizard Conrad Snowden leads his son Emery into the cave, guiding him by the rope tied around his wrists. Emery's younger cousin Kline Snowden; the prodigious son of the current Emperor of the Lumare Empire, is in turn led into the cave by a man named Thurio, a top warrior from Conrad's Elite Squad.

"Click" – Conrad powers on his flarestone torch, lighting up the cave in a bright shimmering yellow light. These torches, powered by the magical potential stored inside a flarestone cell, can last being powered on for nearly a week straight. The drawback is the price, costing on average as much as your average house.

After what felt like two hours of navigating through the tight mist-sprayed stone passages, they come to a full stop.

"This is where we leave you, wait here at least half an hour before beginning your escape." Conrad commands the cousins.

Emery and Kline are put down onto the cold rocky floor, still blindfolded and tied at the wrists, *it begins...*



"If you make it out alive by dawn, you will be promoted to Elite Soldiers of the First Legion... Good luck..." Conrad says adamantly, glancing at the two shivering cousins with stern eyes full of ice-cold pity.

Conrad and Thurio begin making their way out of the area, the last light of the flarestone waning as they go further and further away. Ultimately, Emery and Kline are left in complete darkness, a noticeable difference even considering their blindfolds.



The Escape Plan

Kline and Emery lie on the ground, the last heat in their bodies being slowly sapped away by the frosted cave floor, in darkness darker than the darkest night. *It's cold, very cold.* Concurrently being soaked down to the bone and the icy floor sapping away the last remaining body heat, puts the cousins at the crux of hypothermia.

"So... I-I g-guess we gotta f-find our way out n-now... It's pitch b-black, we're blindfolded and t-tied up, and who knows w-where in the cave." Emery remarks, shivering violently like an earthquake.

"Don't worry Emery, I have a p-plan..." Kline responds calmly, his voice also shaking.

Without skipping a beat, both Kline and Emery conjure a blade of water magic, slicing open the ropes that are tied around their wrists, freeing their hands before removing their blindfolds.

"Oh w-wow... it really is d-dark in here" Emery says, trying to make out his surroundings.

Without saying a word, Kline pulls out a stick the size of his arm that he had hidden in his indigo-colored robes.

"Hey Emery, d-do you still carry flareburst b-bombs on you?"

"Uuhhh... I t-think I still have some in my pouch, w-why?"

"Just w-watch..." Kline says in a confident tone.

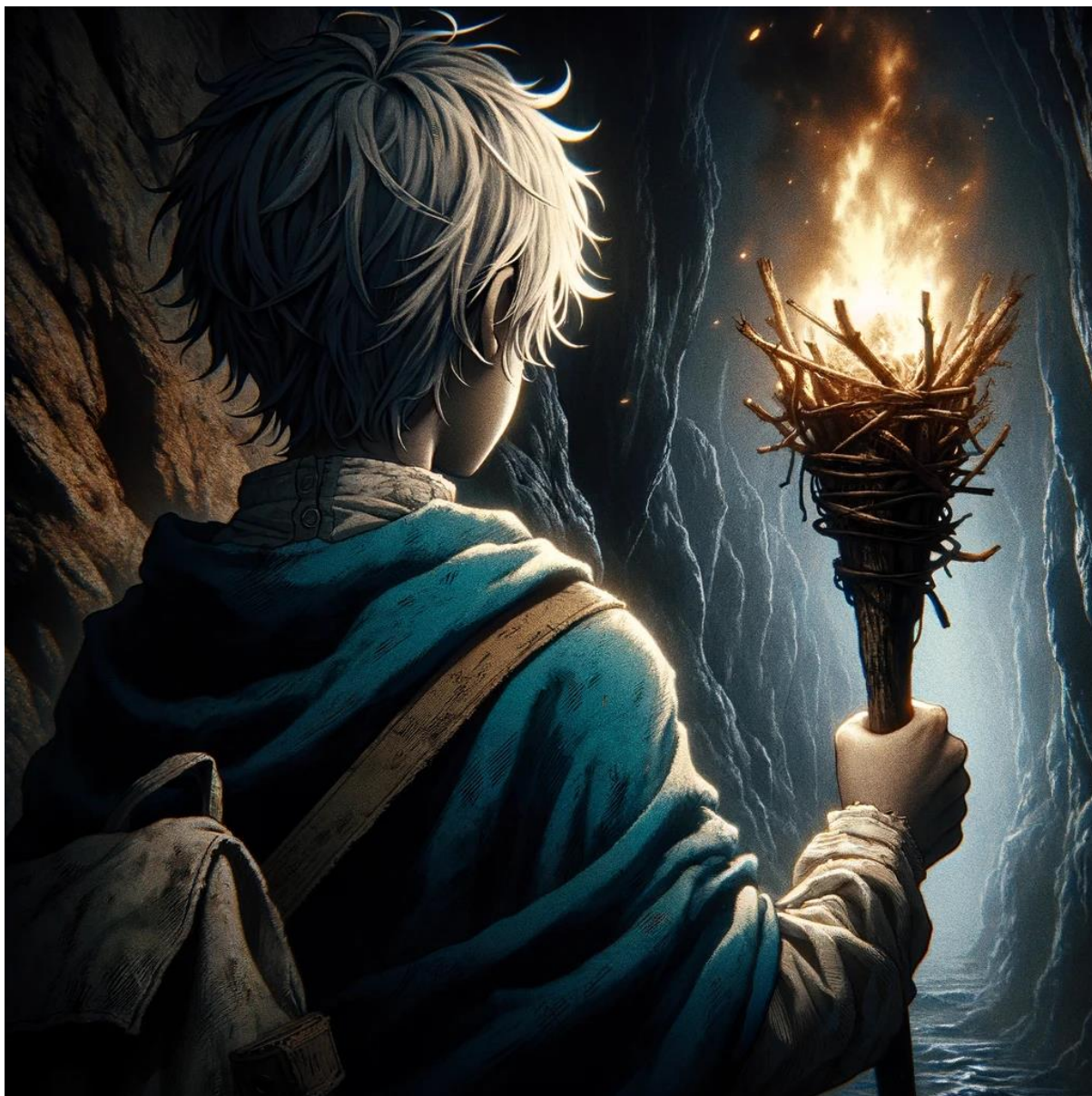
Emery reaches into his pockets and pulls out a black baseball-sized bomb, handing it to Kline. Kline swiftly screws the cap off and opens the bomb up, pouring some of the powder onto the ground. He lays his stick on top of the powder before grabbing a rock off the ground. With one firm smack of the rock, sparks fly in all directions, momentarily lighting Kline's face up a sun-like color, before the stick bursts aflame.

"F-Fire!" Emery shouts enthusiastically.

"N-Now, lets find our way out of here!" Kline shouts in a motivated tone.

Guided by the warm light of the torch, the two cousins begin making their way out of the cave. The torch radiates heat, gradually warming Kline and Emery's bodies and bringing some color back to their faces.





Lurking in the Darkness

Kline and Emery make steady progress, climbing through the sharp mist-licked rocks and crevices, refuelling the torch with any debris they find.

"Are you sure we're headed in the right direction?" Emery points out.

"Don't worry Emery, I left faint marks in the ground with my magic when Conrad wasn't looking, we're still headed in the right direction."

As they make their way through the cave system, Kline keeps looking down at the scratch marks he etched into the stone floor. While Kline is busy focusing on the ground, Emery spots something in the distance, something that looks vaguely wire-like. He can't quite make out what it is so he taps Kline's shoulder, prompting him to look up.

As they walk closer to investigate, the warm torchlight reveals not wire but web, thick silver-gray spiderweb. This is not just any spider's web; this is the territory of a goliath man-eater.

Abruptly, an unnatural tapping noise can be heard coming from behind a corner up ahead; something is approaching. Both Kline and Emery quickly crouch down behind a rock, peering into the dark crevice in front of them. The silence is only broken by the flickering of the flame and the increasingly loud tapping. The tension rises, both of them are thinking the same thing; *that must be it - the goliath man-eater spider!*



Escape

"Emery, ready your sword." Kline whispers.

"You know I'm afraid of bugs! If that's a giant-ass spider, I'm getting the hell out of here, not fighting it!" Emery whispers defensively.

The tapping gets louder and louder, before a grotesque hairy leg the size of an adult male emerges from the darkness. The leg is followed by another, followed by six more, all originating from a bulbous thick-hided and hairy body, slightly swaying as it walks closer; *it's the goliath man-eater!*



Sensing the movement of the torchlight, the massive spider starts skittering towards the two cousins with rapid speed, the tapping quickly turning into rapid thumping.

"Screw this!" Emery bolts away from behind the rock, running into the darkness they came from.

"We can take it down together!... EMERY!" Kline shouts.

Emery is only focused on getting the hell away, Kline's words don't reach him. Kline glances nervously at his cousin running for his life, before turning towards the gigantic spider.



It's too risky taking it on by myself, especially underground in its own territory, shit! Kline drops his torch and uses both of his hands to cast a powerful bolt of water magic towards the roof of the cave. As the bolt of water crashes against the rocky roof in a loud crackling splash, a carriage-sized piece of the roof comes caving in, sending spiky rubble crashing down onto the spider. Taking the opportunity, Kline sprints towards where Emery ran, quickly catching up to him.

Both Kline and Emery are now running into the darkness. The sound of clattering and thumping continues, now joined by the sound of a terrifying screeching, *the spider is still alive, and now we angered it!*

As Emery looks back, he sees the spider skittering towards him at rapid speed. In the same moment, he stumbles and trips on a rock, crashing down onto the rough stone floor. Emery is frozen in place, with a terrified expression plastered across his face as the gigantic spider lunges towards him, ready to sink its enormous fangs into him.

In a split second, the rocky ceiling above explodes in a reverberating fiery blast. Among the rubble and flames, a man comes crashing down onto the spider, skewering its head with a blade trailing fire.

The crashing rubble shakes the very cavern itself, flames roaring loud. The man standing on top of the gigantic now lifeless spider, pulls out his blade from the spider's head with a quick tug.

"Pull out your sword Emery, pull out your sword! The situation just got ten times worse." Kline shouts to Emery, with fear in his voice.

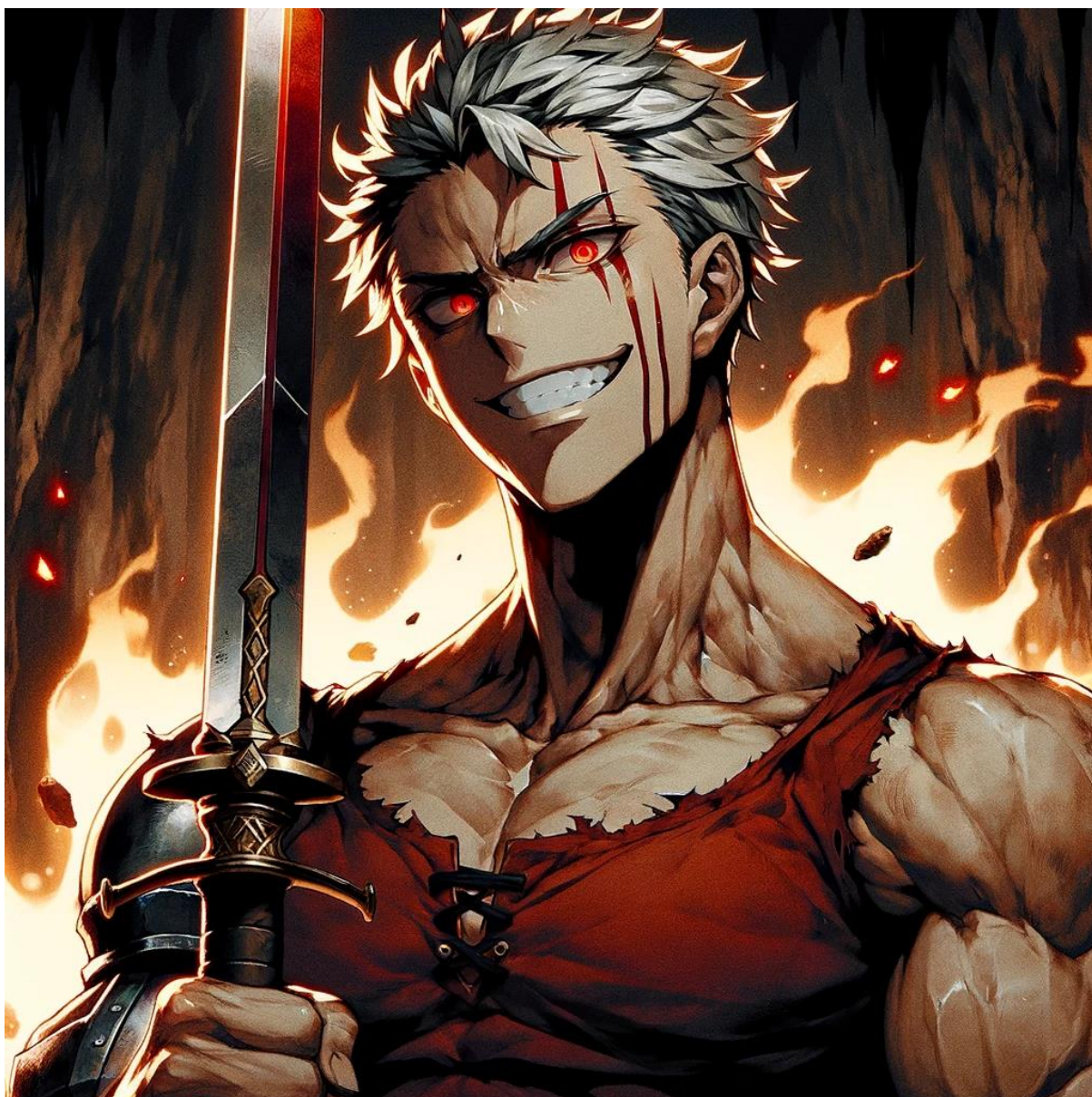
"A muscular royal-blooded fire-demon, wearing a red tank top and wielding a legendary adamantite sword; t-that's Commander of the Third Flame, Griffin Stonepyre!" Emery shouts, recognizing the extent of the danger they're in.

Emery pulls out his sword from its scabbard, gripping it tightly with both hands as the sweat begins forming on his forehead. *H-he shouldn't be here, there's no reason for him to be here, so WHY!? We're the only other people in this cave right now, he must have found out about our training and planted an ambush for us!*

Eight Chosen Warriors jump down one after another from the hole that the Commander crashed down from, landing on the ground beside Griffin. *Each and every one of them likely rank between Troll and Minotaur on the Threat Scale; this is bad... The Commander alone would've been enough; but this... This is an execution!*

"Sons of Snowden!... I'm here on business, let's make this quick!" the man smirks, pointing his sword directly at Kline and Emery.





Order to Kill

"This is bad, very, very bad!" Emery shouts.

"The Emperor himself ordered you Snowden's executed!... What WASTED potential! If you devote yourselves to me as my chosen, I'm even willing to spare your li-"

A bolt of water from Kline's hand hurls straight towards griffin. With a quick upwards slash, Griffin destroys the bolt of water, which explodes on impact with his adamantite blade, splattering water droplets everywhere around him.

Griffin looks down at the cousins with a prideful look in his eyes, before pulling his arm back, preparing to swing his sword.

"Your parents never tell you it's rude to interrupt somebody SPEAKING!?" Griffin shouts while swinging his fiery sword, a baseball-sized ball of fire flinging from his blade towards Kline and Emery.

Kline lifts up both arms and conjures a wall of water magic with a tense facial expression, biting his teeth together as he narrowly blocks the fireball which explodes into steam on impact. The force of the impact instantly breaks the cohesion of the water-wall, splashing the water onto the ground and shaking the cavern itself. *From one hit! This is bad!*

The eight chosen warriors start sprinting towards Kline and Emery, weapons held high in their hands. One of the chosen warriors, a man wearing thick chainmail armor and a coal-black hood, pulls out an iron chain with a barbed hook at the end. The warriors lunge towards the cousins swinging their swords and axes, ready to cut the cousins down.

Just as a warrior was about to slash Kline's neck with his razor-sharp sword, Kline resonates the water particles in the cave floor, causing the floor to cave in on itself with an echoing thunderous crash. The swing narrowly misses Kline's neck, grazing his snow-white hair as the warrior loses his footing. The eight chosen warriors crash down onto another level of the cavern, falling for what looked like at least fifteen meters; though it is impossible to tell because of the darkness below.

A chain abruptly pierces the darkness, surprising both Emery and Kline. Before Kline has any time to react, the metal chain has already wrapped around his leg, piercing his calf like a fishhook. *Shit!! I messed up!* Kline turns to look at Emery with a panicked expression. In the same instance, the chain is yanked, pulling Kline past the ledge, down into the dark depths below.

"SURVIVE EMERY, HOLD OUT AS LONG AS YOU CAN!!" Kline shouts as he vanishes into the darkness.



A bone-chilling fear permeates Emery's whole body, as if he was facing death itself. He comes to the grim realization that now has to confront the Commander of the Third Flame all by himself. He grips his sword even tighter as the fear rushes through both mind and body. Eyes glazed and face scrunched like a ball of paper, Emery shakes in fear. *This is it; I'm going to die!*



Survive!

Emery shudders in fear as he glares at Griffin with laser-focused eyes. All the hairs in his body have stood up; he knows that this is a life-or-death confrontation!

"Hahaha, are you scared little puppy!?" Griffin laughs maniacally.

Snap out of it, Emery! I have to survive! I-I don't have to defeat him, I j-just have to buy enough time for Kline to come back! E-easy r-right, Emery?... He consoles himself, trying to take back control over his fear-possessed body.

"I thought you Snowden's were supposed to be strong!? Don't disappoint me now!" Griffin shouts, blasting himself towards Emery like a fiery cannonball. He swiftly swings his adamantite blade towards Emery; a deadly slash.

Seeing imminent death approaching, Emery's frozen body reacts with pure survival instinct as he uses his water magic to push himself to the side, Griffin's blade roaring past his face, fire tracing right behind. *So fast!!* Trying to counter, Emery uses his left hand to blast Griffin with a water bolt, aiming for the back of his neck.

"Too slow!" Griffin shouts as he ducks below the whizzing bolt of water. In the same flow of movement, Griffin slashes upwards with his sword, grazing Emery's cheek.

In the next few seconds, Griffin rushes Emery with vicious attacks, slashing at him again and again. Emery just barely blocks each reverberating blow with his sword, one after another. Each slash and block send sparks and flames flying through the air, heating up the space like an oven. Griffin slashes at Emery relentlessly, leaving no chance for him to counter-attack. A slash grazes Emery's shoulder, then his thigh, then forearm, forehead, each searing his flesh like red-hot iron.

"What's wrong, getting TIRED!?" Griffin laughs, as he speeds up his slashes even further.

I can't keep up with his speed, this is bad, very bad! Emery is no longer able to block Griffin's slashes effectively; now only blocking by reflex alone. Many of Emery's blocks are now at a poor angle, resulting in his blade getting dented and the force of the impact going right into his hands. His body starts feeling sluggish and tired, hands blistering; Emery's movements start getting slower and slower.

"I'm not even using my magic! Just how weak are you!?" Griffin shouts, before sending a devastating kick towards Emery's head. Emery blocks the kick with the side of his sword, but is sent flying into the cave wall, stone cracking like bone as he crashes into it.



Small stones and dust fall onto the cave floor before Emery regains consciousness. He stumbles back onto his two feet despite the impact, coughing up blood. Despite knowing he has no chance against Griffin, Emery lifts his sword right back up. *Kline better come soon, because I can't do this much longer...*

"Oohooohh! You can still stand after that, impressive willpower! Perhaps you might still have some potential, haha!"

Griffin rests his adamantite sword on his shoulder before looking at Emery, smiling maniacally.

"What was your name again?... Emery, right?... I'll ask you again; join my chosen!.. Or would you rather be killed instead?" He laughs.

Emery glances at the opening Kline fell into; *goddammit, where is he!... I have to buy him more time...*

"What exactly would happen if I did join you?" Emery asks while glancing at the hole in the cave floor.

"Dunno... Join me and you'll find out..." Griffin says, noticing that Emery's gaze is fixed on the hole. "Well, what will it be pup, join me or die?... You can stop worrying about your little friend, my chosen have already ripped him apart by now." Griffin chuckles, before pointing his sword towards Emery."

I know Kline wouldn't die that easily, I have to put my trust in him! Emery moves into a battle stance, ready for another confrontation, all the while his body is screaming in pain.

"Like I'd believe a word you say..." Emery says to Griffin, thinking this will be his final struggle. *If he doesn't come now, I won't last more than a minute...It's all up to him...*





Surrounded

Before he even hits the ground, Kline severs the metal chain using a razor-sharp compressed blade of water. Right before impact, he discharges a powerful blast of water from his back, cancelling out the kinetic force of his fall and landing gracefully on his two feet.

Looking around the space, Kline analyses the situation; *eight chosen warriors, each with various different melee weapons, all of them most likely within threat scale troll and minotaur. This could spell trouble... I have to be extra careful fighting the one wielding the chain, he's most likely an upper minotaur class based on his movements.*

The warriors ready their weapons, planning to attack him all at once. *Seems I have no choice; I don't see another way out.* Kline begins conjuring extremely dense water magic between his hands, even denser than that of many Captains'.



The first warrior swings his axe at Kline from behind, another warrior at twelve-o'clock swings horizontally at his neck with a sabre. With a rapid twist of his body, Kline drops his body and ducks to the right, evading both the sabre and the axe. Nearly doing a split on the ground, Kline simultaneously aims his open palms at each of the warriors. In only a split second, both warriors are blasted by a lethal beam of water magic, each stream piercing their bodies like nothing, the sheer force sending them flying towards the cave wall.

The bodies crash against the stone wall, the resulting shockwave reverberating the whole cavern. The remaining warriors pause momentarily, stunned at the sheer power that came out of a small child. The lifeless bodies hit the ground in a simultaneous rocky thud, sending dust flying into the air.



The warrior wearing chainmail shouts to the other warriors:

"Don't be afraid! He's just a kid, we are trained warriors of the Third Flame! He doesn't have the experience we do!", before flinging his now-broken chain straight towards Kline.

As long as you can follow its movements, any weapon – no matter how deadly, only amounts to mere wind if it never hits its mark, Kline thinks to himself as he softly sidesteps, avoiding the deadly chain which crashes onto the stone floor right beside him, sparks and debris flying from the impacted ground. Kline has a calm expression on his face as the gentle gust of wind from the slash hits his face.

The man yanks his chain to the left, sending a wave of chain flying towards Kline's legs. Kline jumps over the oncoming chain with a graceful hop, firing a blast of water towards the man while still in the air. The man quickly evades the blast, the blast still grazing his shoulder and tearing off a small piece of his chainmail.

From the left comes a warrior trying to pierce Kline through the side of his abdomen with an adamantite-steel spear. Kline counters by conjuring a water shield into his hand; an ingenious design composed of water swirling imperceptibly fast from the center outwards, effectively deflecting incoming attacks, even sending weapons flying, while also neglecting the force of the impact on the arm. The piercing spear is sent flying out of the warriors' hands as it makes contact with the hypersonic water, flinging into the stone ceiling with a crackling thud.

Kline snaps his fingers, turning the shield into a hurling water-wall, blasting the now unarmed warrior to the opposite side of the cavern. *That's three down, five left.*

Two warriors, each with longswords, try to pincer Kline, as a third warrior swings at him with a massive two-handed axe from straight ahead. All warriors activate their fire magic, boosting the raw power and the lethality of their attacks. Kline swings his arms into a crossed formation, sending multiple razor-sharp blades of water flying towards both sides, ripping apart the warriors with the swords. *I hate having to go all out like this, but I can't afford to lose anymore time or Emery will die!*

As the two-handed axe heads for Kline's head from above, Kline swings his arms back to a neutral position, casting his water shield above his head. Out of nowhere, a metal chain rips through the warrior in front of Kline, piercing straight through his stomach and killing him instantly. Kline tries to evade the chain by twisting his body, but it's too late; the chain slashes his chest, ripping a deep gash on his chest and sending blood flying. *Shit!!*

Kline clenches his teeth and shrivels in pain, quickly enveloping himself in a protective water barrier, instantaneously blocking a firebolt that would've killed him. *Couldn't be that easy could it!* Kline releases his barrier, trying to take the offensive. A thick lukewarm mist permeates the cavern following the impact of the firebolt, obscuring the visibility. *Good thing I learned magilite sensing from Kyros; I'll have to thank him for that later.*



Straight ahead behind the misty clouds stands the chain-wielder. The other remaining warrior, a hooded assassin, attempts to hide his presence by holding onto a cone-shaped piece of stalactite in the cave ceiling just above Kline. *I bet he's going for a sneak attack.*

The chain-wielder snaps his chain, cracking it like a whip before sending it slicing through the cavern towards Kline. Kline leaps underneath the flying chain, just barely evading the deadly crackling slash. As Kline looks up at the warrior on the ceiling, he sees a black baseball-sized object flying straight towards him. *A flareburst bo-!!*

A powerful fiery explosion sends Kline crashing into the cave wall. Dust and debris fly everywhere as he breaks the rock from the force of the impact. When the dust clears, Kline is sitting inside the smashed-up wall, miraculously only slightly bruised. *I managed to activate my barrier just in time; that was close, way too close. Now... Time to finish this...*

Kline conjures up his signature compressed water-whip, swishing it around to clear the mist around himself. The assassin drops to the floor, taking out two adamantite-steel daggers from within his black leather-clad armor. The assassin starts playing with his daggers by throwing them from one hand to the other. He starts flipping the knives around, as if showing off his skill. Each flip lights up his armor a vibrant orange-red, as clouds of fire flash from his knives.

"Now that the runts aren't in the way anymore, why don't we finish this kid, eh Piercer?" the chainmailed man says, swinging his chain around his arm in a circular motion.

"Affirmative." the assassin says, voice muffled by the bandana covering his mouth. He grabs onto his daggers before blasting himself towards Kline like a flaming arrow, fire trailing from his back and feet.

In the same instance, the chain comes loose, roaring straight towards Kline with incredible speed. Kline swings his water-whip, simultaneously aiming his left palm towards the assassin. In the same exact instance that the water-whip collides with the crackling metal chain, Kline sends a blast of water flying towards the assassin.

Both the water-whip and metal chain recoil backwards from the impact, metal crackling and clattering from the impact, water flinging in every direction. At the same time, the assassin slides below the steam of water, narrowly evading the deadly blast. As the assassin closes in on Kline and starts swinging his dagger towards him, Kline swings his whip back, aiming for the assassin's stomach. The assassin flips his dagger into position, deflecting the whip, but losing the dagger to the sheer force behind Kline's whip, sending his dagger flying. The assassin quickly rotates his body, ready to strike Kline with his other dagger.

Kline jumps back, the dagger just barely missing his eye as the assassin swings. The intense infernal-like heat almost burns his face as the trail of fire passes in front of him. In the blink of an eye, Kline lets go of his whip, lifts both arms up and sends a powerful water-wall hurling towards the assassin.



The assassin's life flashes before his eyes before flying towards the cave wall, bones cracking and instantly passing out from the blast. *Now, one left...* Kline moves his gaze to the chainmailed warrior, glaring at him with his intense deep-blue eyes.

The warrior yanks his chain, beginning to whirl it erratically before igniting it on fire with his magic. The chainmailed warrior, despite being as strong, arguably even stronger than some Captains of the Lumare Empire, has a nervous expression on his face, sweat running down his cheek. He thinks to himself; *t-this kid... his magical potential is near limitless, he can't be human, can he?...*

The roaring of his flames and crackling of his chain increase even further as he speeds up his whirling chain, simultaneously boosting the output of his fire magic, making the chain start glowing a red-hot color like fresh lava.

Let's see whose final attack is stronger then, shall we. Kline begins channelling a whirling ball of water magic, compressing and spinning it until it almost seems to have a glow of its own.

Out of nowhere, a profound understanding floods Kline's mind like a dam being ruptured, insight! The true essence of water... The true essence is not found in the appearance of the water, in its color, taste, shape or density, but in the emptiness that contains it. The true power of water is found in its intrinsic potential, the potential to take shape, to flow, to change...

Kline stops pouring more power into the swirling ball of water magic, readying himself to blast the warrior into smithereens. While holding the ball of hypersonically-swirling water, Kline identifies a new-found tranquillity and ease within himself; it's almost as if the vast magical potential within him suddenly became a part of his own being, a part he now controlled as naturally as his own body. The powerful realization of freedom permeates his body and mind. Conventionally, drawing from your magical potential requires intense concentration and visualization, but now... it's as natural as walking or running, as natural as your own heartbeat.

Witnessing the sheer magnitude of power building up in Kline's attack, the warrior deactivates his fire magic, slowing his chain down to a stop. His face is locked in a horrified expression of fear and disbelief, as if he was facing a demon itself.

"Y-you're a MONSTER!!" the warrior screams before running off in the opposite direction. In pure desperation, he uses all of his remaining magical potential to blast himself away from Kline, disappearing into the darkness ahead.

What I shame... I was hoping I'd get to try that one out... Kline thinks to himself while re-absorbing the magic into his open palm. He dusts off his clothes before looking up at the hole he came from. *No time to lose, I have to get to Emery.*



Backup

Griffin starts slowly walking towards Emery, his sword bursting into flames hotter than a fire drake's breath. In response, Emery activates his magic, enveloping his sword in a circulating compressed water.

Griffin slashes horizontally, a searing-hot blade of fire flinging from his sword towards Emery. The flame-blade shakes the cavern as it flies through the space towards Emery. With a desperate vertical slash, power amplified by his water magic, Emery manages to deflect the fiery slash to the ceiling of the cavern. The intense clash between sword, water and fire, shakes Emery's worn-out blade, making a sound like cracking ice.

Griffin leaps toward Emery with a hungry expression and crazy glint in his eye, as if he was an animal hunting his prey. Emery swings his sword back, desperation in his eyes, attempting to cut the Commander down. Griffin swings his fiery blade into a direct clash with Emery's blade. A metallic screech, followed by a thunder-like snap, pierces Emery's ears like a knife, as Griffin's adamantite sword snaps his blade in two, roaring fire trailing behind. Seeing his blade snap right before his eyes, Emery feels instant shock and terror course through his body; *this is it, I'm dead!*

Griffin uses the momentum of his swing to deliver an explosive fire-powered gut punch with his other hand, cracking Emery's metal armor and instantly driving the air out of his lungs. Emery crashes back into the cave wall in a thunderous smash, droplets of blood flying from his gaping mouth.

Griffin laughs maniacally as he looks down at the utterly defeated Emery. Emery tries to get up, but his vision has gone blurry, his ribs are cracked and he is barely able to maintain consciousness.

"Ahahaa! Just look at how weak you are, you really want to remain weak!? Pathetic! If you would only join my chosen, I could give you power, I could make you strong!!" Griffin shouts, trying to convince Emery to join him.

"I am weak... but you... don't get so full of yourself" Emery says, smirking as he glances over Griffin's shoulder.

Behind Griffin, there's a hand grabbing onto the ledge of the hole. Emery sees Kline's white hair slowly poking out of the hole as he pulls himself up. Just as Griffin turns his head back, suspecting something, Kline blasts him away with a powerful beam of water magic. Griffin is sent whistling through the cavern like a bullet, smashing into the cave wall with water splashing everywhere.

"Emery, are you alright?" Kline asks in an unusually calmly tone.

"B-been better..." Emery responds, followed by a blood-splattering cough.



Griffin groans in pain, his whole body igniting on fire as murderous intent radiates from him. As he exits the cavity that his body created in the stone wall, he has a furious expression on his face.

"I'll handle this, Emery... I understand it now, what Lumare meant by the true essence of water..." Kline says quietly.

Even though Emery wants to help, he realizes that he would only slow Kline down in his current physical state; Emery has to grit his teeth and place his trust in him.

"Don't you dare lose, Kline!"

"Don't worry, I'll win." Kline says with intense determination in his voice as he begins walking toward Griffin.

Kline conjures both his water-whip and shield, ready to face the Commander head-on. Griffin gets into a battle stance, the same one he was in when he shot towards Emery, now itching to strike Kline down.



True Essence

The tension in the cavern is thick like black tar; both Griffin and Kline are ready to strike each other down. The silky-smooth mist emanating from his magic softly caresses Kline's skin like a wet feather. At the opposite end of the cavern, the intense infernal heat from Griffin's flames nearly burns his skin like searing iron.

Kline has an expression likened to the calmness of a morning lake, as Griffin intensely contemplates what happened to his chosen warriors, his forehead and eyebrows wrinkled like a mountain range. Griffin stares intensely at Kline with bloodshot eyes, Kline's eyes like serene pools of water in contrast.

Kline suddenly let's go of his water whip and shield, the water splashing onto the rocky floor. In that same instant, Griffin blasts himself towards Kline with intense murderous resolve. Griffin's sword whistles through the air, fire roaring towards Kline's head. Kline moves ever so slightly, the blade whizzing past his tranquil ocean-like eyes. Griffin, now at arms reach and mid swing, is left completely open.

In the blink of an eye, 13-year-old Kline uses his right hand to blast Griffin with a never-before-seen shockwave of water; a blast as powerful, or even more powerful as the magic of the Royal Wizard Conrad Snowden, smashing Griffin against a boulder that shatters from the impact.

Griffin's fire, momentarily quenched, bursts back aflame as he stumbles back up. *A blast like that from one arm... This kid.... He must be as powerful as the Royal Wizard...*

Before Griffin even has time to get into a stance, Kline has already materialized another ball of water above his head, spinning faster than anything Griffin has seen from the other Lumare Captains. *This kid...*

Griffin lunges towards Kline, holding his sword in two hands. Each running step sending flames flying from his feet. Kline responds to his advance by chucking the ball of water straight towards him. As the ball of water breaks the sound barrier, a thunderous sound echoes through the cavern.

Griffin attempts to cut the hurling ball of destruction with his ultimate move – the Slayer Slash. Griffin pours a massive amount of magic into his adamantite blade, almost making the adamantite blade glow red from the extraordinary power and heat. Griffin plants both of his feet firmly on the ground, and by gripping his sword tightly with both hands, he executes a perfect ascending diagonal slash, roaring with scorching power.

Griffin's blade cuts clean through the supersonic ball of water, the halves crashing behind him as it impacts the cave wall, shaking the whole cavern from the collision. As the cavern shakes violently, a sharp two-meter-long stalactite cracks and falls off the cave ceiling, heading straight towards Emery.



Kline turns his head and sends a shockwave of water towards the stalactite just before it would've impaled Emery. The stalactite is blasted off into dust from the force of Kline's magic. As Kline looks back where Griffin was standing, he sees that he has disappeared.

"Behind you!!" Emery shouts desperately.

Griffin's adamantite blade roars through the air towards Kline's head.

"Think you can hide your presence?" Kline says, ducking below Griffin's blade at imperceptible speed.

Kline rotates his body, sending another shockwave towards Griffin, who is again sent flying backwards. He manages to break his fall by rolling on the ground, quickly getting back into position.

Hmmm, why don't I try that one move, Kline thinks to himself, harnessing a vast amount of magical potential from within his body, cumulating into a glowing ball of hypersonically rotating water. Kline puts in a little more spin, a little more power into the ball of water, and it begins to glow brighter.

Seriously!? That magical potential, it's even stronger than Commander Kouga's! Griffin reflects to himself, dumbfounded at the sheer power behind Kline's magic. *This kid, could he be... Threat Scale Demon!?*

The sheer power behind Kline's magic lights up the whole cavern a faint pastel-blue color. *Let's try it out then, shall we; the true capacity of my magic...* Kline thinks to himself, releasing his ultimate blast towards Griffin.

The whole cavern is filled with light; the cavern shakes violently like the roar of one of the ancient dragons. The sheer power of the blast disintegrates the entirety of the cavern in front of Kline and Emery, destroying everything in its path with torrential fury, ripping straight through stone, straight through the whole cavern. The cavern rumbles and shakes, the ceiling partially collapses, rubble comes crashing down onto the stone floor with thunderous applause.

Once the blast clears and the dust settles, a huge hole with a diameter of over ten meters, length of who knows how far, is left in front of Kline and Emery. Kline still has a calm expression on his face despite the magnitude of power far exceeding his expectations. Emery on the other hand... he sits on the cave floor in shock, mouth agape at what he just witnessed; this power, it's something only ever seen in a handful of individuals.

"K-Kline?..." Emery says, shocked, even a bit frightened.

Kline doesn't respond, but as he looks at Emery, it's as if he was looking straight at his soul; *something's different behind those eyes, something changed in you?* Kline has an aura of humility to him, an aura that the cocky prodigy didn't possess before; *what changed?...*



"The Commander, where is he?" Emery asks, with an anxious tension still in his voice.

"I doubt he survived the blast; I think we're safe..." Kline says softly.

"Well... w-why don't we start making our way out of here then?" Emery asks, barely able to stand up on his own.

"Yes, let's get out of here." Kline says, helping his cousin get keep upright.



Elite Soldiers

A painful multiple-hour long journey later, they finally see a glimpse of light at the end of the tunnel. Both of their eyes light up, Emery even starts walking on his own, excited to see the sky.

The cousins climb over a stone ledge, nearly running the final stretch to the source of the light. As they turn the corner, they pause for a moment, both taking a deep breath before walking out of the cave.

The dawning sunlight hits their faces and the warm morning breeze caressing their faces. The sound of the leaves rustling in the wind and the tweeting of the morning-birds breathes new life into their bodies.

"We did it!" they both shout!

Finally able to let go of the tension, both Kline and Emery hit the mossy ground from sheer exhaustion.

"The moss is so soft, it's like resting on a springy cloud!" Kline says in a relaxed tone, stretching his arms and legs out wide.



Some rustling can be heard coming from the distance. Moments later, two familiar faces pop up from behind a large boulder, it's the Royal Wizard Conrad Snowden and his Elite Soldier Thurio. Conrad walks up to his son and nephew, looking at them with a slightly perplexed expression on his face.

"Congratulations Kline and Emery Snowden, you are now Elite Soldiers of the First Legion. Thurio will lead you back to Itero, you can... get yourselves fixed up there..."

"Yes sir!" Emery and Kline shout, giving each other a high-five.

"You guys are pretty beat up, what exactly happened in there?" Thurio asks curiously.

"Oh, we beat the Commander of the Third Flame and his Chosen." Kline responds casually.

"What!?"

"It's the truth! We were ambushed..." Emery shouts, the atmosphere of the moment shifting to a more serious tone.

Conrad looks at the two cousins, trying to hide the simultaneous fascination and worry behind his eyes. He is clearly thinking of something, whether it be evaluating their potential or contemplating the concerning involvement of the Kaligo Empire, we will never know.

"Well... It's not going to be the last time you fight Commanders and Chosen Warriors now that you're part of the Elite Squad. Prepare yourselves, for your battle is just beginning." Conrad says, still thinking deeply about something.

"I want to become stronger, I HAVE TO become stronger, so that I can protect others!" Emery shouts.

"This was just the beginning... I wish to learn more about magic, I wish to understand it at a deeper level, the essence of magic itself!" Kline shouts, his words, his ambition echoing far throughout the pine-filled woods.

