

Storm King 61

Chapter 61: End of Enrollment

Everyone's eyes flit between Leon and the unconscious Gaius. Their looks were complex when they turned to Leon. Some were disapproving, stemming from attacking Gaius when he was on the ground. Others were slightly fearful, and understandably so, given the implication of Leon having such an overwhelming killing intent. Even some of the fifth-tier knights present didn't have a killing aura that was so potent! Leon had obviously experienced battle before and had seen a fair amount of death to have a killing intent like that.

A few of the nobles, like Marcus, Alcander, Asiya, and Valeria, looked at him with curiosity more than anything. Leon didn't speak much and clearly wanted to be left alone, so they weren't particularly concerned about him.

But, out of all the nobles who stared at him, none did so with the same mocking derision they had just a few minutes before. This was the value of strength. They might still believe themselves superior, but Leon had earned a modicum of respect today.

The same could not be said for Gaius. When the nobles turned their eyes back to his unconscious form, their looks were filled with pity and disgust. The former was from how quickly and brutally he had been crushed, and the latter from the brown foul-smelling stain on the back of his pants.

No one was more disgusted than the examiner overseeing the duels, who was checking Gaius for any permanent injuries. The damage Leon had done with the training weapon would wear off in a few hours, and he would then regain full functionality of his body. After he was sure Gaius was fine, the examiner gestured to a pair of his subordinates who were standing by the Legate to come over.

"Get him out of here. Leave him in the baths and get him a change of clothes. Bring him to the written test location after he wakes and cleans himself up." The two men nodded and carried Gaius out by his arms and legs.

One of the Legate's knights starting walking towards Leon, intending to admonish him for injuring a noble, but he was stopped by the Legate. He was certain Leon was a scion of House Raime, but given the circumstances it had fallen under, he wasn't about to get involved. It had been rumored that Archduke Kyros had ascended to the eighth-tier just weeks before his assassination, and even if it wasn't true, he was still the single most powerful mage in the entire kingdom. Someone who could not only kill him but his sons and his entire retinue as well was not someone the Legate wanted any involvement with.

'He's not of House Raime. He's just an immigrant from the Northern Vales.' The Legate just repeated this several times and turned his attention back to the test.

After the previous three duels, the remainder of the nobles fought quite unremarkably. No one paid any more attention than was polite, and the entire chamber had an air of tension in it. The duels started off magnificently with Marcus and Alcander, and only got better with Asiya and Valeria, but Leon had quite ruined the mood with his brutality.

When everyone was finished, the examiner led them outside and directly to a building just a few hundred feet away. Everyone was glad to be out of that training chamber and out in the warm

afternoon sun, even if it was only for a moment. The building they were led to was just a boring administration building with little in the way of decoration, but it was the site for the written test.

The examiner pushed open the door and led everyone inside. To no one's surprise, the building was just as boring and colorless on the inside as it was on the outside.

They were brought to a room which was filled with forty small cubicles. Within each was a table, an extremely comfortable chair, and a stack of papers. Each of the applicants were given a quill and ink and assigned a cubicle.

The test wasn't long, but Leon was one of the last to finish. As he turned in both his scorecard and his test, the examiner told him the results would be posted in a week outside the main administration building of the Academy, and that he would receive further instructions then.

With all that done, Leon left. He had finished enrollment, and he was quite ready to leave this place. It had taken several hours, and he was starving. The thought of a late lunch at the burger place spurred him on, and he arrived in just a few minutes.

From outside, he could hear the sounds of raucous laughter and a very animated discussion, which made him frown. Having been surrounded by so many people all day and especially drawing attention to himself during the combat test had left him quite mentally exhausted. He didn't want to deal with a loud environment. Were he not so hungry, and had he not arranged to meet Charles here, he would probably turn right around and return to the inn.

He took a deep breath, preparing himself as much as he could, then walked inside.

The place was extremely crowded, packed near wall-to-wall with celebrating applicants. The first and second-tier groups had finished their tests over half an hour before the third-tiers, and a good number of the commoners from those groups had made their way here afterward.

Leon almost froze at the door, as seeing over a hundred people in this small diner nearly made his heart stop. His eyes frantically scanned the room, finally seeing Charles sitting at a table with two others. Leon made his way over, squeezing through the crowd as best he could.

"Ah! Leon! You finally made it!" Charles exclaimed when Leon finally arrived. He rose and clapped Leon on the shoulder. Leon glared at him, and Charles hastily retracted his hand. Feeling a little awkward, Charles turned towards the others at his table.

One was a man of fairly average height, curly auburn hair, hazel eyes, and a handsome face. He had a slight build, but it was clear to Leon from his rough-looking knuckles that he was no stranger to fighting.

The other man was quite tall, about an inch or two more so than Leon, and was very muscular. His biceps were almost as big as Leon's head, and not even the loose-fitting shirt he wore could hide his perfectly built chest and chiseled abs. His looks were otherwise unremarkable, with plain brown hair and eyes, but his youthful looks were contrasted with the stubble that covered his face.

"This is my friend I was telling you guys about, Leon Ursus." The two men respectfully nodded to Leon but didn't go any further than that. Even a blind man would be able to tell that Leon wasn't comfortable in this crowded place, and he wasn't exactly subtle in expressing his displeasure at Charles clapping him on the shoulder.

“Leon, this is Henry...” Charles pointed to the shorter man, “... and Alain.” He pointed to the taller man. Leon nodded to them but remained quiet. Charles, having spent over a month with Leon by now, wasn’t surprised in the least at Leon’s silence.

“Good to meet you, Leon. Charles told us how you showed him a few moves to help him through the combat test,” said Henry.

“Yeah, you really helped me out! I don’t think I would’ve passed if you hadn’t!” Charles was beaming, and Leon noticed he was almost shaking from excitement.

“Congratulations,” muttered Leon as he slid into the last empty seat at their table.

“So how did your test go? I’m sure the third-tier tests were very different compared to ours, right?” asked Charles with a lot of enthusiasm.

Leon thought back to the tests. The power test was rather uneventful, but when he thought about the combat test...

He sighed, and propped his arms up on the table, resting his head in his hands. “They went fine. Made a fool of myself though...”

“Well, at least you passed, right?” asked Alain. Leon nodded in response. “Good, then that’s all that really matters, isn’t it?”

Leon frowned, but he had to admit that Alain was right.

“Good! Then in a week, we’ll all be classmates at the Knight Academy!” shouted Charles, and the entire diner of successful applicants erupted into loud cheers and celebration.

Leon and Charles stayed there for almost another hour, but eventually decided it was time to leave. When they returned to the inn, Leon was exhausted from being around so many people all day and returned to his room. Charles, however, was still jittery from excitement and spent his time talking to Jeanne.

Leon had recovered a little when dinner time rolled around and met up with Charles.

“So, what should we do tomorrow?” asked Charles a little nervously. Leon had agreed to train him in order to pass the enrollment test, and now that the test was over, Charles wasn’t sure if they would continue.

Leon thought for a moment. There was something he wanted to do, but he was a little hesitant. Xaphan still needed those potion ingredients, so he wanted to go to the capital’s Heaven’s Eye Tower to try and find them, but now that he knew Elise was here too, he grew a little indecisive.

“There’s... some business I should take care of tomorrow...”

“Oh...” Charles was clearly disappointed, which Leon noticed. Charles hoped the training would continue, if only because it was something to do for the next week until they could move into the dorms of the Knight Academy. He barely had the money to eat, let alone do anything else.

“If you want, we could continue training over the next few days...” Leon offered.

“Of course!” Charles had already gained so much just from the past two weeks that he answered immediately.

“Ok. I’m sure this Heaven’s Eye thing tomorrow will take all day, so be sure to exercise and meditate.” Charles nodded in acknowledgment.

Dinner came and went, and Leon returned to his room to bury himself in his books. Charles meditated until Jeanne got off work, then spent the rest of the day with her.

Leon woke up a little early the next morning. He made sure to fully prepare himself for going to the Heaven’s Eye Tower, taking a long shower and dressing in some clean black clothing. He finished by meditating for half an hour.

[Well aren’t you just the cutest little thing, getting all dolled up like that,] Xaphan said mockingly.

[Screw you, demon.]

[Hehe, looking forward to meeting that Elise girl, aren’t you? She clearly wants to ride you, why don’t you just let her?]

Leon had no words to respond, but his face immediately grew bright red.

[Hmmm... ‘Elise Raime’. Has a nice ring, doesn’t it? Hey, is there any way I could convince you to name your first-born after me?]

[Enough, demon.]

[No, no, you’re right, I shouldn’t be so presumptuous. After all, there’s no way a shy little cherry boy like you could ever get a girl like *that*.]

[Shut up.]

[Yeah, she probably wants a guy who is actually capable of talking to her without his face glowing brighter than me. But hey, you never know, maybe she’s into charity and might give you a pity fu-]

[I’M GOING THERE FOR YOUR DAMNED POTION! Maybe I shouldn’t bother, I can just as easily stay here and read instead.]

[All right, all right! You need to lighten up, kid, I was only playing around a little. Besides, there’s no guarantee she’ll even be there, right?]

Leon sighed. Xaphan was right about that last bit, at least, Elise might not actually be at the Tower.

[What was that sigh? Relief or disappointment at the idea?]

Leon grit his teeth in annoyance, but he had no answer for Xaphan. His heart was beating fast and his hands were shaking slightly, but it could just as easily be from anticipation than dread.

Regardless, he soon left his room and went to get some breakfast.

Chapter 62: Chance Encounter

Leon left the inn after greatly enjoying a light breakfast. He absolutely couldn't get enough of the food in the south. Even the plain eggs, bacon, and bread in a place as cheap as that inn were far superior to most anything he'd ever eaten back north.

He left at the same time as Charles, who intended to run down to the park they'd been training at recently. He didn't really know what he was going to do there, but at least going for a run down the forest paths would kill a few hours.

Charles took off to the south, while Leon started leisurely walking to the west. The inn they were staying at was in the eastern districts, at the foot of the hills that lead to the Eastern Territories. The Heaven's Eye Tower within the capital was on the edge between the southern districts and the central districts.

On the way to the Tower, Leon found himself caught between wanting to explore the city and wanting to get his business taken care of, so he could go back to the inn. In the end, he decided to wander around a little, but to always walk in the general direction of the Tower while doing so.

Most of the buildings around were wood and timber, with little to distinguish them apart from the others. As he went farther west, though, they started getting nicer. Glass appeared in the windows, the streets turned into boulevards, with bright red roses and tall oak trees filling the median. The buildings shifted from wood to stone as he walked, and many of the storefronts were painted. Most were painted white, to emulate the expensive white stone the nobility favored, but some were painted in bright eye-catching colors.

Leon knew he had really left the poorer districts behind when he started seeing fountains and marble statues even in the small forums and squares just off the street. In contrast to many of the statues and art pieces in the north, these weren't painted. After a few seconds of admiring one particularly intricate statue of an old Bull King standing atop a platform that was covered in masterfully carved reliefs of his deeds, Leon decided that he liked this cleaner unpainted aesthetic better.

After an hour of walking around, Leon felt that he had seen enough and that it was time to head for the Tower. But, there was one more place he wanted to see before that. One of the Five Great Monuments of the city was less than a thousand feet to the south of the Tower, a giant four-sided column five stories tall, carved with thousands of tiny runes on two sides and depictions of the Sacred Bull's rise on the other two sides. Leon spent a few minutes admiring the workmanship of the obelisk, then made for the Tower.

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The Heaven's Eye Tower in the capital was nearly identical to the Tower in Teira, except there were many more people in the lounge. Including the beautiful attendants, there were several hundred people on the ground floor of the Tower. Every patron was extraordinarily wealthy or noble, and would probably dominate any other room they might've found themselves in.

No one gave them a second look here, though. There were many reasons why they wouldn't stand out, but the biggest was because everyone was focused on the three blindingly beautiful women sitting in a booth in the corner, who were quite happily ignoring the attention they were receiving.

One was dressed in a red and yellow dress and had a cute and happy attitude. The second was dressed in a blue skirt and white jacket and looked cold as ice. The last was dressed in an elaborate black

sleeveless dress that reached her ankles and had a slit up to her thigh, complimented with a pair of long black gloves that extended past her elbows. She had a seductive yet authoritative air about her.

These three were Asiya, Valeria, and Elise.

“... but every time I tried to get within range, you would skip around me! It was sooo frustrating! I could barely even touch you.” Elise had been curious about how her friends had fared during the enrollment test, and Asiya had been quite eager to sate her curiosity. The power and written tests were boring and could be ignored, but Asiya narrated the combat test with enthusiasm, energetically gesturing and almost acting out the first duels right there in the booth.

“Well perhaps you should train a little more, prepare yourself to face anyone with any weapon,” said Valeria, with a cold and expressionless face.

“Hey! I train plenty! And you didn’t just win because of the weapon, you have that weird stepping technique! I can’t train to accommodate for that!” Asiya pouted adorably.

For a moment, a tiny smile appeared on Valeria’s lips when her movement technique was brought up, but it was gone so fast that only her two friends saw it. “Well, then we should just train together.”

“Yeah! Let’s do that! What about you, Elise? You need to train too, right?”

“Oh, I don’t rely on violence so much here. Besides, ascension through the tiers of magic doesn’t necessarily need warrior’s training, right?”

“But you should come too! Come on, it would be so fun!” Asiya almost reached out and grabbed Elise’s arm, but restrained herself.

“Oh, I’ll consider it. By the way, didn’t you say that there were three interesting fights? You’ve only told me about the first two, what about the third?” Elise had seen Leon at the training field and was certain that his duel would’ve been attention-grabbing, but she wasn’t expecting Asiya to quiet down and look a little thoughtful for a moment.

“... The third duel was something else indeed. A Valeman was there, and Gaius Tullius challenged him! Everyone thought the Valeman would lose, but he beat Gaius so badly he passed out from embarrassment!”

“That isn’t all he did...” muttered Valeria with some disgust when she remembered the arrogant noble soiling himself.

“Well I’ve never met the Young Lord Tullius, but I’ve heard that he has some talent with the blade, how was he beaten so quickly?” asked Elise.

“The Valeman used killing intent! Gaius froze on the spot and was pummeled in an instant!”

“You sound impressed, I wouldn’t think a little killing intent would be such a big deal.”

“But it wasn’t just ‘a little’ killing intent, I’ve never felt anything like that before!”

“Asiya’s right, his killing intent was shockingly strong,” said Valeria.

“What was this Valeman’s name?” asked Elise. She felt it was obvious who this Valeman was, but she wanted to be sure.

“I think it wa-“ Asiya suddenly cut herself off. Her eyes widened in disbelief and she stared at the young man who just walked in through the Tower’s front door. “That’s him! The guy who just walked in!” She wasn’t so rude as to point, but she did indicate where she was looking with an emphatic nod.

Valeria looked over at Leon, but her icy expression didn’t even flicker. Elise, however, allowed a devilish smile to appear on her face.

“Leon...” she whispered, just loud enough for Asiya and Valeria to hear.

Asiya turned her eyes towards her friend with a look of shock. “Do you know him?” she asked.

Elise nodded at Asiya, barely having time to speak as she rose from the booth. The dress she wore was much fancier than the dress she had back in Teira, but it had many of the same enchantments. Elise released some of her magic into it, and the dress tightened around her chest, waist, and hips, emphasizing her bountiful assets.

She walked towards Leon with an ethereal grace, ignoring the stares of all the other men and women in the lounge. She didn’t ignore the beautiful attendant approaching Leon, though. The attendant glanced over in her direction after noticing the slight ruckus from star-struck patrons in Elise’s wake and made eye contact. Elise glared at her and her smile disappeared, then looked back at Leon. The attendant froze, then timidly retreated.

Leon didn’t notice any of this. The air was filled with the single most delicious scent he had ever experienced, and his eyes were glued to the restaurant adjacent to the lounge where it was wafting from. He was tempted to walk over and see what it was, but before he could, someone grabbed his arm and pressed their body into his.

Leon was momentarily startled and almost drew his sword until he turned and saw the familiar bright green eyes and impish smile of Elise just a few inches away from his face.

“What a coincidence, seeing you here Young Lord!”

Leon took a step back and pulled his arm away from her. Elise didn’t want to let him go quite yet, but still let him slip away while putting on a fake pouting face, before returning to her seductive smile. This smile immediately charmed the dozens of male nobles watching, and they glared at Leon with an undercurrent of killing intent, but both Leon and Elise ignored them.

“Wasn’t expecting to see you here,” said Leon.

[HA!] Xaphan was watching, as he had little else to do until Leon got those potion ingredients and couldn’t help but loudly laugh at Leon’s obvious lie.

Of course, Leon knew she’d be here. He wouldn’t have put so much effort into preparing himself this morning had he not been expecting her. The past month and a half had helped him get a little more used to being out among people, so combined with his mental preparations, he was able to get out a few words this time.

"I was only in Teira to get away from the capital. Ajax is my uncle, and his Tower seemed as good a place as any to get away for a while." Elise flashed him a radiant smile, then moved a little closer. "So, what brings you here? Looking for *something* in particular?"

Leon's heart raced. He had to admit that her beauty combined with her bold and charming personality was a potent weapon, but he kept himself as calm as he could. His cheeks reddened in her presence, but not so much as last time.

"Yes... I need to find some, uh, ingredients..." He stumbled on his words a little, which Elise thought was kind of cute, and only encouraged her to be a little more flirtatious.

"Oh... That's disappointing, I thought you were here to see me..." They had locked eyes back at the enrollment test, so she was well aware he knew she was in the city, but she pretended to be upset Leon wasn't here to see her. She even shrunk back a little and gave him a slightly forlorn look, which only enraged the nobles who had their eyes stuck on her.

One of them, some minor noble from the south, immediately took this opportunity to try and get into her good graces.

"Is this dunce bothering you, my lady?"

Elise barely spared him a single a look. He was classically handsome, with fine blond hair and the very fit body of a late second-tier mage that he was happily showing off with a very tight sleeveless shirt. He stepped up right next to Elise and tried to send a chilling look at Leon, calling upon his killing intent in the process.

This had zero effect on Leon. His meager amount of killing intent was barely a fraction of what Artorias had instilled into Leon. But this was lost on the noble, as he clearly hadn't examined Leon's aura before coming over, otherwise he wouldn't have antagonized a third-tier mage.

Elise was even more unimpressed than Leon. She despised these 'white knight' types that tried to ingratiate themselves with her by jumping into something that wasn't their business. All she could think was, *'The only dunce here is you, barging into our conversation completely uninvited.'* But what she said out loud was decidedly more diplomatic.

"Oh, there's no problem here, Good Sir, my friend and I are just having a *private* conversation." She smiled so sweetly that the noble couldn't even form the words to respond, and he hardly realized she was telling him he was intruding. "Now, if you'll excuse us." She reached over and took Leon's arm, leading him towards one of the magic lifts, leaving the noble standing slack-jawed in the middle of the lounge.

On the way to the lifts, Elise gave a rather sinister smile to one of the fifth-tier guards standing inconspicuously in the corner. The guard had been watching ever since that noble interrupted her flirting, and he knew exactly what she meant with that smile: "Get rid of that one." Elise had long ago lost her patience for guys like that.

"So what ingredients are you looking for?" she asked Leon on the way to the second floor. This was where all the merchants affiliated with Heaven's Eye gathered and was the best place in the entire city to find rare and valuable materials.

"A core from a fifth-tier fire beast, a feather from a fourth-tier bird possessing wind magic, and a century-old Kagu flower."

Elise looking thoughtful for a moment.

"I'm not sure about the Kagu flower, those are rare and only grow in places with a high density of fire magic, but the other two shouldn't be too hard to find."

When the lift doors opened, Elise happily lead Leon to the most reliable merchants, but they couldn't find any of the ingredients Xaphan needed. They asked around for almost an hour, but all to no avail. In the end, Leon placed an order with a merchant Elise recommended.

"Heaven's Eye will send a messenger to you when we find what you're looking for. All you need to do now is wait." Elise closed the distance between herself and Leon and lowered her voice to a sultry whisper. "For now, how about we go downstairs and talk a little? I'd like to get to know you better... Or if you like, we could continue to look around some more, surely you need another weapon or some armor, too?"

'Armor? How did I forget that?!' Leon thought with a little panic. He glanced around at the merchants around him and saw a few pieces of armor, though none that could be said to be particularly well-made. They were also fairly expensive, going for thousands or tens of thousands of silver coins.

Leon shivered a little when he thought of the potential cost of getting armor custom-made if these were the prices for generic armor. For now, he decided to simply wait and see what kind of armor he should be given during his training. Buying armor now would probably only be a waste of money.

"I... should probably get going... I wanted to train a little today..."

This legitimately disappointed Elise more than she expected, but she didn't pressure him to stay.

"Of course. You've joined the Knight Academy, you need to be prepared. Well, don't be a stranger, ok?" she said quietly, her smile fading a little as she took a step back. Leon gave her a small smile and gently nodded.

They returned to the lounge on the ground floor and began walking towards the door. The noble who had interrupted them was long gone, but another noble that Leon recognized walked in just as they had taken a few steps away from the lift. His eyes widened in surprise and glee when he saw Elise.

"Lady Elise! What a pleasure it is to see you back in the capital!" His deep voice traveled throughout the entire room, and those who had been checking out Elise quickly averted their gaze. He hurried forward to greet her, but his eyes narrowed in anger when he saw how intimately she was holding Leon's arm.

"Oh... Tiberias, how wonderful to see you," Elise said in a flat tone; she certainly didn't look thrilled at his arrival, but he paid it no mind.

Leon gave this 'Tiberias' a quick look. He was tall, with black hair and equally black eyes. He was lean, but he gave off the same kind of air as a caged wolf; restrained, but wild and unpredictable.

This was one of the two nobles Gaius had gone out of his way to greet before the enrollment started, the other being Marcus. Thus, Leon figured Tiberias should be related to a fairly high noble, but he

couldn't be sure. He certainly didn't leave that great an impression on him during the combat test, though Leon did note that his opponent had been remarkably lackluster.

"You should have informed me you were back in the city, I would've organized a great feast in celebration!" Tiberius tried to ignore Leon, but Elise unconsciously tightened her hold on his arm. She still wore the same smile she had normally, but her eyes slightly narrowed in anger and annoyance.

"I returned not too long ago and wanted to spend some time alone with my mother. Now if you'll excuse us..." She pulled Leon away, but Tiberias made to follow them. "Don't you have business here? Please don't let us keep you from it." Elise tried to gently get rid of him, and he frowned in response.

"My lady, I simply wish to speak with you, surely you won't deny me this?" He reached out and grabbed Elise's arm, and he began to emit a little killing intent while his face took on a sinister look. Leon's dominant hand went to the hilt of his sword and prepared himself for the fight that Tiberias seemed keen on starting, while Elise shook him off her and returned his furious look.

Fortunately, one of the Tower's guards felt the killing intent as well and walked over.

"What's going on here?" he asked, glaring at Tiberias.

"I'm just talking with my friends, nothing wrong with that, is there?"

The guard glanced at Elise, silently asking her what to do. Under normal circumstances, he would've already removed Tiberias for his unrestrained behavior, but with the only daughter of the Tower Lord present, he would defer to her.

"Tiberias, if you have business with Heaven's Eye, then go about it. If not, then leave." Elise took Leon's arm again and steered him towards the door.

Tiberias sent a deathly look Leon's way, but when his eyes met Leon's, he froze for a moment. Leon hit him with a blast of killing intent that dwarfed what he had used to try and intimidate the other man. He felt he now understood why Gaius had been so helpless before Leon. That killing intent was immensely strong!

When Elise left, the guard did as well, though he kept a close eye on Tiberias, who turned around and made for the lifts. No attendant came to help him, but he didn't care. The only thing that filled his mind was the sight of Elise on Leon's arm.

'I'm going to skin that little animal alive...' he thought, looking over his shoulder and staring at Leon's back in barely concealed hatred.

Chapter 63: Results of the Test

Elise and Leon parted ways at the door of the Tower. As Leon walked away, he glanced backward and saw Elise still standing there, watching him leave. She dropped her seductive air and gave him a beautiful genuine smile, which Leon found himself quite captivated by. His cheeks went bright red, and he smiled back at her as best as he could in his embarrassment. Then, he turned and kept walking.

But that sight of Elise smiling at him stuck in his mind. He felt giddy from the excitement, and that made his hands start to shake. But, it was less than a minute after he left the Tower before a certain demon decided to try and ruin his mood.

[Can't believe you didn't make a move. Well, I take that back, a little cherry boy like you would never make a move. What I can't believe is that you hardly spoke more than a few sentences to that girl.]

Leon didn't respond. Xaphan was clearly trying to bait him into being mocked, but Leon refused to bite. Of course, Xaphan wasn't going to stop with only a single attempt.

[I honestly don't know what she sees in you. Some virginal weirdo who barely talks hardly meets *my* standards of attractiveness, but maybe I just have high standards. Hey, you're incredibly lucky, meeting such a gorgeous woman with such *unique* tastes.]

Leon grit his teeth and kept quiet. His hands were no longer shaking with excitement, but rather from anger, and he unconsciously curled them into fists.

[Or, maybe she's just into charity, right? She might see you, an obvious novice when it comes to women, and feel some kind of pity, and decide to at least give you a taste of what you're too hopeless to get for yourself.]

One of Leon's eyes began twitching in anger, but he held his tongue. Barely.

[... Really? Nothing? You're not going to give me anything? Just going to sit there and take it? Fine, whatever, way to just suck the fun out of it.] Xaphan dejectedly sighed and stopped talking and turned his attention back to trying to recover his power. There still wasn't much he could do right now, but he was getting rather bored watching Leon go about his day.

Leon relaxed now that Xaphan wasn't talking, but his good mood had been nearly ruined. The memory of Elise's smile put the spring back in his step, though, and he had an uncharacteristically broad smile on his face when he finally returned to the inn.

It was too early for dinner, but past when lunch was being served, so Leon made straight for his room. He didn't see Charles around, so he lacked any desire to hang around.

Usually, Leon would've buried himself in the books he had brought, but he felt that he needed to spend some time meditating. He estimated that he was a long way off from advancing to the fourth-tier and every little bit would help.

He sat down on the floor and began to control his breathing. There wasn't much practical use for breathing exercises once past the second-tier, but it helped him calm down and control his magic. His mana surged through his body, and he felt it begin to inundate his brain and internal organs. These were the last parts of his body that had yet to adapt to magic, and he needed to keep magic flowing through those areas as much as possible.

He stayed like this for several hours before meeting Charles for dinner. They made their plans for the next week during the meal, then went to their rooms. Charles continued his breathing exercises, and Leon dove into his books again.

The next week proceeded much like the previous two had gone. The two men would eat a hearty breakfast, then spend the morning and much of the afternoon doing physical training, with Leon helping Charles in some basic combat techniques. They would return to the inn and rest until dinner. Then, after eating, Charles would either spend time with Jeanne or meditate, and Leon would either read or

meditate. A simple schedule, and soon enough, it was the day the results of the enrollment test would be posted.

They woke up that morning, packed their things, and left the inn. Charles did take a few minutes to say goodbye to Jeanne, which Leon was perfectly willing to wait for. Jeanne got a little teary-eyed, she and Charles had gotten to know each other very well over the past few weeks, and only calmed down a little when Charles promised to come back when he got some time.

For a moment, Leon was tempted to say something about how obvious it was that they liked each other beyond just physical attraction, but he decided not to very quickly. Xaphan was probably listening, and he got the feeling the demon wouldn't let that go without saying something about Elise.

Charles felt himself getting a little nervous again as they walked to the Knight Academy, so he decided to try and strike up a conversation with his taciturn friend.

"Soooo, looking forward to seeing your score? How do you think you did?" Charles had asked the second question before, but he was just looking for something to talk about.

"Satisfactory," Leon replied.

"... Right. I suppose a third-tier mage would have to actually try to fail for the Academy to not let them in..." Charles said, looking a little more nervous than before. A moment of silence followed before Leon glanced at Charles and decided to engage in the conversation a little.

"The written test was a little hard. Maybe not so satisfactory on that."

Charles livened up a little at the chance to talk, and said, "What? There's no way you didn't get through that!"

"The Knight Academy expects their knights to not be just soldiers, but also have some knowledge of culture and history. I'm... not so good on that front."

"... Huh. I didn't get that feeling from the written test. It just asked us some basic questions about history and geography. Things like, 'Name three Bull Kings who have reigned in the last millennium', or 'In which of the Five Territories is *whatever famous fortress or landmark*. A few history questions, but nothing I would classify as being 'culture'."

"Really... I had questions about works of art and literature, and very specific questions related to magical theory. Hmmm... Perhaps the written tests are different for every tier. Since third-tier applicants are almost universally the children of higher nobles, it makes some sense that there would be slightly more in-depth tests for them."

"I guess..." Charles agreed with Leon's reasoning, but the way it was phrased made it seem like the Valeman considered himself separate from that group. He was separate in a way since he came from the Northern Vales, but most everyone would now associate him with that group given his magical strength.

The two discussed some of the finer points of the written test for a while longer. Charles cheered up after finding something to talk about, and before long, they arrived at the main administration building of the Academy.

Just to the side of the walkway leading to the building was an enormous stone slab hovering several inches off the ground. Dozens of papers had been attached to it, and a table with several administrators had been set up next to it.

Leon and Charles walked up to examine the papers. The scores of every applicant had been written on them, but there were just under a thousand applicants who had passed the tests, so it took several minutes for them to find their scores.

Charles' face lit up in surprise and delight when he saw his score. The first two weren't a surprise, given that he'd been told what he had scored right after the tests, but now he saw a '53' in the third slot next to his name. He only needed to score twenty points, so he passed the written test by a wide margin!

Leon was significantly more subdued, which didn't surprise Charles in the slightest. What surprised him were Leon's scores. The first two numbers were just as Charles expected, a pair of '100's. The third number made him stop and stare for a moment in disbelief, though.

'31'.

'I scored better than Leon in something?' he thought to himself, before looking at Leon in confusion. Sure, he was a Valeman, but it still beggared belief that he got a score so low, especially after maxing out the other two tests.

Leon didn't much care. He passed, and that was what counted. Artorias had done his best, but what he could teach Leon would always have been limited by being so far away from civilization. Besides, such insignificant things like the names of every Bull King or the locations of every single castle in the kingdom took a back seat to fighting techniques and hunting. Artorias knew that the sooner his son learned to fight and kill, the better, and that these skills would suit him better than history or geography in the long run.

Given recent events, Leon agreed wholeheartedly with his father making combat and magic his priority when it came to teaching him.

Leon quickly scanned the scores of the rest of the third-tier applicants. Every one of them had perfect scores, '100' in all three categories. He frowned a little when he saw that even Gaius had a perfect score, especially that big '100' the nobleman had gotten for the combat test, despite his disastrous performance.

Leon just sighed and tried to put it out of his mind. Whether Gaius passed or failed had little to do with his own business, so it was best not to let it bother him. That was easier said than done, though, and Leon wasn't about to forget it.

Just as the two were about to move on, Leon noticed another name: 'Valeria Isynos'.

'Isynos? Like Adrianos?' Leon froze and stared at that name as he remembered the men who attacked his home and murdered his father. Intense waves of killing intent rolled off him, and Charles' vision grew hazy and his stomach began turning. The nearby administrators weren't unaffected either. They were sitting behind the table, which was lucky since their knees grew weak and they felt nauseous.

"Hey! Leon!" Charles' shout brought Leon back to reality, and the killing intent abated. "What the hell was that?"

“Hmm?” asked Leon, who was so thrown off by Valeria’s name that he couldn’t say anything else for a moment.

“Relax, buddy, it’s just a score!”

It took a moment for Leon to realize what Charles was talking about. “... Right. Just a score.” He forced himself to calm down and regain his usual stoicism. Charles watched him with some concern before spurring them onwards, to try and take Leon’s mind off of whatever set him off.

“Come on, let’s move on.” Leon slowly nodded, and the two approached the administrators next to the stone slab. The administrators didn’t let what just happened go, however, and the supervisor spent a few minutes chastising Leon before letting them proceed.

After showing their ID’s, they were directed to the assembly field behind the building by the first administrator, who was still a little rattled from the earlier killing intent. The second administrator was a little more composed and gave them a stack of papers which assigned them to their training unit and corresponding dorm building.

There were ten groups in total, with about one hundred people in each. When Leon and Charles made their way over to the assembly field, they found that almost all of the applicants who passed the enrollment test were already present, including all the other third-tier nobles. They weren’t going to wait around as a show of authority, not on this day when they formally enter the Academy.

There were ten wooden signs posted around the small field, each with the name and sigil of one of the training units burned into them. Everyone had already grouped up in their assigned units in front of their signs.

Leon looked at the stack of papers in his hand. His training unit’s sigil was emblazoned on the very first page, and it made him smile, helping him take his mind off what he just learned. He had been assigned to the Snow Lions. He had half a mind to fish his coat out of his pack. A quick glance at Charles showed Leon that he had been assigned to the Snow Lions as well. Charles smiled at Leon, seeing that they had the same group, and they began walking over.

Leon noticed that they had drawn quite a bit of attention, and many eyes were following them as they went to join the Snow Lions. Most were from the third-tier mages, and they were concentrated on him, which he understood given how his combat test had gone. Two of those stares stood out to him because they carried a great deal of killing intent. The more intense one was from Gaius, while the other was from Tiberias.

‘I get why that one hates me, but what’s up with... was his name Tiberias?’ Leon thought to himself. He honestly had no idea how much Tiberias despised him after the latter saw how affectionate Elise had been with him.

As for the other stares, they were mostly just from those who were curious where this third-tier Valeman who had come out of nowhere would go. But, there were two that were genuinely pleased to see them, and they just happened to be in the Snow Lions as well; Henry and Alain came forward with big smiles welcoming Charles and Leon to the group. The other two third-tier nobles who were in the Snow Lions weren’t so thrilled at seeing Leon stop here.

While Charles began introducing himself to some of the others in the Snow Lions who came forward to greet them, Leon took a look around at who was in the other groups. The first he noticed was the smallest group and the only one with less than one hundred people, the all-female Crimson Tigresses, where Valeria and Asiya were. Valeria hardly glanced in his direction, but Asiya cheerfully waved to him. Much like when he was around Elise, having the attention of such a beautiful girl brought some red to his cheeks, and he almost froze, but after a few seconds, he was able to rather stiffly wave back. Asiya giggled, then turned back to Valeria.

Leon took a moment to watch Valeria. Having had a few minutes to think and completely regain control of himself, he was able to restrain any killing intent that may have otherwise been released. Given her youth, there was little chance Valeria was involved in the attack on his home in any way, but he was still alarmed and wary of her. There was little he could actually do with this new information, even if it was the same 'Isynos' as he had immediately assumed, so he bit the inside of his cheek to take his mind off her and moved on.

Marcus and Alcander had both been assigned to the same unit as each other, the Steel Century. Marcus had only watched Leon for as long as it took the latter to reach his unit, before turning away. Alcander, on the other hand, had been staring at Leon with a look of intense anticipation ever since the other man had arrived.

Leon's eyes then turned to Gaius, who had lost the swagger he had before the test but made up for it with the ugliest and most hateful look Leon had ever received. Gaius had been assigned to the Deathbringers, a name so ridiculous that Leon couldn't help but chuckle a little. He didn't spare Gaius another look, which only made the arrogant noble furiously grind his teeth so hard that the other two third-tier nobles in his unit gave him some strange looks.

The last person Leon glanced at was Tiberias. Leon wouldn't have bothered, but the other man had been glaring at Leon as if he wanted to murder him. Tiberias was assigned to the Black Vipers.

After getting the lay of the land, Leon turned back to the Snow Lions. The other two third-tier nobles in the unit deliberately ignored him, and Charles was already talking more than enough for the both of them, so Leon just relaxed and waited for whatever came next.

Chapter 64: Their Fortress

After half an hour of waiting in their groups and watching the last few stragglers arrive, the Legate of the Knight Academy exited the main administration building and walked over to the new trainees. He brought an entourage of over fifty knights, and silence descended over the field upon his arrival.

"Welcome, everyone, to His Majesty's Knight Academy!" the Legate's booming voice easily traveled over the entire field, and no one had any trouble hearing him. "All the finest knights of the realm were trained here! If you graduate, then you will have proven that you have what it takes to join their ranks!"

He paused to gesture towards the many knights at his side, and thirty of them stepped forward.

"These will be your combat instructors! They are all anointed knights, and you *will* treat them with the respect they have earned! If you don't, then you will be removed from this Academy!" He nodded towards the knight-instructors, and they spread out among the groups, arranging them into lines and formations. Under the watchful eye of the Legate, not a single person made a fuss.

When the instructors were done, the trainees of each unit were arranged in long columns five people wide and about twenty long. The units themselves were arranged like spokes on a wheel, with the Legate in the center. The instructors were at the head of each unit, with the unit's three third-tier trainees directly behind them.

Seeing they were done reassembling the trainees, the Legate continued.

"Now that you're all a little more presentable, I want you to look around at the other training units! These people will be your enemies for the next year!"

Most of the commoners didn't know how most things worked in the Academy, so they were looking around in relative confusion. In fact, only the higher nobles really had an inkling of what to expect while they were here and were giving each other competitive looks. Alcander, in particular, had a smile that nearly split his face in half, and he was twitching like he could barely restrain himself from brawling right here.

"Your dorms will be your fortress! When you're not training or attending any classes you might sign up for, you must defend your fortress! Right now, all your forts contain your unit banners! These banners are the pride and glory of your unit, and their loss *will not be tolerated*! On the other hand, capturing an enemy banner will be honored and rewarded!"

The commoners were starting to get it now. This entire year will be one big competition between the units, and they will use the skills they learn to fight against the other trainees. The biggest goal during this period will be the defense of their banners.

After the Legate paused for a moment to let his words sink in, he started speaking again with a blast of killing intent that caused everyone, including the instructors, to freeze in place and sent a chill down their spines.

"However! If *any* of you use anything other than the provided training weapons, I will personally have you *removed* from this Academy!" The Legate's eyes flickered to Leon, Alcander, and several others who had brought weapons. "Personal weapons are permitted to be worn, but they *will not* be used during your time here! Does everyone understand?!"

Once everyone nodded in acknowledgment, the Legate simply said, "Good! Knight-Instructors, they're all yours!" and returned to the administration building with his knightly entourage in tow.

The Senior Instructor for the Snow Lions immediately turned and faced them. "Our dorms are about three miles away. You will follow me, and those who do not reach it in less than fifteen minutes will learn the true meaning of hell!" The other Senior Instructors gave similar orders, and all the units ran off the field.

The Knight Academy occupied a significant portion of the land set aside for the Legion Headquarters, at the extreme west end of the capital. To the west of the administration building, the direction that all ten units were vaguely running in, was a field half a mile wide and over two miles long. Beyond the field was a dense and hilly forest, and beyond the forest was a series of rocky and barren artificial mountains created by an enormous number of earth mages.

That enormous field was the primary training grounds for the Knight Academy's trainees to learn basic combat formations. They were training to be knights, so they needed that room to practice maneuvers.

The forest and mountains would also allow them to train in different tactics they were expected to encounter serving in the Legions; most bandits were based in forests, while Valemens were known to launch raids from the Frozen Mountains in the north and the Giants frequently came down from the Border Mountains to pillage the Eastern Territories.

The dorms had also been built within that forest, along with an extensive road network and mock villages to simulate slightly more urban combat.

As the Senior Instructor for the Snow Lions led the way, one of the other two instructors fell back to behind their trainees. They didn't require the trainees to keep running in that formation, but the other instructor would be there to make sure none of the trainees would get lost.

After they left the gates assembly field and got to the adjacent and much larger training field, Leon started suspecting that the Senior Instructor's prior threats were directed solely at the first-tier mages, as he had set a pace that was just beyond the ability of most of the commoners in the unit. Leon himself, the other two third-tier mages, and the twenty-five second-tier mages had zero trouble keeping up, but several of the first-tier mages had already been left in the dust before they had even reached the tree line.

By the time the unit had reached a dirt road at the edge of the forest, nearly half of the first-tier mages had fallen out. Leon quickly checked behind him and was a little comforted when he saw Charles still running with the group, though he was clearly starting to struggle. That struggle grew more pronounced as they pressed on, and more first-tier mages fell out from the unit.

It took about three minutes for the main unit to run a mile, and only about a dozen first-tier mages still accompanied the others. Henry and Alain had just barely managed to keep pace, but now Charles began to fall behind. He kept falling back a little, then gaining a little speed to catch back up, only to fall behind again. Eventually, he fell out completely, unable to cover the distance he was losing.

Leon rolled his eyes. Though it wasn't too in-depth, he had been training Charles for the past three weeks. As his informal instructor during that time, how would it look if Charles now couldn't keep up?

To many confused and bewildered looks, Leon started falling back. The Senior Instructor noticed this, but apart from a slight narrowing of the eyes, he didn't react. One of the other third-tier mages, a man with long black hair and such beauty as to be almost mistaken for a young woman, had to fight back laughter at Leon's behavior. The other third-tier mage, a brown-haired and blue-eyed man with only slightly above average looks, simply frowned in disapproval.

Leon fell all the way back to Charles to the increasing astonishment of the entire rest of the unit that could see it.

"You'd best get back up with the others, Charles," Leon said in a calm and understated tone, but it carried a hint of killing intent that sent a chill down Charles' spine. He picked up speed but couldn't sustain it for more than a few seconds and wound up right back where he had been.

“You’re not going to quit, are you? Have the last few weeks been wasted?” Leon’s cold voice spurred Charles onward, but that lasted only about as long as it had just a moment before.

As Charles fell back once again, Leon lost patience. He didn’t say another word, but he unleashed his killing intent. He controlled it as much as he could, not releasing so much as to paralyze anyone in fear, but the startlingly terrifying aura behind everyone pushed them onwards.

There were a few other first-tier mages who had begun to fall out from the unit, but with Leon behind them, they barely managed to keep pace. Seeing this, the Senior Instructor allowed the tiny hint of a smile to appear on his lips, but it vanished as quickly as it had come.

The unit arrived at their dorms ten minutes after leaving the assembly field. After Leon took a position behind the Snow Lions, not another trainee fell out from the group.

The building the unit now found themselves in front of was a round six-story tall stone tower topped with a dome of dark red ceramic tiles. The walls of the first two floors had been painted a dark red to match the roof, while the tower’s stones above were still sparkling white. The tower was covered with dozens of arched windows, indicating just how many rooms were contained within.

At the end of the dirt road they had been following was a set of arched double doors, easily ten feet tall. The Senior Instructor wasted no time pushing them open and leading the unit inside, while the other instructor waited at the entrance for the stragglers. Any trainees who didn’t make the time hack would be stopped at the doors.

Just inside was a simple hallway that lacked any decorations. The floors were light grey stone, and the walls weren’t painted, though there were a few hanging magic lanterns keeping the place illuminated. At the other end of the hall were three doorways. One was another large set of arched double doors, while the other two were normal sized doors on the right and left.

The Senior Instructor led them through the double doors and into a large assembly chamber. The chamber’s domed ceiling was two stories high, and it had been given the only decoration in the entire room, an incredibly realistic painting of an adult Snow Lion. Next to the entrance were a pair of stairways that led to the upper floors, and around the wall were seven more doors. There were also a number of chairs, tables, and couches, but little else.

In fact, the only other thing of note within the assembly chamber was what looked like a shrine in the very center of the chamber, with eight thin columns supporting a small dome, beneath which hung a black banner emblazoned with a white lion’s head.

The Senior Instructor finally allowed the trainees to catch their breath once they entered the chamber. Charles nearly collapsed from exhaustion, as did all the other first-tier mages. But, just because he was giving them some time to rest didn’t mean he wasn’t going to talk.

“Good job making it in time! I’ll show you all around these dorms, then apart from when I show you all where the main dining area for the Academy is, the rest of the day will be yours!” The Senior Instructor paused for a moment, allowing the first-tier mages to straighten up a little before continuing.

“This is the unit’s banner! As with the Legions, the banner is the absolute representation of the unit’s pride and glory! To lose it is to lose all of that pride and glory! You *will not* lose this banner, do you understand?!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Yes!”

“Aye!”

Most of the trainees responded verbally, but a few, like Leon, only nodded. Regardless, they had all acknowledged him, so the Senior Instructor moved on.

“This will be the common area for those of you in the first-tier! The door directly opposite the entrance is the common baths and toilets! The other doors lead to the main hallway, which gives access to the first-tier bedrooms! I don’t really care which bed you choose, but the first two floors are for the first-tier mages! Got it?” After the first-tier mages acknowledged him, he continued. “Good! Now go choose your rooms! Be back here at five for dinner!” All the bedrooms had clocks, so the Senior Instructor wasn’t worried the trainees would lose track of time.

The first-tier trainees were a little taken aback at the abrupt dismissal, but after a moment of thought, they began shuffling towards their rooms. Charles gave a quick nod to Leon in gratitude for keeping him going and left with Henry and Alain.

“Everyone else, follow me!” The Senior Instructor led the second and third-tier trainees up the stairs directly to the third floor. Another two-story high assembly chamber was found at the top of those stairs, but this one was much nicer than the one on the ground floor. There was no banner, but the floor had carpets, the furniture was made of finer leather and wood, and the magic lanterns were a soft yellow and orange, rather than the harsher white downstairs. On the other side of this chamber was the bathroom for the second-tier trainees.

The Senior Instructor dismissed the second-tier trainees with the same instructions he had given the first-tier trainees, then turned to the last three people, the three third-tier mages.

“You three, come with me.”

They were led to the top floor where the top of the stairs had been blocked by another set of double doors. The Senior Instructor pushed them open and led them into the room beyond.

Leon and the two others found themselves in an opulent lounge, with plenty of expensive furniture all around the room and thick carpets over marble floors. The walls were covered in carved reliefs depicting the Legions in battle and rather than a separate hallway leading to the bedrooms, the lounge was edged with a peristyle made of white granite columns. Hanging from the ceiling was an elaborate silver chandelier adorned with diamonds and sapphires. There was even a kitchen and small bar!

Again, the Senior Instructor repeated his instructions to the three, then left them to choose their rooms. It was now time for him to return to the entrance to see how many trainees didn’t reach the dorms in his time limit.

There were only four rooms adjacent to the lounge, and without even looking at Leon, the other two third-tier trainees made for the two doors farthest from the stairs.

Leon didn't care and walked towards the room to the right of the stairway doors. This room was just as nice as the lounge, with white walls and furniture made of dark wood. The large bed was on a slightly raised platform and covered in red furs and blankets, and there was a marble statue of a heroic looking knight in the center of the room. Next to the door was a rack that had a dozen different weapons, all made with the same dull white metals and enchantments as the weapons from Leon's combat test. Off to the side was another door that led to a private bathroom that even had its own porcelain bath.

Leon smiled as he checked out his room. He placed his pack down near the bed, then began looking through the drawers and dressers. To his pleasant surprise, he found a large number of training clothes, all of which were white, brown, or green. He supposed these clothes were given to him so he was guaranteed something to wear while attending the Academy.

His smile grew wider as he threw himself onto the bed. It wasn't nearly as comfortable as the bed from the Prison Lord's chambers, but it was infinitely more comfortable than the bed he had back in the Forest of Black and White.

'So this is our fortress, huh? I like it...'

Chapter 65: Tension in the Dining Hall

With the exception of the top floor, which only had four bedrooms reserved for the third-tier mages, the other four floors each had eight bedrooms. This left the seventy-six first-tier commoners to have five or six trainees per bedroom, while the twenty-five second-tier nobles only had to have two at most per bedroom. Some of the second-tier trainees were the direct followers of the third-tier nobles, and they used their positions among the second-tier trainees to get their own rooms.

Charles, Henry, and Alain were all getting settled into a room on the first floor. There were five beds in the room with a set of drawers and a footlocker each. There were also weapon racks with ten training swords upon them by the door and a magic lantern above each bed. The window on the opposite side of the room from the door didn't have that great a view, just looking at the tall grass and trees that surrounded the tower, but it was welcome regardless.

"So Charles, what was up with Leon on the run over? I didn't think he had that kind of killing intent... oh, they even gave us clothes!" asked Henry as he was rifling through his drawers and examining the training gear the Academy had provided them with.

"I'm not sure. He's had that strong killing intent from the moment I first met him. He used it on some thugs who were attacking me... damn, these are *nice*!" responded Charles as he pulled out a grey shirt from his drawers and held it up for examination.

"Makes sense to me why he'd have such killing intent. He's a barbarian," said Alain as he walked over to the weapon racks.

"No need to be a dick, buddy. Leon seems nice enough, if taciturn. Hell, if he weren't there, I probably would've fallen out from that run..." Henry sat down his bed and absentmindedly massaged his legs

while looking at Alain with a reproachful look. Charles was about to say something as well, but Alain beat him to it.

“Wasn’t trying to be rude, just being honest. Besides, the fact that he’s a barbarian raises some interesting implications, like what he would’ve had to endure to gain third-tier strength. My father always told me that exercise was the best way to peacefully gain not only physical strength but also magical strength. However, no matter how much I would work out, I never would’ve caught up with those high nobles, who could afford potions and better instructors than I could ever dream of.”

Henry and Charles frowned. Alain had a good point, how Leon gained his power was certainly an enticing mystery.

“But,” Alain continued, “given the strength of his killing intent, I would definitely say that he’s killed people before, which isn’t that surprising given his background. This also lends some explanation as to how he got that power because my father also said that nothing beats actual combat for getting stronger, not even intense exercise. Assuming you survive it, of course.” Alain removed one of the swords from the rack and gave it a few test swings.

“Whatever. Everyone has their secrets, no use speculating about Leon’s.” Henry said. He rose from his bed and walked over to join Alain at the weapon racks.

Charles continued sifting through his new clothes. He had some doubts as to who Leon said he was, which stemmed from his visit to the Heaven’s Eye Tower in Teira. No Valeman should have business there immediately after entering the city.

Suddenly, several people ran by the window, startling the three in the bedroom. Charles, Henry, and Alain quickly exchanged confused looks before hurrying over to the window to see what was up.

They saw the sixty-four first-tier trainees running around the tower with enormous logs on their shoulders. The three Snow Lion instructors were among them, shouting and berating them to move faster. Some of the trainees looked ready to die, and they were inevitably the ones that attracted the attention of the instructors, who descended on them like jackals on a rotting carcass.

“... Hey, remind me to thank Leon for keeping us moving and sparing us from *that*,” said Henry. The three exchanged another look, but this one was ninety-five percent nervousness at how closely they’d dodged this punishment and five percent schadenfreude at watching those who didn’t.

But, that punishment couldn’t last forever. The instructors let them finally enter the tower after a couple hours and gave them the same spiel they had the others. They then allowed the latecomers half an hour of rest before it was time to reassemble for dinner.

The latecomers were a truly haggard looking bunch; even the strongest of them looked half dead. Even with the relief of being given some time to rest they went to claim their beds with sluggish steps and glazed eyes. The two who came to Charles, Henry, and Alain’s room didn’t speak to them. They only put their things down and collapsed into bed. When it came time to reassemble in the common area, Charles was forced to wake them up so they wouldn’t miss it.

The seventy-six first-tier commoners were all in their common room at the appointed time. The twenty-five second-tier nobles sauntered down the stairs just as the Instructors walked in through the entrance.

“Everyone here?! Where’s those third-tiers?!” shouted the Senior Instructor as his eyes swept over the assembled Snow Lions.

“We’re right here!” A voice came from the stairs not a second later. The beautiful black-haired noble nonchalantly waved to the Senior Instructor while the brown-haired noble respectfully nodded. Leon trailed a few steps behind them.

The Senior Instructor slightly frowned, but it was generally better to not make enemies of the higher nobility, so he kept his admonishments to himself. He didn’t shut his mouth entirely, though.

“Well hurry up! I’m sure most of these guys are hungry!”

“Right!”

The two third-tier nobles hurried over to the front of the group, while Leon followed, feeling significantly less than enthused about his place of prominence.

The Senior Instructor did a quick count and after arriving at one hundred and four trainees, the group set out. Immediately after leaving the tower, he broke out into a run, causing the group to take off after him, much to the consternation of the tired first-tier trainees. The other two instructors took up positions behind the group to catch stragglers just like the run from the assembly field, but it wouldn’t be necessary this time as the Senior Instructor took a much more forgiving pace and the Snow Lions arrived at the dining hall without a single trainee falling out.

The dining hall was a long rectangular building made of white stone and red roof tiles, like just about all the other higher quality buildings in the capital. Its surroundings took away from the pure and stainless look, though, as it was in the same forest as the unit towers. It was built in an artificial clearing located at the end of a dirt road. The nearby trees brushed against the roof and blocked the sunlight from reaching the windows, while the long unkempt grass grew so high as to brush the bottom windowsills.

As they arrived, the Senior Instructor turned back to the trainees and said, “You all have half an hour.” He then pushed open the doors and led them inside.

The giant building was almost one entire room, filled with polished granite columns and bright magic lanterns. It was packed with tables and chairs enough to seat the trainees from all the units, though there were only two other units present when they arrived, so it seemed quiet and empty.

The area closest to the doors were dedicated to serving the food, and there were a dozen servants behind counters ready to load up plates.

The section of the building in the very center was the most eye-catching, though. Rather than stone floor tiles on the ground like the rest of the dining hall, it was made of dirt. Vivid green grass grew on that dirt, as did numerous flowers that formed a wide spectrum of colors, all of which was illuminated by a radiant magic lantern that made the area look just as bright as if it were outside on a sunny day. There were only a dozen small tables in that section, and the two third-tier nobles from the Snow Lions made for one of those empty tables as soon as they walked in. They didn’t even stop to grab food on the way because they knew food would be brought to them instead.

Two other tables in that area were taken by the six other third-tier nobles from the other two units that beat the Snow Lions to the dining hall. Leon also noticed that the trainees closest to that section were of the second-tier, while those closer to the walls were of the first-tier.

The two third-tier Snow Lions politely greeted the other six nobles and took a seat, not even bothering to see if Leon would join them.

Leon, of course, had no intention of joining them. However, as he was looking around the room, the other Snow Lions wasted no time getting in line for their food. When Leon turned back to them, it was already too late to capitalize on having been first through the doors.

A thought crossed his mind. *'I could probably just cut the line... Doubt anyone would make a fuss...'* He shook his head and banished that thought, though, and calmly walked to the back of the line.

The Senior Instructor stuck around just long enough to see that, and another hint of a smile appeared on his lips. *'I think I might like this one...'* he thought. With that, he left the other two instructors in the hall and walked out.

It took about ten minutes for the entire unit to file through. Charles, Henry, and Alain had already grabbed a table, so Leon made his way over. Going to join the third-tier nobles never crossed his mind, but he still had to ignore the odd looks he drew from the first-tier trainees as he walked over, especially from the other four trainees at the table.

Charles nodded in greeting, which Leon returned.

There was an extraordinarily tantalizing smell coming from his dinner, a grilled chicken breast with potatoes and an assortment of carrots and green beans. Leon took a deep breath, savoring the smell before digging in. He'd never eaten carrots or green beans before, so that's where he started. The others watched in amazement as the stoicism melted away and an unapologetic smile that nearly split Leon's face in half grew wider with every bite.

'Is his food really that good?' was the question on all their minds. They were so amazed at the change they saw in Leon that they didn't give voice to their question. Even Charles, who was a little more used to seeing this trait in Leon, was affected by the quiet atmosphere.

One of the other first-tier trainees at the table who wasn't so familiar with Leon didn't pick up on this social cue and directly asked Leon, "Why are you sitting here? Shouldn't you be with the other third-tier mages?"

Leon's face immediately reverted back to its usual stony and expressionless appearance and he had to force himself not to immediately erupt with killing intent. For him, a meal was sacred, and a man was not to be disturbed when eating.

With as much patience as he could muster, he responded, "Not noble. Don't want to sit with them." Then, he went back to eating, though with less obvious glee than before.

His blunt reply and the reproachful looks from the others at the table shut the mouth of the man who spoke.

The rest of the meal wasn't going to be eaten in peace, though, as the other units began to arrive. The first after the Snow Lions were the Deathbringers, Gaius' unit.

As seemed to be the custom for the third-tier nobles, Gaius immediately made for the center of the dining hall, but as he was about to take his seat, he noticed Leon and froze in anger. His killing intent burst forth, though Leon was unaffected. In fact, only the weakest of the first-tier mages who felt that killing intent felt the slightest bit of fear from Gaius.

The nobleman retracted his killing intent in a hurry anyway and quickly sat down, though he frequently glared in Leon's direction. Notably, the other third-tier nobles seemed to be ignoring him, which was most certainly not normal for the son of a Duke, though nobles of such lofty stations were rarely so humiliated as Gaius had been by Leon.

Leon ignored him and continued eating. He was almost done when the next unit arrived, the Black Vipers, Tiberias' unit. As with Gaius, as soon as Tiberias saw Leon his fury and killing intent were obvious for all to see.

"What's up, man, you got a problem with that guy?" asked one of the other third-tier nobles from his unit.

"... No..." responded Tiberias, clearly lying through his gritted teeth.

"Right. Well whatever your problem with him is, he knocked Gaius down a few pegs, which is alright in my book."

Gaius had no problem hearing that as his third-tier senses were very sharp, and that noble wasn't even trying to be subtle, eyeing Gaius out of the corner of his eye. His face grew red with fury, and he thought, *'I need to get my revenge on that worthless barbarian! My prestige will never recover if I don't, and I'll never be able to look her in the eye!'*

These hotheads cooled a little when the next unit arrived, the Crimson Tigresses led by their beautiful female instructors and the even more gorgeous Asiya and Valeria. No one wanted to make fools of themselves in front of them, and even Gaius' mood improved as his gaze found itself on Valeria. He was about to get up and greet her, but then his gaze wandered to Leon again and he remembered the humiliation he suffered in front of her, and he remained in his seat. His seething hatred for Leon only grew more intense.

Asiya happily greeted the others and even politely waved to Leon, which caused the jaws of everyone else at his table drop in surprise. Leon was able to nod back at her, but as usual, his cheeks went red. Asiya smiled and went to her seat.

Valeria barely looked at anyone in the room. She radiated a cold aura which was barely stifled by the auras of the other third-tier nobles in the room. But, it was plain as day to Leon that she was very strong. She was an exceptionally skilled fighter if the combat test was anything to go by, and with her obvious magical strength and last name... Leon was growing more and more wary of her by the minute.

The other units gradually arrived, and the Steel Century, the unit with Marcus and Alcander, arrived last. Marcus was calm and rather indifferent to the room, but Alcander's eyes immediately searched the

third-tier area looking for Leon. He looked a little confused when he didn't see the other man until he expanded his search and saw him with some of the first-tier Snow Lions.

Alcander stared at Leon with so much fire in his eyes and such a wide smile of anticipation that Leon couldn't help but grow a little uncomfortable. In fact, his entire table had grown quiet and fidgety now that Alcander, Tiberias, and Gaius were all staring in this direction creating a palpable killing aura. Alcander wasn't emitting any killing intent, but he certainly wasn't helping matters by so obviously wanting to fight. The trainees in between the tables had it even worse than Leon's table, being closer to the sources of this aura.

The aura gradually spread throughout the entire dining hall, and everyone could see that there were three third-tier nobles who seemed to have some kind of antipathy towards Leon. The Snow Lion trainees could feel their hearts sink, as this could potentially pit them against three other units!

Fortunately, the situation didn't escalate beyond simply emitting killing intent.

—

A small building had been quite expertly hidden several hundred feet into the forest. Here, the ten Senior Instructors sat down to have a meal with the Legate of the Knight Academy. This meeting was only a formality, so the Legate wasn't paying any attention to the Senior Instructors, who were busy exchanging tales of how they punished their first-tier trainees for not reaching their towers on time.

Rather than those conversations, what interested the Legate more was what was going on in the trainee's dining hall. He had spread his magic senses over the building so he could see everything that was happening within, and he smiled a little.

The Senior Instructor for the Crimson Tigresses noticed his weird expression and gave him an odd look.

He smiled, and asked her, "When do the fights between the units typically start?"

As soon as he started speaking, the other Senior Instructors respectfully quieted down so they could hear what he had to say.

"Usually after the first month. There needs to be some time for them to build a little enmity first, and even then, there will only be a few small fights, maybe even just a duel or two. But, things will escalate from there, and they will put their training weapons to use." responded the Crimson Tigresses' Senior Instructor.

"Hmm. I get the feeling that things will start a little earlier this cycle than usual. What's first on the schedule for training?"

"First aid."

"Replace it with basic combat."

The Senior Instructors looked a little confused, but they all answered with a resounding "Yes Sir!"

The Legate smiled. There would definitely be some conflict between the units soon, and Leon was undoubtedly going to be right in the center of it.

'Seeing what this son of House Rai- ... what this Valeman will do is going to be quite entertaining...'

Chapter 66: Rules and Structure

Several minutes after the Steel Century—Marcus and Alcander's unit—arrived at the dining hall, a number of servants entered from the serving area with heavenly looking food. Every cut of steak was cooked and seasoned to perfection, every leaf of lettuce was crisp and cool, every potato baked to beautiful golden brown. No matter what the food was, whether it was a salad or just plain fries, everything about it looked immaculate, and the mouth-watering aroma reached everyone in the room.

The eyes of the envious first-tier trainees followed those servants as they brought this food to the center of the room. Even Leon paused to watch them for a moment. The servants quickly and professionally distributed the third-tier nobles their plates and loaded them up for a small feast.

There was some confusion, though, once the servants were done. They had one set of dishes and silverware left over, and another portion of food they still had to give out. The servants' supervisor began panicking a little as he silently counted the third-tier trainees and realized there was one missing! He absolutely couldn't afford it if he accidentally spurned someone in that group! If that trainee complained, or his own bosses heard that he brought some food back to the kitchen and skipped over that trainee, he would probably be fired on the spot!

The supervisor had never encountered something like this before. The third-tier trainees had always sat together in the center section of the dining hall, so it never crossed his mind that Leon would be sitting with the lowly first-tier plebeians. He frantically scanned the center section again, looking for the final third-tier trainee they had to bring food to.

The other servants were also standing there at a loss of what they were now supposed to be doing. After a few more moments of this, some of the other nobles started getting a little impatient with the servants who were still in their space. Fortunately, the supervisor's panicking eyes met those of the brown-haired Snow Lion's. The brown-haired noble pointed over his shoulder directly at Leon.

The supervisor was a little confused as to what the noble was trying to tell him, but as he was just barely a second-tier mage, he was able to identify Leon after several confused seconds. His face burned in embarrassment at having not expanded his search, otherwise he would've been able to identify Leon given that he would've been the only other trainee in the room whose power was unknown to him.

"I'm terribly sorry for the wait, Young Lord, we weren't expecting you to be sitting with *these people*." The servants hurriedly brought the last of the food to Leon, who was so nervous at being stared at by the entire table and the numerous first-tier trainees around them that he was unable to talk. But when the food was placed before him, his eyes almost grew as wide as the dinner plate.

Charles, Henry, and Alain glared at the supervisor for his snobbish and derisive comment, but the food the servants brought quickly took their attention. Even these three stared in envy at Leon, let alone the hundreds of other first-tier trainees around.

Their envy only grew as Leon started to dig in. He had already eaten a delicious meal, but that didn't stop him from tearing through what the servants brought over. Over the course of the first three bites, his face lit up with joy. No one at the table disturbed him this time.

About half an hour after the Snow Lions arrived, their Senior Instructor burst in and shouted, "Snow Lions! You're done! Let's get going!"

The two units who had arrived before them had already left several minutes before. The first-tier trainees all rose quickly and hurried outside. The second-tier trainees were a little more leisurely, but they didn't waste time either. The two third-tier noblemen took their time, making sure to say goodbye to the other nobles in the dining hall. Leon didn't bother with them; he had left with those at his table.

The Senior Instructor led them on a run back to the tower. After bringing them inside, most of the first-tier trainees were about to head for their rooms, but the Senior Instructor stopped them.

"Hold on there, who said you all could sleep now?" His sharp tone and slight emanations of killing intent froze them all in their tracks. Even the second and third-tier nobles backed away from the stairs.

"We still have some business to discuss, then we're going over what the schedule will look like for the next few weeks."

The unit shuffled around until they were all gathered around the Senior Instructor, while the other two instructors just stood by the door and waited for it to be over, so they could go home.

"Here at the Knight Academy, we will train you all to be leaders! If you graduate, you will be placed in charge of a ten-man squad! However, before we teach you to lead, you must learn to follow!" The Senior Instructor was looking directly at the first-tier trainees as he said this. He didn't bother looking at the others because they likely already knew what he was going to say, especially since they seemed to hardly be paying any attention.

"In every unit, the rank and file soldiers follow the lead of the men-at-arms! All of you first-tier trainees are those soldiers!" He raised his voice a little and looked over at the nobles who were still looking towards the stairs. He waited a moment for them to turn back around, which they fortunately did because otherwise he would've had them running laps around the tower all night.

Well, the second-tier trainees would've been running laps at least.

"You second-tier trainees will be the men-at-arms! It is your duty to watch out for your men, got it?!" He glared at each one in turn, until they all slowly nodded in acknowledgment. "... We'll see if you do or not later..." he added ominously.

Then, he turned his eyes towards Leon and the final two nobles. "You three will lead this unit. You are in charge of your men-at-arms, and you are responsible for every single man in this room. If any of them antagonize the other units, you will be partially responsible. If any of the other units attack this tower, you will lead the defense. If you decide to attack the other units, you will lead your men into battle. Don't let them down." He didn't ask them if they understood. At their social rank, he had little doubt that they wouldn't bother answering him.

Regardless, he moved on.

"Tomorrow, you will be assembled back here at seven in the morning, then we're off to basic combat training! We'll eat breakfast at the training field! Dress appropriately and bring at least one of your training swords! After that, we're off to lunch, and then you'll go to class!"

The first bit was expected from the Knight Academy; after all, knights have to be able to fight, but the bit about classes clearly confused some of the trainees.

“There are a number of electives that you all can choose to partake in. From poetry to painting to history, there are a large number of courses available to you! However, you first-tier trainees are required to take Magical Theory for one of your electives, where you will learn the basics of what magic is and how to gain magical strength!” The Senior Instructor looked around at the first-tier trainees. Most of them looked thrilled to finally gain access to the basic knowledge of magic, but the second and third-tier trainees were about as enthused about this class as he expected them to be, which is to say not at all.

“You second-tier trainees are also encouraged to sign up for that class as well! Don’t forget that ascending to the third-tier may not be required to become a knight, but it absolutely required to graduate from this Academy! And don’t expect to become a knight if you find yourself failing to graduate!” A few of the second-tier trainees were a little displeased at his words and he could tell that very few of them would actually follow his suggestion.

Leon had no intention of taking this class, though. He guessed that he already knew all he needed to about the basics of magic, and the books he retrieved from his family’s Archives had given him some very useful tips and techniques to train that he was excited to start trying out after he finished reading up on them, even though almost all of them required greater strength than he currently possessed.

“Now then, any questions?” asked the Senior Instructor, surveying the room.

“Will we get a list of our possible electives?” asked one bold-looking first-tier trainee. The Senior Instructor’s eyes immediately locked onto him like a shark eyeing its prey.

“What did you just say?! I am a knight! Is that how you speak to a knight?!” His tone was harsh but quiet, giving a very sinister feeling and turning the trainee he was reprimanding meek as a mouse.

“I... uh... I don’t...”

“Speak up! How do you refer to a knight?!”

“um.... Sir?”

“Holy fucking shit! You actually got it right! What’s your name?” The Senior Instructor’s tone shifted to an amazed bewilderment, and the trainee relaxed a little.

“Theoderic!”

Leon facepalmed at Theoderic’s response. He had just made the same mistake as before!

The Senior Instructor didn’t bat an eye, though, and proceeded in a congratulatory tone.

“Well Theoderic, since you answered correctly, I’ll only make you run around the tower two hundred times tomorrow! One hundred for the first time you forgot ‘Sir’, and another hundred for the second!”

Theoderic immediately stiffened. His face fell, and he audibly gulped. He hadn’t made the time hack before, so he knew exactly how grueling running around the tower with those heavy logs was.

“To make something clear, all of us Instructors are knights! We have earned our titles, and we expect you all to use them! Understand?!” shouted the Senior Instructor angrily at the first-tier trainees. As the other trainees were nobles, he fully expected that they would never forget to use his title, so he didn’t bother looking in their direction.

“Yes, Sir!” shouted all the first-tier trainees.

“Good! To answer this genius’ question, you will receive a list of your choices for other electives tomorrow, when you are choosing them! Any other questions?!” The Senior Instructor waited a moment, but the nobles had no questions to ask and the commoners had been too intimidated to speak up, so he continued.

“If that’s it, then the rest of the day is yours! And just so you are aware, you are only permitted to leave the Academy on designated off days! Most weekends are off days, but there are also a few others that we’ll inform you of as they approach! Other than these specific days, you are not allowed to leave the grounds of the Academy! You are, however, allowed to explore the forest if you so desire, so long as you aren’t late to training!”

Leon’s eyes lit up at his last sentence. He greatly desired to go out and spend some time alone in the forest, to get away from all the people that he had been surrounded by ever since he arrived in Teira, and now that he knew it was permitted, he would definitely do so. He still had some training he wanted to do, so it wouldn’t be this night, but soon.

“I’ll be back here at seven!” With that, the three instructors left the Snow Lions in the tower. The nobles wasted no time heading for the stairs, and the trainees who had to run around the tower immediately made for bed. Everybody was fairly exhausted with the move to a new place, but a few trainees stayed awake for a while longer.

Henry and Alain went to their room, but Charles stayed in the nearly deserted common room to meditate. He had no intention of slacking in his breathing exercises, not when he had reaped such valuable rewards from them already.

Leon climbed up to the top floor. He saw the second-tier trainees socializing with each other, forging closer bonds with their fellow nobles. When he got to the top floor, the other two third-tier nobles didn’t even look at him. As he walked to his room, the little bits of their conversation that he caught indicated that they were deciding who would be in charge of the entire unit and who would be second in command.

The only thing Leon wanted out of the Knight Academy right now was power, so who was in charge didn’t matter to him. He just entered his room and locked the door behind him. He used a runic circle on the wall next to the door to turn off the magic lanterns, then drew the heavy dark red curtains across the window, plunging the room into almost total darkness.

Leon channeled a little magic into his eyes and returned to the center of the room. He removed his clothes and sat down on the thick carpet. For a moment, he allowed himself to enjoy how comfortable the carpet was, but then it was on to business.

He began meditating and pulled as much magic out of his soul realm as he could handle. His heart fused it with his blood, and the resulting mana filled his body with magical power. He channeled as much of it as he could into his head and into his core, saturating his brain and organs with power.

For the first fifteen minutes or so, that's all he did. He allowed his organs to soak in the magic power until he felt they had reached their limit. Normally, this would be all he would need to do, allowing his magic to permeate throughout the last corners of his body that still had to adapt to it, but tonight would be different.

There was a certain technique described in his books for training, and though it stated that only fourth-tier mages could manage it, he wanted to try it anyway. If all went well, this would allow him to hurl bolts of lightning as if they were spears once it had been sufficiently practiced and he had ascended to the fifth-tier. The technique even seemed quite easy, all he would have to do is try and compress some of his magic power and send it surging through his arms as fast as he could, forming something like a constant stream of lightning.

He ran into problems immediately. While he could manipulate his magic power fairly easy, he found that he couldn't compress it very well. It felt like trying to squeeze air; every time he tried, it would slip out of his grasp.

Artorias had taught him that when his brain fully adapted to magic, he would gain an extremely fine control over his magic, and after half an hour of failing to compress his own power, he felt that that control was what he needed to perform this technique.

He sighed. Regardless of the results, his magic power was flooding his brain and organs, so his time was still very productive. After several more hours of meditation and an hour or so after the sun went down, Leon climbed into bed and quickly fell asleep.

Chapter 67: Basic Combat I

Leon woke early the next day. The sun had barely started to rise when his eyes opened, and he estimated he still had at least two hours before he needed to head downstairs.

It had been nearly two months since his father had been killed. He'd come a long way in that time and experienced a great many things, but he still found himself starting to miss the smell of his father cooking bacon from a boar they'd hunted. He missed spending all of his time hunting and training with Artorias. He even found himself missing his house, which was nothing more than a cheap shack compared to this majestic tower.

'Ugh... What am I doing, getting so lost this early in the morning?' Leon shook his head to clear his mind of the morning haze and refocus on the upcoming day. He still didn't get up, though. Instead, he spent a few minutes practically rolling around on the bed with an enormous smile on his face. For a young man who had spent his entire life sleeping on the ground or on a cheap bed frame only covered by a few furs, this was heaven.

[You're such a child.]

When Xaphan's voice resounded through Leon's mind, he froze. He was unable to bring himself to move again for at least five seconds, but by then his gleeful smile had vanished and been replaced with a

mortified look. He couldn't bring himself to respond to the demon, and Xaphan himself said nothing more.

Leon rather stiffly rose from the bed and walked to the bathroom, deciding to pretend that what just happened actually hadn't. He hoped Xaphan would do the same.

He spent half an hour in the bathroom cleaning himself up and then got dressed in some of the training clothes the Academy had provided. The shorts were just plain black, but the shirt was dark green with a white lion's head embroidered onto the back. The Academy had also provided some good shoes. Leon slipped his feet into them and took a few steps. His face lit up with joy for a moment, but he was still a little haunted by what happened earlier, so he quickly forced his expression back into one of stoic indifference.

He liked those shoes, though. He liked them a lot.

Leon took them off, though. He guessed that he still had at least another hour, and as a third-tier mage his internal clock was quite accurate, but it wasn't perfect. Regardless, he still had plenty of time before the Senior Instructor arrived. He spent that time meditating, preparing himself to be around people all day. The past few weeks had helped him get a little more comfortable being around so many other people, but he still wasn't very used to it and greatly needed this time.

Besides, a little extra relaxation wasn't a bad thing.

That hour passed quickly, and Leon rose from his meditation. He did his best to keep as much magic as he could flowing through his body so he could train all day. Meditation wasn't strictly necessary, but Leon greatly enjoyed it, finding it extremely relaxing. Training was always easier when relaxed, and not so easy when out and about.

When Leon felt ready, he approached his door and strapped a training sword around his waist, right next to his own sword. He did one last check to make sure he had his ID, then he reached for the door handle. He paused to take a deep breath, then left his room.

The other two third-tier nobles were busy chatting in the third-tier common room, but apart from a brief glance, they ignored Leon. Leon paid them just as much attention and made for the stairs.

Charles was awake and in the common room practicing a few of the basic swings Leon taught him with a practice sword. Henry and Alain were watching in fascination.

"He actually taught you that much? I thought you said it was only like one or two strikes! How did you get him to do it? Did you drug him or something?" Henry asked a flurry of incredulous questions.

Charles didn't answer immediately. He didn't want to admit that Leon basically taught him all he did out of pity.

"Do you think he might teach us?" asked Alain with some hesitation.

"Maybe... Want to ask him?" responded Henry, not pursuing his previous question, much to Charles' relief.

"Wouldn't hurt to try..." said Alain thoughtfully.

"Well, you two are in luck." Charles nodded to the stairs, where Leon had appeared. He waved at Leon, and the young third-tier mage made his way over.

The first thing he said upon approach was, "Widen your stance, it's too unstable as it is."

"Right!" Charles widened his stance by another foot or so and kept swinging. His swings were slow, more about building muscle memory than anything else.

"Leon, could you show me some of those moves too?" asked Henry.

"Me too, please?" added Alain.

They looked at Leon with stars in their eyes. After all, having a third-tier mage give them some personal instruction was a lot more than they could ever dream of!

"... I... uh..." Leon was completely taken aback at their earnest request and passionate gazes. Alain was a little more reserved, but both he and Henry were very eager to get stronger. But, this very eagerness put Leon on the spot, and the young mage almost froze.

"Hey, guys, give him some space!" Charles stopped swinging his sword and reprimanded the other two. "Besides, we have less than fifteen minutes before the Senior Instructor will arrive, it's not like Leon could show you much with only that much time."

"Right..." said Henry a little dejectedly.

"I suppose..." said Alain as he too backed a few steps away from Leon.

Having been given a moment to think, Leon said, "We don't have time now, but maybe later..."

"Really?" asked Henry. Alain also looked at Leon with great interest.

"Yeah... Maybe tonight, after dinner or something..." Leon didn't know these guys very well, but he had a good impression of them. Besides, he may not be too fond of interacting with other people, but he knew that he ought to make an effort to get better. He figured helping them out a little with some sword techniques would be the best way to go about it.

"Thank you!" said Henry and Alain simultaneously.

The Snow Lion's three instructors arrived several minutes later. By then, all the first-tier trainees had assembled, and the second-tier trainees came downstairs at the same time. They waited a few more minutes for the third-tier nobles to show up, during which time the Senior Instructor almost lost patience. When he arrived, he had been quite pleasantly surprised to see that Leon was already in the common room on the bottom floor, but his mood turned when he had to wait for the other two third-tier trainees.

He didn't have to go and fetch them, though, as they strolled downstairs before the Senior Instructor lost his patience.

"Did you three decide who was in charge last night?" asked the Senior Instructor to the third-tier trainees. Leon was predictably silent, but the black-haired noble answered immediately.

"We did, Sir. Castor will be our centurion." The black-haired noble nodded to Castor, the brown-haired noble, then took a position in the place of honor on his right.

The Senior Instructor's eyes quickly scanned Castor up and down, and he frowned slightly. From what little he had seen of Leon, he felt the quiet Valeman would be a better fit, but he didn't press the matter.

'Better to not force them. Besides, not like the kid looks like he wants to be in charge...' he thought. He wasn't wrong, either. Leon wore his standard stoic look and hardly glanced at the other two third-tier trainees.

"Alright then. Castor, pick someone to carry the banner. Whenever we train, it goes where we go."

"Right, Sir!" Castor turned around to examine the unit. The man who carried the unit was always placed in a position of prominence; he was the only soldier who marched ahead of the unit commander, so this was a serious decision to make. As it so happened, Castor had already made that decision, but he paused for a moment so it seemed like he was considering the issue right now.

"Aemilius! Grab our banner!"

"Yes!"

Castor had chosen a second-tier trainee. Those who were familiar with him weren't surprised, as this particular trainee was the son of a strong knight in service to Castor's father. For Castor to pick him for this honor was almost expected by many of the other nobles.

Aemilius ran over to the banner and, after a few moments of fumbling, carefully extracted it from its small shrine in the middle of the common room. Then, he ran over to the front of the unit.

"You are responsible for the banner from here on out. Don't fuck this up." said the Senior Instructor. He then continued without even waiting for Aemilius to respond. "Alright, let's get moving! We're going to the training field!"

The Snow Lions ran out of their tower, with the Senior Instructor in front, followed by Aemilius with the banner, then the third-tier trainees, second-tier trainees, first-tier trainees, and the other two instructors all the way in the back. The unit arrived at the training field in fifteen minutes. They had run at an easier pace than yesterday, but some of the first-tier trainees still nearly fell out.

Near the tree line and where the dirt roads that lead into the training forest began, a large platform had been set up. Scattered around the platform were dozens of knights serving the Academy, as well as a number of servants handing out sandwiches to the trainees. After dinner the previous night, some of the trainees were a little disappointed that this was all they were getting for breakfast, but no one complained. Or, at least, no one complained within earshot of the instructors.

The Senior Instructor led them to the platform where he had Aemilius leave the banner. While the units may be in competition with each other and encouraged to steal the other banners, the training platforms were the one place they weren't allowed to act. A banner on the platform wasn't allowed to be touched until the training exercise was over.

After that, the Senior Instructor split the group up by magical tier, with the first-tier trainees split off to learn from some of the weaker Academy knights. They were to learn basic combat techniques similar to what Leon had taught Charles as most of them barely knew which end of their swords to hold.

The second-tier trainees were to be taught by some of the stronger Academy knights. It was assumed that they knew how to fight, but the Academy still needed to give them adequate instruction in their fighting style.

Castor, Leon, and the final third-tier noble who Leon learned was named Alphonsus from his chatting with Castor, followed the Senior Instructor away from the platform. Giving third-tier trainees instruction in basic combat was pointless; they already knew how to fight if they were that strong at such a young age. Consequently, the 'Basic Combat' courses were just an excuse for the third-tier trainees to spar against each other for a few weeks.

About a quarter mile away from the platform was a long cloth wall raised between several dozen wooden posts. The Senior Instructor led the three to the other side of this wall. The nobles knew they were brought here so the other trainees wouldn't stare, but Leon wasn't so well-informed. He didn't ask any questions, though, and just went along with it in silence.

The Snow Lions were the first unit to arrive, and over the next fifteen minutes or so the other nine units trickled in. Like the Snow Lions, they split their units by tier so the Academy's knights could instruct everyone as needed.

As the other third-tier trainees arrived on the other side of the cloth wall, Leon felt the stares of Gaius, Tiberias, and Alcander. He barely glanced back at them, preferring instead to lean against one of the wooden poles with his eyes closed in a state of silent meditation.

Once everyone had arrived, one of the Senior Instructors for one of the other units stepped forward, catching the attention of the third-tier trainees. Hearing them quiet down, Leon opened his eyes and started paying attention.

"Today, we're going to have another set of duels! Just like the combat test, everyone must fight at least once!" This Senior Instructor paused for a moment. His eyes flit between Gaius and Leon before continuing, something which almost everyone else present saw. "We will not prevent anyone from challenging anyone else, but we will intervene if things get out of hand!"

Gaius fought the urge to smile twistedly at Leon, but he was ecstatic at this announcement. If he had the opportunity, he was absolutely going to beat Leon down! He was about to step forward and make his challenge, but the Senior Instructor wasn't done speaking.

"We also encourage you to challenge someone you didn't fight in the combat test! These sparring sessions aren't just to bring you all closer together, but also to expose you to different combat styles! The more experience you have in the art of battle, the stronger a fighter you will be! But, don't forget: no strikes on the head! Such attacks are still dangerous, even with these training weapons!" The Senior Instructor didn't give mention to any more rules. The enchantments on these training weapons were very robust, so there was little need to restrict the trainees too much when sparring.

"Now, do we have any volunteers to fight first?"

Most of the nobles present wanted to fight. Some, like Alcander, were almost giddy with excitement. However, almost everyone turned to look at Gaius. They all knew exactly what he wanted, and they were looking forward to a good show.

Gaius smiled as elegantly as he could with all this attention and snuck a glance at Valeria. She was looking at him, but it was with cold and emotionless eyes. Gaius didn't see her distant attitude, though. All he processed was that she was watching him.

'She wants to see me fight! No, she wants to see me win! I'm going to break that barbarian in half, revenging myself in front of her! The rest of these hapless fools be damned, with her watching me, I can't fail to regain my honor! I really should get around to sending my marriage request to Calabria...'

The nobles watched Gaius, waiting for him to step forward. But, he was so lost after noticing Valeria's attention, he didn't move a muscle. Instead, something none of them expected happened: Leon walked forward and stood before the group.

Gaius' eyes widened, and his smile turned vicious as he took his first step forward. He thought that Leon stepping up was a direct challenge to him. However, Leon raised his hand and pointed directly at Valeria.

"I would like to challenge you," he said, stunning the nobles speechless.

Chapter 68: Basic Combat II

"I would like to challenge you."

Leon's words were shocking to everyone present. Gaius, who had been about to step forward to face Leon again, froze. Alcander stared in amazement of Leon's boldness; even he wouldn't challenge such an ice queen in front of so many other nobles.

Slowly, all eyes turned to Valeria. Her cold exterior had cracked a little. Her eyes were wide, and she had tilted her head just a little in confusion.

'Why is he challenging me?' she thought. Similar thoughts were echoed in the minds of everyone else, as Leon had no apparent reason to challenge Valeria.

'This animal would challenge a goddess?!' thought a furious and indignant Gaius. He didn't say anything, though, because the Senior Instructors were still present. They would doubtlessly defend Leon's right to challenge anyone here if Gaius were to make a fuss, so he held his tongue.

'Perhaps he has a crush on her and is trying to gain her attention?' speculated a fascinated Marcus. Regardless, he greatly looked forward to seeing who would win this duel.

Leon continued to point, waiting for her answer.

[What are you doing?] asked Xaphan. The demon couldn't fathom why Leon would want to challenge this woman out of nowhere.

[Her last name is 'Isynos', the same as at least one of the men who attacked my home and killed my father. I can't say if her entire family is involved, or if it was just this one guy, but I want to gauge her abilities regardless.]

[You're *just* testing her? Really? No other reason?]

[... She's strong. Strong enough to be a match for me. Maybe even more than a match...] Even though Leon didn't say anything out loud, Xaphan could still sense the anticipation in his statement as plain as day. Leon wanted to fight this woman and he'd find any excuse to do so.

Xaphan didn't say anything more. There was certainly more he *wanted* to say, but he also didn't want to distract Leon. If Leon were to lose, then it would also look bad on the demon.

This entire exchange happened in the few seconds of stunned silence that was left in the wake of Leon's challenge. Leon let his hand drop from pointing at Valeria, but he never broke eye contact with her.

She quickly regained her cold exterior, covering up her surprise. She calmly walked forward while unstrapping the training spear from her back.

The nobles stared as she took a position only ten steps from Leon and said, "I accept your challenge."

Leon's face broke into a slight smile as he assumed a ready stance. Valeria did likewise, though without the smile.

The two combatants squared off, waiting for the signal to start. The Senior Instructor in charge of overseeing these duels waited a moment for them to speak a few words to each other, as was the typical custom. When neither spoke for several long seconds, he hesitantly said, "... Begin!"

Leon unleashed his killing intent as soon as the words left his mouth. However, unlike when he fought against Gaius, this move seemed to have very little effect on Valeria. In stark contrast to Gaius' dismissiveness towards Leon, Valeria had prepared herself for a serious fight. She had been letting her magic circulate throughout her body since she had woken up—much like Leon—so she was perfectly ready to counter his killing intent even though her own wasn't quite so potent.

She felt a chill run down her spine and her scalp tingled, but she didn't freeze in terror. Instead, she lunged forward, stabbing straight at Leon's stomach.

Leon wasn't waiting around, though. His fighting style was designed to take advantage of the strengths of lightning magic. As a result, it was extremely aggressive, eschewing defense in favor of speed and power. He'd darted forward at the same time as Valeria, twisting away from her spear and getting into range with his sword in the blink of an eye.

Leon swung his sword in a horizontal slash aimed at her waist, but she rapidly stepped back, letting the sword taste nothing but air. She brought her spear back to lunge again, but Leon dodged and counter-attacked.

Valeria raised her spear, blocking the sword strike with the haft of her spear. She then tried to sweep Leon's leg out with the back end of the spear, but he shifted his weight and the spear had as much effect on him as it would on a massive column. Leon took a step forward, still pushing against Valeria's spear with his blade. She pushed back for a moment, then pivoted on her back foot and spun out of the deadlock.

Leon didn't lose balance, though, and he kept up the pressure with a blistering round of attacks. Valeria had little trouble blocking most of them and dodging those she couldn't block with enough room to spare that she got in a few attacks of her own.

As he barely ducked out of the way of a counter-attack after one of his strikes was deflected, Leon's smile grew wider. He increased the flow of magic into his muscles, bringing greater strength and speed at the cost of greater magic consumption. However, even with his increased fighting capability, he still couldn't land a good hit on Valeria.

He felt it was time for a slight change in tactics.

Valeria had gained a little distance after blocking another of his strikes, so he lunged forward to close the distance. He pulled his sword back in preparation for a stab, but he held it for a moment to create an artificial opening.

Valeria wasn't going to miss this opportunity. Leon had been keeping the pressure on well enough that she didn't know when, or if, a chance like this would present itself.

She stabbed forward, aiming directly for Leon's stomach. This was the moment he was waiting for. As the spearhead hurtled towards him with all the force of a powerful third-tier mage, Leon's smile grew even wider. He side-stepped with only the briefest of moments to spare and the spear tore past him.

He took one hand off the sword and grabbed the spear. Valeria's eyes widened in surprise and she tried to pull it back. Leon didn't let go, not even when the spearhead came into contact with his hand. The weapon's enchantments were strong and his arm rapidly lost feeling, but he stepped forward and swung again at Valeria, aiming for her leg.

She didn't let go of her spear and consequently couldn't move out of the way in time. Leon's blade hit her calf, sweeping her leg out from under her and sending her straight to the ground. When her back hit the grass she tried to roll away, but her leg wouldn't move. Leon calmly tossed the spear away and stabbed the sword down in the ground, less than an inch from her face. Valeria froze, and slowly turned her head to look up at him.

The two stared at each other. She was well aware that he could've ended the fight by striking anywhere else on her body rather than the ground. She had also lost her weapon and used much of her magic power. Valeria sighed when she realized the obvious.

"I concede defeat," she said quietly.

The watching nobles could only stare in awe. This fight had been fast and brutal; both combatants clearly hadn't held back in the slightest. The results were even more jaw-dropping! Valeria had fought several times before in private competitions held between young nobles, so most of the spectators had a good idea of what she was capable of. Leon defeating this tigress in a fair fight said far more about him than it did about her.

Even Marcus was stunned. He had correctly predicted that Gaius would lose to Leon, but that was because the noble didn't bother raising his guard before the fight. Marcus believed that if the other nobles had put aside their own arrogance and pride in their station, then they too would've easily

predicted Gaius' loss. Valeria, however, wasn't playing around. She came out swinging, but Leon was the victor in the end.

Even more shocking to Marcus than the result were Leon's tactics. This fight had given Marcus a good look at Leon's fighting style and the noble was astonished at the sheer lack of concern Leon seemed to have for defense. Leon's final move—grabbing Valeria's spear—made quite the impact on Marcus.

Leon pulled his training sword out from the ground. He still had a very wide smile on his face which made it clear just how much he enjoyed the fight even though his left arm was hanging limply at his side. He drew the ire of several of the watching nobles—chief of whom was Gaius—when he started walking away from Valeria. The young woman's leg had been disabled when Leon struck it with his sword, which Leon seemed to be ignoring.

Gaius was about to rush forward to help Valeria to her feet, but Leon surprised everyone again by beating them to it. Instead of walking away and leaving her on the ground, he'd actually walked over and picked up her spear. He calmly returned to Valeria and handed her the spear. She blinked in confusion and surprise, but she gratefully accepted the spear.

"Thank you," she said as she rose to her feet while putting all her weight on her good leg. She didn't actually need the spear to stand, but she would've had a very hard time walking without the support.

Leon nodded back to her in acknowledgment as he walked away. This, too, shocked Valeria. Due to her strength, beauty, and noble status, she was used to everyone she spoke to treating her like a goddess. Leon's indifferent treatment of her was unusual, to say the least.

"Next time we fight, you won't win," she said. She then started hobbling back to the watching crowd, not even watching him long enough to see the smile of anticipation he wore in response to her statement.

"My lady, may I offer you some assistance?" asked Gaius as he hurried forward. He tried to put on a look of concern, but his eagerness got the better of him and he smiled like an idiot as he held out his hand.

Valeria responded with a very curt, "No. Thank you." She returned to Asiya's side before sitting down on the grass to rest. She glanced over at Leon and saw that he was doing the same. Their fight had taken its toll on both combatants; they were tired and low on mana. Their mana reserves could be recovered in several minutes, but the stun effects from their weapons would take another hour or two to wear off. Until then, it was obvious they wouldn't be fighting again today.

Or rather, it was obvious to most of the nobles that neither would be accepting any challenges. Gaius, however, was not most of the nobles. Seeing Valeria limp away while leaning on her spear had infuriated Gaius almost as much as waking up in the bathroom after passing out during the combat test. That it was the same person responsible for both only made it worse.

Gaius stepped forward and drew his training sword. He pointed it at Leon just as he did on the day of the combat test.

"Get up here, savage! For daring to bring harm to lady Valeria, you deserve nothing but death! However, in consideration of the fact that you are a fellow student of the Knight Academy, I'll settle for beating

you like the disobedient dog you are!” Gaius put as much of his hatred in his words as he could. There was nothing he wanted more than to tear Leon limb from limb and his tone made that obvious.

Leon, however, didn’t move from where he was quietly meditating. His only response was to glance at Gaius and slowly shake his head, which only served to infuriate the noble even further.

“What, has the barbarian lost his nerve? Get up here and receive your beating, mutt!”

Leon sighed. He was about to speak up, but the Senior Instructor supervising the duels beat him to it.

“He’s already fought once, and his arm has been stunned. He’s under no obligation to fight again.”

Gaius’ face twisted into an ugly snarl, but he couldn’t force the issue now that this Senior Instructor had made his position known.

[Smile at him,] said Xaphan.

[What?] asked Leon in slight confusion.

[Just do it! Smile at that dickhead!]

Leon complied, flashing Gaius a cheeky grin. Gaius’ face grew so red from anger that he appeared to be in danger of bursting a blood vessel. The arrogant noble started grinding his teeth and his knuckles went white from how hard he was gripping his sword.

[HAHAHA! LET THAT DICKHEAD FEAST ON NOTHING BUT HIS OWN IMPOTENT RAGE!!!] thundered Xaphan in sadistic glee. The demon’s rapturous response was so unexpected that Leon almost burst out laughing. He actually let out a few chuckles and Gaius had to literally bite his tongue to prevent himself from sprinting over and attacking Leon, despite his refusal to duel.

Most of the other nobles were content to watch this play out. They had never seen anyone who had angered Gaius so completely before. A few of the other nobles were also very interested in Valeria and seeing Gaius—who they considered their main rival—in such a state was incredibly entertaining. Alphonsus was counted among their number and he didn’t even bother trying to hide his laughter.

This laughter seemed to drive Gaius over the edge as he took a few menacing steps toward Leon. He didn’t get very far before Alcander rushed forward.

“Since the Valeman won’t fight, how about indulging me?”

Gaius continued to glare at Leon, but he reluctantly agreed after several quiet seconds. Unfortunately for him, his anger at Leon filled his mind and dulled his reflexes; Alcander beat him handily. Gaius managed to walk away from that duel, though his mood had only grown worse.

Regardless, no one challenged Leon again for the remainder of the morning.

Chapter 69: Start of Classes

The first Basic Combat class was over several hours after it had started. All the third-tier nobles had fought at least once. Asiya won her duel, as did Tiberias, though their opponents weren’t particularly strong fighters. Combat training wasn’t necessary to advance through the tiers of magic and perhaps half of the third-tier nobles were not nearly as proficient in combat as the other half.

Marcus and Alcander weren't in that group. They had been training to fight since a very young age and could match an older and more experienced third-tier knight blow for blow. Alcander was very eager to duel the others and fought more than half a dozen times, only stopping when Marcus beat him again.

Marcus didn't continue to fight. He only wanted to watch the others and learn their fighting styles, but Alcander had been getting in the way.

Leon also watched several of the duels. He didn't watch with the same fascination as Marcus, but he still felt the need to know how well the others could fight. He paid special attention to Marcus and Tiberias. He recognized the former as being an extremely intelligent mage, while the latter seemed to hold some grudge against him for some reason. Observing the fighting styles of both would be very beneficial in his opinion.

He didn't learn much from their duels, though, as they each only fought once. He was a little disappointed that he couldn't see more, especially since Tiberias wasn't even trying to hide his hatred for Leon.

The Senior Instructors had them return to the banner platform when the class was over. The first and second-tier trainees were called back, and all ten units returned to their groups.

Leon glanced back at the rest of the Snow Lions as they lined up. Charles and Henry looked exhausted, while Alain only looked marginally better. The rest of the first-tier trainees appeared to be in roughly the same shape, but the second-tier trainees barely looked winded.

After the units retrieved their banners, the Senior Instructors led them on a mass run back to the dining hall for lunch. This meal wasn't as tense as dinner had been the day before. Alcander had fought enough duels that he wasn't paying much attention to Leon. Tiberias, too, was more preoccupied with his conversation with the other two third-tier nobles in his unit to glare at Leon.

Gaius was still sending the occasional dirty look Leon's way, but Leon was too busy gleefully wolfing down his food to listen to the conversation at his own table, let alone pay any attention to what the nobles were doing. If he had been paying attention, though, he might've noticed Valeria occasionally looking his way.

After lunch, the units were taken on another run through the forest. A few miles later, they found themselves on the edge of the forest again, but this time they were on the southern edge of the training field. Half a dozen buildings that shared the clean and unadorned aesthetic of the administration building and dining hall were found there.

The units were led into the largest of the buildings. Much like the dining hall, this building was just one enormous room, though this one was round and domed. Apart from the dozen columns supporting the dome the only things of note, there were about one hundred large tables. Each unit was made to sit at ten of these tables.

A number of servants appeared with a number of documents which were passed out to each trainee.

Leon scanned the documents he received and discovered that these were the lists that described the electives available to the trainees. He quickly scanned through the lists to see what the Academy

offered. There were only two slots available every training cycle for electives, so he needed to choose wisely as he would be stuck with these courses for the duration of his time at the Academy.

At the very top of the first page was 'Magical Theory'. From what he could tell, most of the time in that course would be spent meditating and practicing proper breathing techniques. He had no use for that course, so he quickly moved on.

A few other offerings stood out to him as he skimmed through the lists. First was 'A Brief History of the First Bull King's Campaigns'. He had nearly bombed the written test, so he felt like he could spare some time to brush up on his knowledge of the military history of the Bull Kingdom.

The next course his eyes were drawn to was 'The Classics of the Bull Kingdom'. This was a course devoted to the great works of literature written in the Bull Kingdom and the states that preceded it. Again, given the results of his written test, Leon was sorely tempted to take this course and cover some of the areas he was lacking in.

Leon's eyes widened in excitement when he saw the next course: 'Basics of Enchantment'. Ever since he was young, he had been fascinated with runes and their myriad applications. However, Artorias never had the skills or means to properly instruct Leon, so all he could do was let the young mage read a few of the books he had taken from the Archives in Teira. Leon still had many of those books, but he lacked the foundation he needed to understand the information contained within them.

Leon decided immediately that his first elective was going to be this course on enchantments.

The last piece of paper was a map of the surrounding buildings. The room each course took place in was clearly labeled on this map. The building they were all in was actually the classroom for Magical Theory, which made sense given that it was required for all the first-tier trainees.

He hadn't decided what else to take when he finished scanning the documents, though. The Academy offered courses on just about every conceivable art, from painting to sculpting to writing; there was something there for just about everyone. There were so many courses, in fact, that Leon felt that most of them wouldn't be very heavily attended, which suited him just fine.

After about twenty minutes, the trainees were dismissed to their first course. They only had to attend the first class of their chosen elective to sign up for it. The Academy didn't have any formal tests, so the trainees were encouraged to take whatever interested them the most.

All of the second and third-tier trainees left the room for their first elective while the first-tier trainees stayed to take the first class of Magical Theory.

Leon quickly made his way to the enchanting room, but he had been one of the last to leave the room for Magical Theory, so he was one of the last to arrive. His eyes quickly scanned the room when he entered the classroom, and his eager smile faded when he saw who else was present: Valeria and Gaius. About two dozen trainees had elected to take the course on enchanting, but these two were the only other third-tier trainees who had made that decision.

Leon paused for a moment at the door as every eye in the room turned towards him. Most of the other trainees didn't spare him a second glance, but he made very brief eye contact with Valeria. She gave him a slight respectful nod, which he hesitantly returned.

Gaius, on the other hand, glared at him with as much hate as he could fill his eyes with. Leon ignored him as best as he could and calmly walked to the back of the classroom. For a moment, the noble's face began to go red with rage, but he simply glanced at Valeria and forced himself to calm down.

The room had a couple dozen tables with enough chairs to seat fifty trainees. In the very back of the room were a few more tables which held thousands of sheets of cheap spell paper. At the front of the classroom was a large limestone slab covered in several glyphs made of light runes.

Leon took a seat in the very back, as far away from the other trainees as he could be. There, he closed his eyes and silently meditated while he waited for the instructor to show up.

While everyone waited, the second-tier trainees chatted amongst themselves. They spoke about business in their home territories, fashion, the arena games, the usual noble fare. Gaius quickly grew bored with these topics and stood up, leaving his second-tier lackeys to continue their conversation while he strolled over to Valeria's table.

Valeria had been quietly sitting alone at her table. The other trainees seemed too intimidated by her cold attitude and even colder aura, but Gaius didn't seem to care about those things. He helped himself to seat at her table and began trying to talk to her. She politely responded, but she didn't say much and her expression never once changed, leaving Gaius undeterred. When the instructor finally arrived several minutes later, he was still doggedly smiling and talking at Valeria.

All the talking in the room quickly faded when the instructor glared at the trainees. He loudly slammed the door shut behind him and strolled over to the limestone slab without a word. Even Gaius shut his mouth, though his eyes frequently darted back to Valeria to sweep over her body.

The instructor pressed his hand against a runic circle at the bottom of the limestone slab, activating the light enchantments. To Leon's astonishment, a black screen materialized a few inches off the slab, though no one else seemed very surprised so he contained himself.

"All right! This is 'Basics of Enchantment'! By the end of this class, you all should be relatively proficient in about fifty basic enchantments as well as have an understanding of the basic structure of most variants of enchantments." The instructor pulled out a blank piece of paper and handed it to the closest trainee.

"You will write your name on this paper! After you do, you will be expected to attend every one of these classes for the duration of this training cycle!" The trainee hurriedly scrawled his name down and passed it to the next man who did the same.

"We start lectures next week! For now, I want you all to get acquainted with these runes!" He waved his hand over the black screen and a series of white lines appeared, which formed into seven shapes. Leon recognized them as the most basic runes, not that he actually had to as the instructor waved his hand again and what each rune represented was written below it. The first four were the four primordial elements: earth, water, fire, and air. The last three were the three heavenly elements: darkness, light, and lightning.

"There are many runes in the modern art of enchantment, but these are the most basic and the most versatile! Thus, these are the runes we will start with! In the back, you will find plenty of spell paper. Your task for the next week is to copy these runes onto those papers until you can draw them perfectly

even in your sleep!” The instructor sat down behind a desk at the front of the class and stared at the trainees.

It took a moment for them to realize that was all he was going to say and get moving. They shuffled to the back to grab a small stack of spell papers each. As the trainee closest to the back, Leon had already grabbed his paper and gotten to work before anyone else. He concentrated solely on drawing runes so much that when someone elegantly sat down next to him he almost jumped in surprise.

His surprise was compounded when he saw Valeria in the seat next to him, but his shock was nothing compared to Gaius’. The noble had been talking up a storm with her as soon as they had risen to their feet and had completely missed the annoyance that momentarily appeared on her normally impassive face. The words he had been saying to her caught in his throat as he stared in complete bewilderment at Valeria.

“I would like to speak with Leon about our duel this morning. I trust you don’t object?” she asked, though her ice-cold tone brokored no room for objection. She didn’t even wait for Gaius’ response before she turned away from him.

It took a moment for him to process what had just happened, but when he did all he could say was, “O-Of course, my lady.” He staggered back to his table without another word.

“I’m terribly sorry for dragging you into this, but I couldn’t stand the thought of listening to him for the entire two and a half hours. I honestly didn’t think he’d pick this class too...” Valeria said to Leon with a slightly apologetic look.

This was the first time Leon heard her speak so much. Her voice was as smooth and calm as a gentle river, and he found he couldn’t work up any anger toward her at all. Only when he recalled her name did he raise his guard back up. However, when he glanced at the back of Gaius’ now-seething head, he found that he couldn’t blame Valeria for wanting to get away from him at all costs.

He silently nodded to her, and the two turned to their spell papers. They worked in pleasant silence for the rest of the class.

Chapter 70: Additional Instruction

The first class was over two and half hours after it had begun.

Leon and Valeria had spent the entire class working quietly on their runes. They knew the rune was correctly drawn when they could channel their magic into it and create a magical effect. The spell paper they were using was very cheap, so the effects wouldn’t be particularly dramatic. An air rune might create a slight gust of wind just powerful enough to move a few stray hairs, or a fire rune might cause the edges of the paper to smolder a little.

Ultimately, these runes were useless in a practical sense, but they weren’t meant to be used. The students were using this time to work on the runic equivalent of hand-writing. This entire next week would be devoted to letting the students build up the muscle memory they needed to write these basic runes quickly and correctly, so they wouldn’t need to spend hours working on a single enchantment.

Leon had a little experience in this regard. He had learned how to draw a few enchantments from the books Artorias had made him read. But, in the end, he was only memorizing the shapes and patterns of

specific enchantments so he could replicate them later. This was no different to an illiterate person memorizing the word 'fire' because they knew it meant fire but having no idea what the individual letters meant.

The art of enchantment was often referred to as 'The Language of Magic' because of this characteristic. In essence, this class had the trainees start the same way a young child learns to read and write: by studying individual letters first.

But while Leon and Valeria were peacefully working, Gaius was stewing in anger so much that he hardly lifted his quill to write anything until the instructor began walking around the room to inspect the trainees an hour after the class had begun. When the instructor saw that Gaius had only written half a dozen runes whereas the other trainees had written almost fifty, he only spared Gaius a single derisive look before shaking his head in disappointment and moving on.

This dismissiveness from the instructor drove Gaius to new heights of rage. He could barely sit still in his chair and he snapped his quill in half from clenching his hand. It took every ounce of patience he possessed not to immediately challenge Leon to a duel.

'This was supposed to be my time to shine, to match my older brothers! If it wasn't for that contemptible rat I wouldn't have been repeatedly humiliated! He's made a fool of me! I'm sure that barbarian bastard is laughing at me right now! Laughing at me in front of Valeria! I'm going to kill him. I'm going to tear him limb from wretched limb.'

Gaius was so caught up in his anger that he didn't even notice that Leon and Valeria weren't even speaking to each other, despite Valeria's excuse for sitting with him.

When the class was over, all the used spell paper was thrown away and the trainees left to go to their next class.

As Leon made his way out of the room, he and Valeria made eye contact. They didn't say a word to each other, but they gave each other a respectful nod.

When Leon had walked part way to his next chosen class, he felt an intense burst of killing intent. His hand immediately found its way to his sword and he spun around to see who was threatening him. What he saw was a livid Gaius scowling at him from across the hall, emitting a killing intent that surpassed anything the noble had previously shown.

Leon slowly removed his hand from his sword as Gaius walked away.

[As much as it entertains me to infuriate *that one*, you ought to keep an eye on him. He'll be trouble, no doubt about it,] said Xaphan.

[I'm sure he will be. But, given the combat skill he's demonstrated so far—or the lack thereof, more accurately—I'm not too worried. Let him be angry,] responded Leon with a dismissive tone, though he didn't turn around and continue walking until he lost sight of Gaius.

Xaphan didn't respond and Leon moved to his next class in silence.

The other elective he had chosen apart from 'Basics of Enchantment' was 'The Classics of the Bull Kingdom'. Leon had been tempted to take a few other courses, but the factor that finally pushed him for

this literature course was its description that led Leon to think it was a class about quietly reading old books.

Leon was absolutely correct in this assumption. What made it even better was that no one who would bother Leon took the course at the same time. It was two and half hours of very quiet reading in comfortable armchairs and Leon relished every silent moment.

After this class finished up, the units gathered in the central plaza between the six class buildings. It was time for dinner, so the Senior Instructors led them on another run back to the dining hall. After an uneventful meal, the units returned to their respective towers.

"Tomorrow will be the same deal as this morning! We'll go to the training field first thing, so be down here at seven a.m. sharp! The schedule for the next few weeks will be largely the same! Everyone understand?!" Once he got at least a nod of acknowledgment from everyone, he turned around to leave. But then, just as he was about to reach for the first set of doors, he turned back around.

"Ah, right! Theoderic! Get over here!" The Senior Instructor's voice boomed throughout the entire tower and the trainee in question froze in terror for a moment before sheepishly stepping forward. The Senior Instructor was about to drag the young trainee outside when a thoughtful look appeared on his face. His silence felt extremely oppressive to the young man, but Theoderic didn't have to suffer under it for very long before the Senior Instructor opened his mouth to shout again.

"Castor! You get over here too!"

The third-tier trainee was halfway up the first set of stairs when he stopped in confusion. Most instructors didn't bother the nobles unless they were noble themselves, so Castor was very surprised at the Senior Instructor calling him out. He calmly walked over after recovering himself.

"Sir?" was all he asked.

"You are the leader of the Snow Lions, are you not?" asked the Senior Instructor.

One of Castor's eyebrows rose to give the Senior Instructor a quizzical look before he answered, "Yes, Sir."

"Good. That makes Theoderic *your* guy. Thus, I will leave you to carry out his punishment. Two hundred laps around the tower with a seventy-pound log. Get to it."

Castor stared at the Senior Instructor in such disbelief that he didn't even move.

"You're training to be a knight, aren't you?! Act like one!"

The Senior Instructor's sharp reprimand brought Castor back to reality and the noble looked over at Theoderic in resignation.

"Might as well get this over with, then. Let's go... Theoderic, was it?"

"... um... Ah! Yes!" Theoderic was so surprised that the noble had actually remembered his name that he stared at Castor with just as much disbelief as Castor had shown a moment before.

“Well then get moving!” shouted Castor. Theoderic ran outside while Castor made a quick gesture at the five second-tier nobles waiting on the stairs. It was obvious to the watching Leon that these trainees were probably related to people who serve Castor’s family because they immediately followed Castor and Theoderic outside.

The Senior Instructor took one last look around before he left as well, accompanied by the other two instructors.

Leon was just about to head for the stairs when Henry called out to him.

“Hey, Leon!”

When Leon turned around, Henry and Alain were staring at him with great expectation.

“You’re going to teach us some of those moves you taught Charles, right?” asked Alain.

“You did say you would this morning...” added Henry.

“I did, didn’t I...” muttered Leon. He glanced at the two young men, then over at Charles who was watching and stifling his laughter at Leon’s obvious discomfort not too far away. “Fine. But first, show me what you were taught this morning.”

“Alright, but we weren’t taught much...” said Alain.

After about five minutes, Leon had a fairly good grasp of what they had gained from their first lesson in Basic Combat. The knights had made practice a single stabbing attack hundreds of times and little else. Leon understood the emphasis on the stab, though. His own training sword was about the same length as his personal sword, which was longer than the one-handed arming swords the first-tier trainees had been given, but shorter than a large two-handed sword. The hilts of both of his weapons were long enough to use with two hands, though at the third-tier Leon was more than strong enough to use them with only one hand very comfortably.

Given what Leon knew about Legion fighting tactics, this emphasis wasn’t a surprise. Most of the rank-and-file soldiers would fight in a tight formation with large shields which were often paired with shorter swords that were designed for very close-range fighting. It made a lot of sense to him that stabbing attacks would be the bread and butter of the heavy infantry that made up most of the Legions.

But Leon wasn’t too fond of that style of combat. Everyone here was training to become knights. They would be assigned to leadership roles suited for a far more open style of fighting at slightly longer ranges rather than filling spots within large shield formations.

‘This is only Basic Combat. Maybe they’ll be taught better fighting styles later...’ thought Leon.

“Ok, I think we can start with some footwork,” he said out loud.

“Footwork? Not actual fighting moves?” asked Alain in disappointment.

“... Take a swing at me,” said Leon.

“Huh?”

“You have that sword in your hand, use it to try and hit me.”

“... But...” Alain clearly didn’t want to do so. Leon was a third-tier mage, so there was little chance he’d actually hit him anyway.

“Never mind, then. Try and hit Charles instead,” said Leon after thinking a little about why Alain was hesitating.

“What was that?” asked Charles, who had been starting his own practice session.

Alain glanced over at Charles and gave him a wicked smile. Both had power that was about on par with the other, but the tall and muscular Alain was clearly far more physically powerful than the shorter and much skinnier Charles. Alain immediately struck out toward Charles using the very stabbing move they had been taught that morning.

To the shock of everyone but Leon, Charles dodged the strike with ease. He seemed to vanish from in front of Alain and reappear to his side in the blink of an eye, completely unscathed. Alain swung his sword again, abandoning any pretense of skill or instruction. Again, his sword tasted nothing but air as Charles almost effortlessly dodged his slow and uncoordinated swing.

“You’re putting too much strength into the blow without the technique needed to take advantage of it. This makes you slow. Charles can easily dodge that with the basic skills I taught him,” Leon explained to a slightly frustrated Alain. “A week or two of practicing your footwork and you’ll be able to do the same thing.”

Alain and Henry nodded at him enthusiastically. Charles chuckled a bit before returning to his own practice. His little demonstration kept a proud smile on his face for the rest of the day.

For the next twenty minutes, Leon slowly demonstrated a stepping method that Artorias had taught him when he became a first-tier mage. This was the same technique that he had taught Charles several weeks earlier. It was essentially just stepping to the side and pivoting around on that foot.

Artorias had also taught Leon how to properly channel his magic to maximize speed, but Leon didn’t bring it up. He thought it was best to let Henry and Alain learn the normal version first, just like how he taught Charles. In fact, Leon hadn’t even given Charles the more advanced technique yet!

“This... actually isn’t so hard...” said Alain in a surprised tone.

“It isn’t hard because you’re not trying to use it in battle. You need to build muscle memory, first. Train like this for an hour or two every day for the next week, then we can have you show me how easy you think it is...” responded Leon with a slightly sadistic smile.

Leon sat down in a nearby chair to concentrate on his own training. As a third-tier mage, there was little need for him to train his muscles unless he needed to learn a new technique or fighting style. Thus, his training mostly revolved around filling his body with magic power to come closer to ascending to the fourth-tier.

Several of the other first-tier Snow Lions watched them train. They were quite curious as to what Leon was showing the other three, but given his status, none of them felt comfortable approaching the group to watch closer. Despite it having been made very clear from where Leon sat during meals and the antipathy shown to him by Gaius and Tiberias that he wasn’t one of those high nobles, the lower-tiered trainees couldn’t help but group him with them.

“Hey Leon, I’ve got a question,” said Henry after a little hesitation.

Leon waited a moment for Henry to continue before he realized that Henry was waiting on him to say it was Ok. He gave a slight nod.

“You’re from the Northern Vales, right? Why did you come all the way here?”

“Those are two questions, guy,” muttered Alain only just loud enough for the other three to hear.

Leon took a moment to think before answering. “I just wanted to be a knight. Isn’t that enough?”

“Don’t get me wrong, it certainly is, it’s just people from the Northern Vales don’t come south very often.”

“Valemen come south plenty. Usually on trading missions, or for the occasional raid in the case of the vales in the west. They just don’t stay. Can be very hard to get through the Frozen Mountains. Makes moving entire families nearly impossible.”

“But don’t you have people you want to see again back home?”

Leon frowned a little and quietly said, “No...”

Henry easily picked up on the fact that he had started getting into some things Leon didn’t want to talk about, so he decided to switch gears.

“Well, just wanting to be a knight is as good a reason as any. Hell, it’s a better reason than Alain’s got.” Henry said in a playful tone. Alain’s face went red with embarrassment.

“Oh? Why are you two here then?” asked Charles curiously, much to Henry’s delight.

“Well, my buddy here is quite the ladies’ man. Too much of one, in fact. He got involved with three girls back home and ended up getting all three pregnant!”

Charles immediately turned to Alain with a boggle-eyed expression. Even Leon took on a subdued surprised look for several seconds.

“Really?!” asked Charles incredulously.

“... Yes...” confirmed Alain. “But I love all of them! And they’re going to be the mothers of my children! I’m going to do right by them, but I can’t get married to all three unless I become noble! I have to become a knight!”

“And they’re Ok with this?!” asked Charles with increasingly mounting disbelief.

“Well, yes,” replied Alain.

“Our village is rather poor,” added Henry. “We only became first-tier mages by a happy accident when we found a small pond in the nearby forest that had a slightly denser concentration of magic than everywhere else in the village. By hanging out there, we ended up becoming mages completely without intending to! And when this guy knocked up those girls, signing up at the Knight Academy just seemed like the natural thing to do.”

“But what about you?” asked Leon.

“Well I couldn’t let my best friend join the Knight Academy alone, could I?”

Charles just lightly grunted while still staring in amazement at Alain, who pretended to double down on his training to hide his embarrassment.

“Hey Charles, your turn. Why’d you come here?” asked Henry.

“Well...” said Charles as he turned away from Alain. “I met Leon not too long ago. He was on his way to the Knight Academy, and since I was a first-tier mage, I decided to accompany him.”

“It was a spur of the moment decision? Really?!”

“I... also hadn’t made much of myself in Teira... to put it mildly. The way I saw it, I could go back home and work in my parents’ mine or sign up for the Legion. Since I potentially qualified to be a knight, I figured I might as well see if I could become one.”

“Fair enough.”

The four continued to talk while they trained for another hour or so. They swapped stories about their hometowns and about the girls they had chased. Leon, for the most part, just listened, but he occasionally told them a few things about Vale Town.

Eventually, Leon felt that he had enough of being around people and was getting desperate for solitude, so he left for his bedroom. The others didn’t last much longer than he did before retiring to their own room to meditate and perform breathing exercises for a while.