

EARTHS G MAGUS 21

21 Path of Comba

Thrax, in fact, had been talking about wanting to check out the institute of combat since day one during their discussions on the previous nights but hadn't had the chance to attend it because he didn't want Julian to one up him by being ahead in spiritual comprehension.

The next morning came and Emery got ready with the boys. Actually, he wanted to try and deepen his comprehension in the basic earth spirit cultivation technique since he had invested three days already in it but after considering magus Darius' advice not to push himself, Emery removed that thought in his head and focused on the institute of combat, especially in his heart, he had always wanted to become one of those great knights waving the sword that would've also made his father proud.

The four boys came out of their private quarters, passed through the portal in the fountain plaza and were surprised to see how different this place looked, except perhaps for Emery who felt like this place was reminiscent of his kingdom's aesthetics.

Gray bricks painted the walls of most of the buildings, rooftops either scarlet-red or azure-blue, and tall towers higher than the castle in the Lioness Kingdom. This place was also bustling with crowds and the buildings were all bunched up together, creating a tight network of streets, alleys, stairs leading up and down to god-knows-where that could make a person feel like they'd get lost after taking one wrong turn in the corner.

Luckily, they noticed a large group of acolytes wearing a different kind of uniform that looked more like a suit of armor and started following them until arriving at a giant building with large signages of a sword, spear, hammer, bow and arrow, dagger, shield and fist placed accordingly on the spacious gray wall.

Thrax made his way first inside with the others not far behind, passing through two massive opened doors with two guards standing on both ends of the doors, and spoke to a green-haired woman with big-round spectacles.

She said in a flat tone, "If you have just arrived at the institute of combat, please make your way to the left and just keep following the path. If you have been here for more than one occasion, kindly go right. If you have other business, tell me how I can assist."

Julian couldn't help but comment, "Wow! It's like our Colosseum at home but this one's much bigger and magnificent!"

On the side was a man with beefy arms, large chest, bald head but overgrown pointy beard who had taken notice of them. "Ay! Fresh blood! Come 'ere! I was 'bout to start me introduction and ye soft bones just came at the right timing. Me name is Vico and I'll be yer guide in this stadium!"

After the quick introduction, Vico pointed with his thumb at the rows of weapons placed behind and proceeded to explain the institute of combat with his booming voice to the thousand new acolytes. "Since ye all are soft bones lads and gals, I'd like for all to know this institute is open to ye soft bones who want to pursue the art of fighting.

"Whether yer a close or a ranged magus, ye all still need to learn how to fight with weapons regardless of yer ranking. Tis' would ensure a magus could adapt to the situation in the battlefield or if yer spirit capacity runs out. And even though a magus dun' need a weapon to fight, at least ye would know how to defend yerself or predict the movements of yer enemies that's using a weapon."

Vico grabbed a great axe with two sharp edges and flames suddenly erupted on the edges! "Ye may also use tis' weapons as a tool to channel yer elemental energy. The magi who are experts in tis' spells are known as combat magi. Some objects 'ere as well can be used as a catalyst to increase one's spirit power temporarily such as 'tis stave.

"There are many ways and spells one could do with 'tis weapons for example, wind coming out of every slash, making the weapon so heavy that it could easily crush flat surfaces, flaming it like 'tis so it could cut or penetrate even the toughest metal, etc. 'Tis are our, the combat magi's, secret to our greatness."

The flame then disappeared and Vico placed the great axe back on the rack. "In this institute of combat, for now ye will learn how to fight using 'tis weapons or bare hands. Me sure that ye all saw the display on our front door, right? In case some of ye forgot though, our institute has eight paths. They are the path of sword, spear, blunt weapon, bow, dagger, shield and of course yer trusty bare hands.

"We all welcome ye soft bones acolytes to come here anytime and use our training equipment and places at any time. However, since ye all are soft bones are fresh blood, we only allow ye all to choose just one type of weapon. But once ye are stronger, ye all may learn all weapons we have and in fact, we encourage ye. 'Ter all, it'd be best for ye soft bones to learn yer enemies' movements."

Vico demonstrated some movements using the sword, switching to axe, then wielding a spear. His force was so powerful that the onlookers could feel that the air was heating up with each wave of a weapon.

"Again, ye all may use and train in any path ye'd like, however, that dunn' mean our institute accept ye as our acolytes. Only those who have talent, endurance and determination could enter our institute and be taught unlike the element institute, the combat institute dunn' not easily accept acolytes as a member of our institute. If ye are accepted, however, ye have the opportunity to learn from one of our famous combat magi."

Vico then took the acolytes to another side of the stadium where five well-built men, whom Vico had mentioned were combat magi, before saying, "Today, we will accept only a hundred from ye all to be our students. Make sure ye are all ready to take the test 'cause like in the battlefield, ye only have one life."

22 The Gauntle

They made their way to the center of the stadium with a door placed on the ground. Vico said while caressing his pointy beard, "We will contact a test for ye and 'tis divided into two parts. Yer ability in using a weapon or bare hands and an obstacle course."

He shouted, "Bring it up, boys!"

From beneath the door, it opened and spawned a large construct made of wood, iron, and other materials that stretched for over 330 feet (100 meters) in length. It was a marvel of mechanical construction in Emery's beaming eyes, who also liked complex creations.

"Let me introduce ye to the gauntlet!" said Vico with a big smile from ear to ear. He added, "If ye can pass this gauntlet to the end, then ye've passed our first test."

The construct cranked and started to come alive. It had at least a hundred pikes stabbing from beneath and the side of the walking platform, blades and axes swinging in all directions, spinning mechanisms that had a large bag that would ensure one would fall if got caught and all other manners of traps placed on the various areas of the course.

The first year acolytes, including Emery and his friends swallowed hard as the blades, axes, pikes appeared to be live weapons. Some acolytes actually even started walking away from the construct since this gauntlet looked so scary that they couldn't help but think this would be the end of their life. They were first-year acolytes; they weren't willing to waste their lives for this. After all for most of them, this institute of combat was just an extra skill not as important as the other institutes.

Vico simply laughed and didn't care about the acolytes running away. "Hahaha, of course ye won't die from this course — on yer first try, at least."

From the ground behind Vico, hundreds of boxes also spawned out and Vico pulled out an armor that looked like it was made of thick leather. He threw it to a man on his side.

After the assistant finished wearing it, he then proceeded to get on the obstacle, dodged a couple of traps, making his way to the middle and purposely got hit on one of the swinging blades. He was knocked down from the gauntlet and some of the acolytes watching closed their eyes from how loud and hard the assistant had hit the ground. The assistant, however, got back up like nothing had happened and took off the thick leather.

"This protector is one of our basic magic items made by our small craftsmans. It gives ye limited protection from attacks, but can only be used fer only once," Vico explained.

The first year acolytes discussed with their friends and didn't appear convinced they could finish this course. There were hundreds of traps after all.

The circle was 33 feet(10 meters) in diameter, and in the center was a wooden puppet with hands, legs, and all with the size of the average youth, around 5 ft 4 inch(163 centimeters) in height.

"Tis' 'ere is the main training equipment our institute provides to all ye soft bones. Ye all could fight with tis' puppets all ye want and learn as much as ye can. If ye managed to defeat the wooden puppets, the better," Vico said. Then a giant cube floated in the middle of the field and a list of names appeared.

1. Damien - acolyte rank 3 - level 6
2. Tori - acolyte rank 3 - level 6
3. Vida - acolyte rank 4 - level 5
4. Zurui - acolyte rank 3 - level 5
5. Axel - acolyte rank 2 - level 5

Despite hundreds had already run away after Vico's demonstrations of the institute's equipment, there were thousands first year acolytes names listed in the ranking who had taken wooden puppet combat test in the first three days.

"Tis' board here is the results of the rankings of those who have fought against the wooden puppets for the first time. Whichever of the two tests ye'd like to take, do what ye want. The ranking board, mind ye, is the real kicker in being selected as a disciple for one of the combat magi. They be selecting their disciples 'till nightfall arrive. Ohh, they seem to be 'ere," said Vico, looking at the five men who had just arrived. Most of them were also large people like Vico, except for the one on the furthest left appeared to be slender.

Emery watched as the five combat magi made their way to the podium located on the side of the stadium. The one who had a slender body seemed to have noticed Emery's stare and Emery started to feel a heavy pressure bearing down on him before disappearing on the next second.

"Hey, you okay, Emery?"

Emery twisted his neck to see who it was that spoke and found Chumo looking at him. He asked, "Oh, yeah, I'm fine. Chumo.. I hardly heard you speak."

"That... well... how should i say this.. actually I get too nervous when speaking if there's a women around... and Klea's... She's scary..." Chumo answered, slightly shaking his head.

"..."

Vico's booming voice drowned out Emery's and Chumo's discussion. "The gauntlet and fighting wooden puppets, 'tis two will be yer tests for today and ye all can start whenever ye like!"

Remaining hundreds of acolytes dispersed and made their way to their preferred test. There were only a few that walked toward the obstacle and the wooden puppets were the more popular choice.

Thrax was cracking his fist and was raring to give the wooden puppets a good beating. "Alright! Action! I'll imagine those Kalios pigs as these wooden puppets and beat them up real good!"

He entered the circle and a list of items appeared in front of him and he unhesitantly chose a spear. The wooden puppet sprang to life and a wooden spear appeared on both him and the wooden puppet.

Thrax got into position with the spear above him and so did the wooden puppet. A countdown appeared in Thrax's vision.

[3...2...1... Fight!]

Thrax let out a loud shout as he thrust the spear straight to the wooden puppets chest. It missed as the wooden puppet jumped to the side but Thrax was expecting that and he spun toward the wooden puppet direction and punched it on the face, felling it to the ground, before impaling its chest with the spear.

The wooden puppet stopped moving and a tiny light like a floating dew seemed to have exited the wooden puppet's broken body and entered Thrax's chest.

[complete level one combat puppet - reward received]

Thrax breathed out as his muscles tightened. He checked out his status and said, "Oh wow! My battle power has gone up by one!"

23 Wooden Puppe

Emery, Julian and Chumo nodded to each other, all thinking the same thing. They all proceeded to their own circle and faced the wooden puppets.

Emery selected a sword, as well as Julian, while Chumo went for a more unconventional weapon, a bow and arrow. Emery gave the sword a few swings to get himself used to it. Surprisingly enough, the moment he slashed it was lighter than the swords he had been training with, plus, the way the sword sounded as it cut the air, it was sharper than anything he had held before. Maybe it was safe to assume the battle with the wooden puppet could injure him since it also used the same weapon, so Emery didn't select start and opted for the option standby wanting to observe his friends first.

Emery watched Chumo's fight against the wooden puppet. Chumo kept on running in a circle as he dodged each arrow the wooden puppet shot. After each dodged shot, Chumo would take the chance to grab an arrow from the quiver on his side, put it on the nock and release, hitting the invisible wall behind the wooden puppet. A lot of shots had missed between the two sides, indicative of the five arrows left from the twenty arrows Chumo had in the beginning, so he decided to be more aggressive. Chumo grabbed multiple arrows from his quiver and shot it against the wooden puppet. The wooden puppet dodged all of it, but Chumo had run straight to the wooden puppet and punched its head with the last remaining arrow he had. Soon, a tiny orb flew toward Chumo and he gave a rare smile.

Emery missed Julian's battle against the wooden puppet but based on how Julian didn't seem to have a sweat on him and breathing normally, Julian had an easy time defeating the wooden puppet. In fact, watching Julian may have been a better idea than Chumo since Emery and Julian were using the same weapon, a one handed sword. Nevertheless, Emery turned his attention to Thrax, who was shouting 'Graahh!' and 'Ahu!' in each blow with the spear.

A loud cheer erupted as there was another group of acolytes watching Thrax's aggressive fighting style. He stepped out of the circle and sat on the ground, not minding the crowd, instead watching the acolyte adjacent to his circle.

Emery also got glued at the acolyte next to Thrax. That acolyte had a large, well-ripped body and was using a greatsword to fight against the level two wooden puppet. Clearly he had a high battle power since the bald acolyte had an athletic body. After all, it was a measure of a person's physical strength and endurance, but when they clashed swords the wooden puppet did a maneuver, tripping the bald acolyte, and the puppet's waved its greatsword before stopping an inch before the bald acolyte's neck. He was defeated.

Vico kept his big grin while caressing his overgrown beard with his large calloused hands. "Hahaha, thought ye can defeat 'tis puppet with brute strength, did ye? Try again, soft bone! 'Tis puppet has the same battle power as ye, so ye have to be clever. Treat yer battle as if ye were in a real one!"

Same battle power... So, didn't that mean Emery would have a chance? He gazed at his sword before closing his eyes and gave it a few more swings, trying to remember... the only thing he had left of his

father. Tightening his grip on the sword, he placed one foot forward before pressing the start with his other hand.

[3...]

The wooden puppet started moving its limbs.

[2...]

A sword, the same as Emery, appeared in the wooden puppet's hand.

[1...]

It shot straight to Emery, but he was expecting it and parried the puppet's sword to the side, leaving the wooden puppet wide-open before stabbing straight into the chest! The image of the marauder appeared in Emery's mind and he suddenly mindlessly charged the impaled wooden puppet against the invisible wall while shouting and smashing it to pieces. The tiny orb appeared.

[Combat puppet level one defeated. Reward one battle power.]

Emery breathed in and breathed out, trying to steady his shaking hands. He didn't notice the tiny orb entering his body for his pounding heart was all he could feel. His father had always taught him to be calm especially when wielding the sword and try not to lose control, and soon everything was clear again. He summoned his status and indeed confirmed the increase of battle power, and another message.

[Received Swordsmanship technique lvl 1.]

24 Level Up

Julian's style in sword fighting differed in a way that it was more centric in synergising it with a shield. Julian blocked a lot of the incoming attacks, looking for an opportunity, until an opening finally appeared and he struck down the wooden puppet on the chest.

Chumo, on the other hand, still used a bow and arrow and a sword was now hanging from his waist. He kept on switching weapons depending on the range between him and the enemy. If Chumo was close to the target, he used the sword; if he was at a distance, then the bow and arrow.

Thrax also fought the level three parrying with the round shield and spear while still shouting whatever his shenanigans meant. He hadn't used a second weapon on level two, so level three must be tougher for Thrax to use both weapons.

He watched Julian once more and paid close to Julian's sword play. Emery tried to incorporate some of those moves and once he got used to it along with his new understanding, he started the battle with the level two wooden puppet.

The level two puppet's techniques showed its worth. These were the moves Emery had just understood but he dodged, most of them although some cuts made their way through Emery's uniform. In the end, however, he was victorious. He sat once to take another rest and this time it only took him ten minutes to get his breathing pace back. His status showed him a battle power 8, so he was now at a state where

Julian was at before fighting these wooden puppets. It didn't occur to him that if right now was back at their estate, he would be gasping for air except this time he didn't notice it.

After getting a sufficient amount of downtime, Emery had seen Julian and Chumo defeating the level three wooden puppet with ease while Thrax was making a mess on the fourth level.

He started the battle with the wooden puppet once more but this time, the puppet defeated Emery, but Emery wasn't going to give up here, not now when he was finally making some progress. He got back up and tried once more. Emery failed the second time on the third level. Still he wasn't done. Once more! Wiping off the dust and sweat accumulating on his face, Emery tried and tried until finally he was spent.

He laid on the ground, drenched from head to toe. That big grin however... It was worth it. His battle power was now 11 and level four was available.

"That barbarian, look at him go. It looks like he can go on for hundreds of rounds! I guess he'll make a decent entertainer," said Julian, taking a sip of water from a crystal ball attendant in the stadium.

"What do you mean?" asked Emery.

"Hahaha, you'll see when you visit my home. Anyway, let's check out this gauntlet first."

Emery and Chumo agreed, leaving Thrax behind battling the level four puppet with a menacing look as if a madman.

The construct wasn't far away since it was located in the center of the stadium. It's rhythmic clanking, whooshing of the spinning wheel and slashing blades swinging from side to side brought goosebumps to Emery but at the same time, his eyes couldn't help but beam.

He had yearned to create something akin to this, well not this complicated however, but something simpler like the box he had made for Gwen. Shaking off his thoughts of her, Emery returned to observe the mechanical wonder.

The whole obstacle course was divided into three parts. First, were the alternating platforms on each side with space in between where one would have to jump to get to the rope waiting on the other side and land below a tall wall, which would have to be climbed. The second part in the middle was where it became a little tricky. It was filled with moving obstacles made of iron and wood that were always spinning and ready to knock down every acolyte that passed. The biggest challenge though, lay in the third part of the obstacle course. It was a long straight platform, about 164 feet(50 meters) in length and this was where those sharp swinging blades cutting the air were stationed.

There were thousands of acolytes training in this stadium, new and higher ranking magus alike, but it was clear most of them favored the benefits of fighting the wooden acolytes.

Thrax just arrived, after defeating the level four wooden puppet, drenched with sweat.

"Hey guys, that thing looks interesting," Thrax said, his pacing was still normal.

"You're still raring to go?" asked Emery.

"Yeah, I'm on fire!" Thrax said as he made his way first on the obstacle.

25 Trembling

Julian and Chumo gave it a go and got up on the obstacle course, while Emery held back once more. The two got past the obstacle course's first part, however, didn't manage to get past the spinning traps and were knocked off to the ground on the second part. Emery tried to compare the three attempts just now and made a mental image of how he should attempt it.

He couldn't do it like Thrax; Emery was sure he didn't have the fast reaction Thrax had.

When Emery finished devising his plan, he wore the protective armor and got on the first platform. It didn't look high when he had watched his three friends running the course from below but it surely affected Emery's leg as it became noodly at the thought of falling, especially feet first. The protective armor also negated damage on the legs, right? He stomped his feet, trying to straighten it and get his mind off of it. That helped a little as well as trying not to look down, instead setting his eyes on the alternating platforms.

He ran and grabbed each one like a cat trying to do a wall jump. Making it to the rope, he swung himself with just enough force to get to the other side. Now he faced the tall wall that towered over him. There was no time limit and he needed to catch his breath. After lightly hopping, he placed one foot forward, one foot back and dashed with all the strength in his leg and reached for the high wall. Just an inch left and he would've reached it. He tried once more, and this time, he waved his arms at the moment he jumped and reached the corner of the wall with just the tip of his fingers on one hand.

It was slipping off but with gritted teeth he managed to grab with his dangling arm the edge and pulled himself up with his arms shaking terribly after. Emery crouched, that feeling of wanting to puke, blurring vision, heart pounding against the chest up to his ears, all he was too familiar with was starting again. He shook his head as if that would help his situation. Straightening his back, he was still gasping for air but at least his mind and vision was clearing again.

Emery made his way on the second part and the spinning mechanical wheels inside clicked and clanked. He so wanted to pick apart these things and learn how they work but this wasn't the time. These contraptions moved at a steady pace; as long as he could anticipate the right timing, he should be fine.

Finally he arrived at the third part. The hundreds of axes and blades swung, cutting the air around themselves. This time the sharp object in front of him made his heart beat faster, no normal 15-year-old kid wouldn't be worried seeing what was in front of him right now.

Emery took deep breaths and did the same thing he did in the second part.

"I can do this," he muttered to himself.

One step, three steps in, it was going well so far and his confidence boosted when suddenly...

BAMMM!!

An axe slammed Emery back to where he was standing. He rolled on the platform as he hit his head, almost falling 33 feet(10 meters) from the ground.

Without the protector, he would be cut in half, but even so the hit was heavy enough that he felt a little headache. He was somehow fortunate enough not to fall, but now the protector's function wore off, he was unsure what to do.

"Get down or you'll die!" Julian shouted on the ground.

"Kid! Ye don't have to push yerself!"

Emery heard the shouting coming from below, however, his mind still set on the hurdle in front of him. Whether it was because of the headache or his ignorance, he dulled his ears. His trembling feet reminded him of the time his father died in front of him. If he decided to walk away now, then he would still be the same boy that ran from his father's murderers. A version of him that he was starting to hate. A cowardly weak version of him.

For some reason, his father's words of not losing control kept running in his mind. What would happen if he didn't keep calm? He had made it this far by keeping collected. Maybe like Thrax, he had to be more aggressive to finish this obstacle course.

Unconsciously, he was gritting his teeth as the blood throughout his whole body boiled. The clanking became louder in his mind, and when a blade appeared, he shot forward and the spinning blade missed Emery by a hair's breadth, repeating the same maneuver every mechanism he had faced. His heart was racing, his awareness heightened. This was the first time he had felt like this. As if something inside him was unleashed.

The hundreds of axes and blades swung, cutting the air around themselves. One hit, for sure he would die. The sharpness of the weapon rang clearer in Emery's ear but the way it moved felt weird. It looked like they were moving slower than he remembered.

In the eyes of the others, they saw a crazy kid run without hesitation straight through the hundreds of weapons. As for Emery, however, he seemed to start losing himself.? He moved reactively dodging and dashing at all the blades to swing in front of him.

Third obstacle complete. He managed to pass the gauntlet leaving his three friends and many others in awe. The weak looking mad kid passed through the gauntlet without the protective vest. Emery stood there outside the gauntlet unmoving

And then, darkness. Emery lost consciousness. Chumo was the first to arrive on the scene and checked Emery's breathing. The breath was hot, and when Chumo touched Emery's forehead, it felt like a fever was acting up.

Julian, Chumo and Thrax were preoccupied with Emery when the giant cube floating in the middle updated its ranking.

67. Thrax acolyte rank 2. Level 5

101. Emery acolyte rank 1. Level 3

At the end of the day, Emery didn't make the cut but unbeknownst to him, the slender combat magus took an interest in him.

26 Choices

"You're awake," a sweet melodic voice said on his side.

He looked over and saw Klea sitting next to his bed. Her usual spunk seemed non-existent and instead, her big beady eyes reflected the rain hitting his window on the opposite side of her.

His three friends were also there, Julian sitting next to Klea, Thrax on the ground and Chumo leaning beside the door. The room was bright, but the outside was dark. It was evening when he had woken up.

Emery tried to sit up, his hand on his throbbing head, trying to recall what the last thing he could remember. Why were they all here? He first recalled defeating the wooden puppets until level three and being hit by the axe, after that however, almost everything was a blur except the part where he was standing on the end of the course.

Half a day had already passed. Emery sighed, he couldn't help but think he had wasted almost a day's worth of training. Tomorrow was their fifth day here and there would only be two days left once the next day arrived.

[Emery Ambrose, 15 years old]

[Battle power: 11]

[Spirit power: 24]

Emery's eyes widened. He knew how the battle power had increased but what about the spirit power? What was its cause? Confused, he asked the three boys but they shook their heads. Of course, he was happy that both battle and spirit power had increased but to stay in this magus academy, what he really needed was at least 30 spirit power and be accepted in any institutions. If he couldn't do that, then it would be time to say goodbye. Not to mention, three of his friends had reached acolyte rank two while Klea reached rank three. He was the only one among them that stayed on rank one, probably even the whole academy.

Julian, as if he had known Emery's thoughts, said, "Consider yourself fortunate you know or else..."

Chumo made a gesture of slashing his neck.

Julian nodded. "Right... Dead. While you were out, we've heard that three people had attempted the gauntlet and were split in half after their protectors had been used. What were you thinking? Risking your life like that."

Emery stayed silent. He didn't know either.

Julian sighed. "Anyway, one of the healers said you pushed yourself too hard and asked us to tell you to rest for the night."

"Right... Thank you," Emery said, his voice hoarse.

"You must be famished. Here, eat some fruit. The lady from the cafeteria gave them to me." Klea offered some weird orange looking fruit after she had peeled them. Emery slightly bowed as Klea fed him.

"You meant to say Ares, the God of War. You pigs really love stealing and twisting things," Thrax retorted.

Julian ignored Thrax and faced Emery. "So what's your plan now? How far away are you from spirit power thirty?"

Chumo seemed to have opened his mouth but no words came out. He made several gestures but Emery didn't notice Chumo's actions.

Emery stared on his palm before answering, "I don't really know. I felt like I was about to break through last time but..."

His voice trailed off.

Julian had his arms crossed, looking to be in deep thought.

Klea said, "You should come with me tomorrow to the institute of water. The guiding magus favors me, and I think she'll give us some advice if I ask her. Come with me this time, okay?"

"I think he should continue training with me at the institute of rock. He's close to comprehending the basic stage, you're not going to make him start all over again, are you?" Julian said.

"It should be fine. I'm sure it'll be more fruitful if he spends time with me," Klea said, not even looking at Julian while feeding Emery another piece of the strange fruit.

"Ahh, you're wasting Emery's time." Julian shrugged.

Chumo was waving again, trying to get anyone's attention but no one seemed to notice him. Thrax, on the other hand, stayed still on the ground with his eyes closed.

"Wasting his time? He's been with you for over three days now, and he's nowhere close to achieving spirit power thirty. You're coming with me right, Emery?" Klea asked, staring sternly at Emery's eyes.

"No, you'll be with me right, Emery?" Julian asked as well.

"I... think... I'll go with Klea this time. Maybe it'll be beneficial if I learned the other elements," Emery said.

Julian snorted as he muttered to himself, "Hoes before bros."

Emery wanted to explain further but Julian had already exited the room while Klea jumped in joy, her eyes beaming as she clapped to herself.

Klea then started talking to herself, seemingly thinking out loud and writing on her palm. "Alright, tomorrow we'll start by..."

Emery was already regretting his choice. He heard the things Klea said and some of those things made his spine shiver. Was she really going to help or had something else in her mind? But he couldn't take back the words he said, could he? He shook away that thought, after all, his father had taught that 'A man's bond is his words'.

It was late in the evening when Klea, Chumo and Thrax had left his room. He was alone again in the unfamiliar room, droplets hitting his window, reflecting on his decisions. He remembered when he had first arrived at the institute of rock, there was that origin of stone that gave him one spirit power in just half a day. There must be a similar object at the institute of water and as Klea mentioned, she would ask the guiding magus to give him some advice. Since he had four elemental affinities, that meant if the other institutes were the same, he could get at least an increase of three spirit power in-a-day-and-a-half, at the very least. That would bring him closer to the required spirit power.

Emery turned away from the window and stared at his door. It was decided then, he would go to the institute of water tomorrow, then the plant and lastly darkness institute.

27 Water Elemen

Water institution - Varuna

Passing through the glowing portal, Emery arrived at a stunning beach. As far as the eye could see, the wondrous crystal blue sea stretched on the horizon with white pearly sand. Trees on the side had azure leaves and some shells were left lying across the shore. This was the most beautiful place Emery had ever been, it wasn't an exaggeration to call this a paradise.

He and Klea walked on the tickling grains of sand along the shore. There weren't too many acolytes around, at least 400 - 500 or so. Some of them approached, greeting Klea with a bow, and she responded with a sweet smile and nodded to every person they met along the way. Emery couldn't help but feel the stares of some male and female as he walked side by side with the goddess.

They went toward the center of the island along with a group of youths and the next sight was equally surprising. There was a very large lake surrounded by tall trees on the edge of the lake and a long platform heading toward the giant statue standing in the middle of the lake.

Some acolytes who were with their group started walking on the platform and dived in the lake. Only a few of them had stayed behind and Klea greeted a woman dressed in magus robes standing beside the platform.

"Sister Carla," Klea called out as she grabbed Emery's hand and pulled him to her side.

"Klea, welcome back. Are you going to join today's water element training? If so, why don't you dive right in with the others?" Magus Carla answered.

"I will join in a bit but first, let me introduce you to my friend. It's his first day here," Klea said, presenting Emery.

Carla looked at Emery from top to bottom as if she was analyzing him. Then she smiled. This long-blue-haired had the same position as Darius, the instructor of the stone institute. She was the institute of water's guiding magus. Although she had a friendly face and a refreshing aura, she also emitted some kind of pressure that made Emery slightly feel uncomfortable.

"Hmmm... You have good taste, Klea," Carla said with a knowing look.

"Wow, Sister Carla agrees? Please help Emery, sis," Klea said, her hands clasped together.

Carla then looked at all the remaining acolytes and exclaimed, "All of you first-timers here, please follow me."

She lifted her hand and a small beam of light approached the faces of each acolyte.

[Special effects: Able to breathe underwater for a certain time.]

"Thank you, sister Carla!" Klea again pulled Emery's hand and walked into the lake. She led him straight to the giant statue in the middle. Klea pointed down and Emery saw underneath the pristine clear water that there was a giant dome built in the water. Klea said, "Let's go!"

Emery nodded and the two dived into the water just like the earlier acolytes.

"Don't you think it's romantic?" Klea said, her voice sweet.

Emery was still in awe of the sight before him but when he turned around and looked at Klea, he was shocked again. Klea's whole body was soaking wet. Her shoulder-length dark hair stuck to her bronze face and the uniform clasp on the curves of her body, enhancing her voluptuous body. Emery unconsciously gulped, unable to answer, trance at her beautiful sight.

Klea chuckled lightly. "I wish I could go with you, but I have to go to a different room to train. Good luck, Emery, I know you can do it! Sister Carla, I'll leave Emery to you."

Carla nodded and led the new acolytes to the room Emery had been wanting to train in, the room where the water element's origin stone was.

"Those of you who are present, it's your fifth day in our prestigious Magus Academy. I believe I don't have to explain everything from the start. All of you have half a day."

Without much talk, they all sat cross-legged in front of the floating aquamarine stone.

A word entered Emery's mind.

"Water is always flowing, never ending, adapting to its surroundings."

The dark room in Emery's mind was filled with a smooth flowing river. He let himself be drifted away but then it started picking up pace faster and faster until it became a raging river. Emery was remembering that he was in the river where he had struggled for his life and was starting to panic. He reached for anything, a stone perhaps or anything solid just to hold himself back. Then the words entered his head again.

"Water is always flowing, never ending, adapting to its surroundings."

Emery realized he wasn't there. He was in a magical place and this river was in his mind. It couldn't hurt him. Slowly, he calmed himself and felt the flow of the river and drifted along it freely. It went up and down, left and right, swirling in any way, and he just focused on going with the flow. When Emery was starting to feel something changing inside him, he woke up.

"Time has run out," Carla announced.

[Spirit power increased by 2 points]

[Spirit power 26]

28 Drople

Emery continued to practice the basic water element cultivation. He could feel there was only a thin layer left before he could gain a new understanding of the water elemental spirit. Without realizing it, several hours had passed and evening had arrived. Unfortunately, Emery still couldn't break through that layer, if he could just get one more day he would most likely breakthrough. He couldn't help but wonder though why they had such a limiting time studying in this magus academy.

Emery got out of the room and went to enjoy the view of the lake's bottom with the fishes of all sizes swimming around. It didn't take long for the acolytes in a separate room to finish their training and Klea came out with Magus Carla.

Carla stood before Emery and checked his status through her wrist. "Spirit power twenty six and a quadruple element! You have quite the boy here, Klea! Hmmm. Spirit aptitude though... It's too bad it's low."

His eyebrows slightly twitched, Emery didn't like hearing as if he was already a failure. He clasped his hands before him and tried to be humble. "Magus Carla, would it be fine if I stay here longer? I would like to practice more."

Carla gave it a thought and said, "As far as I'm aware, the rate of cultivation amongst all the elemental institutions is the same wherever you go. The same goes for the origin stone room. And considering your spirit aptitude rank... you'd be lucky to achieve another point in spirit power even if you stayed here until your seventh day."

Emery's shoulders slumped but he straightened it immediately, determined to not give up.

Klea took Magus Carla's hand and said, "Sister Carla, give him some advice please."

Carla smiled at Klea and said, "Let's see... Since I saw that you have four elements, which one have you tried so far?"

Emery answered, "I cultivated in the institution of stone in my first three days."

Carla furrowed her brows. "Ughh, am I right to assume you've met Darius?"

Emery nodded.

Carla sighed. "You had such a stupid man taught you in the first crucial days. I'm sure he gave some exaggerated story about how earth is the strongest amongst all the Ten Elements. Well, it's not exactly over the top, but he's barbaric measuring of the spirit energy through a strength test is just old fashioned. Boy, did you know that even a single continuous droplet of water can deform a stone? Open your mind and hear this, the spirit of water is always flowing and relentless, the potential for strength is limitless."

Carla crossed her arms. "Let me ask you this first. What do you think of the water and earth elements?"

Emery placed a hand on his chin, thinking. He said, "I think they're the opposite of each other. Earth focuses on keeping in place as if it was a stubborn man. While water focuses on adapting to any situation."

Carla clapped, her eyes beaming. "Excellent! I'm glad that you've somehow reached an understanding of the two elements. Now, listen to this. I happen to notice magi who have multiple elemental affinities exceed on the secondary elements. Having even a little understanding of the main elements would help the secondary elements by a large margin. And since you've studied earth and water, its secondary element is—"

"Plant!" Klea exclaimed.

Carla smiled sweetly at Klea and said, "Well done!" She turned to Emery and continued, "Studying in the institution of plant will give you a higher chance of possibly achieving spirit power thirty, rank two acolyte, but whether you'll succeed or fail, it all falls on your determination."

Emery's face shone. He bowed and said, "Thank you, Magus Carla!"

Now that he thought about it, it made sense. Also, Emery studying the plant element might really be the way for him to go. After all, back home, he had always loved being around nature and exploring its nooks and crannies and strange plants and animals. Inside him, he couldn't help but blame his own stupidity for not realizing this sooner.

Even though Emery didn't manage to get more than two spirit powers increase, it felt like he had increased in spirit.

"We appreciate your help so much, sister Carla!" Klea said. She turned to Emery and said, "Let's go!"

As Klea took Emery's arm, he suddenly slipped on the wet floor and dragged Klea down with him. Then, something soft landed on Emery's hand, he had his eyes closed, he squished it once, then twice, wondering what that soft feeling was. A soft moan entered his ears, next a womanly scent wafted in his nose.

Emery's eyes widened and crawled away. That soft feeling, could it be? It probably was, Klea's cheeks were red and her arms were covering her chest. Emery nervously laughed and slightly jumped as Klea stood up. He could still feel it on his palm; his face was turning hot.

"I-I'm sorry! I-I didn't mean to!" Emery put out his palms.

"Its.. ok i don't mind" Klea's tone was low.

This was the first time Emery had heard Klea like this. He prepared himself to be slapped and closed his eyes but that never happened.

"Well, I guess it's better you than Ptolmy," she said and walked as if it didn't bother her that much.

On the way to their private quarters, Klea seemed to have forgotten about it and talked like normal. As for Emery though, he tried to keep his distance but she kept sticking to him.

29 Elder's Respite

After entering the portal, he arrived at a place filled with large, towering trees, some roots were springing out from the ground. There was also a swamp behind him.

The wind brushing against the leaves of the trees, birds flying around singing wonderful songs, tiny critters such as butterflies, rabbits, etc. moving around made Emery at ease. He let out a relaxed sigh and gazed at the colossal tree in the distance. It was so gigantic that Emery couldn't see its top. He felt like he was a single small leaf of this massive tree. In large, bold words, a sign said, 'Welcome to the Elder's Respite.'

Emery headed toward the institute of plant along with hundreds of acolytes and to his surprise, even the leaves of this magnificent tree were at least ten times larger than the size of a human adult! He entered into the large hole at the feet of the tree and the inside was filled with dozens of twisted staircases leading to different places. Luckily though, in the middle was a person waiting behind a desk.

As he walked toward the reception area, he heard light, small steps walking toward him from behind and when he turned around, a girl with long, white, silky hair, wearing a light green dress, and pale skin filled his vision. She wasn't wearing a veil this time, so her green, snake-like eyes felt like it was burning him because of her intense stare.

Emery recognized her. She was the girl who had become his group's discussion during their first night in their private quarters. The girl who had the highest spirit and battle power. Silva was her name.

The girl walked toward him with graceful steps but seemed like she was on guard, ready to pounce at him if he made any sudden moves. Silva was now in front of him, but she was still silent.

Emery's heart began beating faster. He said, "H-Hi, you're S-Silva right? I'm Emery."

Silva looked indifferent and suddenly leaned in to him, sniffing. "You... You smell different from the rest."

Emery stepped back. He couldn't understand what she meant since he had taken a bath this morning. He nervously laughed. "W-What do you mean? C-Can I help you with anything?"

Emery tried keeping a straight face even though it wasn't successful. Deep inside him, he was beginning to become annoyed with himself on why he couldn't be relaxed and collected. Then the next words of the mysterious girl somehow broke his confidence.

"You smell... weak," Silva said, looking at him from top to bottom.

He was silent. What the hell was that supposed to mean?

After saying he was weak, she walked away and ascended on one of the twisted staircases.

Emery focused his mind on his objective in this place and proceeded to talk to the person manning the desk. After explaining he was a first-timer in this place, the person pointed to a wide, straight, staircase where the origin stone of plant was located.

He was able to get inside and there were already dozens of acolytes training at that place today. They appeared more mature than him though and it seemed like he was the only first year acolyte in that room. This wasn't surprising since today was the sixth day of their seven days studying in this magus academy,

all the new acolytes had probably passed and were focusing on honing the elementals they had already established.

Emery sat cross-legged and focused his thoughts on the mysterious piece of stone floating in the middle of vines. In plain view, there were no differences between the origin stones of earth, water and plant, other than the color and aura they were emitting.

He started to feel the same suffocating pressure of the other origin stones and a sort of greenish liquid emerged from the ground in the darkness of his mind, creeping up to him. His whole body was now fully covered and even if he couldn't move, the liquid's warm, refreshing made him feel comfortable. A word entered his mind.

"The plant is life. It grows, emerges and breathes life to its surroundings."

Emery felt like he was one with the liquid. Then, the liquid started to squiggle and he was divided into two whole separate parts, a splitting image of himself on the other side. He had his eyes closed but he could tell the liquid getting bigger and bigger.

"It grows, emerges and breathes life to its surroundings," Emery repeated and the other image mirrored him.

Slowly, the two halved itself once more and now there were four, from four into eight, and so on. Emery was losing himself within his thousand images, he should have been alarmed but the wonderful sensation was overpowering him. Then he woke up. He was a single person again.

"Time's up," the guarding magus said.

Emery shot up to his feet with a big smile on his face. He felt wonderful! He then exited the plant's origin stone room but the surreal feeling stayed with him. The rest of the cultivation techniques he had tried with the other stones either made him panicked or distressed, but this time, the whole experience was different. He examined the symbol on his hand.

Emery smiled since he was two points shy from the issued target. The increase in power was as expected. He didn't waste time and sat cross-legged once more in front of the origin stone's room, trying to see if he could master the basic plant spirit cultivation technique.

Not long after he had sat, a group of acolytes came out from the room bustling. It was quite puzzling to realize that they had only passed half a day of training at the institute.

Emery asked the female acolyte, who was checking her palm, beside him. "Hi, sorry to bother you but can you tell me what's going on?"

She placed her attention on him and replied, "A mission has just been placed."

30 Moon Clover

Emery moved closer to know more about what the mission was and couldn't help but notice the strong scent of herbs and plants floating in the air like the cauldron he had back in his late-father's estate.

The woman, dressed in a magus robe, had a dark skin with long curly hair and a face that had white stripes. She was talking to the man beside her on the platform who had a small but wide stature, overgrown beard, reaching up to his stomach, and a rugged face full of wrinkles.

She faced the crowd and announced, "Today, we would like to announce a wonderful opportunity for every acolyte here. Master Grom from the crafting institute has issued a request for every acolyte that has an affinity with the plant element."

The small, unusual-looking man stepped forward and took out a small bottle filled with green liquid from his summoning ring. He said, "Thank you for the introduction, Magus Erica. This here is a Green Essence potion. Once taken, it increases the spirit power of those who are acolytes rank 4 below."

Emery's ears perked up and stared at the potion as he listened carefully to this person named Grom.

Grom continued, "Making this potion requires a vital ingredient that appears only once a year which is tonight. I am grateful that Magus Erica is helping us gather as much as we can to make the most of this potion. For each of you who will return with the plant we require, we'll give you a potion in return. We recommend that you all bring us as many as you can because those who turn in the most number of the four-leaf moon clover will become a disciple in our Crafting Institute specifically, the Path of Alchemy."

An acceptance to an institution and an opportunity to increase the spirit power, this was what just Emery needed to stay in this magus academy!

Grom put back the Green Essence potion. "Now you all better get this opportunity because becoming a disciple at the crafting institute is beneficial for magi that have the plant element affinity. We only have a hundred or so members but each one is vital and respected amongst the magi. Don't waste this valuable opportunity."

Emery wanted to raise his hand and join immediately. Tomorrow was the final day for the first year acolytes, so if he had to, he would spend all night to find this four-leaf plant, however, he wasn't sure if it looked like the one from his world. His answer though was answered as Grom whipped out another object.

Grom handed out a couple of four-leaf moon clovers for everyone to familiarize themselves with its appearance. Emery took a closer look at the plant and memorized its appearance before handing it back to the acolyte before him.

When Grom received back the moon clovers, he clicked his tongue. In the crowd, suddenly, the clothing on the chest part of the acolyte before Emery lit up. Grom glared at the acolyte before saying, "Cheating already, aren't you? You're banned from attempting this mission. Knights!"

Knights entered the room and grabbed the first year acolyte in front of Emery. The first year acolyte tried to struggle while being escorted out of the room. He pleaded, "No, no! I'm sorry, please give me a chance!"

The door slammed shut after they had exited. Murmurings between the acolytes erupted and Grom snorted. He said, "The crafting institute condemns all those who are dishonest especially, we, the members of the path of alchemy. I don't have to explain how disastrous it would be if a pretentious

person manages to get in our ranks and provide false or incorrect items fell into the hands of our fellow magi."

Grom continued, "Be advised that the forest we are about to send you will have some beasts. They are lower-leveled beasts, mind you, hence no one of you should have a problem handling them. If you can't handle these beasts if you encounter one though, might as well you give up being a magus."

Grom touched his wrist and a light shot up showing a map with four x marks. "These four locations are where these four-leaf moon clovers are found. These are two to three hours away from where we are, so it's best you all start moving since it'll be sunset in a couple of hours."

He then waved his hands and trails of light flew to each of the acolytes' palms.

Emery stared at his glowing palm and focused on it. A new option appeared and he selected the word mission.

[Mission: Gather Four-Leaf Moon Clovers]

[Time Duration: Until Dawn]

[Reward: Green Essence Potion]

[Additional Reward if the Required Conditions are Met: Acceptance to the Crafting Institute for the Path of Alchemy]

An option for a map was also added and Emery decided on which location he should go to.

Racks of weapons and supplies then entered the room and all the acolytes were given the items. Of course, Emery grabbed his weapon of choice, a sword, and rushed toward the location he had chosen.