

## Storm King 51

### Chapter 51: The Estate

[Alright, Xaphan, I've got somewhere to be tonight, but let's talk.]

[Do you possess an Inherited Bloodline?]

Leon was a little surprised at this question, but he answered immediately. [Yes.]

[What was your ancestor?]

[The Thunderbird... probably...]

[Probably?]

[We don't know for certain, and our ancestor hasn't been too chatty in recent millennia.]

[Hmmm...] Xaphan went silent for a few moments, long enough for Leon to get a little worried.

[Is this a problem?]

[No... No problem... But I suppose it would figure that you have *that* bloodline, the same bloodline as the Storm King. I guess he got his way eventually, I forged a contract with his clan.] Xaphan spoke with noticeable bitterness, but he didn't seem particularly angry to Leon.

[Wait, what?! The Storm King was a descendant of the Thunderbird!?!]

[Yes. This was, in part, what gave him his titanic strength.]

[So then, the mage who you described as being one of the strongest humans ever, might be my ancestor?]

[I sincerely doubt it. If that note you found was accurate, then he and his children died not too long after summoning me. You are probably descended from one of the branch families of the clan, from one of the Storm King's distant cousins. If you're lucky, then maybe one of his uncles or aunts started your clan.]

[Why would I be lucky in that case?]

[The closer you are to the main family, the purer your bloodline will usually be, and the easier you will use your signature elemental magic. Of course, this means that you will have a lower affinity for other elements, and you...] Again, Xaphan went quiet, as if he was specifically trying to test Leon's patience.

[I... what?]

[You used my power with ease. Far too easily, in fact. Over the past day, I've been investigating your body as much as I could-]

[-YOU WHAT?!]

[Relax, it isn't as bad as what you think. I've just been letting what little magic I have circulate through your body, so I can see how well it flows. If your ancestor truly was the Thunderbird, then my power shouldn't flow so easily through your body, as it's of the fire element, not lightning.]

Leon frowned. He had no answers for Xaphan, and he hoped the demon was wrong, if only because he already stated in his mana glyph that he was a descendant of the Thunderbird. If this was proved to be wrong, he didn't think he could stomach the embarrassment.

But then, something occurred to him.

[Are there any exceptions? Possibly inheriting an elemental affinity from both parents?]

[I've... never heard about something like that, but my knowledge of humans is admittedly fairly lacking compared some others of my kind. Why do you ask?]

[I never knew my mother. She was taken away from my family when I was too young to remember, but my father did tell me some things about her. For instance, she—and at least one other member of her clan—used fire magic.]

[Hmmm...] Xaphan went silent as he thought. There wasn't much he could say, as despite how confident he sounded when he started this conversation, he was really stretching his knowledge of humanity here. [That... Maybe. Well, whatever the truth is, the real point I'm trying to make before getting sidetracked is that you have an incredible affinity for fire magic. In fact, before you said 'Thunderbird', I was expecting you to say some kind of flame creature rather than lightning.]

[Really... Well that is something to consider, isn't it?] Leon narrowed his eyes in thought. He had never considered using any kind of fire magic outside of runes before, but Xaphan seemed to think that he had some talent for it...

[It is something to think about. It's not terribly useful information at the moment, but once you get strong enough to use elemental magic, or once I get strong enough for you to use my fire, then we will have to speak of this again. My little test today wasn't the most accurate thing in the world, but I have faith that I'm right, and thus I can't let someone like you with such a high affinity for fire simply ignore it.]

[Really? Well aren't you just the sweetest thing, demon.]

[Don't give me that, boy. It would offend my pride as a Lord of Flame if my partner wasn't a fire mage. This just works out in both our favors.]

Leon glanced outside, and seeing that the nighttime crowds had largely dispersed, he decided to set out. Xaphan wasn't quite done talking, though, as he had one more thing to say.

[Oh, and by the way, it was incredibly negligent of you not to mention your Bloodline when making the contract.]

[How so?]

[Don't you think I should have been informed that I would be sharing space within your soul realm with your ancestor?]

[You make a good point. It probably should have occurred to me then. Oh well.]

[I'm glad you can be so flippant about it.]

[So am I.]

[You're an ass.]

Leon smiled in a way that infuriated Xaphan, but the conversation ended there, with the demon returning his attention back to recovering his power and letting the young mage make his final preparations. For his part, Leon worked quickly, making sure that the door was locked and barred, then opening the window. He trusted Charles enough to believe him when he said the inn was quite safe and secure, but he wasn't going to take any chances. He'd learned from Artorias that he should always prepare as best he could for everything.

In this case, there was little else Leon could do other than locking and barring the door, so that's all he did. As for leaving, that was what the open window was for. His room was on the third floor, but as a third-tier mage, he could easily jump out and land completely unharmed, then jump back in when he returned. He was also lucky that the window was on the side of the inn, opening out into the alley between the inn and its neighbor.

Leon took one more moment to recheck the location of the tunnel access point he wanted and the route to get there, then took the jump. He landed surprisingly quietly, then took off into the night.

This part of the slums wasn't well lit and had few guard patrols at night, but Leon wasn't too concerned with running into any shady characters. Any he did run into would undoubtedly go the same way as the thugs he'd run into earlier in the day when he saved Charles. No, it was the guards that he wanted to avoid. To that end, he'd left his Snow Lion coat back in the room and kept to the side streets.

His goal was a small mausoleum near the edge of the old city, now in between the slums and the city proper. It was easy enough for Leon to find, as it wasn't too far off the main street, so Leon just stayed one street over from the very brightly lit main street and followed it south. He turned west when he saw the gate archway and kept going for another mile or so.

He moved very quickly and stuck to the darker streets enough that he didn't run into anyone the whole way. There was one near-encounter with a pair of drunks stumbling home that he almost ran into, but fortunately, they were too drunk to notice him.

Only half an hour after leaving the inn, he found the mausoleum. It had been supposedly built to honor a knight and his retinue who fell in the service of House Raime, but there was an odd lack of writing within, so the truth was a mystery to most everyone. At least, it would be, if anyone actually cared about the place. This mausoleum had been there for so long that no one paid it any mind, and it had only been kept relatively clean by a public service funded by the Archdukes that maintained many of the landmarks around the city. Unfortunately, when Archduke Kyros was killed and an Exarch was dispatched to administer the city, this service was axed so quickly that the mausoleum hadn't even been properly sealed. It was only visited by rats and the occasional horny or rebellious teenager looking to evade parental eyes.

The mausoleum itself wasn't much to look at, just a simple circular building topped with a dome with three tiny tombs just big enough to inter a single person each jutting out from the main chamber.

Leon pushed open the stone door and walked in. The chamber itself was empty, save for a single stone stele near the entrance. Leon could see the three stone slabs covering the entrances to the three tombs, but that wasn't what he was looking for, so he walked straight to the stele.

The instructions for opening the tunnel were written in very small letters on his map, just barely legible. Leon pulled the map back out to check it again after glancing over his shoulder to ensure he had closed the door.

The stele itself was so old that anything that may have been written on it had long since faded, as it seems it may have been painted rather than carved. Many archaeologists that visited this mausoleum had left disappointed at that fact, not realizing that the choice to use paint rather than carved letters was deliberate, to ensure the mausoleum would fade into obscurity.

Leon placed his hand upon the face of the stele and channeled his magic into his palm. He controlled his magic power as much as he could, allowing it to slowly seep out from his palm and into the stele, then revolving around in a very specific pattern within the stone. He did this for almost a whole minute when he heard a quiet arcane pinging sound come from the floor, then stumbled back from the stele. Controlling his magic with such precision was incredibly straining, but he was lucky he pulled it off at all. He reckoned that were he of the fourth-tier, were his brain adapted to magic, then such control would come very easily, and he'd be able to open this door in seconds.

Leon took a moment to breathe, slowing his rapid heartbeat, then walked to the very center of the chamber. There, he found a very dimly pulsing runic circle in the floor, which he quickly activated, causing the stone slab covering the tomb directly opposite the door to slide open. Rather than revealing a coffin or sarcophagus, what Leon saw was a staircase leading far down into the ground. He smiled and immediately ran into the tomb and vanished into the darkness. After several seconds more, the runic circle disappeared, and the stone slab slid shut.

Leon was left near blind, but he simply did the same as when he was moving through the prison, channeling magic into his eyes. This allowed him to see with little difficulty.

He spent the next few minutes descending down the stairs, then running along in a dark and otherwise unremarkable tunnel straight towards the palace. On the way, he passed two other flights of stairs, leading to the tunnel's other access points. Leon paid them no mind and continued.

He was in something of a hurry and kept running through the tunnel, eventually reaching a large open chamber about the same size as the mausoleum. He knew from the map that he was now underneath one of the residences of the ruined palace. The only thing within the chamber was a spiral staircase around the edge of the chamber leading up, so Leon wasted no time in ascending back towards the surface.

At the top of the staircase was a platform with a slight recess in the ceiling by the wall, with a ladder carved out of the wall allowing easy access to it. Leon could tell that this recess was a stone hatch that led out into the palace ruins, but unfortunately, the enchantments that opened the door had been destroyed along with the palace. However, this also meant that the enchantments keeping the hatch closed were also broken, so after a little experimenting, Leon was able to brace himself against the ladder in the wall and push the hatch open. This proved to be a challenge even to his superhuman third-tier strength, but he got the hatch open, pulled himself out of the tunnel, and took a look around.

The old palace had been well and truly destroyed, as most of it had been rendered into indistinct piles of stone, several broken walls, and a few lonely pillars. There wasn't so much as a single intact room. Seeing the ruins up close, Leon hoped the Archives were still intact. No more time was spent looking around, as even though the wild forest that was allowed to spread over the once immaculately well-tended estate, he was able to see the lights of the city, and he knew that at least a couple of those lights were from the guard posts along the perimeter of the estate.

Each of the hidden tunnels had been built underneath the five main residences of the palace. The one he emerged from was the home of the Archduke's heir. His uncle Alexander would've been the last inhabitant, but as much as Leon wanted to look around, he needed to make his way towards the Archduke's residence about half a mile to the south.

Perhaps it was due to his haste, but he didn't encounter a single patrolling guard as he made his way past the shattered husks of once glorious palatial monuments and overgrown gardens. It seemed obvious to him that the Bull King didn't know about those tunnels and placed a great degree of trust in the enchantments placed upon the iron fence that surrounded the estate, so there weren't many guards within the estate itself.

Finally, he arrived at his goal, though it was somewhat hard to tell, as the small mountain of scorched and broken stone was nearly identical to the other small mountains of scorched and broken stone in the area. But, Leon had his map, so he knew exactly where he was. Behind the residence was what he was looking for, the Archduke's private training courtyard. In the center of the courtyard was a mosaic of House Raime's family crest made of shiny polished stone tiles, though many had shattered and blown away.

When he had to force his way through the tunnel's secret entrance at the other residence, he was worried that he might have to do the same here, but he still followed the instructions on the map to open it, and to his pleasant surprise, he found that the enchantment was damaged, but still functional! The mosaic sank about half a foot into the ground and slid to the side so slowly it was almost painful, but at least Leon wouldn't have to force it open. He doubted he would even be able to if he really needed to.

But, the door finally opened to reveal cracked marble stairs leading down to the hidden escape tunnel and House Raime's private Archives. Leon smiled, and happily descended into the ground.

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The guard post at the southern corner of the diamond shaped estate was the largest of all the guard posts that watched the palace ruins. It also contained the central hub and power source for all the enchantments that protected the ruins. It wasn't anything fancy, just a glowing emerald the size of a quail's egg and four enchantment control consoles that was each staffed with a single guard.

When Leon opened the door leading to the Archives, one of the guards manning the consoles noticed a small rune in the corner of his console light up. His eyes widened, and he stared in disbelief for a second before he turned to the only knight in the room, a man who looked to be struggling to stay awake as he read a book behind his desk.

"Captain! I'm picking up some kind of magical presence within the ruins!"

For a moment, the captain looked extremely annoyed at the disturbance, but then the implication sank in, and he turned to another of the guards, and said, "Do a sweep for anyone within."

The guard immediately complied, tapping a very complicated looking glyph on his console. A nearly imperceptible pulse was emitted from the iron fence, covering the entire estate in the blink of an eye. Fortunately, Leon had already made it below ground by this point, so the glyph then flashed red.

"No signs of life within, Sir."

"Hmmm..." The captain frowned. The enchantment that detected magic wasn't too reliable, given the ubiquity of enchantments and strong mages within the city, but he wasn't about to take any chances with this particular assignment. He stood up and called over the few men-at-arms in his service. He was going to alert the other guard posts and make sure the estate was locked down, then organize a patrol to sweep through the estate, just in case.

## **Chapter 52: The Door**

At the bottom of the stairs, Leon found the escape tunnel on his left, going south, and a huge set of double doors on his right. He smiled when he saw the runic circle still glowing brightly in the air about ten feet in front of the doors.

Leon jumped down the last few steps and ran straight to the runic circle. He reached his hand out, ready to channel his magic into the circle to activate it when a tiny bolt of lightning flashed between his fingers and the circle. It was no more serious than a static shock, but Leon still froze, as he felt the lightning magic circulate dozens of times through his body in less than a second. This lightning bolt then rushed back down his arm, out through his still outstretched hand, and back into the circle. The circle then gave off a golden flash of light and the doors began sliding open.

Xaphan was disturbed by the foreign magic from the runic circle and took a brief glance at what was happening with Leon. He saw the young mage still nervously standing still.

[Don't worry about that. That was a deceptively powerful enchantment that confirmed your Bloodline. If it had found you to be an invader, you would likely be dead. Instead, it's now opening those doors.]

Leon breathed a sigh of relief and began walking towards the doors, while Xaphan continued to watch out of curiosity.

[What exactly do you expect to find in there?]

[I'm not expecting much of anything. My father had told about a few things stored in the family Archives, but none are particularly important. I want to see if there are texts on House Raime's magic or enchantments. Maybe there's additional treasure down here, who knows?]

[Hmm. Well, watch yourself, there might be more traps within.]

[There are, but none that should affect me.] Leon smiled, having regained his confidence after the unexpected ID check.

The doors finished sliding into the wall, revealing a long well-lit corridor. Leon narrowed his eyes when he noticed the trapezoidal hall shape and the white fire burning in the lower corners. This looked like

exactly the same architecture as the prison, though made of marble and stone rather than a shiny grey metal.

[Huh... Looks just like the prison...]

[Of course, it does. Both this place and the prison were built by the same clan, thus the similarities in architecture.] Xaphan said with some exasperation.

Leon hurried down the corridor. He didn't have to go far to reach its end, where he found another, smaller door. This door opened on his approach, revealing an incredibly large library with hundreds of rows of bookshelves. The ceiling was an enormous dome, somewhat reminiscent of the control rooms from the prison, but rather than being covered in runes beyond counting, it was painted to look like the open sky. Set in the center was an enormous diamond, larger than Leon's entire body, shining with golden light. At the ends of each bookshelf was a tree, though each tree was unique, with leaves in all the colors of the rainbow. The floor was made of sparkling black granite tiles.

Leon could only stare at the scene before him. With the palace above so thoroughly destroyed, he never would have guessed that something like this would have still existed!

He was pulled back to reality by the sounds of loud metallic footsteps. His hand went for his sword, while his head turned on a swivel to find the source of the noise. Several seconds later, he saw something that looked like moving bronze armor, with flashes of lightning noticeable between the gaps. Its face was featureless, and it was holding a broom. Leon relaxed a little when he saw it was only sweeping up the fallen leaves around the trees, but he still stared at it.

Xaphan spoke up, seeing that Leon didn't know what this thing was. [A bronze golem. Looks to be inhabited by a lightning wisp, too. Built for basic labor, it poses no threat.]

Another bronze golem emerged from the shelves and walked in Leon's direction. He could tell it was coming to him because it's eyeless face seemed to be staring at him, and it walked with obvious purpose.

[And *that*?] Leon's hand went to his sword again.

[That... I don't know.]

Leon was about to draw his sword as it approached, but then, it spoke.

"Young Lord, welcome to the Archives. Is there anything in particular you wish to see today?" The bronze helmet that was its head gave its voice a very pleasant resonance, and Leon couldn't detect any killing intent coming from it. He maintained his vigilance, but he released his sword and straightened himself up.

"Yes... But first, tell me what you are."

"This one is the Librarian, built by Prince Nestor to manage these Archives."

Xaphan recognized that name. [Prince Nestor was one of the Storm King's sons.]

Leon smiled in gratitude, then addressed the Librarian again. "What all is contained within these Archives?"

“Records of history, culture, and magic can all be found here.”

“How about lightning magic? The power of the Thund... our Bloodline?”

“There are many Records of the clan’s lightning arts held here, including those written by the Honored Ancestor.”

“Show them to me.”

“Yes, Young Lord.” The Librarian turned and began walking down the central aisle of the Archives, and Leon hurried after it. As they were walking, something occurred to the young man.

“Are there any Records of other kinds of magic here? For instance, fire?”

“There are. Would Young Master like to see them as well?”

[What are you doing, Leon?]

[You said I could use fire, so what’s the harm in checking?]

[The *harm*? You have a demon of flame willing to share his power with you, and you look into *other fire magic*? Why don’t you just spit in my face!]

[Alright, alright!] The Librarian was still waiting for Leon’s response, so the young mage just mumbled never mind, and they proceeded onwards.

A few aisles later, the Librarian stopped and turned to Leon.

“This is where our lightning arts are recorded.”

Leon nodded, then said, “Which of them are the basics?”

“Those closest to the center are more basic and grow more advanced as they get closer to the walls.”

Leon smiled at the sight of the tall bookshelves filled with thousands of books. His excitement was dampened somewhat as he saw the many were copies, so there were only a few hundred books, but it was still far more than he expected.

“Are all these the clan arts?”

“Not all of them.”

“The clan arts are what I’m interested in.”

The Librarian bowed, then began walking through the aisle, gathering about half a dozen books. While it was doing this, Leon allowed his eyes to wander a bit, to take in the sight of the Archives. The longer he looked, the more details he noticed, such as the tiny diamonds fitted into the floor between tiles that glowed with white light, providing additional illumination where the artificial sun’s light didn’t reach.

But, as he let his mind relax, something occurred to him.

*‘If the Librarian was built by Prince Nestor, then surely it would know what my ancestor is. If that’s the case, then how did the Thunder Kings and the Archdukes after them forget?’*



The Librarian soon returned with the books, each roughly as thick as a finger. The golem even retrieved a leather bag to carry them in from a drawer underneath one of the many tables that ran down the center aisle.

"These books comprise the entire foundation for the clan's lightning arts. Is there anything else Young Lord requires?"

Leon took a moment to look at the books before responding. He immediately recognized one of them, as he had a copy back in his pack in the inn. He gave that book back to the Librarian who accepted it with a bow, while he packed away the other five in the leather bag.

"There *is* something I'd like to ask you, Librarian."

"How may I assist Young Lord?"

"First off, you can call me Leon rather than Young Lord, and secondly, I want to know what you know of the Honored Ancestor."

"Regretfully, this one's knowledge of the Honored Ancestor is lacking, all this one knows is that the Honored Ancestor was the Thunderbird and it exists within all the Awakened within the clan."

"You don't know anything more?" Leon was both happy at having some confirmation that he didn't make his unchangeable mana glyph in error, but also disappointment at the lack of other information.

"Prince Nestor built this one to maintain these Archives. Knowledge of the Honored Ancestor was not considered crucial to this one's task, thus it was never taught."

"Is there anything in these Archives that contains additional knowledge of the Thunderbird?"

"Not within the Main Archives."

"What does *that* mean?"

"Nothing within the Main Archives, but what lies beyond the Sealed Door is unknown to this one."

"What is this Sealed Door?" Leon asked, narrowing his eyes.

"This one will show Leon."

The Librarian began walking, and Leon followed. A few minutes later, they arrived in a small alcove of the Archives that couldn't be seen from the entrance. Within this alcove was a door with the same trapezoidal shape that Leon was growing familiar with. The door was made of completely featureless stone, with no visible way to open it.

"You don't know what's on the other side?"

"No."

"How about a way to open it?"

"Unknown."

"*Really?* You don't know?"

“This one was deactivated before its construction. The instructions to open it were not left behind.”

“Why were you deactivated?”

“Unknown.”

Leon frowned. He wasn't very surprised at that answer, but it still left him unsatisfied. He supposed the masters of the golems wouldn't have told them the reason for deactivation since it would've hardly mattered if they did or not.

“This one remained deactivated for seventy-nine thousand eight hundred and nineteen years before reactivation fourteen years and seven months ago when the palace above was destroyed. This one did its duty protecting and maintaining these Archives, but it has not discovered a way to open the Sealed Door in that time.”

Leon's frown grew deeper, though this did explain why his clan forgot its own ancestor. The Thunderbird never spoke to them, and they couldn't ask the golem either.

He walked up to the door to examine it. There was nothing much to say about it, as he couldn't sense any magic coming from it and there was nothing written on it either.

[Xaphan? Any thoughts on this door?]

[Hmmm... Try channeling some of your magic within it. There may be internal enchantments that can't be sensed, or perhaps an internal lock that will open it when the proper magic is applied.]

Leon followed Xaphan's instructions and placed his hand on the door. He pushed some of his magic within, and to his surprise, it vanished! As soon as his magic came into contact with the stone, it completely disappeared, like tossing a pebble into the ocean. He frowned again and stepped back. There wasn't much he could glean from this door without more magic. He'd already resolved to return to these Archives when he was stronger, if only for the next books on his clan's magic, and he would keep this door in mind when he did. There was something beyond that was of great importance, he was certain of that.

Suddenly, the lightning within the Librarian flashed red, startling Leon enough that his hands flew to his sword.

“Alert! This one has detected intruders in the palace estate approaching the entrance of the Archives!”

Leon's heart almost stopped. The only 'intruders' he could think of were the guards that watched over the estate.

*‘Did I accidentally trip an alarm enchantment? Are they even here for me? Maybe it's just a standard patrol... But the door in the private training area is still open!’*

Leon didn't know who these 'intruders' were for sure, or even if their path would bring them here, but he decided not to take a chance.

“Librarian! I'm leaving now, lock the doors behind me!”

The Librarian bowed in response, and Leon took off running back to the entrance. The doors to the Archives had closed behind him when he had entered, but now they slid back into the walls on his rapid approach. He didn't even wait for them to fully open and squeezed through as soon as there was enough room for him to fit. He stopped just long enough to make sure the doors were closing behind him, then he sprinted back up the stairs.

For a moment, he entertained the idea of trying to close the door in the training area from inside, then using the hidden tunnel to return to the city, but a cursory glance showed him that the tunnel had collapsed a few hundred feet in. He picked up the pace as much as he could, and very soon he found himself almost flying back into the private training area. His eyes darted around, searching for the way to close the door when he noticed a runic circle hovering in the air by what was left of the residence. He immediately ran over and activated it, hoping that his assumption was right.

Fortunately, it was, and the door soon closed, sealing up the stairway that led down to the Archives. Leon didn't get a moment to catch his breath, though, as the door didn't close silently.

"Hey! I heard something from over there!"

Leon heard the sounds of approaching guards, and he knew they were guards for no one else would be so loud and obvious if they were breaking Teira's biggest taboo.

The Archduke's residence was right at the edge of the forest that covered the rest of the estate, so that was where Leon sought refuge. His figure vanished into the trees just as several guards rounded the corner of the residence's ruins to investigate the training courtyard.

Leon's hunting instincts kicked in, and he slowed down, moving with the utmost care. He spared no glances back and kept moving silently, sticking to the shadows.

He sighed. He could hear other guards swarming over the rest of the ruins. This would make returning to the tunnel he used to come here and leaving undetected very difficult. Regardless, there was little other choice, so he began circling back around through the forest towards the late Alexander's former residence.

### **Chapter 53: Flight from the Estate**

"What was that?"

"Keep alert! You three, investigate these ruins! Everyone else, sweep through this entire area!"

Leon heard the guards arrive at the training courtyard and kept going as fast as he could. He was far enough in the nearby forest that they wouldn't be able to see him, but he still had to limit his speed to not make too much noise, either.

He did have an advantage in that the guards had to look everywhere, whereas he could just leave, but he wasn't going to get careless. Artorias had long ago taught him the virtues of patience and moving with purpose.

Leon smiled as he remembered his father teaching him to hunt, but the smile quickly disappeared. The Forest of Black and White had been his home for as long as he could remember, and thinking about his

father and his time there brought recent events back into his mind. Leon grit his teeth, pushed those thoughts out of his head, and kept moving.

He quickly left the Archduke's residence behind and swung around to head back north. The guards were mostly concentrating on the palace itself, and largely ignored the rest of the estate. Leon wasn't too surprised by this, as the estate was very large, and the Bull King had made sure it was rather heavily forested, so it would undoubtedly take days for the guards to investigate the entire thing. This had a side effect of allowing Leon to move almost completely unhindered through the forest, as even though there were many thick trees, the ground was still very flat and easy for even a child to walk through, let alone someone like Leon who was raised in much harsher terrain.

But, his luck didn't hold out. When he arrived at Alexander's residence, a guard squad had beaten him to it. There were now no less than ten guards, all second-tier or above, inspecting the ruins.

Leon frowned. He had negligently left the hidden passage open, and it was only a matter of time before the guards found it. Based on where they were, Leon guessed he only had about five, maybe ten, minutes before they came across it.

His mind worked fast, assessing several old hunting tricks he'd used back in the Vales. He settled on a very basic one, and his eyes fell to the ground. He very easily located a small white stone—likely a piece of the palace that had been blasted all the way over here. He picked it up and threw it as hard as he could.

His third-tier strength sent the rock flying through the air, loudly hitting the base of a splintered statue several hundred feet away from the residence. The guards heard it and immediately rushed over to investigate, leaving only two of their number to keep an eye on the residence.

Leon grinned and sprinted across the open ground between the tree line and the residence. The two guards left behind were far more interested watching their comrades investigate the sound they had just heard, so Leon went unnoticed. He didn't waste time and crept along, keeping the mountainous piles of rubble between himself and the guards. A few seconds later, the opening to the escape tunnel entered his view. He was right about to race over when one of the guards let his eyes wander over in his direction. Leon happened to glance over at them to see if he was clear to go, and the two locked gazes.

"Hey! You there! Stop immediately!" The guard acted fast, ordering Leon to freeze and alerting his teammates at the same time.

Leon moved just as quickly, dropping down and grabbing another small stone from the ruins. He rose, took the briefest of moments to aim, and hurled it with all his might. The stone hurtled across the space between the two and slammed into the guard's chest with a horrendous crunch. The guard had been wearing leather armor which blunted the impact somewhat, but he still suffered a few broken ribs and was knocked flat on his back. The jagged and broken stones he landed on didn't help matters, but at least the guard didn't die.

Leon bolted straight to the tunnel and jumped down. He reached back up to pull the stone hatch closed, but the heavy thing barely budged.

"Hector! Hey, are you all right? Can you hear me?"

Leon heard the guard's comrades find him. He grew a bit more panicked and pulled even harder on the hatch.

"Clodius! Get over here now! Everyone else, fan out! Find the bastard who did this!" The squad medic ran over, pulling out some healing spells on the way, while the rest of the squad surged towards Leon and the tunnel.

Leon pulled at the hatch with all his strength as he heard the guards come closer. Finally, just before the guards got close enough to see him, the hatch started falling back towards him. He threw himself back down the stone ladder, finding his balance just in time to catch the hatch before it slammed shut. He eased it down silently, then dropped down onto the stone platform. Leon wasted no more time and took off down the stairs.

He hit the ground running and rushed down the tunnel. There was no subtlety in his movement; he ran as fast as his legs could carry him. His current destination was the mausoleum. There were two other access points in this tunnel, but he had been to the mausoleum and knew that it was deserted. Besides, the other two access points could be damaged or blocked, and he wasn't going to risk going one way only to have to turn back. He just needed to get as far away from the estate as fast as he could.

The tunnel was about two miles long, and he crossed it in less than six minutes. He almost flew up the stairs, pausing only to activate a runic circle on the inside of the door, then making sure it closed several seconds later. He hurriedly left the mausoleum, finally slowing when he had put another mile between himself and the tunnel.

It was a quick journey back to the inn. Leon jumped back in through his own window just after midnight, then wearily collapsed on the bed. There would probably be even more chaos among the ranks of the city guard tomorrow, especially since they were already looking for Adrianos, but for now, he just let himself drift off to sleep.

—

He awoke not long after sunrise. He was still wearing the same clothes from the previous night and even had the leather bag full of books around his shoulder. He quickly stripped and jumped in the shower. Half an hour later, he was dressed, fully awake, and ready for breakfast.

He slightly hesitated before leaving. He took a few more minutes to steel himself for venturing back out into public. He really didn't want to go out, but the smell of breakfast wafted throughout the entire inn, and Leon hesitated no longer. He left his room, making damned sure to lock his door, then proceeded downstairs.

He wasn't surprised to find that Charles had beaten him down there. The man must have gotten more sleep than Leon and woken up earlier. But, the energy and enthusiasm with which Charles waved at him made him frown a little. Leon didn't dislike Charles, but the other man was certainly more open and chatty than Leon was used to.

"Hey, Leon! How'd you sleep? I was like a log, at least until my roommates got back. Those drunks snored all night!"

"Slept well enough, I suppose."

Charles nodded. "I get you, hard to sleep in a new place. For the first few nights after I came to Teira, I could barely close my eyes long enough to sleep. I guess I was too homesick."

Leon smiled. Charles was right that he wasn't feeling very comfortable in this new place, and greatly missed his little house back north and... His smile faded, so Leon decided to change the subject.

"Breakfast ready yet?"

"Almost, only a little longer! By the way, we should probably use this time to talk about where you want to see today. You mentioned a barber, a tailor, and a bookstore. Anywhere else?"

"We can cut the bookstore. Can always find one in the capital later."

Charles gave Leon an odd look, the way one would look at a friend if they just threw a pouch full of silver off a bridge. "Are you sure, buddy? You're paying me one hundred silvers, but giving me *less* work?"

Leon shrugged. "Eager to get south. I just... just want to get to the Knight Academy."

"The Knight Academy, huh? Any reason in particular you're so jazzed to enroll there?"

"Need power. Magical... and secular..." Leon absentmindedly gripped his sword, and Charles knew not to ask for specifics.

"Well, I got thinking last night. I thought about maybe enrolling in the Academy myself. I'm still young enough, and I'm a first-tier mage, so there shouldn't be any problem."

Leon frowned a bit. Charles' magical foundation was shaky, and he likely had little control over his power. The Knight Academy would be exceptionally hard for him.

"You sure? There are plenty of other jobs for a first-tier mage, jobs that aren't so dangerous or strenuous."

"I've checked, and trust me, there aren't that many for *me*. And those that are for me, I've already been fired from. Joining the army means some guaranteed food, silver, and a bed, and becoming a knight is far more respectable than just taking a place in a shield wall. Pay's much better, too."

"If you're serious, it would be nice to have a little company when going south..." Leon surprised himself when he said this. He was even more surprised to find that he meant it! He was getting fairly familiar with Charles and having someone who knew how to get around this land would be very helpful.

"Well that's settled, then! Tomorrow, we head south!"

The two ate a hearty breakfast, then made their way out into the city. Before they left, though, Leon made sure to pay the innkeeper for another day in his room. He didn't want to risk the older man throwing his stuff out while he was gone.

They made for a barber first. Charles took Leon to a place just a few streets over, and Leon got a simple cut that was much more in line with the southern style. His hair was less obviously barbarous, and he felt a little more secure walking around. Charles then took him to a good tailor near the triumphal gate, regaling Leon with stories from his hometown that he assured Leon certainly weren't embellished at all.

“... and I was left standing there, completely naked with nothing more than a few fallen leaves to cover myself with!” Charles laughed uproariously at his own story, while even Leon chuckled a little.

“And how did you get home? Wasn’t her father climbing the mountain at the same time?”

“Well, it was close to sundown, so I decided to wait things out. There was a hidden mountain spring I’d discovered when I was twelve, so that’s where I hid. I chilled for a couple hours until it got dark, then made my way home... relatively unnoticed...”

“Relatively?”

“Her old man never saw hide or hair from me, but her sister was another story. That demoness beat me black and blue, but I got my revenge several months later when we held a ‘rematch’ in her bedroom.”

“Really?” Leon asked doubtfully.

“Of course! I would *never* lie about such a thing!”

Leon was about to respond when a guard unit of several hundred marched past them in the street. They moved further into the city with such haste that they were given some very weird looks from the crowds in their way, if only for the sheer number of guards in the formation. Leon felt like he knew why they were in such a hurry, but Charles watched them in confusion.

“By the Ancestors! What are they doing, pulling even more guards out of these districts?! Going to leave this place completely lawless!” a nearby stall keeper shouted to no one in particular. One of her elderly patrons helpfully responded.

“My daughter’s in the guard, and she was told that someone broke into the old palace ruins last night. No one knows who they were, but the guy injured a guard and escaped. The guard commander was furious and humiliated, so he ordered a manhunt for the guy responsible.”

Charles overheard the exchange, and muttered, “Who would be so suicidal as to do *that*?” Leon remained quiet, and they proceeded on to the tailor once the guard unit finished passing them.

The tailor was about what Leon expected from a place in the slums. No enchanted clothing, nothing particularly fancy or expensive, but he still walked away with nine sets of pants and shirts. Three were white, three more grey, and the rest were black. These clothes were made of loose cloth and didn’t quite fit perfectly, but he no longer looked like a Valeman, so he was quite happy.

When he was done, he and Charles made their way back to the inn. Leon retired to his room, intending to spend the rest of the day reading his way through those books he had taken from the Archives, while Charles took that time to write to his family and tell them he was heading south to the Knight Academy. The two men rested and readied themselves as best they could for the journey south, to the capital.

## **Chapter 54: Breathing Exercises**

Leon and Charles met up at dinner. Their conversation was dominated by their plans to go south. Charles had wanted to head west, then take a barge down the Naga river all the way to the capital. Leon shot that idea down just by bringing up the price of such an endeavor, making Charles pat his own coin pouch in dejection. Leon suggested that they simply follow the Julian Road all the way there. It would take them several weeks on foot, but it would be much cheaper, especially since Leon had no intention

of staying at any inns. Charles wasn't too thrilled with that idea, but the weight of his coin pouch—or lack thereof—prevented him from voicing any concerns at the sleeping arrangements.

Next came the issue of food. Charles, realizing that Leon was far more adept at planning long traveling excursions, deferred to him. So, Leon figured that they would only need about a hundred silvers to buy travel rations for the both of them to last a week, more than enough time to reach the next city on the road. There, they would buy enough rations to reach the city after that, and they should be able to reach the capital from there without stopping for food again.

Water wouldn't be a problem. Leon planned to buy a dozen sheets of spell paper along with the food, to write water runes upon. He wasn't good enough at inscribing runes for this to allow them to bathe, but they would have plenty of water for their journey.

With their route planned and logistics figured out, the two went back to their rooms to pack. Leon moved all of his books and maps into his leather bag, while all his clothes and the two days of food he still had went into his pack. Charles didn't arrive in Teira with much, and he had sold some of it during his more desperate times, which left him with little more a few hundred silvers and about five days of clothing, so he packed very quickly.

Both men went to sleep early and rose early as well. They got themselves cleaned up, then met for breakfast. They didn't speak much and finished quickly. They then grabbed their things, returned their room keys to the innkeeper, and left.

There weren't many places open that sold food, but Charles knew one that serviced travelers and was consequently open at dawn. Due to Charles not having much money, Leon bought all the food they'd need, while Charles used the abundant space in his own pack to carry most of it.

With all that taken care of, the two made their way to the main road and began their journey south.

They walked in relative silence. Leon was being his usual quiet self, but Charles was more than a little nervous, and now that he was leaving Teira, he was starting to hesitate a little. He kept walking, though.

The two left the slums, continuing all the way to the palace estate. Leon was eager to get past this place, as he could see that the guards around the posts had doubled since he had seen them last. They appeared very on edge and were glaring at anyone who lingered too long to stare. Leon and Charles hurried past, though Charles was a little too wrapped up making himself commit to his choice to notice Leon's anxiety.

Fortunately, no one stopped them. The two men made it past the diamond-shaped estate, through the central district, and entered the southern district. This place was beautiful, with trees, flowers, and gardens, all awash with color. There weren't many stores here, as this was where the nobles built their manors and palaces. And those manors and palaces certainly were things to behold, all painted marble, glittering silver, and shiny polished stone. The road was flanked with grand marble statues and many more triumphal arches, as well as very stressed looking guards.

Leon and Charles stayed buried in the throngs of people moving here and there. Leon was very uncomfortable being surrounded by so many people, but since they were traveling through noble estates now, there wasn't much he could do about it. There were side roads, but hardly anyone used those, and he didn't want to be seen by the guards. It was unlikely he would be identified, as he didn't



think the guard who saw him back in the palace ruins had gotten that good of a look, and he had changed his hair and clothes since then, but he wasn't about to take chances.

Despite Leon's anxiety and Charles' hesitation, the rest of the day was unremarkable. By dusk, they had made it about thirty miles out of the city. It had taken a little while to leave the sprawling estates of the southern district, but Leon felt that they had made good time.

As the sun began to set, the two made camp. It wasn't much to speak of, Leon simply made a small fire with what few sticks and weeds he could find and they slept with their heads resting on their packs. They did, of course, go about a thousand feet off the road, to make sure no one would try and steal their things, but there were hardly any trees this side of Teira. The land was too rocky, and where there was dirt, it was too thin to let much of anything but grass and weeds to grow.

So, the two settled in for the night behind an outcropping of rocks that would conceal them from the road.

"Hey, Charles." They hadn't spoken much all day, so Charles was a little surprised when Leon spoke up.

"What's up?"

"There's something I'd like to talk about..."

"Yeah?"

"I've heard the Knight Academy only accepts first-tier mages and up, aged sixteen to twenty."

"That's right. We both fit that criteria, so why bring it up now?"

"I'm a little concerned, because to my eyes, your foundation looks a little shaky. If you continue on and enroll in the Academy as you are now, you'll likely have a tough time of it..."

Charles frowned, and looked a little hurt and offended at Leon's words, but he knew Leon was right. He didn't have anyone to train and instruct him as he grew up, so it was a minor miracle that he achieved the first-tier of magic at all. He was about to half-heartedly defend himself, but Leon continued, cutting him off just before he began to speak.

"If you want, I could show you a thing or two that could help."

Charles was a little stunned, but he responded, "Yes, please, any pointers you could give me would be great!"

"Not pointers, specifically, more like a way of breathing."

"Like a breathing exercise that the nobles practice? How do you know such techniques? Aren't you from the Northern Vales?"

"Look, Charles, I may have grown up in the Vales, but I'm no Valeman. You should've realized that after my visit to that Heaven's Eye Tower."

"True, that was a little eyebrow-raising..."

"Anyways, I can tell that you've received little to no instruction with regards to magic, but you should know what makes a first-tier mage, right?"

"Yeah, lungs can absorb magic from the air."

"That's a fairly simple way to look at it. My father taught me that humans can't use magic naturally, but their bodies will adapt given time. Entering the first-tier means that your lungs have adapted and magic can enter your blood. However, adaptation is not a yes or no thing. There are infinite degrees of adaptation, and the nobles have the time and money to figure out ways to maximize this process."

Charles was fascinated. He didn't make a single noise while Leon spoke, because all of this was new information to him. The majority of commoners wouldn't know the specifics of magic use unless they lived close to a city or magical guild, and the mining town Charles grew up in was far too out of the way for him to pick up on these details.

"Your lungs have adapted well enough to allow magic to enter your blood, but it doesn't appear to be that much."

"How can you tell?"

"It's a little hard to describe, but your aura seems a little thin. I'm a third-tier mage, which means I'm sensitive enough to the magic in the air to know that you're exhaling far too much of it to be absorbing a lot. In fact, compared to most of the first-tier guards I saw back in Teira, I would estimate you're absorbing about half as much as you should be. Trying to advance up the tiers of magic with such a weak foundation is like trying to build on sand. Not impossible, but prohibitively difficult."

"And this breathing technique will help?"

"Yes, but you'll have to work at it. I won't force you to do anything, but I would recommend a few hours of meditation while performing these breathing exercises every night. This won't cover all of that ground by the time we reach the capital, but I'm guessing that after a few months, you'll make up that difference, and be able to concentrate on ascending to the second-tier much easier, possibly within the next year or two."

Charles was a little stunned. As a commoner, he never thought he would reach the second-tier before he turned thirty, if ever, and the third-tier was unthinkable! If he was honest with himself, he was going along with Leon to enroll in the Knight Academy more as a way keep himself fed for a few more months while moving to the capital, where there ought to be more opportunities for him. He never expected that he would even be able to graduate! But, if what Leon was saying was true, then it just might be possible.

"Please, I welcome any insight you may have!"

"Alright then. What you need to do sounds fairly easy but maintaining it for hours can be a very hard thing to do, so do your best. First, I find it easier to sit up. My father said it doesn't really matter how you relax, as long as you actually relax, but I find that laying down can lead to sleep far too easily. So, I sit up when I meditate."

Charles immediately sat up, following Leon's instructions.

“Alright, now breathe slowly. Inhale and exhale with purpose, don’t just let your body breathe naturally. After you inhale, hold it for just a second, then exhale. Inhale, hold, then exhale.”

Charles closed his eyes and breathed.

“Good. After a while, you should feel a warmth in your chest. This is your lungs absorbing the magic in the air. A little while later, that warmth will spread throughout your body, after the magic is fused with your blood. Over the next few weeks, you should slowly increase the amount of time that you hold your breath, and your lungs will grow more efficient at absorbing magic.”

“Is there anything more to it? Is it just that simple?”

“Yes. Well, it is for you.”

“What is *that* supposed to mean?”

“There are some techniques in manipulating mana that might help others, but for someone like you who is just reinforcing their own foundation, the breathing exercises will do just fine. Besides, anything I might show you could create some bad habits for when you’re learning your chosen element.”

“I see...” Charles didn’t quite understand, but he took Leon at his word that the breathing exercises will be all he needs. So, he sat and controlled his breathing. Leon watched Charles for a little while before drifting off to sleep.

When they woke up the next morning, Charles felt incredible. He was bursting with energy and felt like he could run all the way to the capital before lunch.

“You’ve absorbed more magic than your body is used to, so it’s no surprise you’re feeling good,” Leon remarked dryly

“Wow! This is amazing! If all the nobles have been doing that for years, no wonder they grow so fast!”

“And with some diligence, you’ll be just as strong as them.”

“Ha ha! Thank you, buddy!” Charles spoke directly from the heart. Leon wasn’t what anyone would call ‘friendly’, but in less than a week, he’d saved Charles from those thugs, helped him come to a decision about his future, and even given him such a powerful gift!

Leon was a little embarrassed at Charles’ abject gratitude and his face turned a little red. Charles almost looked like he was about to run over and give him a hug, but he abstained, much to Leon’s relief.

The two happily ate breakfast, despite it being nothing but a few chunks of dried meat, then set back off on their journey south.

## **Chapter 55: The Capital**

For three weeks, Leon and Charles walked along the Julian Road. They passed quite a few towns and cities, but they only stopped long enough to fill up on food. They slept outdoors and occasionally stopped by a river to wash up a little.

Every night, Charles would perform the breathing exercises that Leon taught him, and he could really feel the difference. Every day when he woke up, he felt like a new man, stronger, faster, more

perceptive. He knew it was just a feeling of having more mana than he was used to, but he was ecstatic at the rapid progress he was making.

He was so happy, in fact, that he never once complained about sleeping outside or Leon's increased walking speed when around other people. He simply kept pace with Leon, chatting his ear off the entire time. As they got closer to their destination and he got more familiar with Leon's more subdued personality, he quieted down significantly.

Finally, they arrived in sight of the capital on the twenty-second day. There were a few hills on the northern side of the city, and when they arrived at the top, they could see almost all of the enormous city. It was less dense than Teira and sprawled out over miles and miles of land. Here, the nobles generally lived in the central district, so most of the buildings formed a ring around the huge estates, and right in the center of the city was the King's Lake. Set slightly to the west of the center of the lake was the great island upon which was built the royal palace. The palace's great towers and halls could be clearly seen even from where Leon and Charles were, almost a dozen miles away.

The two stood there, just to the side of the road, and stared in awe at the city. They could see the giant Heaven's Eye Tower in the south, a colossal arena in the north, and no less than five monuments to the royal family towering over almost everything else.

Leon could also feel a great amount of magic in the air. With the exception of his home back in the Vales before the obelisk was destroyed, this city had more magic in the air than anywhere else he'd been. Each breath was sweet and refreshing, despite the smells of the Julian Road, crowded as it was with hundreds of people and horses.

"Look out there, isn't that the Legion Headquarters?" Charles pointed southwest, at a gargantuan fortress, built on a lonely hill on the opposite side of the city. The hill was surprisingly not surrounded by walls, but there were extensive fields and even forests just beyond the hill, presumably the training grounds for the soldiers stationed in the city. "Wouldn't the Knight Academy be found around there?"

"Maybe. For now, we should focus on finding some accommodations, then we can ask around about enrolling in the Academy."

"Right. It will be nice to sleep in a proper bed and wash all this dirt off!"

The two finally stopped staring and resumed walking towards the city. The suburbs began at the foot of the hill and were predictably inhabited mostly by those of lesser means. As with the slums of Teira, the buildings were made of simpler materials and possessed little in the way of magical enhancements. However, this did make it much easier to find a cheap inn.

Leon and Charles found a place on about the same level as where they stayed at in Teira and eagerly took the opportunity to wash up and rest. As with the last inn, Charles was in a cheaper common room, while Leon paid extra for a more private room.

Charles, the lover of talking and socializing that he was, was already in the dining hall by the bar when Leon made his way down chatting up a pretty barmaid. Leon hesitated, not wanting to interrupt, or more accurately, not wanting to meet someone new, but Charles saw him and happily waved him over.

"Jeanne, this is Leon, my friend I'm traveling with. Leon, this is Jeanne."

"Hiya! Good to meet 'cha!" Jeanne was a very chipper girl and enthusiastically greeted Leon. For his part, Leon just nodded respectfully before grabbing a seat next to Charles.

"Oh, don't mind him, he's just not that good at talking to cute ladies," said Charles, winking at Jeanne, who blushed and giggled. Charles turned to Leon and said, "So, we were talking just now about the Knight Academy..." Leon's ears perked up, and he glanced over at the two.

"Yes, Charles told me you both were going to enroll. That's very impressive." Jeanne said with a bashful smile while throwing flirty looks Charles' way. "You two can sign up at any time, but you can't fully enroll until you take an entrance test, which only happens once a year."

"When's this test?" asked Leon.

"You're in luck, it should be about two weeks from now."

"How do you know this?"

"The Royal Government makes sure everyone in the city knows, and that commoners know they aren't stopped from joining. Town criers don't shut their traps about it, fliers are posted everywhere, sometimes guards are even sent to inns and bars when night falls to make an announcement about enrollment. A lot of good it does *us*, though, when they only take first-tier mages and up..."

Leon nodded in acknowledgment. He didn't mind this wait, as he had been fairly lax in his training over the past month and could use the time to catch up. Charles was a little more nervous, though the cause for him was the test, not the wait. He had never even held a sword before, and only had the most cursory of instruction with a bow and spear. Combined with knowing his flimsy first-tier strength would make him one of the lowest of the low even if he did pass this entrance test, he was starting to sweat over this enrollment a little.

Charles laughed to cover his anxiety and turned back to Jeanne. "Alright! So, with our business basically done, how about you join us for a meal?"

Jeanne giggled, then said, "I can't, I have to work! But how about we continue this when my shift ends?"

"My lady, nothing could make me happier." Charles smiled at her, and she blushed and got back to filling drinks and carrying food to the other customers.

"So, what do you want to do about enrollment? I-I can wait a few days if you want to delay it a little..." Charles tried to sound nonchalant about it, but he couldn't help stumbling over his words a little.

"No, let's knock it out first thing tomorrow." Leon's response drained all the blood from Charles' face, something which Leon noticed. "... We'll get it done, and we can spend the time between now and the test training." This statement caused Charles' façade of calm to crumble.

"What do you mean 'training'? I have nothing to train with, let alone any idea of *how* to train in the first place!"

"What's your concern? You've seemed happy and confident for the past few weeks."

"What *isn't* concerning me?! I'm too weak, and I have no idea how to fight! Those nobles who enroll will tear me apart!" Charles was speaking very intensely, so much so that Leon felt he would be shouting

were it not for Jeanne still being in the same room. It was clear that the rush he had gotten from learning the basic breathing exercise had worn off and arriving in the capital had started to drive the reality of his choice home. He was weak—at least compared to the nobles who had been training their entire lives—with a depressingly light coin pouch, few prospects, and hundreds of miles from home.

“Alright. Calm down, we can do something about this...” Charles didn’t seem encouraged, especially since Leon was still speaking with the same monotone seriousness as usual.

“Nothing can be done. The Ancestors, Old Gods, and the Sacred Bull itself could all descend from the heavens to help me, and I’d still fail. Why should *this* be any different from anything else I’ve done...” Leon rolled his eyes at that, raised his fist, and smashed Charles’ hand into the bar. “GAH! What the shit?!”

“Don’t act so pitiful, you’ll find no pity here. We’re going to the Knight Academy to sign up for the entrance test tomorrow, then you’re going to train with me.”

Charles rubbed his sore hand and looked a little aggrieved, but his self-pity vanished. “... And what does this training entail?”

“Muscle training and breathing exercises mostly. We don’t have enough time for much combat training, but I can show you a few things that will help you hold your own. Got it?” Charles nodded slowly. “Good. We’ll meet again at breakfast, so I’d recommend resting tonight...” In the corner of his eye, Leon saw Jeanne almost gliding between the tables, avoiding drunken hands that sought her butt with ease and grace. “... Or don’t, your choice. Just be ready.”

The rest of dinner was spent in relative silence. Leon finished his food quickly, then went back to his room to continue reading through his books. Charles ate much slower. He needed the time to think, and he was waiting for Jeanne to get off work.

—

The next morning, Leon came downstairs just in time to see Charles and Jeanne lightly kissing goodbye. The two looked a little tired, and Leon knew they didn’t get much sleep the night before. Charles saw Leon come down, and he said a few more words to the blushing Jeanne, gave her a wink, and went to join Leon for breakfast.

“You good?” Leon asked.

“Yeah, I’m doing better now. Nothing like some attention from a cute girl to get my spirits back up!”

“Right.” Leon was a little relieved that Charles had pulled himself together. He didn’t quite consider the other man a friend, as they hadn’t been acquainted for very long, but he had a gift for speech that Leon valued greatly. He had also gotten to know Charles well enough to relax a little around him, and without him, Leon would have to actually *talk* to other people to figure how and when to enroll in the Knight Academy!

[Leon.] Xaphan’s voice resounded throughout his mind, startling Leon a little.

[What is it?]

[When next you have the opportunity, let's talk.] Xaphan placed a great deal of stock in appearances, and he didn't trust Leon to not look weird in public when they spoke.

[Sure thing.]

The conversation ended there. Leon wasn't very chatty to begin with, and Xaphan needed to concentrate on recovering his power, so he didn't talk very much either.

Leon and Charles finished breakfast quickly, then approached the inn manager. They paid for a few more days, then asked for directions to the Knight Academy. After receiving them, they set off.

It was only an hour-long walk to the Academy in the south-west. The roads were wide and very well-maintained, allowing for easy travel almost anywhere someone would need to go. Leon didn't talk much, which was expected, but Charles was uncharacteristically quiet as well. But, for all his worry and misgivings, he kept walking.

They arrived outside of a three-story building that had much of the same architecture as other government buildings. The décor was simple, but of obvious quality, and an enormous sign made of black granite was hovering several feet over the door, which read 'The Knight Academy of the Bull Kingdom' in glowing white letters. Next to the door was pinned a large piece of paper, which advertised the Academy's open enrollment, and invited anyone willing to take the test to head inside.

Charles took a deep breath before stepping forward past the gate, but Leon needed no such preparation. He had a steely and determined look in his eye, and he didn't hesitate to approach the grand front doors.

"Hey! Wait up!" Charles called out, as he hurried after Leon.

The guards at the door took one look at Leon, saw his incredibly stable third-tier aura, and straightened up while averting their eyes. They assumed someone with that strength at that age was undoubtedly a high noble, and they wanted no trouble from him. Leon barely glanced at them as he pushed the door open. Despite its size, the door swung open with ease, and Leon and Charles walked inside.

## **Chapter 56: Some Much Needed Training**

The Knight Academy encompassed a great deal of land and many buildings. There were dorms for recruits, libraries, lecture halls, training fields, and sparring platforms. Everything that was needed to quarter and train the recruits was found in abundance at the Knight Academy.

The building that Leon and Charles stepped into was the Central Administration building, where most of the bureaucratic needs of the Academy were met. Just on the other side of the doors were a number of desks and receptionists, as well as chairs and tables for people to wait and relax in.

"How may we help you gentlemen?" one of the receptionists asked.

There was a moment of silence before Leon realized that Charles was a little too nervous to answer. "... Here to sign up for the enrollment test."

"Of course, just follow me please."

What followed was a flurry of checking ID's, paperwork, and cursory physical and magical tests. There were a few strange looks thrown Leon's way when he said he was from the Northern Vales, but his Heaven's Eye ID was genuine, and thus, effectively beyond reproach. Ajax had neglected to mention to Leon that Heaven's Eye very rarely issued their own ID's, and so the identities of those who possessed them were hardly, if ever, questioned. Charles' process was a lot less straightforward. His background was heavily scrutinized, and he was questioned intensely before he was cleared for the enrollment test.

They emerged from the building several hours later, feeling like interacting with those bureaucrats and filling out all those papers had shaved a few years off their lives. Charles greedily inhaled the fresh air, while Leon stared hollow-eyed into the distance, absentmindedly gripping his sword.

They only recovered when they had stumbled their way to the first place that had hot food. A few streets over, there was a small restaurant that served some fairly mediocre burgers, but those burgers tasted like ambrosia after the soul-crushing experience they had just gone through.

"Just signed up at the Knight Academy, eh?" the owner asked, seeing the familiar looks of unmitigated joy on Leon and Charles' faces as they wolfed down their food. Leon didn't stop, but Charles at least had the decency to nod to him between bites. "Yeah, all commoners have that same look when they leave that place. A shame they don't do the same to the nobles, but I guess it makes sense, they have names that are much easier to verify."

When the owner left to check on his other customers, Leon examined the documents they left the Academy with. They didn't walk away with many papers, and most of them were instructions for when and where the enrollment test would take place. They would have to go to a training field a mile south of the administration building in fifteen days, and there they would take a power test, a written test, and a combat test. There weren't any details about what these tests would actually entail, but their names gave a few clues. Essentially, they would be tested on their knowledge about culture and magic, and their magic power would be confirmed.

That combat test was a little ambiguous, though. Leon could think of quite a few things it might refer to, but he had no real idea.

*'I'll find out soon enough, no use pondering it now.'*

Once they were done, Leon and Charles paid for their food and left, hurrying back to the inn.

"So, what kind of training did you have in mind?" Charles asked Leon, somewhat nervously.

"Every day, you'll allocate at least three hours for breathing exercises. You'll also accompany me for another two hours for physical exercise. Another couple of hours for combat training." Leon responded. When he said that last sentence, Charles was sure that a tiny smile flickered across Leon's face, but he blinked, and it was gone. He felt a shiver run down his spine.

"Ok, that sounds... good. What should we do now?"

"Change into looser clothing. Something easy to move in."

They went back to their rooms and did just that, though Charles had to do his best, as he didn't have a whole lot of clothes to choose from. Leon, on the other hand, was dressed in sandals, leather shorts,



and a loose green shirt, the same training attire he wore back home. He still had his sword, but it was secured onto his back, rather than around his waist. It would be much less intrusive there.

“So, what now?” Charles asked, trying to sound eager but unable to suppress his anxiety.

“Do you know where the largest public park in the area is? There should be some in the city...”

“Hold on, let me find out!” Charles knew that Leon wanted to talk to as few people as possible, so he happily volunteered to speak with the inn manager. Leon had done so much for him in so little time, that he wasn’t bothered in the slightest at his companion’s reticence to speak to others.

“You know the way?” asked Leon when Charles walked back over.

“Yep!”

“Good. Start running.” Leon said with a half-smile that terrified Charles.

“... What?”

“The park. Start. Running.” Leon let some of his potent killing intent spill out for a moment, and Charles had to suppress the urge to immediately vomit and pass out. Once the killing intent abated, he immediately turned around and sprinted out of the inn, with Leon in hot pursuit. Every time he slowed, Leon would be there, almost literally pushing him forward.

They ran past bewildered onlookers and pedestrians, dodging and weaving through the crowds. The sight of lower-tier mages out for physical training wasn’t a particularly rare sight but seeing one running with such a look of terror and the other with a look of sadistic glee was definitely out of the ordinary.

Half an hour and half a dozen miles later, they arrived at a very large public park. The land near the edges was flat and cleared of all but grass, while the interior of the park was relatively well forested, and even contained some large ponds and a few tiny lakes. There were quite a few lower-tier mages training in the cleared area, most by sparring with friends or playing various sports. Most people around, however, were just common people who were out enjoying the warm sunny day.

Charles began slowing down to catch his breath when he stepped onto the open field at the edge, but Leon didn’t stop.

“Who said to slow down? Into the trees...” Leon hit Charles with another blast of killing intent, and Charles picked up the pace, running straight down one of the hiking trails of the woods. It was only when they reached a secluded clearing that Leon allowed them to stop. When he did, Charles collapsed, gasping for breath.

“Hmm. Can see now why you were so nervous. If you can’t even handle that little jog, then you wouldn’t make it very far in the Academy...” In contrast to Charles, Leon wasn’t even slightly winded, which given that he was in the third-tier, was to be expected.

“Uuuugh... That sucked, kill me now...”

“If you can talk, then get back up.”

Charles immediately held his tongue, and Leon waited a few more minutes before getting him on his feet.

“Alright, you ready now?” Leon asked. Charles nodded apprehensively. “Good. Then I’ll show you a few unarmed techniques that you ought to find some use for...”

“Just *unarmed* moves? I don’t think they’ll ask us to fight with fists...”

“These techniques are useful for defending yourself from weapons as well. First off, I want you to try to punch me.”

“What?”

“Punch me. Or, *try* to punch me.”

“Umm... ok...” Charles stepped forward, and after a little hesitation, he threw a half-hearted punch in Leon’s general direction. Leon rolled his eyes, side-stepped with ease, while also grabbing Charles’ outstretched arm. He pulled Charles forward while sweeping his leg out from under him. This all happened so fast that Charles barely had the time to process it before he found himself lying face down in the dirt.

“Don’t be so indecisive, it’s not like you’re going to hurt me. Now, get up and try again! And commit to the punch!”

Charles pushed himself up, and swung his fist at Leon again, with less hesitation, but he still wasn’t putting his full weight behind the strike. To Leon, this was still almost in slow-motion, and again, he dodged while pulling Charles forward and knocking him off balance.

“This move isn’t just for when someone tries to punch you. If they attack with a knife or sword, it still remains useful.” Charles struggled to his feet while Leon was speaking. “We’ll practice in stages. First, the dodge. When you see an attack coming, you need to step out of range and place all your weight on that foot...”

When Leon called it for the day, Charles was exhausted. Leon had him practice the dodge-grab-sweep move so much that he could barely stand. Leon had also demonstrated the move on him so much that Charles’ face had become quite familiar with the ground, but he had also managed to get Charles to commit to his punches.

They only had fifteen days; not enough time to really make Charles a good fighter, but plenty to make him a little stronger.

After Leon allowed Charles to rest for a few minutes, they started making their way back to the inn. Of course, Leon made Charles run, and the first-tier mage was almost crying in misery by the time they returned.

—

The night, when Leon was alone in his room, he remembered that Xaphan had something he had to say.

[What’s up Xaphan? You wanted to talk?]

[Yes, but it's a little hard to admit...]

[No worries, take your time.]

[... Over the past month, I've determined that it will be... almost impossible for me to recover on my own. I'm going to need... your help.] Xaphan almost seemed to spit those last two words out.

[Oh really? Well what does the mighty 'Lord of Flame' need from little old me?]

Xaphan ignored Leon's tone, focusing entirely on just saying the words he needed to. [I will need you to brew a potion for me. There are three ingredients needed: a feather from a bird strong in wind magic, preferably fourth-tier or higher, the bud of a Kagu Flower, try to find one that's at least a century old, and the core of some kind of fire beast, fifth-tier or higher..]

[Ok. I need to focus on training until I get into the Knight Academy, after that, I'll look into it. Probably going to need to stop by the Heaven's Eye Merchant Guild, but I'll see to it.]

Xaphan wasn't that thrilled at Leon's plan to wait, but he still said, [See that you do. I won't be of much help to you until you reach the fifth-tier, otherwise. Don't forget that the stronger I am, the more power you'll be able to draw upon.]

[I won't forget, you're my partner after all.]

—

On that very same day, around midday, the personal yacht of the Exarch of Calabria arrived in the capital. As the three gigantic water runes on the back of the yacht pushed it towards the docks, dozens of servants and crew members scurried around on the decks making sure everything was ready for their Lord.

None of this was heard in the opulent living quarters, though. Here, sitting on one of the black couches was a gorgeous young woman in an elegant dark blue dress trimmed with gleaming silver. Despite reaching her ankles, the dress wasn't particularly conservative, as it left her arms bare and had a low V shaped neckline. The young woman had long silver hair pulled into a loose ponytail, leaving enough to frame her beautiful face. Her cold and detached eyes glittered in the light like sapphires.

But, for all her beauty and elegance, her most striking feature was the strength and stability of her third-tier aura. She was only sixteen years old, but anyone who saw her would know she was already on the path to becoming a great mage.

The man who sat across from her on another couch of black leather was even more impressive. His aura dwarfed hers in its sheer strength and intensity, despite his serene and calm demeanor.

He was, of course, Lord Justin Isynos, the Exarch of Calabria, and the young woman was his daughter, Valeria.

"I'm sorry, my dear. We should've been home long before now, this place is far beneath you."

"Don't worry, Father. It doesn't matter where you say 'home' is, I have only ever known the Bull Kingdom. Enrolling in the Knight Academy is just the logical choice for me."

"I understand wanting to go out to see the world, but there are so many other ways to do that..."

"But my friends are here. Asiya is already in the city, and I recently heard that Elise has returned as well. So, don't worry about me, I'll be just fine. There'll be plenty of time to go sightseeing when we finish our business here." Valeria gave her father a brilliant smile, but it didn't banish Lord Justin's slightly guilty look.

"Right... Listen, Valeria, be careful, ok? I doubt there will be anyone in the academy that could, or *would*, harm you, but I can't help but worry."

"Yes, Father." Valeria started sounding a little annoyed, but Lord Justin didn't drop the matter.

"Look, we haven't heard from Timotheos in over a month. Something went wrong, I know it, and we don't have that many people we can rely on. This leaves us very short-handed, and..." Lord Justin would have continued, but his daughter interrupted.

"I'll be fine! I'll be with Asiya the entire time, nothing will happen here!"

"Ok, ok, I'll drop it."

Just at that moment, the yacht finally slid into the dock, and a servant opened the door.

"My lord, we have arrived."

"Good. Make sure all of my daughter's possessions are packed and get the carriage ready at once!"

The servant bowed and left.

"Well, this is it." Lord Justin had a melancholic smile on his face, but his daughter banished it with a brief hug.

"Don't worry, Father. We'll get a few weeks off from time to time, and I'll be sure to come home then."

After their final goodbyes were said, Valeria boarded her luxurious carriage and departed the yacht, heading straight for the home of one her friends, a woman named Asiya Samarid. The two of them would begin enrollment in the Knight Academy the next day.

## **Chapter 57: The Enrollment Test Begins**

Fifteen days passed quickly, and it was time for the Knight Academy's enrollment test. Leon had given Charles some very basic instruction in handling a sword and dodging attacks, and he was certain it would be more than enough to see the first-tier mage through to a good score. Every day when they returned to the inn after training, Charles would meditate and perform breathing exercises for several hours, and his aura was significantly more stable. Leon guessed his power had increased by almost half of what it was before they left Teira.

When the two arrived at the assembly field where the test would take place, Charles wasn't that confident, despite the advances he'd made. His body was bruised and sore, and he had barely slept the previous night. Leon was far more relaxed, as he was absolutely confident in passing the test. As for getting a good score, he couldn't have cared less.

The field was large, so large that despite the several thousand people present, it still seemed fairly deserted. Most people were here with friends, so they had spread out around the field for some last-minute practice and warming up, though the wooden platform in the very center was given a wide berth.

There was a fence of iron bars that ran all the way around the field, and at the entrance were several dozen administrators where Leon and Charles signed in and were handed a blank scorecard. After that, they stood at the fence and watched the crowds for a while, waiting for the test to start. Charles eventually sat down to meditate, to make sure he was topped off on magic, while Leon leaned against the fence and closed his eyes.

More and more people arrived over the next hour until there were over ten thousand on the field. A few hundred workers began setting up a hundred stations around the field, which Leon knew was for the power test from the instructions he'd been given. There was a crystal on a wooden table, about the size of his fist, and every hopeful applicant would need to channel their magical power into it. The crystal would light up different colors for every tier the applicants had advanced through. This was the first test and would likely be where most of the applicants would wash out.

It was only when the stations were almost finished being set up that the nobles started arriving. There were a few lower nobles who showed up early, but the test was scheduled to begin around midday, and most nobles weren't that thrilled at the idea of waiting with commoners, so they would usually arrive as late as possible.

Most of them walked right past the admin desks, sending their servants over in their stead. Of course, it was only to inform the administrators of their presence, rather than to finish signing up for the test. A few of the more vocally anti-commoner nobles even started pushing through the crowds that had started to form around the center of the field after the stations started being set up.

"Make way, you filthy peasants!" One of them, a young man with golden hair, an athletic build, and brilliant crimson clothes, went beyond just pushing, and even kicked at those in his way.

Leon frowned. He could sense that most of the nobles were of the late second-tier, but a few, such as this exceptionally ill-mannered man, were of the third-tier. Still, he found none of them to be that impressive, and his opinion dropped at their arrogant display.

One of the newer arrivals, a comparatively quiet lower noble of the second-tier, ran after the golden-haired man. He was easy to follow, given the curses and bruised shins in his wake. The new arrival approached the golden-haired man, bowed slightly, then went to whisper something in his ear. The golden-haired man's eyes widened in disbelief and excitement before the new arrival hurriedly spoke a few more words. The golden-haired man immediately turned around and forced his way back through the crowd and all the way back to the gate, where he began to rather anxiously wait.

Leon had no idea who he was, but he seemed important, or at least related to someone important, as other nobles saw him waiting and went to wait with him. Soon enough, there was a group of two dozen young noblemen and a few servants all waiting by the gate.

This was a very curious sight, one that drew the attention of just about everyone that could see it. The suspense was lifted when a beautiful carriage arrived. It was painted sky blue, trimmed with silver, and pulled by a pair of magnificent white horses that almost glowed in the sun.

Leon's eyes narrowed, he felt a slight magical aura surrounding these horses. They were undoubtedly absurdly expensive, so much so that all the other nobles that had arrived in carriages of their own felt horribly inadequate. The more Leon inspected the carriage, the more he felt its inhabitants were very special, as even from over a hundred feet away he could sense the magic within. This carriage was evidently very heavily enchanted.

Leon glanced over at the golden-haired noble and saw that he had walked to the gate and was waiting expectantly, with a look of pride at seeing the other nobles behind him not dare to move forward themselves. These other nobles had a slightly bitter look, but they didn't speak up to object.

The carriage driver jumped down and reverently opened the door, stepping to the side and bowing slightly. The watching crowd went silent, almost holding their breath. Three women stepped out, each of nearly unrivaled beauty.

The first was a dark-haired woman with bronze skin and warm brown eyes, clearly a descendant of the people from the desert kingdom to the south of the Bull Kingdom, past the Gulf of Discord. She wore loose yellow clothing, which though plain, was made of the finest silks and studded with diamonds. Despite how loose her clothes were, they were held in place with a red sash around her waist, and her pants were tied to her ankles at the hem.

This exotic southern beauty warmly smiled and waved when she saw everyone at the gate, and for a moment, it almost seemed like the sun flickered in jealousy of her beauty.

The next woman who stepped out was the near opposite of the first. She had dazzling silver hair tied into a loose braid, and eyes like two sparkling sapphires. She was dressed all in tight blue training clothes, which hugged her body in all the right places. She had a cold and distant air about her, and she hardly spared a single glance towards the waiting nobles. Instead, she stepped down from the carriage and looked disinterestedly towards the horizon, while waiting for the final passenger to disembark.

When the third woman stepped out into the light, Leon almost had a heart attack. He recognized that lustrous red hair, those piercing green eyes, the seductive aura she seemed to project, but he didn't expect her to appear here of all places. She was, of course, Elise.

Leon hurriedly averted his gaze, hoping he wasn't seen. Unfortunately for him, when everyone else was staring at the three of them, anyone not looking their way was quite obvious. Elise saw his familiar figure plain as day, though she didn't seem to react. She cast her devilish gaze around at the dazzled nobles with a smile that was half disdain and half satisfaction.

These three young women spoke a few more words amongst each other before Elise gave them both a brief hug and boarded the carriage again. Just as she was about to close the door, she looked over her shoulder to see that Leon had turned his own gaze back in her direction, and they made eye contact. Elise smiled impishly and winked at Leon, causing his face to immediately turn red and his head to turn away in embarrassment. She giggled coquettishly as the door closed and the carriage departed.

When Leon worked up the nerve to look back towards the entrance again, he was relieved to see that Elise had left. He couldn't get that beautiful and confident smile of hers out of his head, though.

The other two young women fell in with the noble crowd, though they didn't seem particularly enthusiastic about it. The woman in blue wasn't even bothering to hide it, as she barely acknowledged anyone who spoke to her. The woman in yellow was much friendlier, speaking to everyone in turn, and allowing the golden-haired noble to walk with them, though his eyes kept turning towards the woman in blue.

The other nobles didn't seem to say anything apart from greetings, which Leon understood as these two young women were both in the third-tier, head and shoulders above all but the golden-haired noble. Leon resolved to keep an eye on those three. He wasn't too concerned about them, but a little caution was never a bad thing.

Over the next half hour, the rest of the nobles arrived, though none of them had quite the same impact as Elise's group. Leon found that it was easy to see who was important and who wasn't, as there were a few nobles who would receive greetings from almost all the others. There were two who even the golden-haired man sought out and spoke a few words with. However, those two young women didn't seem to feel the need to give any greetings, themselves.

By the time a knight in fancy military garb ascended the platform, Leon counted three dozen third-tier mages among the thousands of hopeful applicants, including himself. None of the others seemed to be commoners, though, given their expensive attire.

There were also about three hundred second-tier mages, with perhaps two hundred and seventy-five or so being noble. All the rest were first-tier mages of varying quality.

When the knight arrived at the center of the wooden platform, he waved his hand and an iron rod appeared from his soul realm. At the top of the rod was a diamond-shaped iron plate, with a fingernail-sized opal set into the center and gently glowing runes along the outside edge. Thanks to this iron rod, when the man spoke, his voice was heard from one end of the field to the other.

"Welcome to the Knight Academy of His Royal Majesty, King Julius Septimius Taurus! I have confidence that you all know why you're here, so I won't waste time with a long-winded speech! Along the perimeter of this training field, you will see one hundred stations, each with a magic measurement crystal! If it's found that you're not solidly of the first-tier, you will be denied entry to the Academy! Next to each station is a sign with a number on it, the same number as should be in the top right corner of your scorecard. You will line up *in single file* in front of the same station as is on your scorecard! *In. Single. File!* When it is your turn, you will present your examiner with your card, and they will give further instructions as needed! Now get moving!"

The ten thousand people immediately began moving. Leon looked at his card, which said '26'. Charles' was '57'.

"Hey..." said Leon, "If one of us finished before the other, let's meet up at the burger place from the other day." Charles felt like he might throw up from anxiety if he opened his mouth, so he simply nodded in response, and the two young men walked to their respective stations.

Leon's station was all the way on the other side of the field, and he took the walk over there as an opportunity to observe the other stations. He noticed that they weren't divided by tier, or at least, not completely. The first four stations were given over to the nobles, and all the commoners sharing the rest. The first station only had the thirty-five third-tier nobles getting in line for it, with the next three divided amongst the second-tier nobles. All the other stations had about one hundred and twenty commoners spread out between them. He saw that the few second-tier commoners were scattered amongst the other stations, too.

The stations themselves were identical, and the examiners were all of the third-tier. The sole exception was the first station, who Leon guessed was a fourth-tier examiner from what little he could glean of the man's aura.

Leon arrived at the back of his line and waited. Those in front of him were all only first-tier mages, and the few that turned around to size him up noticed his incomprehensible aura and immediately turned back around with slightly ashen faces. Leon didn't care, he just calmly waited for his turn, watching the others slowly undergo the exam.

### **Chapter 58: Power Test**

"Fail." The stern examiner glared at the young man, and he withdrew his hand from the crystal. The young man looked like he wanted to say something for a moment, to try and argue with the examiner, but the crystal had only flickered with an incredibly faint red light. He was only sixteen, young enough that he still had at least four more tries to enter the Knight Academy, so he shut his mouth and dutifully left the station, making for the field's gate.

Charles saw the whole thing and was just about drenched in sweat. It was almost his turn, and out of the forty-five people who had tried their hand at the crystal, only seven had passed.

The next applicant stepped up. He walked straight to the crystal without even waiting for the examiner to call him forward. So confident was he that he seemed to forget to give the examiner his scorecard. He placed his hand upon the crystal and began channeling his magic power into it. But, his confidence was all for nothing, because the crystal pulsed with a red light that was barely brighter than the previous man.

"Fail." said the examiner.

"What? No!" The young man's confident façade shattered, and he turned to the examiner. "Let me try again, I can do this!"

The examiner was having none of it, though. "You failed. Get lost." The man ignored the examiner and extended his hand to the crystal again, but before he could touch it, the examiner lunged forward and drove his fist into the young man's stomach. The young man collapsed, and the examiner kicked him to the side before grabbing his scorecard and tearing it to pieces.

He glanced back at the line, and growled, "Next."

The next man came forward. He did like all the others had before him and placed his hand upon the crystal. Again, the crystal flashed a dull red light, not enough for the man to pass. An extremely dejected look appeared on his face, but when the examiner said 'Fail', he didn't stick around.



“Next.”

It was now Charles’ turn. He tried to swallow his fear, then stepped forward. He held out his scorecard for the examiner with trembling hands and approached the crystal. Before stretching out his hand, he took a few deep breaths, giving the mana in the air time to be absorbed by his lungs.

He couldn’t wait too long, though, and reached for the crystal. When his fingers came into contact with it, he channeled every drop of mana within him into his hand as quickly as possible. For a moment, there was no response. His magic power flowed into the crystal like a tiny river into the Endless Ocean, and his heart rate skyrocketed in panic.

But then, a tiny red light appeared in the crystal. It grew in brightness until nearly a quarter of the crystal had turned red. He kept going, but the crystal didn’t grow any brighter. He looked to the examiner and braced himself for failure.

“... Pass.”

Charles released a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. A smile broke out onto his face and he had to fight the urge to laugh in relief. The examiner quickly wrote down something on his scorecard and handed it back to Charles.

“Go over to the building over there...” The examiner gestured over his shoulder with his thumb. “... and show this card to one of the examiners behind the desk.”

“Thank you!” Charles was giddy with excitement and had to force himself not to pull the examiner in a hug. The examiner just scowled at him, then turned his eyes back to the line and shouted, “Next!” Charles got the hint and hurried off.

There were three relatively small two-story rectangular buildings on the edge of the field, one on every side of the iron fence with the gate on the final side. On the way to the building the examiner pointed to, Charles looked at his scorecard. Below his personal information and the crystal station number, there were three large boxes in a row. In the left-most box, the examiner had written ‘028’.

He needed a score of at least twenty in each test in order to pass. A twenty-eight wasn’t that great, but he passed. Next up should be the combat test, then the written test.

*‘I wonder how Leon is doing... Has he passed yet?’* Charles thought as he pushed the door to the building open. There was no doubt in his mind as to whether Leon would pass this test or not. *‘Probably not. His station was further away, he’s probably further back in line...’*

Charles wasn’t wrong, Leon was still waiting in line. There were still about forty people or so ahead of him by this point, but he wasn’t paying even the slightest bit of attention to them. Instead, he had been watching the third-tier tests.

They hadn’t lined up but rather had formed a large group and began egging each other on, treating this test as more of a game amongst themselves than anything. Leon was too far away to hear what they were saying, but they seemed to be having a great time. Despite being stronger than them, the examiner didn’t disturb them, allowing the young nobles to undergo the test at their own pace. Consequently, only about half of them had gone through in this time.

Leon watched as the golden-haired noble decide that it was his turn to go through and stepped forward to the cheers of his peers. When he touched the crystal, almost immediately it glowed red, then orange, only stopping when the entire core of the crystal had turned bright yellow. The other nobles cheered, but Leon saw that the golden-haired noble seemed a little disappointed in his performance. Even from this distance, Leon could tell that there was a slight tinge of orange that clung to the edges of the crystal.

The golden-haired noble joined the ranks of those who had finished the test, and one man in particular, a tall and lean man, slapped him on the back in congratulations. The golden-haired noble smiled rather meekly in response, as this was one of the men that Leon had noticed him go out of his way to greet.

The nobles stopped cheering and grew deathly silent when they saw who was going to take the test next, the woman in blue. She walked towards the crystal so gracefully that she almost seemed to glide. She gently pressed her hand against the crystal, which responded by quickly glowing bright yellow, with no hint of orange. Her cold emotionless face didn't so much as twitch as she stepped away from the crystal, though the group of young nobles clapped and cheered.

Next came the woman in yellow. The crystal was made to match her clothes just as fast as the woman in blue, to the celebration of the noble crowd. The woman in yellow was very happy with the result, and ran straight to the woman in blue, happily hugging her friend.

The woman in blue cracked a very brief smile, then the two began walking towards the building opposite from the gate, completely ignoring the other nobles. The golden-haired noble called after them, asking them to wait with everyone else, but the woman in blue didn't even acknowledge his presence, and the woman in yellow just waved to him with a smile on her face, and they kept walking.

Leon noticed that they would pass close by his station, so he hurriedly turned his gaze away from them. The woman in blue wasn't paying any attention to the other people around, but the woman in yellow's head was on a swivel, taking in everything that she could.

Inevitably, as they passed Leon's station, she noticed him. He wasn't trying to stand out, but he wasn't exactly hiding his aura, either. The woman in yellow's radiant smile faltered for a moment in surprise, then she leaned over to whisper to the woman in blue. The latter's eyes briefly narrowed in suspicion before whispering back to the former. They nodded to each other, then proceeded towards their destination. They didn't bother thinking more of Leon, because if he were truly third-tier, they'd meet very soon anyway.

After those two and the golden-haired noble had taken their power test, Leon rather lost interest in continuing to watch the other third-tier nobles. He calmly waited until it was his turn to approach the crystal.

As with all the other examiners, the one running his station was a very humorless man who was only concerned with keeping the line moving in an orderly fashion. He would hurry the applicants forward by almost yelling 'Next!' at them while giving a glare filled with killing intent. Perhaps it was because he was so unnerving that out of the hundred or so applicants who went before Leon, only nine had passed.

When it was Leon's turn, the examiner was about to do the same as he had with all the other applicants, but as soon as his eyes met Leon's, he caught himself. He shut his mouth and gave Leon a respectful

nod, which Leon returned. The examiner could tell from Leon's aura that he was a strong third-tier mage, perhaps even stronger than he was. It wouldn't do to make enemies of one with such strength at such a young age.

Leon walked up to the crystal and casually placed his hand upon it. It immediately flashed red, and seconds later to orange. The examiner watched in near awe as the orange gave way to yellow, which filled the entire crystal.

"Out of curiosity, how high can these crystals measure?" Leon asked the examiner, clearly not caring much about the test.

"The fif... They can reliably measure up to the fifth-tier. Sixth-tier and up would likely make it explode." responded the examiner. Now, it wasn't just Leon's aura that shocked him, but his fairly dismissive attitude towards the test. The examiner was only used to dealing with first-tier commoners who would give the test their all, so Leon's casual attitude really threw him for a loop.

"Alright, you passed." the examiner said after a few more seconds. He would've said so sooner, but Leon had thrown him completely off his game. In fact, as Leon removed his hand, the examiner could've sworn he saw a tiny hint of white in the core of the crystal.

He wrote '100' down on Leon's scorecard and passed it back to Leon as quick as he could, then pointed him towards the same building the two third-tier women had gone to. Leon frowned a little but began walking towards it anyway.

Glancing over his shoulder, he noticed that the third-tier nobles had also finished and left while he hadn't been paying attention. Not that it really mattered to him, though.

The administrators in the building entrance were packing up their things when Leon pushed the door open. Most of the first-tier administrators didn't do more than give Leon a casual glance, not even trying to examine his aura. The one who seemed to be in charge, a second-tier mage wearing a green military casual uniform, did a little more than glance at Leon. She noticed his third-tier strength and immediately walked over to greet him.

"Hello, Good Sir, what brings you over here?"

Leon looked around in confusion for a second or two before answering. "... I was told to come here for the enrollment test..." he said quietly.

"Y-You were?" The woman was so taken aback she stuttered a bit. All the third-tier nobles had already arrived, so she wasn't expecting another applicant to walk in, which was why all her people were busy packing up. "... May I see your scorecard?" she asked politely.

Leon obliged, handing her the card. When saw his name, her panic receded. For a moment, she had thought he was another noble, but she didn't recognize his name, so she relaxed. If he were noble, it would be very hard to explain why her people were getting ready to leave so early, but since he wasn't, this would be much easier to take care of.

"I'm terribly sorry, we weren't expecting anyone else to come in. Just give us a few seconds, and we'll get this sorted out, ok?"

Leon nodded, and she quickly handed the card to one of her subordinates. It took a few more minutes, but she came back to him with the card and directed him to go through the only other door in the room.

“... Thanks...” he muttered, just loud enough for her to hear. She hoped it wasn’t sarcastic, but it didn’t seem to be so.

Leon left the administrators to their business and walked towards the next set of doors. When he pushed them open, he found himself in a huge nearly empty room. It was big enough for at least five hundred to exercise in, but it was filled with only thirty-five others. These thirty-five people were now staring at Leon, and most of them didn’t bother hiding their hostility.

## **Chapter 59: Combat Test I**

Charles was meditating as he waited for the combat test to start. In his building, only about seven hundred applicants had passed, out of more than ten thousand. The building was plenty large enough for him to find a secluded place to ready himself, and he was helping himself to all the rest he could. He had passed the power test despite his fears, but he had even less confidence in the combat test.

Leon had shown him a few moves, but he was still incredibly nervous. He ran through the dodging and throwing technique, and the basic sword stabs, slashes, and blocks that Leon had shown him back in the park. Charles could only practice with a stick, but Leon thought it should be good enough.

Suddenly, a set of doors at one end of the enormous room burst open, and dozens of examiners poured in, led by a rather rough-looking knight with a sloppy green uniform and a face full of dark stubble. Each of them carried a pair of wooden practice swords.

“SHUT THE FUCK UP!” he shouted. Despite his unkempt appearance, he radiated the power of a fourth-tier mage, though the applicants couldn’t identify it. Regardless, the light conversation that had filled the training chamber immediately ceased.

“GOOD! Now get into groups of ten!” With everyone being silent, he lowered his voice a little, but it still carried throughout the entire chamber. The other examiners spread out, assigning people to groups if they didn’t move fast enough.

Charles wasn’t one of those people. He waited a moment for the initial groups to form, then walked right to the nearest one that still needed someone and asked to join. Even for all his anxiety, he wasn’t shy.

When the examiners were finished grouping everyone up, there were sixty-eight full groups, and three groups of eight, with an examiner for each. A few examiners were left over and joined the unkempt knight back by the doors. He didn’t need to say anything more, his job largely ended after the initial shouting.

“Alright, all of you keep quiet and we’ll get this done quick as can be.” The examiner for Charles’ group was clearly not in the mood to waste time and began explaining the rules for the combat test immediately. The other examiners did likewise, and the training chamber quickly filled with the sounds of speaking again.

“Now, I’ll have each of you spar with me for a minute. After that, you’ll get your score. Simple enough, right?” The examiner glanced at each of the applicants in turn, but no one said anything. The examiner rolled his eyes and said, “Well I take your silence as a ‘yes’. Now, fork over your cards!”

Everyone complied, and the last man to present the examiner his card was grabbed. "You'll be first, take this." The examiner handed him one of his practice swords, and the applicant's face went pale, but he still took a position a few feet away from the examiner. The other nine members of the group arranged themselves in a half-circle around them.

The examiner waited a few seconds for him to make the first move, then lost patience and went on the offensive. Charles tried to pay attention, but he was so anxious that it was very difficult. His hands began to shake, and he began to sweat, despite the relatively cool temperature of the chamber.

The man next to him was significantly calmer and noticed Charles' condition. "Hey, buddy, you ok?"

"Uh, yeah, I'm good. Just a little nervous is all." Charles responded, trying and failing to keep his voice from shaking as badly as his hands were.

The other man slapped his hand down on Charles' shoulder, startling him, but Charles stopped shaking for a moment. "It's fine, don't worry about this so much. You made it past the first test, so chances are you'll make it past this one as well."

"Y-You sure sound confident."

"Of course, I am, a friend of mine took this test a couple years ago. He told me that it's the power test most people fail at, followed by the written test. The combat test is more of a formality, as the main point of the Academy is to teach you how to fight. It would kind of defeat the purpose if they only took those who could fight to begin with, right?"

Charles had to admit he was right, and he managed to relax a little. The other man noticed him loosen up and smiled.

"Hey, I'm Henry by the way. This here's my friend Alain." First Henry pointed to himself, then to the tall and heavily-built man beside him, who gave Charles a friendly nod.

"I'm Charles."

While they were talking, the examiner finished sparring with the first applicant. He was clearly not impressed.

"That was damned pathetic! There's more to fighting than just standing still and blocking! You're lucky we aren't that stringent with first-tier mages!" The examiner scribbled down a '20' on this applicant's card and almost threw it back to him. He then glanced at Charles. "You, nervous boy! If you can talk, then you can fight! Get over here!"

The first applicant handed the training sword to Charles with a look of relief, which Charles accepted with a look of dread. His chat with Henry had relaxed him a little, but he certainly wasn't calm. He walked forward and assumed the basic stance Leon had taught him; his right foot was slightly ahead of his left, and he held the wooden sword at the ready.

The examiner smiled slightly, then said, "Alright, let's do this..."

As soon as he said this, Charles took a step forward and stabbed at him. Leon hadn't just taught him a few basic moves, he had also given him some valuable advice, such as the value of getting in the first strike.

Given Charles' obvious nervousness, the examiner wasn't prepared for him to take the offensive and hurriedly raised his own sword to block. Charles wasn't deterred, though. He had never once gotten in a hit against Leon when they sparred, so he was used to this. The examiner had deflected his sword upwards, so Charles followed up with an overhead slash, bringing his sword down hard against the examiner.

The examiner's smile grew a little bit bigger, even as he blocked again.

Charles followed up with another stab. Leon hadn't taught him too much, as he figured they didn't have the time for Charles to really internalize it, but he did always push Charles to keep up the pressure when on the attack. He never outright told him to, but he pushed Charles to be as aggressive as he could. This was partly due to the fighting style Artorias had taught him. It took advantage of the strengths of lightning magic, speed and power, and to compensate for its lack of defense.

Charles didn't let up, never once waiting for the examiner to attack. The examiner was so impressed at Charles' aggressiveness, especially when compared to the first applicant, that he didn't even bother taking the initiative to attack. Of course, being a third-tier mage himself, he didn't have any trouble blocking or dodging Charles, but he wanted to see if the young man would keep it up.

Charles aimed a slash at the examiner's arm, which he handily blocked. Charles stepped back for a moment, during which the examiner thought that he might be taking the defense, but then he lunged forward, stabbing towards the examiner's chest. The examiner dodged with a well-practiced side-step, but Charles then slashed towards his stomach, constantly staying in range and keeping the pressure on.

"Why was this guy so nervous if he could fight like this?" Henry wondered out loud.

"His moves seem a little awkward and basic. I'd guess he hasn't had much practice," observed Alain.

After a minute passed, the examiner said, "Alright, that's enough!" Charles sighed in relief, but since he didn't get in even a single good hit against the examiner, he wasn't sure how well he did.

The examiner quickly wrote down his score and handed Charles his card back, and even gave the young man a stoic nod of congratulations. Charles nodded back on instinct, then looked at his card.

'70'.

His eyes widened and his heart beat with excitement. Even though the fight was finished, he felt another adrenaline rush from the sheer joy he felt. He walked back to stand next to Henry with a huge smile on his face.

Henry clapped him on the shoulder and gave him a congratulatory smile and nod, which Charles returned.

"You! Next!" the examiner shouted at Henry. Charles handed over the training sword, and Henry took up a position opposite the examiner.

Charles spent the next few minutes reveling in having passed the test, very much enjoying the rush he got from the fight.

—

The nobles in the third-tier training chamber stared at Leon as he closed the door behind him. The attention made him a little nervous, but he kept his expression neutral. He walked over to an empty space by a wall and sat down to meditate until the combat test started. The nobles were a little dumbfounded and looked at each other in confusion. The woman in blue and woman in yellow were the only exceptions, as they were the only ones among them who had seen Leon during the power test and identified him as a third-tier mage. They knew he would arrive sooner or later.

Of course, they didn't bother telling anyone this, and of the rather blatantly hostile looks, the golden-haired noble was clearly the most hostile. Everyone present was at least of the third-tier and thus could see that Leon was of the third-tier as well, so none of them questioned him. Everyone except for the golden-haired noble.

He walked over to Leon, and after failing to even try to conceal the derisive and mocking looks at Leon's simple grey clothing and plain-looking sword, he asked as politely as he could, "Pardon me, but I don't think we've met..."

Leon barely even glanced up at him, then shook his head no; a response that seemed to infuriate the golden-haired noble. He attempted to keep his calm, as he could feel the women in blue and yellow briefly look his way, but his eye began twitching under the obvious strain of keeping a smile on his face.

*'Who does this little shit think he is, not saying anything when someone as noble as myself is addressing him?!'* he thought.

What he said out loud was quite different. "In that case, allow me to introduce myself. I am Gaius Caecilius Tullius, son of Domitius Aquillius Tullius, the Duke of Lentia!" He looked especially pleased with himself and even puffed out his chest a little so he could look down on the still sitting Leon better.

Leon thought for a moment. If he remembered Artorias' history lessons correctly, Lentia was a region in the south that lay on one of the rivers between Calabria and the Gulf of Discord. The trade that came through along the river had made Lentia relatively rich, despite its general lack of other resources. By the time the first Bull King had united this land, the King of Lentia had lost almost all of his land and power to his rivals and had only been given the title of Duke because he surrendered to the Bull King without a fight.

That same family had kept their lands and titles in the following five thousand years, a feat which few others had managed to accomplish. Gaius certainly thought quite a bit of himself, given his attitude, but Leon wasn't impressed.

"Leon," he said quietly.

"What was that?" Gaius had expected Leon's eyes to widen in fear and shame at having disrespected such a high noble, not the casual indifference the young mage now showed.

"My name... Leon..."

"... Just 'Leon'? Nothing else?"

"Leon Ursus."

That really got everyone's attention. With a few exceptions, they had all been subtly paying attention to the conversation despite appearing to be talking amongst themselves. They were curious, if dismissive, about the new arrival, and had assumed him to be just a simple commoner who had reached the third-tier through luck, not a tribesman from the north!

Gaius was perhaps the most stunned of them all, but he quickly found his tongue. "You're a fucking *barbarian*? What do you think you're doing here? This place isn't for you, get lost."

Leon glared at Gaius and slowly rose to his feet, but fought the temptation to release his killing intent and draw his sword. "Explain, then, who this place is for. And if I'm not welcome, why then was I directed here in the first place?"

"This chamber is the domain of nobility, it's reserved for those of *proper* breeding! Anyone who would send *you* here is clearly just jumped-up common trash who doesn't know better." None of the other nobles who were paying attention looked like they disagreed, though that didn't include the woman in blue, who was immersed in a conversation with an equally inattentive woman in yellow.

Leon straightened up before responding. He was almost half a head taller than Gaius, and he made sure he was looking down at the noble. "You sure do have a strong opinion about this, but unfortunately, we must take the world as it is, not as we'd like it to be. There are no rules prohibiting my presence, and I will not leave just because you demand it."

Gaius began channeling his magic, and the other nobles smiled in pity at Leon, clearly thinking he was about to be beaten and thrown out. After all, in their minds, no commoner would be able to measure up against a properly trained noble, even if they were in the same tier.

Gaius' aura began churning as his mana soaked his body in magic power. The two women stopped chatting and looked over, as did the other few nobles who had been meditating off to the side rather than paying attention.

"Well, since you refuse to leave like a good little peasant, I guess I'll have to make you."

Leon's lips began to turn upwards in a slight smile of anticipation, and he subtly slid one of his feet forward, lowering his center of gravity and preparing himself to fight. "Someone as *noble* as yourself ought to know better than to bark like a rabid dog..."

## **Chapter 60: Combat Test II**

Leon and Gaius stared each other down. All the other nobles in the room watched, some in fascination, others in sadistic glee. Everyone expected Leon was about to get his ass handed to him by Gaius.

Everyone, that is, save for a thin and unassuming man who had been meditating until just now. He had dark brown hair and sharp blue eyes. He maintained a stoic expression, and in contrast to most other nobles who liked to be the center of attention, he preferred to stay quiet and watch. Anyone who underestimated him would quickly find themselves being taught a brutal and painful lesson, though.

This was Marcus Remus Aeneas, the eldest son of House Aeneas, more popularly known as the 'House of Strategists'. This was the family who literally wrote the book on standard battle tactics for the Bull Kingdom, and more than half of all Legates of the Knight Academy were taken from their House. The march they ruled over in the east was the only region that hadn't been ravaged by raids by the Giants



living in the Border Mountains in the past fifty years. They were so influential that despite Marquis being a lower noble rank than Duke, Marcus was one of the two men Gaius had gone out of his way to greet before the power test.

Seeing the conflict between Leon and Gaius, Marcus narrowed his eyes and watched. He saw Leon's subtle movements to take a significantly more aggressive stance, whereas Gaius still stood relatively normally, despite curling his hands into fists and glaring. If they did start fighting, Leon would almost certainly get in the first hit. Given how solid and stable his aura felt to Marcus, then he would be willing to bet that even if the fight lasted a few more blows, it would've already been decided with the first hit.

Of course, he didn't warn Gaius to back down or even share his insight with anyone else. He actually wanted to see a fight between the two, to see if his hypothesis was correct. He watched the two with a slight smile on his face.

However, just as Leon prepared himself to lunge forward at Gaius, the doors burst open and half a dozen knights and examiners poured in, including the man who had announced the start of the power test. Now that they were so close, Leon could see all the detail in his dark green uniform, including the three gold stripes on his shoulders, the gold braid under one arm, and the insignia of the Knight Academy upon his chest. At his rank, he could command an entire legion of twenty-thousand soldiers. If he was here, then he had to be the Legate of the Knight Academy—the man in command of the entire institution—and a sixth-tier mage at the very least!

"Is there a problem here?" he growled. Gaius immediately straightened himself up, then bowed slightly to the Legate.

"No, Sir!"

Leon dropped his stance, and the Legate paid them no more mind, walking towards the center of the chamber. The other nobles followed, and Gaius glared at Leon once more before following suit.

[What a dickhead.]

[You were watching that, demon?]

[I've done all I can to recover my power until you get that potion made. Not much else to do other than watch...]

[Right... I'll get on that soon.]

[Glad to hear it, but you focus on higher priorities. Such as flattening that dickhead noble into a thin paste.]

[Why are *you* so pissed at him?]

[He insulted you, my partner, and thus he has insulted *me* by proxy. I am an exalted Lord of Flame, he should feel lucky to lick the ground I lay my eyes upon, but instead he tried to force my partner to leave. Were I not so weak right now, I'd burn him to ash!]

Leon was about to continue, but one of the examiners stepped forward, interrupting him.

“Everyone gather round and be quiet, and we’ll get this show on the road!” There was hardly a need to say this, as everyone had already gathered and stopped talking, but he felt the need to say it anyway since the Legate was watching.

“Now, what’s going to happen for the combat test is we’re going to have us a few duels between the lot of you. There’s no limit to how many times you have to fight, but everyone must fight at least once. Everybody understand?”

Everyone understood. Being third-tier mages, there’s practically no chance for the Knight Academy to let them fail, so this little exhibition was mostly just for show, to let the nobles strut around for each other.

Of course, that wasn’t to say that there weren’t a few who would take this seriously. Leon already noticed Gaius look at him with a malicious smile, and a few other nobles looked positively eager to get up there and fight.

“Do we have any volunteers to start us off?” asked the examiner. One man was so eager to volunteer he almost jumped forward. He was almost seven feet tall, with curly light brown hair, and so heavily muscled as to put marble statues to shame. He wore a sleeveless green shirt, long dark green pants, and had strapped a truly immense double-bladed battle-ax to his back.

“I’ll go first,” he said with a confident smile.

The examiner chuckled at the man’s eagerness, then said, “Well, this is a good time to mention that personal weapons are not allowed during this test.”

The man nodded and took off his ax, placing it on the ground a few steps behind him.

“Good, do we have any other volunteers?” asked the examiner.

“To shit with volunteers! Marcus, get up here!” shouted the enormous noble.

Marcus smiled jovially, not bothered at all at being called out. “Alcander, my friend, you shouldn’t be so rude.”

“Haha! Save the politeness for strangers! Just get over here and fight me!” responded the big guy with an enormous smile and booming laugh.

Marcus complied, stopping only to nod at the Legate, who everyone noticed looked remarkably similar to Marcus. Those who didn’t know their relation didn’t have to wonder as the Legate said, “Conduct yourself well, nephew.”

When he walked over to only half a dozen steps away from Alcander, Marcus asked, “How will we be fighting? Surely not with just our hands?”

“Of course not. We have been given permission to allow you to use our new practice weapons.” To the shock of most of the noble’s present, the examiner revealed himself to be at least of the fifth-tier by retrieving a pair of swords from his soul realm, seemingly waving his hand and pulling them from thin air.

In contrast to most practice swords, these were not made of wood, but rather of an odd white metal with simple leather grips. They also seemed to be as heavy as regular steel weapons, given the way

Marcus and Alcander held them. The only thing that indicated that they weren't made for battle was the lack of an edge on the blade; they were far too dull to cut anything harder than butter.

"*These* are our practice weapons?" Marcus asked with skepticism. Blunted metal weapons were hardly 'new', after all.

"Indeed they are. They contain enchantments that, when activated by channeling your magic into the blade, will coat the sword with a blade of light. This will allow you to use the sword as if it were real, without permanently harming your opponent."

The two immediately tried this, and the edges of the blades began glowing with a bright white light.

"Hit someone with these, and they won't cut or break bones, but they'll hurt like they had, and possibly paralyze a limb for a few hours. Oh, by the way, they have undergone enough testing to be judged as 'safe', but no strikes to the head or neck, got it?"

The two young men nodded, as did everyone else when the examiner swept his eyes around the room.

"Are there any other practice weapons like this?" asked Alcander, with a look of great anticipation.

"Of course!" replied the examiner, and with a dramatic flourish, a host of other weapons appeared, all with the same blunt edges and strange pale white blades. Alcander gleefully ran over and grabbed a huge ax that strongly resembled his own, but Marcus seemed content with the standard one-handed sword given to him by the examiner.

With their weapons selected, the two took up positions opposite each other and began channeling their magic. When their weapons lit up with white light, they glanced at the examiner, who nodded back at them. Their duel had begun.

Alcander moved first, his third-tier speed and strength made evident as he crossed the distance between the two in a blink of an eye and striking at Marcus with a horizontal slash aimed at his shoulder. Marcus dodged with apparent ease, allowing Alcander's strike to taste nothing but air. Alcander used his momentum to quickly spin into another attack, which Marcus dodged perfectly again.

They repeated this pattern a dozen more times, with neither looking even slightly winded. Things changed when Marcus, having watched Alcander's extremely wide attacks this whole time, suddenly lunged forward, directly into range of Alcander's swing. He brought his sword up, deflecting the ax mere inches away from his face and throwing the much larger man off balance, then following up with a slash into Alcander's exposed ribs.

The blade slammed into Alcander but didn't even leave a mark on his clothes. There was no blood or sound of bones breaking, either. Alcander still dropped to a knee in with a grunt of obvious pain, however.

Marcus took a few steps back and assumed a defensive posture, but he still looked at Alcander with some concern. They were friends, and the big guy was doubled over in pain, not to mention they had never used these training weapons before, so of course he was a little worried.

His worries were assuaged when Alcander rose to his feet with a grimace, then smiled at him. "Nicely played," he said.

“You ok? Do you want to keep going or call it here?” asked the examiner. There was little practical reason to continue, given that they weren’t fighting for points like the other applicants, but Alcander still smiled and nodded. In the end, Marcus got in two more hits against him before he conceded the duel. The two men placed their weapons with the others and walked back to the group.

“Alright, a great start! Who’s next?” The examiner’s waited for another volunteer. Gaius was about to go up, glaring at Leon as he did, but the woman in yellow beat him to it. She happily stepped forward, almost skipping to the weapons. The woman in blue closely followed. Seeing them, Gaius almost completely forgot about Leon and stepped back.

His behavior wasn’t unusual, as everyone else was perfectly willing to watch these two beautiful women go ahead of them.

“Hey, who do you think is going to win?” Alcander asked Marcus quietly. Leon was just close enough to hear them, but everyone else was so distracted they didn’t notice.

Marcus was silent for a moment while they selected their weapons. The woman in blue chose a long polearm with a curved blade at the end, while the woman in yellow chose a thick curved sword.

“I’d bet on Lady Valeria. Her glaive will give her far better reach, and from what I’ve heard, she’s damn good with it.”

“You sure? Lady Asiya is an artist with a saber, I think she’ll definitely hold her own.”

“I suppose we’ll see, won’t we? Care to put any money on it?”

Alcander didn’t end up betting, which was a good thing, as the fight went about as Marcus expected. Asiya was indeed very good with her saber. She was fast, and her slashes were strong and accurate, but it wasn’t quite enough. Valeria kept her distance with expert footwork, and she took full advantage of the extra reach her glaive gave her. In the end, despite a very commendable showing, Asiya conceded defeat.

The two women returned to the group, with Asiya complimenting Valeria’s skill and fighting style. Valeria still projected a stoic and disinterested attitude, but she responded to her friend quite readily. The two were so captivating talking about something they enjoyed, especially with how animated Asiya was, almost jumping around from the residual adrenaline, that no one stepped forward to be in the next fight. Even Leon couldn’t help but momentarily lose himself.

Gaius was the first to recover and step forward. His movement gradually brought everyone else back to reality, and they turned their eyes away from Asiya and Valeria. Gaius walked over to the training weapons and grabbed a sword. He gave it a few practice swings, smiled, and pointed it at Leon.

“Get up here, barbarian, and let me show why your kind should stay where it belongs!”

Before Leon had a chance to even respond, Xaphan summarized what they were both thinking in three words: [This fucking *dickhead*!]

[He is indeed an irritating piece of shit, but perhaps he has the strength to back it up? He is a young third-tier mage, after all.]

[... If you don't break him over your knee like a flimsy board, you and I are going to have some serious problems.] said Xaphan in a threatening tone.

[Yeah, because I was planning to lose to begin with.] Leon replied with great sarcasm.

[I don't want you to just *avoid losing*, I want you to kick his *fucking teeth in* and make him choke on his own blood!] Xaphan was getting heated now, and Leon could feel a frightening killing intent rising from his chest, a killing intent that wasn't his own. It had become clear to Leon that Xaphan was rapidly regaining his sense of pride after being freed from that prison. Leon didn't mind this, as the contract they had forged had brought with it a peculiar sense of familiarity, allowing Leon to be far more relaxed talking to Xaphan than he could be with anyone else.

Leon walked forward with an odd half-smile. He fully expected this to be the most challenging fight he'd ever had and was obviously anticipating every moment. He carefully removed the sword from around his waist, and gently laid it on the ground, then went to pick up a training sword of his own.

As he did this, the Legate's eyes found themselves attracted to the sword Leon had put down. There was something familiar about it, but it took a moment for him to realize what it was.

Eighty years ago, when he was but a young fourth-tier centurion, he had been a part of King Julius' campaign against the Talfar Kingdom in the east, conducted in revenge of their unprovoked invasion of the Bull Kingdom. During that time, he had laid eyes on the Archduke of the Great Plateau, Kyros Raime, who had been given command of the army by the king. If the Legate recalled correctly, the Archduke had wielded this very same sword, or at least one that was very much like it.

For a moment, his heart almost stopped. He felt a few drops of sweat appear on his forehead, and his eyes turned back towards Leon. Now that he was looking properly at him, Leon looked strikingly similar to the old Archduke!

For a moment the Legate's mind froze up, at a loss for how to proceed. By the time Leon chose his weapon, a sword that was nearly identical to his own, and took up a position opposite Gaius, the Legate decided to wait and see. He didn't actually have any proof, only suspicions and some evidence based on momentarily getting a glimpse of Archduke Kyros one time eighty years ago, so he felt the best option was to keep quiet.

Gaius smiled derisively at Leon and assumed a half-hearted stance, barely even raising his own sword. It was plain for everyone to see that he wasn't going to take this fight seriously.

Leon, in contrast, assumed a much stronger stance, with one foot far ahead of the other, and his sword held up near his ear, ready to lunge forward in a stabbing attack at a moment's notice.

Just like last time, Alcander turned to Marcus to ask his prediction of what would happen, but Marcus simply held up his hand, telling Alcander not to speak right now. He wanted to watch this fight with no other distractions.

The examiner looked at Leon and Gaius, and after waiting for a moment to let them finish getting ready, he shouted, "Begin!"

For a split second, Gaius made eye contact with Leon. At that moment, he was gripped with fear, as if Leon's bright golden eyes were those of death itself. He tried to correct his stance, but Leon had already begun to move, lunging forward with all the speed his magically enhanced muscles could muster.

What was remarkable to those watching wasn't his speed, though his speed was quite prodigious, but rather the oceans of killing intent that erupted from him. It took everyone by surprise, and even the Legate felt his hair stand on end.

Under this killing intent, Gaius wasn't even able to twitch. Had he assumed a proper stance and channeled his magic into his body before the duel began, he might've had a chance, but now it was too late. Artorias had taught Leon to never hold back, and Leon had no intention of holding back here. He drove the tip of sword straight into Gaius' solar plexus, and the noble dropped like a rock, doubled over in pain.

Leon waited a moment for Gaius to finish channeling his own power enough to move, then begin struggling to his feet. Leon was quietly impressed, as he had expected Gaius to be incapacitated for a few more seconds, given that Xaphan's extreme killing intent had been released alongside his own.

Gaius gripped the handle of his sword and started pushing himself up, but this was exactly what Leon had been waiting for. He took a quick step forward and drove the heel of his boot down hard on Gaius' sword hand, then slashing his sword against Gaius' exposed back. The noble shrieked and hit the ground again, but this time, his legs had gone numb.

A few of those watching narrowed their eyes in disapproval, but they didn't speak up. It was only Gaius, after all. They might suck up to him under normal circumstances—as he was the son of a Duke—but he was only the third son, and he wasn't going to inherit his family's lands and holdings. Given his usual abrasive personality, no one felt the need to stop the fight on his account.

No one except the examiner.

"That's enough! You've won, now stop!"

Leon stepped back from Gaius and restrained his killing intent while returning the derisive smile Gaius had given him before the duel began. He returned the training sword to where he had taken it from, then retrieved his own sword, all in silence. That didn't stop Xaphan from speaking, though.

[I'd have preferred crippling one of his arms, or maybe disfigured that smug shit-eating face of his, but I *suppose* I can live with this much.]

Gaius struggled to rise but found himself unable. He could barely even push himself up with a single arm. It seems that the examiner wasn't lying when he said that the training swords could paralyze limbs for a few hours because his legs weren't moving. In fact, judging from the horrendous smell now wafting from his pants, he had lost control over everything south of the middle of his back, where Leon had hit him.

He didn't seem to notice, though, as he was nearly blinded by rage. His face was beet red, his eyes were bloodshot, and he sputtered incoherently.

“Y-You! Grah, \*cough\*, I’ll! I-I’ll! You! Kill you! Ugh, kill you! Dis-dishonorable trash! Barbarian!” That was the last he managed to get out before slipping back to the ground, unconscious from the pain and humiliation.

Leon completely ignored him, returning to where he had been standing, but all eyes in the room followed him, including Asiya and Valeria’s. He truly had no words right now, and he just wanted everyone to stop staring at him.

After Gaius passed out, the chamber was completely silent.