

Storm King 71

Chapter 71: Brewing Trouble

On the day that classes started for Leon and the other trainees, a man entered the capital on a small private yacht. This man—Nicomedes was his name—had extremely eye-catching golden hair and features that strongly resembled Gaius'. He was dressed in the dark green uniform of an officer in the Royal Legions. The golden insignia that decorated his shoulder indicated that he was a Tribune, a sufficient rank to command a battalion of one thousand soldiers and at least a fifth-tier mage.

The crew of his yacht skillfully brought it into port. The man walked off the yacht with all the grace and elegance that a noble of his rank and power possessed. Several of his subordinates and secretaries were waiting for him with a superbly enchanted carriage. When the Tribune joined them, they all entered the carriage and set off for the Knight Academy.

It took the carriage an hour to arrive at the Academy, during which time the men in the carriage brought the Nicomedes up to speed on the work that had piled up during his absence.

Upon arriving at the Knight Academy, the Tribune's men hurried towards his office while the Tribune himself wasted no time making his way to the office of the Legate. He was one of the Legate's direct subordinates, so it was common courtesy for him to greet his boss on his return to the Academy.

The Legate's office was surprisingly small, though it was still the largest office in the main administration building. There was a large desk of dark wood, expensive red carpets, and several chairs around a fireplace.

The Tribune bowed politely to the Legate when the secretary outside showed him in. The Legate gave him a respectful nod in return and waved him over to take a seat in front of the desk. They made some small talk about a policy the Legate was considering having removed, one where the Senior Instructors were allowed to completely revoke all privileges of a unit if they were to lose their banner.

The two spoke for a few minutes without the Legate really coming to a conclusion and Nicomedes excused himself. It was only some small talk anyway, and the Legate didn't actually want his opinion; he simply wanted pay a little respect to a fellow nobleman by asking his opinion.

As he was exiting the Legate's office, Nicomedes ran into another of the Legate's subordinates, a man named Sabinus. He was a Tribune as well and greeted the Nicomedes on his way out.

"Hey there, Nico! Good to see you back in the capital!"

"Sabinus! It warms my heart to run into a friend so quickly upon my arrival." The two friends clasped hands and gave each other a brief hug.

"How was the wedding? It must have been a sight to see; I heard even the Second Prince showed up for the ceremony!"

"His Highness did indeed grace my family with his presence. My father had sent him an invitation months ago, but we never expected he would actually attend!"

"Congratulations! And how is your elder brother dealing with the trials of marriage?"

“About as well as any other man who marries a young and beautiful woman! He and my new sister-in-law have been nearly inseparable these past couple weeks. My father even had to scold them for not leaving the bedroom long enough for the maids to properly clean up!”

“Ha! Sounds like everything went as well as it could have!”

“Yes, it was a splendid time. Unfortunately, my younger brother couldn’t attend as he was busy enrolling in this very Academy!”

Nicomedes’ face had lit up as he spoke about his family, but Sabinus’ face fell a little when Nicomedes brought up his younger brother. Nicomedes noticed and gave his friend a quizzical look.

“It sounds like your elder brother’s wedding was an incredible event. I’m afraid Gaius’ brief time here hasn’t been so stellar, though...” Sabinus quickly explained how badly Gaius had lost to Leon during the combat test, as well as the reports Sabinus had received from the Deathbringers’ Senior Instructor about Gaius’ recent behavior. This included his loss to Alcander that morning and his seeming fixation on his extreme and obvious loathing of Leon which was isolating him from his third-tier peers.

Nicomedes’ mood fell with every word. By the time Sabinus stopped talking, he had grown quite furious.

“Thank you for telling me all of this, my friend. This was a good chat, but we really should get to work.”

“Of course, I understand.” Sabinus smiled as Nicomedes turned around and walked away.

A couple minutes later, Nicomedes arrived at his own small office. It wasn’t lavishly decorated, but it was comfortable enough. It was also located in one of the most private areas of the administration building.

Nicomedes caught the attention of one of his secretaries and immediately said, “Send a message to my brother, I would like to see him when his classes are over.” The secretary nodded. Nicomedes was about to enter his office when he frowned and turned back around to address the secretary again. “And make sure he hurries. I’m... anxious to see my brother after so long.”

The Tribune tried to control his tone, but the secretary was still able to pick up on Nicomedes’ concealed fury.

“Yes, Sir!” he said.

Nicomedes nodded and entered his office. As soon as the door closed and no one could see him, his face contorted into an ugly snarl.

‘That damned moron! He’s tarnishing the image of our family!’ he thought.

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The Deathbringers were brought back to their own tower after dinner. Their Senior Instructor gave them orders that were almost identical to those given by the Snow Lion’s Senior Instructor. Once he was done, he turned to leave. But, just as he reached out his hand to push open the door, the door opened and Nicomedes’ secretary entered.

The secretary whispered a few words to the Senior Instructor who turned back to his unit and yelled, "Gaius Tullius! Get over here!"

Gaius glanced over at them from the foot of the stairs and walked over a moment later. The secretary told him about Nicomedes' summons and Gaius smiled. The two left the tower at a brisk jog and arrived at the main administration building ten minutes later.

Gaius was led through the halls until they reached a plain dark wood door labelled 'Nicomedes Philocrates Tullius'. The secretary knocked and the two entered the office.

The first thing Gaius noticed was the lack of joy on Nicomedes' face at their reunion. In fact, his older brother looked almost furious to see him. Gaius' smile quickly disappeared.

Nicomedes nodded to the secretary, who slightly bowed and exited the office.

"Brother! It's good to see you after these long weeks! How was our eldest bro-"

"Shut up, Gaius." Nicomedes glared at his younger brother and Gaius shut his mouth instantly. Silence followed for several excruciatingly long minutes as Nicomedes glowered at Gaius.

Gaius almost jumped from the mounting anxiety when his older brother finally broke the silence.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, little brother?"

"... I don't quite..." Gaius narrowed his eyes in confusion at Nicomedes' ambiguous question.

"By the time he was your age, Gratian had already hunted and killed both a third-tier griffon and a fourth-tier manticore. Father heaped praise upon him and rewarded him with a barony on the Gallian river.

"I didn't quite match up to our glorious elder brother, but I still graduated from this prestigious institution with great honors. I went on to rise to the rank of Tribune in less than two decades!

"When Father allowed you to enroll here, he was worried you were only doing so to pursue that daughter of Lord Justin. You allayed his fears by insisting you would eclipse both me and Gratian during your time in the Legion."

Gaius didn't know why his brother was bringing all of this up, but he had started to sweat. Nicomedes' tone was growing angrier with every word.

"So, answer me Gaius, why did I hear a story about how you were beaten into unconsciousness in only three hits during the combat test?! By a barbarian, no less?! And why did you go on to humiliate yourself further by defecating in front of all the other high nobles in your class *and the FUCKING LEGATE HIMSELF?!"*

Gaius was stunned speechless. He had no answers for Nicomedes, or at least, none his brother would accept. He frantically searched for an excuse, but a humiliation like the one he suffered at Leon's hands couldn't be dismissed with only a few words.

"I... I-"

"You *what?* What about *you?*"

Gaius frantically scoured his brain for anything to say, but Nicomedes wasn't going to let up.

"Do you have *any idea* how hard I worked to secure this position? *ANY IDEA?*" asked Nicomedes. Gaius shook his head. He honestly had no idea what Nicomedes had to do to get stationed here, or even why he would want this post. After all, there was no practical chance he would ever see combat in this position, so there wasn't much room for advancement through military achievements.

"You don't even know how important my job is, do you?" Again, Gaius shook his head. "In my role here, I arrange for all the food to be delivered to the dining hall, all the class supplies to be taken to the appropriate classrooms, and make sure the instructors have everything they need to make knights out of those first-tier commoners. I'm basically the logistics officer for the entire Academy."

Gaius frowned. This was hardly a position that had much glory or power that he could see. He knew that he would certainly never fight for his brother's job. And Nicomedes saw Gaius' obvious disdain for his work.

"*Sigh*. Think about what it means to be a logistics officer, little brother, before you go judging the position. My day job is just set dressing, busy work that I have to do before I get to do what is my most important job, which is to assign the trainees their squireships upon completion of their training cycle."

Nicomedes let that sink in for Gaius. It took a moment, but when he realized the implications of Nicomedes' position, Gaius' eyes widened almost as far as they could go.

The Academy will always send out their squires for two years to be trained on the job by their assigned knights. After putting in so much time to train these young squires, their assigned knights will usually take them into their service after graduation.

Over ninety percent of all the fifth-tier or stronger mages in the Legions were trained at the Knight Academy. This is no guarantee that a Knight Academy graduate will rise so far, but there is usually fierce competition over the best squires because they will almost universally stay with their assigned knight long after they themselves have been knighted.

Gaius realized that because Nicomedes controlled where these squires go, it gave him a large amount of influence over both the squires and the knights they will be sent to study under. Everyone wants good teachers and subordinates, after all.

"His Highness Julius Octavius Taurus attended Gratian's wedding. The future king himself showed his support for our family!" Nicomedes glared at Gaius again before continuing. "He and I spoke for a while about the Academy. He indicated to me that not only was he looking for a good squire, but both the Sapphire and Earthshaker Paladins were as well!"

Gaius' expression turned ravenously hungry. If he could become a squire to the future king or one of the finest warriors in the entire kingdom, then he had little doubt he'd gain great power and prestige. Enough, perhaps, for him to formally ask Lord Justin for Valeria's hand in marriage!

Nicomedes noticed Gaius' look and scowled. "I *was* considering sending you to one of them, but that was before I heard about your abysmal performance!" Gaius' face immediately fell again. "You said you'd excel here. Instead, you have been beaten down by some uncultured and unwashed barbarian!"

You're lucky that word of this hasn't spread very far. But it will, and when it does, you will be a laughingstock of the entire noble class!"

Gaius felt his face burn in shame and his stared at the floor.

"You are going to need to fix this, and soon! Crush that mongrel and regain your honor, then actually do what you told Father you'd do, and *excel*. *Maybe* if you lead your unit to victory during the ending Field Training Exercise, I'll be able to send you somewhere respectable. Understand?"

Nicomedes now looked at Gaius with extreme seriousness. Gaius turned his eyes back to his brother and said, "I understand. I won't fail like this again."

"Good. Now get back to your unit and train. This isn't Lentia, so don't go throwing your weight around as if it were. Spend your time training so you don't further embarrass the family."

Nicomedes' final words cut very deeply into Gaius. He left his older brother's office shaking with shame and rage. His hatred of Leon reached new heights that he never thought possible. He despised that barbarian as much as a man could despise anything.

He had already decided to obliterate Leon as completely as possible ever since the wretch had humiliated him, but his desire had grown even stronger after that afternoon, when Valeria had willingly chosen to sit by him instead of Gaius. And now, he felt a creeping desperation brought on by Nicomedes.

Gaius clenched his fists and teeth. He silently vowed to never stop until he had done everything possible to stomp Leon down into the dirt so completely that the barbarian would never rise again.

Chapter 72: Her Challenge

Leon's schedule the next morning was largely the same as the day before. He spent fifteen minutes simply enjoying how comfortable the bed was before he got up. Then, he spent another twenty minutes in the bathroom washing up and getting ready. He then meditated for an additional half hour, so he could mentally prepare himself to be around people all day.

Over the past couple months, Leon had found that it was getting easier to talk to people, but his general social unease was still strong. He really needed that half hour of mental preparation before venturing back out among the rest of the trainees.

When Leon was ready, he made his way downstairs. Charles, Alain, and Henry were chatting with a few other trainees which made Leon hesitate to join them, but Henry noticed him and waved him over. The group's conversation died down a little when Leon grabbed a seat as the other trainees weren't very comfortable around a third-tier mage, but the silence suited him just fine.

The Senior Instructor arrived only a few minutes later. When the entire unit had assembled, they began their three-mile run to the training field. Just like the day before, a light breakfast was waiting for them when they arrived.

The Senior Instructor gave the trainees a few minutes to eat, then separated them again, with Leon, Castor, and Alphonsus accompanying the Senior Instructor back to the third-tier trainee's private training area.

Unlike the day before, they weren't the first to show up; the Steel Century had beaten them there. Marcus and Alcander nodded in greeting to the three Snow Lions, as did the other two third-tier trainees in their unit. Leon, Alphonsus, and Castor all nodded back, though Leon's response was very subdued.

While they were waiting for the other units, Alcander walked over to Leon.

"Hey there! Leon, wasn't it?" he asked.

Leon had been meditating in a kneeling posture to pass the time. He opened his eyes and shot Alcander a curious and slightly reproachful look, but the noble ignored them and kept speaking anyway.

"You know, I admire your combat abilities. If it isn't too much trouble, I was hoping to spar with you today."

Leon thought about Alcander's request for a moment. The noble was an admirable warrior in Leon's eyes. In fact, there was a large part of Leon that wanted to test himself against Alcander, and it was this part of him that brought a slight smile to his lips.

"That... might be fun..." he said quietly.

"Ha ha! Wonderful! I look forward to crossing blades with you!" Alcander gave Leon a respectful head nod then started walking back over to the other trainees in his unit. He only took a few steps before he quickly turned back around and said, "My name is Alcander, by the way. I should've introduced myself before, but I was just so eager to make the challenge!"

Alcander beamed down at Leon. Leon gave a barely audible chuckle at the noble's earnestness. He nodded his head to Alcander, who smiled back.

Over the next ten minutes, the other eight units came along. Leon knew exactly when the Deathbringers arrived because he felt the killing intent from Gaius' hateful stare boring a hole in his back. Surprisingly, it felt a little lessened to Leon than it did the day before.

Tiberias completely ignored Leon when he and the Black Vipers arrived. He still hated Leon almost as much as Gaius did, but he was far more reserved about it.

When all thirty-six third-tier trainees had made their way there, the same Senior Instructor as before silenced the trainees and opened the door for any challenges to be made. He didn't say anything more and stepped aside.

Alcander rushed forward, intent on starting his duel with Leon. Gaius moved forward as well, with the exact same purpose. However, someone beat them both to it. Valeria had elegantly and stoically stepped forward and the entire group went silent.

Her sparkling blue eyes slowly surveyed the other trainees while Alcander and Gaius respectfully stepped back so she could make her challenge. Gaius looked a little bashful when Valeria's eyes found his own, but his heart plummeted when she moved on a moment later. His reaction wasn't unique; most of the male trainees felt inadequate and awkward under her indomitable gaze.

Slowly, she turned her eyes to the still-kneeling Leon, and to the surprise of everyone, she pointed directly at him and unleashed a tiny amount of killing intent. This wasn't even enough to alter Leon's

heart rate, but he still clearly felt it and opened his eyes. He smiled, pushed himself to his feet, and took a position opposite Valeria in front of the stunned trainees.

No one could believe that a woman as dispassionate and detached as Valeria would ever take the initiative to challenge anyone else. A few trainees looked a little jealous, and Gaius in particular looked absolutely livid. He hurriedly controlled himself, though, as he remembered that his older brother—and by proxy, his entire family—would now be watching his performance with much greater scrutiny.

Leon calmly drew his sword, while Valeria took out her own weapon. Instead of the spear she wielded previously, her weapon this time was a shorter polearm, only about five feet long and with a relatively long curved blade at the end. Leon's smile grew a little wider when she brandished the weapon in his direction. Her change in armament clearly showed what she had taken away from their duel the day before.

The Senior Instructor shouted for the duel to begin.

Valeria darted forward, opening with a wide slash. Leon nimbly dodged, but Valeria wasn't going to give any room to counter-attack. She followed through with another slash. Leon dodged again, then lunged forward with a swift stab. Valeria rapidly spun her short glaive and deflected Leon's sword upward, then countered with another slash at Leon's chest.

Leon threw himself back, narrowly avoiding the blade of Valeria's weapon. His shirt, however, wasn't so lucky. The blade wasn't so sharp that it would cut through his shirt, but it did get caught and tore a large hole in the side.

Valeria didn't stop. She kept pushing forward, her killing intent soaring all the while. Leon's own killing intent rose to match and then exceed hers, but it wasn't enough to slow her down in the slightest.

Leon pushed back, countering whenever he could, but this was when Valeria's choice to change weapons began to shine. The biggest problem she had in their previous duel was that Leon had easily gotten into close enough range to render her spear nearly ineffective. It had only been her stellar footwork that kept her from a quick defeat.

Valeria switching out her spear for a shorter weapon allowed her to remain effective even at the extremely close range that Leon preferred to fight in. The curved blade of her glaive rather than the straight spearhead also allowed her to use more than just stabbing attacks.

The two of them fought extremely aggressively, matching each other nearly blow-for-blow. The watching trainees and instructors were captivated at the combat skill the two were putting on display. Marcus in particular watched in fascination.

Leon feigned an overhead strike, then attacked her legs when her glaive went up to block. Just as his blade was about to slash her Achilles tendon, however, the haft of her glaive appeared just in time to block the sword. Valeria followed up with an extremely fast and unexpected kick, which Leon had to drop to the ground and roll away to dodge.

Leon sprang back to his feet just in time to contort his body to dodge a slash. Leon responded with a blistering flurry of strikes aimed at her upper body, but she managed to block every one.

Valeria felt herself losing the initiative under Leon's relentless attacks, so she blocked another attack and violently pushed herself into Leon. This forced Leon to push back or he'd lose his footing. Valeria slowly pushed the blade of her glaive toward Leon's face, and Leon pushed back just as hard.

But that wasn't the only thing Leon did; he also subtly shifted his weight so that he could dodge and counter after pulling away from this stalemate.

Valeria's keen eyes noticed his movements. In the moments before Leon disengaged, she made her move. Pushing her blade had been a feint. Instead of over-committing there, she suddenly pulled her glaive away, surprising Leon and almost leaving him unbalanced. In an instant, she spun around and caught the back of his knee with the opposite end of her glaive and knocked him off his feet. Before Leon had a chance to recover, Valeria slammed her blade into the dirt, almost close enough to his face to give him a shave.

The two duelists stared each other down just like the day prior, but this time their positions had been reversed. It was clear from Valeria's sober expression and tremendously elevated killing intent that she was perfectly willing to strike a more decisive blow.

But she didn't, and Leon felt like he knew why. She had surrendered in their previous fight and was now expecting the same from him.

He reluctantly let go of the sword in his hand and, to the surprise of everyone watching, said, "I yield."

The briefest hint of a smile appeared on Valeria's face as she retracted her glaive. This look was mirrored in Leon when he pushed himself back to his feet. The two slowly walked back to the group and sat down to meditate. This duel had lasted for five minutes and wiped out most of their mana reserves, so they needed a few minutes to rest. Their soul realms held enough magic power for them to fight if they absolutely had to, but it would certainly not be at one hundred percent.

To many of the duel's observers, it was obvious that they had each given their all in the fight. It was exceptionally rare to see such a display where two combatants push themselves to the absolute limits of their abilities because it would always vastly increase their recovery times. It was even more unheard-of to see it in battle, as it could leave the winner in an extremely unfavorable position even if they kill their enemy. Pacing during long engagements was very important.

Of course, this typically only applied to the stronger mages. The weaker rank-and-file soldiers would never have the luxury of not giving a life and death battle everything they had.

After the duel, many of the nobles found themselves looking at Leon in a new light. Even if he was a barbarian, he was still very strong and skilled with a blade, and that strength demanded respect.

Gaius and Tiberias were not counted among these nobles, however. Tiberias didn't care how strong Leon appeared to be, he still despised this barbarian for being so intimate with Elise. Gaius still despised Leon with all his being, but after the haranguing he had received from Nicomedes, he restrained himself from furiously challenging Leon.

The duels continued, but Leon and Valeria didn't take part in any more. Their fight had been spectacular enough to earn them their rest. Not even Alcander pressed the challenge he made before the duels had begun.

The rest of the day went about as it had the day before. After the Basic Combat class was lunch. After the trainees ate, it was on to afternoon classes. The first-tier trainees went to Magical Theory, while Leon made his way to the enchanting room.

He was surprised to see that Valeria was sitting in the same place as the day before, in the very back. Gaius had chosen to sit at the table next to hers, but she didn't mind so long as he was quiet.

Gaius glared at Leon as he walked over and took his seat next to Valeria, but he didn't say a word. The three silently practiced writing the seven elemental runes over the next few hours.

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That night, when the Deathbringers had returned to their tower, Gaius let loose with his fury. He hurled a few pieces of furniture across the third-tier common room while screaming, "THAT FILTHY SAVAGE! WHO DOES THAT PILE OF PIGSHIT THINK HE IS?!" and other obscenities to that same effect.

The other two third-tier trainees in his unit paled a little and retreated to their own rooms; they had no idea what had set him off and they wanted no part in this display.

'That filthy brute dared to touch her! My goddess, my future wife! HE TOUCHED HER WITH HIS BARBARIAN HANDS!'

During the enchanting class, Leon and Valeria had very briefly brushed shoulders. It was an act so minor that not even the extraordinarily misanthropic Leon had paid it much mind. But Gaius had noticed, and though he bottled it up at the time, this outburst was the result.

For a moment, sanity seemed to find Gaius as his hand froze while reaching for a magic lamp to throw at the wall. He straightened himself up and, as calmly as he could, made his way downstairs to the second-tier common room. Something had occurred to him and he needed to speak with his second-tier followers.

Gaius immediately drew attention when he came down the stairs. His clothes were a little disheveled from the tantrum he had just thrown, but his demeanor was oddly quiet and serene. It was almost as if all the hatred and rage that had filled him for the past week and a half had just melted away.

He gathered his half-dozen followers in a corner of the common room and spoke for a few minutes. He told them about the idea that had just occurred to him. The circumstances of the combat test hadn't leaked out, but they all knew that he passionately detested Leon, so it was no surprise that what he told them to do was related to this upstart barbarian.

Gaius told them to target and harass the commoners who always sat with Leon during meals. None of his second-tier followers would directly antagonize Leon for him, but the same couldn't be said about the first-tier commoners that surrounded him.

Gaius' enmity with Leon now ran too deep. The noble wouldn't be content by simply beating Leon in a duel anymore. Had the source of his hatred only been his humiliation, then he would never order something like this, but now Leon seemed to be getting closer to Valeria. That was something Gaius would not tolerate.

He left the second-tier common room and returned to the trashed third-tier common room. He ignored the mess he had made; it would be cleaned while the trainees were off at classes. Gaius maintained his composure until he closed and locked the door of his private room behind him. Then, a sinister smile broke out on his face.

'Get ready, wretch. This is only the beginning...'

Chapter 73: The Pool

The events of the first two days in the Academy set the precedent for the next few days. In the morning, Leon would wake early and meditate to mentally prepare himself for the day. Following that, he would meet up with his three 'friends' Charles, Henry, and Alain.

He wasn't quite sure if he should use the term 'friend', but he decided to go with it for now as he lacked a better word. He never had a friend before, after all, so this was all new to him.

The unit would run to the training field for their Basic Combat lesson when the Senior Instructor arrived. Breakfast would be waiting for them, as would several hours of practicing basic stabs and slashes.

Leon, Castor, and Alphonsus would split off to join the other third-tier trainees in their sparring.

After Valeria beat him on the second day, Leon challenged her again before anyone could move. She accepted with a slight smile, as they each had one win and one loss. Her own sense of pride wouldn't allow for such a stalemate.

Leon beat her on the third day. He adopted a slightly different form of House Raime's fighting style which incorporated the entire body, rather than relying solely on the sword. After several minutes of exchanging blows, Leon brought the blade down in an overhand swing, forcing Valeria to block. He then followed up with a shoulder check, knocking her to the ground and winning the duel.

On the fourth day, Valeria evened out the score again by focusing entirely on defense. She tanked Leon's attacks until he over-committed to a strike at her leg and she disarmed him with a blindingly quick swish of her glaive.

On the fifth day, they ended up with a tie. They fought for almost twenty straight minutes until both were almost completely out of magic power. They had exhausted their mana and their soul realms were nearly bereft of magic power to replenish their reserves. Despite this, they still showed every sign of continuing, but the supervising Senior Instructor had to force them to stop lest they run so low on power that they couldn't activate their weapons' enchantments and accidentally injure the other.

The other trainees witnessed the two fighting each other with such fervor that not even Alcander bothered trying to challenge Leon again. It was clear to all of them that neither intended to stop challenging each other.

What Leon found a little surprising during this time was the indifference that Gaius was now showing him. Starting on the third day, Gaius hardly so much as glanced in his direction and Leon didn't feel even the slightest ripple of killing intent emanate from him. The noble just ignored Leon as best as he could.

This would carry over into the afternoon classes, where Gaius would sit with several of the second-tier nobles, almost blatantly ignoring Leon and Valeria who continued to sit next to each other in the back. It

was no longer in complete silence, though, as they would give each other very terse greetings when the class began.

The class was still nothing but endlessly drawing and redrawing the seven elemental runes. The class instructor took to occasionally wandering around the class and pointing out the errors the trainees made.

By the end of class on the fifth day, Leon found that he could draw each rune perfectly more than ninety percent of the time.

From what he could tell, Valeria could draw them perfectly every time without exception, and with such natural grace that he couldn't help but marvel at her obvious skill.

Leon's second course of the day was simply quiet reading. Nothing of note happened during that time of the day.

Following dinner, the Snow Lions would return to their tower and Leon would provide a little instruction for his three comrades. They would practice what they learned throughout the day, though there wasn't any sparring like when Leon was instructing Charles before the enrollment test. When not watching them and giving some critique, Leon would concentrate on inundating his brain and organs with mana.

Leon did notice several other first-tier trainees watching them curiously during this time, but they didn't disturb the four, so he paid them little mind.

On the fifth day, things were a little different. The Academy gave them the weekends off and even provided a small weekly stipend of one hundred silvers to each first-tier trainee, five hundred to the second-tier trainees, and two thousand to the third-tier trainees.

Henry and Alain made plans to wander around a few of the merchant forums while Charles intended to visit Jeanne during his time off. The former two invited Leon to join them, but he declined. Over the past few months, he found himself craving some time alone, far away from anyone else. He planned to spend Saturday and Sunday exploring the forest.

When Saturday morning came around, the Senior Instructors took their units to breakfast at the dining hall, then brought them back to their towers.

The Snow Lion's Senior Instructor gave them a fifteen-minute speech about safety and personal conduct which could be summed up as 'Don't be a dick and be back here by dinnertime'. When he was done, the other two instructors handed out the stipends and the trainees were dismissed.

Henry and Alain left immediately while Charles only waited long enough to give Leon a quick nod before he made for Jeanne's inn.

Leon went back to his room to pack a satchel with a couple books and a map of the training grounds. He waited a few minutes for the other trainees to clear out, then left the tower.

The surrounding forest wasn't nearly as beautiful as the Forest of Black and White which, despite its name, was actually awash with a wide gradient of bright and vibrant colors. The forest Leon found himself in was mostly just the greens and browns that could be seen in just about every other forest, with only the occasional wild flower to break the monotony.

Despite this, Leon found the forest to be incredibly peaceful and relaxing. Unlike where he grew up, he didn't need to rely on Artorias to feel safe here. He didn't need to keep alert for tree sprites, the occasional streams he encountered weren't filled with river nymphs, and there was no danger of running into a sleeping ice wraith.

The environment still reminded him of his father and their home back north, though. Leon frowned for a little while before he managed to push it out of his mind.

He wandered around the forest for almost an hour before finding a place to relax. He had followed a small river upstream until he arrived at a huge rock wall. This was the border between the forest and the artificial mountains in the west of the training grounds. The river flowed from a waterfall that had carved a wide recess in the cliff and left a small pool at the bottom.

This recess at the bottom was quite a bit wider at the bottom than it was at the top; Leon guessed an earth mage must have carved this extra space out from the cliff.

As he explored this place, Leon felt a profound sense of seclusion and isolation. The cliff boxed the pool in on three sides and the forest obscured much of the fourth. After spending so much time around other people, a place like this was exactly what he wanted.

On the wall behind the waterfall, Leon found a small raised tablet inscribed with three runic circles. Out of curiosity, he activated one of them. Immediately, he felt the ambient magic in the area flow into the pool, and the water became as clear and pure as his bath back at the Snow Lion's tower.

Leon smiled in excitement as he activated the second runic circle. Again, he felt the magic in his surroundings flow into the pool, though he didn't see anything happen immediately. After a minute of slight confusion, he noticed that the pool had begun to steam; it had been turned into an artificial hot spring!

He hurriedly activated the last runic circle. Over the course of ten seconds, the roar of the waterfall died down. Nothing else about the waterfall changed, but the loud noise of the water falling off the cliff and hitting the pool had been silenced.

He put his satchel down and began taking off his clothes. He hesitated a little before removing his pants. He had always bathed outside when he lived in the Vales, but this time was a little different, and he couldn't help but be nervous that someone might come and see him. After a few moments, he decided not to remove his undergarments, then slid into the pool.

The water was hot, but not unbearably so. A mortal might have been a little uncomfortable by the temperature, but Leon enjoyed it immensely. He spent the next few minutes happily swimming around.

—

"Ooooooh, this is going to be sooo relaxing!" said Asiya. She and Valeria were walking along the base of a cliff while carrying a couple of small packs. They were following the directions that one of the knights serving Asiya's house had given them that was leading them directly to the pool that Leon had stumbled upon.

"I'm sure it will be, but why did you have to bring me along?" asked Valeria.

"I couldn't leave you all alone in that tower! You need to get out and see the sun! Besides, if anyone needs some time to relax, it's you. Those morning duels you have with... what was his name again?"

"Leon."

"Right! That guy! You two go at each other like you're out for blood! That has to be tiring!"

"... Well, I must admit that it has been thrilling. It's rare to find someone who can fight me on equal terms without being of the fourth or fifth-tier..." Valeria looked a little pensive as she said this, staring out into the forest but not actually looking at anything. Asiya didn't care to hear it, though, as her beautiful face scrunched up in mock anger.

"So training with me isn't thrilling?"

"It is!" Valeria said emphatically after realizing how insulting what she said could be.

"But not as much as that 'Leon' guy?"

Valeria frowned a bit before answering. "You two have very different fighting styles. His is almost animalistic, completely forgoing defense. I've never fought anyone like that before. It's very hard to attack him when he's constantly putting pressure on me."

"But you have beaten him twice..."

Valeria's frown turned into a smile of pride.

"Do you lllllike him?"

Valeria's face froze in shock at her friend's question and teasing expression. Asiya smiled mischievously at her. She knew Valeria was weak to this kind of question, even if she actually hated the person they were talking about.

"Ooooh? You do, don't you?"

"No!"

"That seems a little too emphatic... are you suuure?"

"I don't *like* him! Besides, I think Elise already has her eye on him."

"Right, she does, doesn't she..." For a moment, Asiya looked thoughtful, then she began looking around. "It should be around here somewhere. It's at the bottom of a waterfall, so we should be able to hear it."

"Hey, look at that!" Valeria pointed several hundred feet further on. The two women could see mist wafting out from the cliff.

"Is someone already there? I didn't think anyone would know about this place! Let's go see who it is!" Asiya darted out and made for the pool.

"No wai-" Valeria tried to stop her, but Asiya had already taken off. She sighed and ran after her friend.

The two women curiously peeked around the corner when they arrived at the recess in the cliff. Leon was no longer swimming, but had taken to reading some of his books by the edge of the pool. Asiya's

eyes widened in excitement when she saw that he was almost naked, but Valeria's face immediately went scarlet and she ducked back around the corner.

Asiya hardly noticed Valeria's reaction; she was far too busy checking out Leon's fit and muscular body. It was clear to her that the physical benefits of magic were not wasted on Leon. She was only jolted back to reality when Valeria pulled her back.

"What are you doing?!" Valeria had to hold herself back from shouting, but Asiya would've had to be deaf to miss her disapproving tone.

"I'm only taking a look. I've never seen a guy without clothes before. Besides, it's not like he's trying to hide, so why shouldn't I enjoy the view?" Asiya peeked back around the corner just in time to see Leon lean back, putting his taut chest and abs on display. Asiya's eyes nearly popped out of her head as she took in the sight.

Valeria pulled Asiya back again. "Stop that! You shouldn't be so crude!"

"Oh, come on, Val! Don't tell me you're not curious too? Don't you want to see what he's got? I mean, he's not the most handsome guy ever, but he's still pretty cute. And being a third-tier mage doesn't hurt, hehehe." Asiya gave Valeria a lecherous smile and went back to stealthily staring at Leon.

Valeria stared at Asiya in disbelief. She never expected her friend to be so obscene! But Valeria found her eyes drawn to the corner, just past which lay a fit third-tier mage practically putting himself on display. She tried to banish her lascivious thoughts, but the quick glance she already had at Leon was stuck in her mind.

Valeria quietly sighed and slowly joined Asiya in furtively staring at Leon. When Asiya saw what Valeria was doing, she giggled and pulled back a little, making some room for her friend. She gave Valeria a few seconds to get an eyeful before loudly whistling.

Valeria immediately jerked her head back and glared at a grinning Asiya. Leon had thought he'd misheard for a moment before looking in their direction, so he didn't see either one of them.

"You bitch," whispered Valeria to Asiya, who could barely hold in her laughter. "Come on, we're leaving." She grabbed Asiya's arm and almost dragged her away.

Leon, being on edge after hearing Asiya's whistle, heard the two of them leaving from the rustling of the leaves under their feet, but by the time he had hurriedly dressed himself and went out to see what was going on, they were long gone.

Chapter 74: A Battered Pride

That Saturday was a bright and beautiful day, perfect for exploring the city and seeing the sights. The weather in the capital was perfect and the forums, pools, and bathhouses were crowded with the city's occupants. The many parks, bars, and restaurants were just as packed.

Most of the third-tier trainees who had taken their time off to venture into the city didn't see any of this, though. A few of the nobles had estates in the capital, so that was where they spent their time, but Gaius and Tiberias—though possessing large estates—weren't among them. They and about twenty other third-tier trainees were relaxing in the lavish lounge on the first floor of the Heaven's Eye Tower.

There were a couple hundred other nobles, knights, and public officials who were in the lounge as well, so none of the trainees stood out.

Gaius and Tiberias were in a private booth in a slightly more secluded part of the lounge. When they had entered, Gaius had immediately drawn the curtain so they wouldn't be seen.

"Well that was dramatic," said Tiberias with a slightly amused smile. Gaius had invited him to speak here, otherwise he would probably be either trying to spend time with Elise or browsing the merchants' wares on the upper floors or at the Blasted Furnace.

"Well, I'd rather not draw too much attention right now. I saw both Alphonsus and Castor here," Gaius said as he took a seat opposite Tiberias.

"I suppose the reason you don't want them to see you is the same reason you asked me here? You're acting against the Snow Lions, aren't you?"

"Of course I am! Every second that goes by before I gain my revenge against that miserable barbarian, my prestige takes another hit! I'm going to crush him! I'm going to tear him limb from wretched limb!"

"Calm down there, buddy. No need to get so worked up here."

Gaius was still fuming, but Tiberias stuck his head out of the curtain and waved to an attendant. He spoke a few words to the alluring woman, then turned back to Gaius.

"We'll get some good food and drink, you'll calm down, and then we'll have a nice and *coherent* chat. Sound good?" Gaius slowly nodded in agreement.

They sat and chatted for a few minutes before the attendant returned with some potatoes, perfectly grilled steaks, and some crisp and colorful salad. After serving the two, she poured out some expensive red wine into crystal wine glasses and took her leave.

"Now, do you think you can speak about these matters without flying into a rage?" asked Tiberias after the two had taken several bites.

"Don't treat me like a fuckin' child," growled Gaius. Tiberias only rolled his eyes in response, which Gaius ignored. "So, listen. I had my guys recruit about thirty of the first-tier trainees in my unit over the past few days. I'm having them scour this city looking for those Snow Lions..."

—

Henry and Alain spent most of their day walking around the various merchant forums in the city. They never bought anything, but they did stop for a bite to eat at a rotisserie stall.

"So what now?" asked a bored Alain. The one hundred silver coins they received as a stipend couldn't buy them very much, so there wasn't a whole lot for them to do.

"Hmmm..." thought Henry. "Maybe we could hit up the beach. Might be some cute girls there to talk to."

"As tempting as that is, I'd better not."

“... Right, you already have three kids on the way. Best not to add to that number until you graduate, at least,” responded Henry while throwing his friend a mocking look.

Alain, for his part, ignored it. “Want to go hang out with Charles?” he asked.

“Sure. Not a lot else to do without coin, anyway.”

The two started walking east, toward the lower end districts. They exchanged a few jokes and jabs at each other’s expense, but before they had even left the Western Districts, they rounded a corner and almost ran into another first-tier trainee. This startled trainee almost jumped out of his skin when he saw these two and immediately turned around and ran off.

“Whoa, what the hell was *that*?” asked Alain.

“Not a clue...” said Henry.

They both vaguely recognized this trainee, but he wasn’t in the Snow Lions, so they hadn’t paid much attention to him. If they had, they might’ve known that he was in the Deathbringers, Gaius’ unit.

Henry and Alain put this seemingly minor incident out of their minds, but that trainee sprinted half a dozen blocks to the west. He arrived at a small square with several cafés and a large fountain in the center. Three of Gaius’ second-tier subordinates were calmly drinking tea and waiting at a table in front of the nicest café in the square.

The trainee approached and whispered a few sentences to one of the second-tier nobles.

“You sure?” the noble whispered back. The trainee hurriedly nodded, and the noble stood up. He gestured to five other first-tier trainees who were waiting by the fountain, and they started running after Henry and Alain.

“I’ll take care of these little pests,” he said confidently to the two other nobles. They nodded and continued waiting for other trainees who were out looking for Snow Lions to show up.

Henry and Alain weren’t hurrying, so this group of Deathbringers caught sight of them in less than five minutes. There weren’t many people around on these streets, but the noble still gave the order to drag the two they were following into a nearby alley where he would be waiting.

“Man, I would literally kill for some of Old Salem’s mead,” said Henry.

Alain was about to mutter his agreement, but four young men—who they also recognized from the Academy—grabbed their arms and quite roughly started hauling them into the alley.

“What the hell are you doing?! Let go of me!” shouted Henry while wildly attempting to shake his arms free.

Alain didn’t say anything, preferring instead to use his own prodigious strength of try and break the hold the two Deathbringers had on him. He managed to throw one of them off of him, but a fifth Deathbringer sprang out from the alley and swung his fist into the side of Alain’s head. The man he threw off wasted no time grabbing his arm again and the two Snow Lions were dragged into the alley.

The Deathbringers didn't say a word to them, only taking turns kicking and punching the two. The noble calmly watched for several moments before moving forward and waving off his first-tier underlings.

Henry and Alain pushed themselves to their feet with this respite. Henry's nose was bleeding and he had numerous bruises forming on his face. Alain was much worse, as he was barely able to stand and had one eye already starting to swell.

"You *fucking bast-*" started Henry, but the second-tier noble darted forward and drove his fist in Henry's stomach. The young Snow Lion was lifted off his feet and thrown into the wall behind him. He tried to catch himself when he fell, but his legs gave out and he collapsed.

Alain lunged forward at the noble. He kept Leon's few lessons from the past week in mind; he struck fast to try and put his opponent on the defense while targeting what seemed to be the noble's weakest point. He kept his fist loose and put all of his weight behind it, using his legs and hips as much as his arm and shoulder. Even with the pain he was in from the beating he had just taken, his fist rocketed toward the noble with startling speed.

The noble hadn't expected Alain to go on the offensive and just barely managed to raise his own arm to block Alain's fist mere inches from his face. The noble's arm shook and went slightly numb from Alain's hit. Alain's punch was so forceful, in fact, that the surprised noble had almost lost his footing.

But he didn't. He gave Alain a withering glare and roundhouse kicked the Snow Lion in the side of the waist.

Alain wasn't able to block or dodge, so his stomach took the full force of the kick. He fell to the ground and threw up everything he'd eaten for lunch.

The noble didn't give Alain any time to recover; that punch had really angered him. He kicked Alain down into his own vomit. He then kicked Alain a few more times until his momentary anger had abated.

"All right. Fuck these guys, let's head back to the others," spat the noble. He led the other trainees out of the alley and left Henry and Alain there on the ground.

"Ugggh..." Henry groaned.

Alain could only cough and retch.

It took the two Snow Lions half an hour for the pain to die down long enough for them to struggle to their feet. They were battered, bruised, and bleeding. Their faces were swelling in several places and Alain walked with a noticeable limp. They scrapped all plans to meet with Charles and instead made their way back to the Snow Lion's tower.

Despite their injuries, they were still first-tier mages, so there was no question in their minds about whether they would make it, but they still kept on a constant look-out for any other trainees they might encounter on the way.

—

"So that's why you've been restraining yourself around the barbarian? You had something in motion and that satisfied your anger?" asked Tiberias.

Gaius smiled. He despised Leon as much as he could despise anything, but with him and Valeria constantly fighting first in the morning duels, Gaius couldn't make his own challenge.

After a couple days, something occurred to him.

'The units are supposed to be fighting each other. If I can't fight that filthy savage, then I'll just break his friends into little pieces. Let's see how he reacts then...'

"Satisfied? No, my anger certainly isn't satisfied. I want to humiliate that little shit as much as a man can be humiliated!"

"So then what's your next move? You're not going to get very many Snow Lions today, maybe half a dozen at most. You'll need more than this..."

"That is something I won't let you in on, not unless you commit to helping me."

Tiberias frowned. "And why would I help you?"

"You made it abundantly clear on the first day to everyone with the gift of sight that you hate that barbarian! You should help me!"

Tiberias' frown grew a little deeper. Indeed, his first reaction to seeing Elise on Leon's arm was blinding rage, but in the past two weeks, he'd cooled his head. He had been thinking about what he should do about the barbarian, but he didn't particularly want Gaius' involvement—not when the memory of the combat test was still fresh in everyone's mind. And besides, he wasn't thrilled about taking such actions out in public.

"Why don't you ask the other two in your unit? What were their names again?"

"Actaeon and Linus. And they've already agreed to help."

"Really? *Really?*" asked Tiberias with extreme skepticism.

"Yes!"

Gaius wasn't lying, but he was certainly omitting a few key details. For instance, Actaeon and Linus didn't really want to start the usual inter-unit conflict this soon, not when their first-tier trainees still barely knew which end of a sword to hold. But, Gaius had still managed to win their support by promising to prioritize seizing the Snow Lion's banner above his own revenge. That being said, there hadn't been any discussions between them about how and when to act, and Gaius certainly hadn't consulted with either of his fellow third-tier Deathbringers before ordering these attacks on the Snow Lions.

Tiberias continued to think about it for several more moments. Gaius grew a little impatient and said, "I won't ask too much of you. You won't need to bring your own subordinates, you just need to follow us and help us fight when we enact our next plan."

Tiberias still didn't look convinced, so Gaius added, "And I'll be in your debt. You'll be doing me a favor, one which I will be sure to repay!" Gaius held his breath and waited for the answer. He didn't specifically *need* Tiberias, but no other noble would ally with him so soon into the Academy's training

cycle. Tiberias was the only one who shared Gaius' hatred for Leon, so he was essentially the only support Gaius could find outside of the Deathbringers.

Slowly, Tiberias' frown lessened. He looked Gaius in the eye and gave him a slight nod.

"Good! Now, our next move will depend on how the Snow Lions respond. Basically, we just need to keep an eye on Alphonsus and Castor. I don't expect much from them, though. Regardless, we'll probably make our next move next week."

Chapter 75: Plans for Retaliation

Leon made his way back to the tower fairly early, only an hour or two after midday. During his time at the pool, he had thought he'd heard a whistling sound coming from just beyond the corner of the cliff, but when he'd investigated he'd found nothing. He started thinking that he'd just imagined the whistle, but he kept glancing back to the edge of the recess and couldn't relax again. In the end, he had gone back to the runic circles behind the waterfall, deactivated the enchantments in the pool, and started walking back to the tower.

He heard a slight commotion as he walked in through the outer door. When he walked in through the inner door, he saw a dozen first-tier trainees huddled around a table. He was about to ignore them and continue to the top floor, but he noticed something that made him freeze just as he was about to start climbing the stairs: Henry and Alain, covered in blood and bruises.

The two had limped back to the tower half an hour prior. Their injuries were awful to look at, but they weren't so bad that the healing spells in the first-aid boxes scattered around the tower wouldn't make them right as rain. The only problem was that none of the trainees around them knew how to use the spells, and as they were trying to figure them out, three more injured trainees had returned to the tower.

Leon walked over to Henry and stared at the bruises and cuts. Henry had his shirt off, so Leon could see almost every place where he had been hit, as they had all started turning purple or dark red.

"What happened to all of you?" Leon asked calmly and quietly. Henry appreciated this attitude, as most of the other trainees had started to panic when they couldn't get the healing spells to work properly.

"We were attacked on the street. We think it was some guys from the Deathbringers, but it's hard to be sure given that we spent most of our time in their presence trying to protect our heads," answered Henry.

"I'm sorry, I just can't get this damned thing to work!" complained a nearby trainee, who was pressing a healing spell on Alain's bruised stomach.

"Well don't press down so hard!" responded Alain with a wince of pain. Leon could tell the trainee was aggravating the big guy's injuries just by pressing down on them without successfully activating the healing spell.

Leon gently pushed the trainee aside and placed his hand on the paper. The trainee was about to say something until he noticed that it was one of the unit's third-tier mages who was taking over, so he dutifully shut his mouth and watched.

Leon's magic gently flowed out of his hand and into the glyphs written on the paper. Most of the glyph was built around a small runic circle made mostly of light runes, and that was where the spell was activated and powered.

The glyph on the paper glowed with a bright golden light for several seconds and the bruise on Alain's stomach disappeared.

"Simply rubbing the spell on an injury won't activate it, you need to channel your magic into it as well. Look for this circle in the glyph." Leon indicated the runic circle to the watching trainee. The magic that flowed through the glyph had almost destroyed it, but the circle was still identifiable. The trainee enthusiastically nodded and started treating the other four's injuries. He quickly explained what Leon had just told him to the other trainees who were helping these five injured Snow Lions, and soon enough, all five had almost completely recovered.

But, 'almost completely' still wasn't 'completely'. Alain's left eye was still slightly swollen and the other four still had some visible bruising on their face and torsos.

"So, tell me what happened. In detail," Leon said to Alain and Henry. He controlled his voice well, but the slight undercurrent of killing intent he was emitting betrayed his anger.

'I've agreed to train these two! For someone to assault them is an assault upon me!' he thought.

Henry bitterly recounted how he and Alain ran into the first Deathbringer trainee, only to be jumped by that group several minutes later. He made sure to mention the second-tier noble who was leading them.

When Henry was done, Leon looked over to the other trainees, who all told him similar stories.

It wasn't too hard for Leon to guess that Gaius was behind this. Apart from Tiberias, Leon didn't think he made any other enemies in his short time here. Gaius had to have ordered these attacks.

While this was going on, Castor and Alphonsus returned to the tower. There wasn't anything in particular they had wanted to do in the city, so they came back after spending a few hours in the Heaven's Eye Tower.

Alphonsus wasted no time heading for the stairs, but Castor curiously glanced at the group of trainees tending to their injuries. The healing spells had healed most of the damage, but the five injured trainees still had a few visible marks and bloody clothes. Castor froze from indecision; he wanted to follow Alphonsus to the stairs, but the Senior Instructors words also rang in his ear.

"You are the leader of the Snow Lions, are you not?"

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

These were supposed to be *his* guys.

Castor slowly walked over while Alphonsus—who was already halfway up the first flight of stairs—turned back around, frowned, and reluctantly followed him. Castor looked around at the dozen or so trainees who had gathered around, then his eyes turned to Leon. Regardless of his origin, it was far more appropriate for Castor to speak with a fellow third-tier mage than any lower ranked trainees.

“What happened with these guys?” Castor asked Leon. Leon wasn’t paying any attention to Castor and was quite taken aback at the other man’s question, so it took him a moment to respond.

“... They were assaulted while in the city. Seems to be by trainees from the Deathbringers.”

“Are you sure?” Castor asked after a moment of thought.

“Wasn’t there, but I believe them,” responded Leon in a serious tone.

Castor frowned and looked back to the five injured trainees. He felt that this would not be an easy thing to fix, as he had fought Actaeon, one of the third-tier nobles from the Deathbringers, during the morning duels that week and lost fairly quickly.

“Do you have any proof that it was the Deathbringers?” he asked Henry.

Henry blinked in momentary confusion at why Castor was asking him this, before growing angry.

“Proof? *Proof*? What fuckin’ *proof*?! We saw who it was who attacked us! We recognized them!”

“But can you prove definitively that it was the Deathbringers?” asked Castor again, with a little more insistence this time.

“What proof is there to be had?! A bunch of guys ambushed us, dragged us into an alley, and beat the hell out of us! We know who did because we saw them, what else do you need?!” Henry’s tone was a mix of anger and incredulousness at Castor’s question.

“Are you calling us liars?!” asked Alain with growing fury. The other three assaulted Snow Lions appeared to be of varying levels of anger, but all were obviously annoyed at Castor’s requests for proof.

“Be quiet, peasant! We’re not talking to you!” reprimanded Alphonsus with a cold glare. Just as Alain was about to shout back in rage, a flash of killing intent from Leon shut both of their mouths.

Castor glared at Alphonsus to make sure he wasn’t going to talk again before continuing. “You all want revenge, right? You want retaliation?” Castor asked, looking at the five in turn, then moving on the other half dozen or so trainees who had gathered around.

“We do!” shouted Henry, with a few of the others nodding in agreement. Many others didn’t, though, preferring instead to see how the three third-tier mages fell on the issue.

“We can’t simply retaliate without proof it was them! Right now, it’s just our word against theirs!”

Before Henry, Alain, or any of the other trainees could respond, Leon spoke up. “It was the Deathbringers. If they say it’s them, then there’s no doubt in my mind.” As Leon spoke, Castor looked like he wanted to interrupt, but Leon held up his hand to stop him. “My enmity with that assbat Gaius is no secret. He’s the only one with the motive to have this done. But, if you want proof, then I figure you’ll get it come dinner-time.”

No one really knew what Leon meant when he said that, and he didn’t bother explaining himself. Castor had a few more exchanges with the other trainees before he and Alphonsus went back to the top floor, leaving the others to stew in their own anger. Leon followed not long after, but not before giving both Henry and Alain a nod of solidarity, which they returned.

By early evening, almost the entirety of all ten units had heard about what the Deathbringers did to the Snow Lions. The Snow Lions were furious, especially Charles when he returned and learned of the events.

What Leon had said about getting proof became clear during that meal, as many Deathbringers smiled and laughed at the Snow Lions, while those who carried out the ambushes bragged about how easy it had been. By the time dinner came to an end, almost all the Snow Lions had been thoroughly infuriated.

Henry and Alain made sure to identify the trainees who assaulted them to Leon, especially the second-tier noble who led them. Leon nodded and kept an eye on them, particularly that noble and the other four second-tier nobles he sat with who kept smugly smiling, though they rarely glanced at them.

—

“I know what you all want, but we should wait first! I’ll speak with the Deathbringers tomorrow and get them to apologize! We’ll work out something to put this whole uneasiness behind us!” said Castor to the assembled trainees after the Senior Instructor led them back to their tower.

“Bullshit!”

“Are you *kidding*?!”

“Are we supposed to just accept getting attacked in the streets?!”

“What happens if this is repeated tomorrow?!”

The first-tier trainees made it extremely clear that they wanted something more substantial than just words, though Castor seemed oddly unwilling to offer anything except ‘we’ll talk’. After about ten minutes of getting nowhere, Castor simply reiterated what he said and made for the stairs, with Alphonsus and the second-tier trainees close behind.

“The spineless little shit! Those fuck boys were laughing at us and he just goes slinking away with his tail between his legs! He’ll go and talk to Gaius, and then he’ll roll over like a good dog and we’ll keep getting fucked!” ranted Alain in terrifically obvious rage.

“Focus on your training,” said Leon calmly. “And make sure you get some rest tonight.”

“What for?” asked Charles with a sly smile. He could tell Leon was just as furious as they were, but his stoic expression made it exceptionally hard for most anyone else to see.

“Those nobles should be dismissed from their tower around the same time as us. They shouldn’t be in any particular hurry, so if we book it, we can cut them off before they leave the forest,” mused Leon with a casual tone. He didn’t make any attempt to keep his voice down, so many of the other trainees heard what he said.

“So, to be clear, you’re going to ambush those guys who ambushed us today?” asked Henry, with a subtle glance at the trainees listening to what the third-tier Leon was saying.

“‘Ambush’ is such a nasty, yet apt word. I’ll take those second-tier assholes, you three should be able to handle the rest, right?” Leon made eye contact with Charles, Henry, and Alain.

"Maybe..." said Henry. He liked the idea, but the Deathbringers probably had a couple dozen first-tier trainees roped in this, and the three of them couldn't take on eight to ten of their contemporaries even with what Leon had shown them in the past week.

"Um, excuse me..." said one of the trainees listening in. Leon recognized him as one of the three who had been assaulted in addition to Henry and Alain. "Did I hear you right? You're going to seek revenge for us?"

Leon narrowed his eyes a little at the interruption, but he still nodded at the trainee.

"Then if it's alright, could I join you?" The trainee's eyes almost sparkled as he made this request.

"Of course! The more the merrier!" shouted Alain.

The entire first-tier common room heard his shout, and many other trainees came over to ask to join. In the end, there were twenty-four trainees who joined Leon, Charles, Henry, and Alain.

Few of them could sleep that night as they looked forward to the fight they would seek out the next day.

Chapter 76: Leon's Comedy Routine

"Those peasants should just do what they're told. Who do they think they are to question our decisions?!" ranted Alphonsus in the third-tier common room.

"They're angry. Some of them *were* assaulted today," responded a much calmer Castor.

"And you said you'd take care of it! What more do they want?!" Alphonsus was almost shouting now, only kept in check by how composed Castor remained.

"I said I'd talk to Gaius. They don't want to hear anything about 'talking', they just want their revenge. I understand that, but we're one of the smallest units this cycle. I don't want us to make enemies yet," said Castor with a thoughtful look.

As Castor said this, a voice resounded through the common room. "Enemies aren't always chosen. Regardless of what you want, the Snow Lions have enemies now." Castor and Alphonsus glanced at Leon, the source of this voice, who had just come upstairs after organizing those trainees who were willing to follow him to retaliate against the Deathbringers.

Or, more accurately, watching Alain, Henry, and Charles organize the trainees, though his presence did lend those three some of his authority among the trainees as a third-tier mage.

"Shut up, savage. This is *your* fault, anyway, dragging our unit into your grievance with the Third Son of House Tullius!" shouted Alphonsus spitefully. He would've continued had Leon not shot him a glare filled with killing intent.

"Don't blame me for this. I didn't force the Deathbringers to do this! I've been trying to ignore Gaius and let this whole thing blow over!" retorted Leon in uncharacteristic anger.

Castor sighed and held up his hand, stopping Alphonsus from escalating the disagreement into a full-blown argument. "Indeed, the Deathbringers made the decision to attack our people, and only they can be blamed for that. But we should think carefully before we do anything to intensify this any further."

“Intensify beyond attacking us in the streets?” asked Leon, his words dripping with sarcasm.

“And what would you have us do?” demanded Alphonsus.

“I’m going to do the same to them that they did to us: ambush them and leave them bleeding on the ground.”

“We can’t be fighting in the streets!” responded Castor emphatically.

“It won’t be in the streets. I’m going to hit them tomorrow morning before they leave the forest.”

Castor sighed again and leaned back in his chair. After a few more moments of thought, he said, “Whatever. Do what you will tomorrow. It’ll be easier to talk to the Deathbringers if they’ve been bloodied too.”

Leon smiled in anticipation, and after a moment of silence, turned around and went to his room.

Just before he entered his room, he turned around and said to Castor, “I suppose I can at least try to talk first. Probably won’t get far though...” He chuckled to himself as he stepped into his room, but Castor at least nodded in acknowledgment.

“What the hell are you doing?” inquired Alphonsus quietly once Leon’s door was closed. “You should’ve stuck to your decision! It isn’t *his* place to question you!”

“He’s a third-tier mage, Alphonsus, and technically our equal. He has every right to question me. Besides, even if I told him not to do anything tomorrow, do you think he’d listen?” Castor sounded exhausted from the day’s unexpected trouble. He closed his eyes and stretched, intending to make like Leon and go to his room.

He just so happened to miss Alphonsus looking at Leon’s door and making an ugly snarl.

—

The entire dining hall was very tense the next morning. The Snow Lions had to endure the smug faces of the Deathbringers staring at them from across the hall, though they returned every glare and scowl they received. The atmosphere grew so charged that even the third-tier nobles were affected, with eyes constantly flitting between the two Snow Lions and the three Deathbringers in the center section of the hall.

Few looks were spared for Leon, save for a few self-satisfied smirks from Gaius and some oddly embarrassed glances from Valeria. She couldn’t get the glimpse she had of Leon’s body back at the pool out of her mind, and she found her gaze unconsciously wandering over in his direction every few minutes. Whenever she caught herself doing so, she’d hurriedly look away with her cheeks growing a little redder, despite her stoic and composed expression.

Everyone was so preoccupied with the conflict between the Snow Lions and the Deathbringers that Asiya was the only person who noticed Valeria’s strange behavior. She very pointedly stared at her friend and giggled. Valeria’s face burned with embarrassment and she stared down at the table.

The end of breakfast couldn’t come soon enough, and almost everyone in the hall was quite eager to leave as soon as their Senior Instructors ordered them to.

The Snow Lions' Senior Instructor took them back to their tower and dismissed them, not bothering to repeat his safety speech from the day before.

The nobles immediately made their way to the stairs. Castor hesitated before heading up and looked back at Leon. Leon didn't return the look, instead choosing to watch the first-tier trainees gather their weapons and make last-second preparations.

For a moment, Castor was tempted to join them. But that moment passed quickly. He shook his head and followed the nobles upstairs.

"Everybody ready?" asked Leon several minutes later. There were almost thirty first-tier trainees before him, including Charles, Alain, and Henry. After everyone nodded back at him, he simply said, "Then let's get moving."

He immediately led them out of the tower and turned north-east. He'd spent much of the previous night studying the maps that the Academy gave its trainees of the training grounds. The towers for the Deathbringers and the Snow Lions were relatively close, only about a mile apart.

But Leon wasn't taking his group to the Deathbringer's tower. Instead, he was taking them to a point he'd marked on the road that connected it to the training field. The road curved around a small hill at this point, which would allow Leon's group to watch the road without being easily seen.

Having spent most of his life wandering around in a forest, Leon's sense of direction was uncanny; the group arrived at the hill in less than fifteen minutes. They moved very quickly, and the weaker trainees needed a few minutes to catch their breath. Leon wasn't too worried that they'd missed their targets, as they wouldn't be in as great a hurry as the Snow Lions were, not to mention the nobles typically took longer to leave their towers than the commoners.

The group waited a couple hundred feet into the tree line while Leon sent Henry and two others to watch the road. After about twenty minutes, Henry ran back to Leon.

"They're here!"

"You sure?" asked Leon.

"Absolutely," replied Henry.

"All of them?"

"I recognized that noble who attacked me and Alain, and one of the others I'd another second-tier noble."

"How many do they have?"

"At least three second-tier nobles, including the two we've identified, plus about a dozen first-tier guys."

Leon nodded to Henry, then called out to the rest of the group, "Alright! Let's move up!"

The forest was thick enough that the Deathbringers didn't notice a thing as the group moved forward.

The Snow Lions began bunching up as they followed Leon. The third-tier mage frowned and quietly got them to spread out a little more. Due to lack of materials, Artorias hadn't been able to give him many

formal lessons, but he did spend plenty of time on military tactics. Leon knew that spreading the trainees out would take better advantage of their numerical superiority.

When the Deathbringers finally came close to their hiding place, Leon emerged from the forest alone. He had the rest of the group wait in the meantime.

The group of Deathbringers stopped and stared at him for a moment before several of them broke out into smiles and began walking towards him. Leon, too, walked forward until they stopped and stared at each other just close enough to speak comfortably without shouting.

One of the second-tier nobles stepped forward and said, "You'd best make way for your betters, barbarian!"

"Or don't, we don't mind teaching you that being third-tier doesn't make you invincible..." added a second noble with a savage smile.

Leon, ignoring their threats, said, "You all are the ones who attacked the Snow Lions yesterday, weren't you?"

The nobles looked a little taken aback. They were a little surprised that he was here because of that rather than his public antipathy with Gaius.

"Yeah, that was us," confessed the first noble without a hint of remorse in his voice.

"Who cares if it was?" said the third noble.

"What, did you come here to complain?" said the second noble with a mocking tone.

"No," answered Leon immediately. "I'm here to get you all to publicly apologize and pay my people compensation, otherwise I'll leave you just as battered and bloodied as you left my guys."

The three Deathbringer nobles stared in shock at the completely serious Leon for a moment before bursting out into laughter. Their amusement spread to their first-tier underlings who also started chuckling at Leon.

"Hehehe... I don't think you understand what position you're in, you faithless animal!" said the second noble when he managed to stifle his laughter.

"Indeed! The standards of this Academy must be slipping if *this* fucking clown can manage to enroll!" shouted the third noble.

The first noble smiled derisively at Leon before adding, "It seems the accident that let this barbarian rise to the third-tier makes him think he's better than us! Now, I realize that basic math may be a hard concept for your primitive brain to grasp, but we outnumber you fifteen to one! It doesn't matter that you're in the third-tier, we're still going to break every bone in your body!"

Leon felt fury rising in his chest, a fury that he knew was coming from Xaphan. The demon had been quiet these past few days, but Leon knew he was occasionally watching what was happening outside. This short exchange had left the demon burning with a rage that made his own flames seem insignificant.

But for all the strength of his fury, it was dwarfed by Leon's.

[*Those ones* need to die,] said the demon through clenched teeth.

[They won't be dead when I'm through with them, but they'll certainly wish they were...] responded a furious Leon.

The first noble made a quick gesture and the dozen first-tier underlings quickly spread out and surrounded Leon.

Taking on all twelve first-tier mages and the three second-tier mages was a fight that Leon didn't think he would be able to win on his own. But he wasn't alone.

Sending a mocking smile of his own to the three nobles, Leon waved over his shoulder at the waiting Snow Lions.

Before any of the Deathbringers could react, more than two dozen Snow Lions poured out of the forest and were upon them. The three Deathbringers closest to the tree line couldn't even raise their training weapons quick enough to block; the Snow Lions cut them down in an instant with the stabs and slashes they'd learned during their Basic Combat classes.

Leon drew his own training sword and sliced through the two Deathbringers between him and the nobles in one quick motion. Leon surged forward and engaged the three second-tier nobles.

The fight was over in less than two minutes. The Snow Lions completely overwhelmed the surprised Deathbringers and left all twelve of the noble's underlings stunned and unconscious from their training weapons. Leon, while all that had gone on, had disarmed the nobles so quickly that they hardly had a chance to draw their weapons, let alone use them.

Their ambush was so successful, in fact, that some of the Snow Lions were a little let down at the anti-climax and started staring at the three surrounded nobles.

"If you were smart, you'd make with that compensation..." said Leon with a sadistic smile as he threw their training swords into the forest.

"Ha! As if we would ever do something so shameful!" laughed the second noble.

"Indeed! If you intended to harm us, you would've done so by now!" shouted the third noble, who then chuckled at Leon in derision.

"We serve Gaius Caecilius Tullius! You swine wouldn't dare to touch us! If you do, Young Lord Gaius would tear you apart!" boasted the first noble. "How about you apologize to *us*, clown, and provide our people with compensation? Maybe then we'll keep this incident to ourselves..."

[Does this little shit actually think Gaius poses any kind of personal threat to you?] Xaphan wondered aloud.

[I doubt what happened during the combat test has leaked very far. Give it a few months and I doubt this deluded pissant will be throwing Gaius' name around so readily,] replied Leon.

Leon slowly sheathed his training sword and stepped forward, to the delight of the nobles whose smiles grew even wider.

“I’m terribly sorry...” he started, to which the nobles started laughing. However, their laughter was smothered as he continued. “... because it seems that I’ve given you the impression that I was joking. That could not be further from the truth.”

Leon started walking forward with an ominous smile and emitting an ocean of killing intent. A few of the first-tier Deathbringers who were beginning to stir promptly slipped back into unconsciousness under its pressure.

“You seem to have found much of what I’ve said today funny. Do I really amuse you so much?” he asked as he neared the first noble. None of the nobles could muster the courage to speak under the weight of Leon’s killing intent that nearly drove them to their knees. Leon clenched his fist and drove it into the first noble’s cheek. The noble dropped like a bag of rocks and Leon followed up with a kick that made the noble fly over to the watching Snow Lions. They treated him about as gently as Leon just had.

Leon paused before moving on to the next noble. “You don’t seem to be that entertained anymore. Are my jokes no longer so delightful?” His tone started fairly playful and mock hurt but turned extremely menacing and disquieting by the end. Leon slammed his foot into the stomach of the second noble so hard that the noble threw up all over himself. Again, Leon punted the noble over to the waiting Snow Lions.

This was the same noble who had led the assault on Henry and Alain, and the two eagerly began paying him back in kind.

Leon finally turned to the final noble, who felt his hair stand on end. His arrogant demeanor had collapsed, and he couldn’t maintain a straight face, constantly twitching between various looks of fear and terror.

“Why aren’t you laughing? Hmm?” Leon’s words echoed in his ears and the noble found himself unable to form any words. Leon punched the noble in the face so hard that he was knocked flat on the ground. He didn’t try to get back up, so Leon contented himself with throwing a few kicks at him.

“You still don’t find this funny, huh? I’m suddenly not so hilarious?” Leon said with exceptional rage. He kicked the noble a few more times before stepping back to let the waiting Snow Lions tear into him.

“That’s a shame,” Leon said sarcastically as he calmly watched the Snow Lions rain blows down upon the nobles. “I thought I might’ve had a good future in comedy.”

Chapter 77: Rain

The Snow Lions didn’t stay long after ambushing the Deathbringers. All told, the entire fight lasted barely ten minutes, and that’s counting the few minutes the Snow Lions spent taking their revenge after the Deathbringers had already been beaten.

It might’ve gone on longer, but Leon heard a few more Deathbringers walking down the road who would soon come into sight of the ambush point. The Snow Lions hurried back into the forest, but it took Leon falling back past the tree line for most of them—who were riding high on their victory—to get the picture and follow him.

They left the Deathbringers there in the dirt. Their first-tier trainees had gotten off easy and only been knocked unconscious with the Snow Lion's training weapons. The second-tier nobles weren't so lucky, as all the Snow Lions got in at least one punch or kick on them. But, as only Leon was stronger than the first-tier among the Snow Lions, the nobles were barely left more injured than they had left Alain and Henry the day before. They'd all be fixed right up with a few healing spells.

But, inflicting permanent damage wasn't the point. If it had been, the Snow Lion's wouldn't have used training weapons. Getting revenge for their friends and fellow trainees was the reason they had sprang the ambush, and in attacking and humiliating this group of Deathbringers, they felt that they had achieved that goal.

"HAHA! We did it!" shouted Alain in triumph as soon as they were out of earshot of the Deathbringers. His shout was echoed by the victorious Snow Lions, who joked and celebrated all the way back to their tower.

Leon wasn't in such a celebratory mood. Instead, he felt an odd tingle in his bones and an itch at the back of his head. His eyes turned skyward and he noticed that, despite most of the morning having been clear and sunny, the sky had become completely filled with light grey clouds.

The Snow Lions burst in through their tower's front door, loudly making plans with each other to head into the city to celebrate. Some of the trainees glanced over at Leon with the intent to invite him as well, but Leon was clearly uncomfortable with the attention and the restless feeling that had suddenly come over him.

"Leon!" called out Charles. "We're heading into the city, want to come with?" Henry, Alain, and half a dozen other trainees were with him, and they also nodded to Leon, silently inviting him along.

For a moment, Leon just stared at him. His heart was racing and there was a loud buzzing in his ears. He took a deep breath, intending to give Charles an answer, but he couldn't bring himself to form any words. He slowly shook his head, to Charles' disappointment.

"Well... alright then! We'll be carousing around the clubs and bars in the western districts if you change your mind!"

The first-tier trainees gathered their silver, put away their training weapons, and filed out of the tower.

As they were doing so, Leon stumbled over to the stairs and started making his way up. He started shivering like he was a mortal in a snowstorm. Fortunately, both the second and third-tier Snow Lions were already in the city enjoying their day off, so no one was around to see Leon struggle to climb the stairs. He almost felt like his own body was resisting him climbing the stairs for some reason.

After several minutes, Leon made it to the top floor and collapsed onto the closest couch to the door.

He desperately tried to make sense of what was happening. He tried to steady his breathing and meditate to calm himself down, but his heart beat refused to slow and his shivering only intensified.

Leon lay there for almost fifteen minutes failing to meditate. From what he was able to tell in that time, he wasn't shivering from cold. In fact, his body felt like it was burning up, and that heat was coming from his heart—his soul realm!

[Xaphan, what's happening?] asked Leon. He waited a moment, but there was no answer. [Can you hear me, demon?] Again, his question was met with silence.

Leon grew angry and shouted in his mind, [You worthless demon, answer me!] When that, too, failed to elicit a response, Leon decided to give it a rest. He decided to keep trying in half an hour or so, when he'd hopefully be a bit calmer.

Leon had no earthly idea that Xaphan was in no position to even try and reply.

The young mage tried to get comfortable, but he found it was impossible. Outside, the light grey clouds grew dark, and it began to gently rain.

As soon as the first drops hit the windows of the tower, Leon catapulted upright. He had started to realize that *something* was making him restless, and he felt that this rain was surely a part of it. He pushed himself to his feet and hurried over to the window, throwing it open and letting the rain rush in.

Leon breathed in the earthy scent of the raindrops hitting the dry ground. He stood at the open window for several more seconds before he realized that the noise in his ears had receded and his heart was beating a little slower now.

He immediately turned around and sprinted for the stairs. His mind was filled with nothing but the smell of the rain and the sound of distant thunder. In seconds, he burst out from the tower with nothing but the clothes on his back, his training sword, and his family's sword.

As soon as the rain hit his skin, he stopped shivering. His heart was still racing, but he felt a little better. He took a few minutes to stand under those storm clouds and enjoy the rain; he had always felt a little more relaxed when a storm rolled around, and this was the first storm he had been in since he left the Northern Vales.

But, simply standing there in front of the tower wasn't enough. Leon hardly knew what he was doing, but he took off running as fast as he could sustain into the forest, making for the western mountains.

When he had gone up to the top of the tower, it had felt like he was struggling against his own body. Taking every step had been an arduous task, as if there was a part of him that had been resisting. But now, he felt liberated, as if he had become as light as a feather. He sped across the ground so fast that he almost felt like he was flying.

Soon enough, he found himself at the base of the cliff near the pool he found the day before. But this time, he barely stopped long enough to locate a suitable spot to climb. He scrambled up the cliff almost like it wasn't even there.

The higher he went—the more the rain washed over him—the better he felt. The wind picked up speed, howling in his ears. The thunder he heard grew louder, and occasionally he saw a brief flash of remote lightning strikes.

But even this wasn't enough for Leon. Something spurred him onwards, and he frantically searched for a taller mountain.

At this point, Leon was effectively unconscious, operating purely on instinct. Magic power flooded into his body and his mind wrestled with keeping all of it in check.

After scanning the horizon, Leon sprinted for the tallest mountain he could see. He climbed with the same mindless speed he had the cliff, and he had arrived at the flat top in minutes. The mountain top was just barely big enough for him to kneel down comfortably, which is exactly what he did.

He closed his eyes and fell into a motionless trance-like meditative state, allowing all the magic kicked up by the storm to flow into his body.

Leon didn't regain control over himself until several hours later, when the storm started dying down. He was soaked by then, but his body was filled to the brim with magic power. In fact, the first thing that Leon noticed as he opened his eyes was just how incredible he felt.

He knelt there for a while enjoying the rush this abundance of magic gave him. Eventually, his mind turned to trying to make sense of what had just happened. The last thing he remembered was zoning out in the third-tier common room, then just enough flashes of him sprinting outside and through the forest for him to know that he had done those things. He had no reason for why he had done them, but given how spectacular he felt, he wasn't too upset that he had.

He was still firmly in the third-tier, but he felt that he had made great progress this day. In fact, as he thought about it, he remembered that Artorias would do something similar whenever a storm blew in back in the Vales. He would vanish from their fort at the first sign of rain, making his way—as Leon had found out just before the ritual that awakened his Inherited Bloodline—to that mountain platform he had made.

Leon was certain what he had just experienced was related.

He was soon yanked out of his thoughts by Xaphan's voice resounding through his mind.

[Leon.]

[Xaphan? What happened? Where the hell were you?!] Leon responded with some anger.

[Well...] he began, uncertainty creeping into his voice.

—

Just after the ambush, Xaphan went back to quietly sitting on the red and white tiles not too far from the small throne in Leon's soul realm. The pseudo-magic body that the Thunderbird had created for Leon was sitting in the throne with its eyes closed.

The demon had been spending his days absorbing some of the magic power that Leon's bone marrow constantly supplied his soul realm with. Xaphan could theoretically recover his power by relying on the meager amounts of magic that Leon possessed, but it would be a painfully and highly impractical process without the potion he'd told Leon about. But, there was little else for him to do on that tiny barren island in the Mists of Chaos other than watch Leon's daily life, so he quietly sat and absorbed magic power.

If Leon could see him, he wouldn't see any changes in the demon. His fires still burned all over his body, obscuring whatever might be within, but not so completely that a shadow couldn't be seen. If Xaphan had recovered his power as fast as he had hoped, his flames would have burned much brighter, so much so that he would've appeared to be nothing but an enormous brightly burning flame.

As the demon was sitting there trying to pass the time after watching Leon carry out his ambush, he heard a quiet rumble in the mists. For a moment, he thought he had misheard; he knew of nothing that could exist out there, after all.

His eyes burned a bright orange within the red flames as they darted around, searching for the source of the sound. When he failed to see anything, he turned back to absorbing magic power. And then he heard the rumble again, but louder than before.

This time the demon was certain he heard correctly. He scrambled to his feet and searched his surroundings again. This time, he saw something. It was a tiny dark speck in the bright grey mist, and it was growing very rapidly.

In seconds, that dark speck had grown to encompass the entire horizon, which Xaphan realized to be immense storm clouds. These storm clouds were upon the island before the demon could react and began pouring rain down upon it.

[Leon, what is this?] he asked in a panicky voice, but he received no reply. He turned to look at the magic body on the throne and saw that it had been encased in a cage made entirely of lightning.

[The boy cannot hear you, former Lord of Flame.]

When Xaphan heard that deep voice that seemed to shake all in existence, he froze. Slowly, he turned to see what had spoken, and saw a towering bird standing behind him. This bird had gorgeous brown feathers flecked with gold that sparked with lightning magic. No matter how hard it was raining, not a single drop of water landed upon those feathers.

Xaphan had just come face-to-face with the Thunderbird.

Chapter 78: Remnant

The Thunderbird's brilliant golden eyes glared down at Xaphan, shocking the demon to his core with mere eye contact.

Xaphan found himself completely overwhelmed in the Thunderbird's presence, with its turbulent aura pressing down on him like a hundred mountains. There was no way Xaphan could withstand this crushing pressure, not in his current weakened state. He doubted he could even stand against it if he were in his prime.

The demon's knees grew weak seconds after the Thunderbird arrived, and the pouring rain and fierce wind that accompanied it caused the flames that covered him to fizzle and die down. When Xaphan's knees finally gave out, his fires were completely gone, leaving nothing but the dark figure of an enormous humanoid. He was shaped like a heavily muscled man with handsome features, only with skin like highly polished obsidian that sparkled in the lightning that surrounded the Thunderbird.

Xaphan turned his red-hot eyes—the only part of him that still burned—up to meet the Thunderbird's golden avian irises. However, after the Thunderbird forced the demon to his knees, it hardly spared him another glance. Instead, its attention was focused on Leon, still sitting on his throne as if he was peacefully sleeping.

“Re... Release m-me!” shouted Xaphan in rage, struggling under the Thunderbird’s aura to raise his voice loud enough to be heard over the tempest that raged around the island.

The Thunderbird glanced back at Xaphan, sending the demon’s mind into turmoil. Xaphan crumpled down onto all fours, barely able to hold himself up.

[Tell me, what’s a former Lord of Flame doing residing within my descendant’s soul realm?] asked the Thunderbird, its thunderous voice hitting Xaphan like hammer to the chest.

“Who... are you... calling ‘FORMER’!” roared Xaphan in response, though the effect was slightly tarnished as he could barely string the words together under the Thunderbird’s cataclysmic aura.

[I’m calling *you* ‘former’, because that is what you *are*. A Lord of Flame who has been absent from the Void for so long is no true Lord of Flame. Especially not one so diminished as you.] The Thunderbird’s words cut deep into Xaphan, who grit his teeth under the strain of trying to respond.

[But your status is not my concern,] continued the Thunderbird. **[It is your presence that demands explanation, demon. What are you doing here?]**

Though his fires had been almost completely extinguished, Xaphan’s eyes burned orange like a pair of hot coals as he called upon all of his strength to resist the Thunderbird’s aura. He pushed against the island with all of his might, just barely managing to rise before the Thunderbird appeared above him in a flash of lighting and stomped Xaphan back down into the ground.

Xaphan gave a cry of pain as his chest was pushed into the stone tiles that surrounded the throne and the Thunderbird’s talons dug into his back, preventing him from moving again.

[I will *not* repeat myself again...] it warned, while allowing the pressure on Xaphan to abate just enough for the demon to speak.

Xaphan was about to shout defiantly, but the Thunderbird’s talons twitched and allowed a few small lightning currents to pass through Xaphan’s body. The demon clenched his teeth but was unable to fully suppress his groan of pain.

“I am not trying to possess him, we are partners!” he growled, barely getting the words out through his gritted teeth.

[I saw you absorbing some of my descendant’s magic power,] responded the Thunderbird with an accusatory tone.

“I only took my share! We made a contract! I reside in his soul realm and use a *tiny* portion of his power to recover, while I give him counsel and some of my own power in return!”

The Thunderbird’s golden eyes seemed to bore holes through Xaphan’s shiny obsidian skin for a moment, before answering with: **[A terrible lie, if you are indeed lying, for it is so easily verified...]** The Thunderbird’s feathers rustled slightly, sending a pulse through its body and into Xaphan.

The demon’s ire grew, as this pulse seemed to open everything about his body to the Thunderbird. He felt like he had no secrets under its unyielding gaze.

Slowly, after several moments of waiting, a thick golden thread appeared, connecting Xaphan's chest to Leon's throne. Specifically, it ran from the demon's heart straight to Leon's mana glyph on the back of the throne.

The Thunderbird's eyes swept over the entirety of the thread, reading the nigh-imperceptible information within as if it had been carved into the heavens for all the world to see.

Though its avian face couldn't frown, the Thunderbird's displeasure was plain as day on its face. It removed its talons from Xaphan's back and moved about a dozen feet over with a flap of its wings, keeping itself between Xaphan and Leon. Additionally, it allowed its aura to abate just enough for Xaphan to catch his breath, but not enough for him to rise past a kneeling posture.

Xaphan pushed himself up as far as he could, then took a few moments to reignite his flames. They didn't rise very high; in fact, they barely covered him at all, leaving most of his body exposed. Despite having some time to compose himself, he still couldn't move from where he was kneeling.

The Thunderbird barely glanced at him again, seemingly purposefully ignoring him. It stood between Xaphan and Leon, running its beak through its feathers while keeping an eye on the lightning that surrounded its descendant.

The two maintained their silence for the next few minutes. This quiet atmosphere was only broken when the lightning that surrounded Leon suddenly started to grow far more intense. Where before it was only a few bolts here and there every few seconds, it had become a maelstrom of lightning, concentrating enough power around Leon to shock Xaphan.

"Hey, what's happening to him?" asked Xaphan in concern, after working up the nerve. The Thunderbird didn't reply; it only stared with increased interest at Leon.

"Don't ignore me, damnit! What's happening to him?!" Again, the Thunderbird didn't even look at Xaphan. Seeing that he wasn't going to get an answer, the demon took to shouting at Leon.

[Hey, Leon! Answer me, boy! What's happening?!]

Xaphan got as many answers from Leon as he had from the Thunderbird, but he wasn't dissuaded and continued to mentally shout at his partner.

After several minutes, the Thunderbird rolled its eyes and glared at Xaphan, instantly silencing the demon with its gaze.

[Did I not tell you that he can't hear you, demon?]

"... You did, but there's no harm in trying, is there?" responded Xaphan with a slightly flippant look.

[You're disturbing my peace. That is harm enough.]

Xaphan shrunk back a little at the Thunderbird's rebuke, but then he gathered himself and said: "Well, if you were only to tell me what is going on with all that lightning, maybe I wouldn't be shouting, would I?"

The Thunderbird clicked its beak again, though it was in thought rather than amusement. After a moment of contemplation, it said, **[This is the first natural storm he has been in since he awakened his Bloodline. My power that he has inherited is amplified during storms, and it can be extremely**

overwhelming. He'll experience an overpowering urge to head out into the storm and seek the highest place he can.]

"You don't seem to care that much about it. This isn't dangerous, is it?" asked Xaphan with some uncertainty.

[It's fine. In fact, this is very beneficial to the young boy. A few more thunderstorms and he might advance to the fourth-tier.]

"Is this something he'll get used to? It wouldn't be very convenient if he loses his head every time a few raindrops fall."

[It takes an enormous storm to trigger this kind of reaction. If he experiences a few more, he'll eventually grow accustomed to the surge in power.]

"Good..."

The two continued to watch Leon as he sprinted back outside of the tower and into the forest. They watched him race through the forest and dart up the side of the cliff. They quietly observed as he found a suitable place to meditate, then sit down and do just that.

After about fifteen minutes, Xaphan had become certain that the Thunderbird was telling the truth and Leon wasn't in any danger, so his attention began to gradually turn to the Thunderbird.

'It answered a few of my questions before, maybe it'll continue,' he thought as he summoned his courage again.

"How are you still here, if you don't mind me asking? The universe thinks you dead, yet here you are right in front of me..."

The Thunderbird sent a dismissive look at Xaphan before turning back to Leon. However, to the demon's surprise, the Thunderbird actually answered several seconds later.

[I *am* dead. What you see now is a fragment of consciousness that my descendants have kept within them for eons, a tiny remnant of what I once was.]

"A 'tiny remnant', huh?" said Xaphan, vividly remembering the Thunderbird smashing it into the ground. "How is something like this even possible?"

[A trick that I and several of my contemporaries discovered, an exploited quirk in the way our power is passed down in our descendants.]

Xaphan waited for the Thunderbird to elaborate, but when it remained silent he didn't press his luck.

"I have to ask... Why did you even answer my questions? Your reputation would indicate that you wouldn't even spare a Primal God a moment of your time, let alone me..."

The Thunderbird looked back at the demon and thought about it for almost an entire minute before answering. **[Hmmm. Perhaps that is the way I would've behaved, once. But after dying and watching my clan effectively come to an end, perhaps I feel a little more chatty. Besides, as a former Lord of Flame, it's not like speaking with you is a *complete* dishonor for me.]**

“Don’t call me ‘former’! I *am* a Lord of Flame!”

[You are not. About ten thousand years ago, another of my descendants entered the Void and became acquainted with several of the Demonic Lords. You were replaced a long time ago.]

“What?!” roared Xaphan in fury. The Thunderbird’s response left him stunned and infuriated. He hadn’t even been gone one hundred thousand years! It’s actually quite common for a Demonic Lord to go missing for millennia at a time before suddenly showing up again without warning, so one hundred thousand years is typically how long it takes the Demon Princes to appoint another Lord. He had been captured and held prisoner by the Storm King, but the traditional waiting time had yet to pass and the Prince of Flame had already replaced him!

“I don’t suppose you know who replaced me?” Xaphan asked, barely containing his rage.

[Which Lord of Flame were you, specifically?]

“The Fifth.”

[Then it would’ve been a demon named Amon. Of course, my information is a little out-of-date; my descendant was killed not too long after arriving...]

“Amon...” spat Xaphan with more hatred than even he thought possible. “Of course, it would be *that fucking one*. When I return to the Void, I’m going to tear him apart...”

[‘When’? I doubt you’ll make it that far.]

“And what is *that* supposed to mean?”

[Before you were summoned, my clan was one of the strongest in all of the universe. They ruled a truly immense portion of the Nexus and were lords over dozens of planes. Yet now, in less than a hundred thousand years, my clan has been reduced to a single boy in the Divine Graveyard. A fall that sudden is impossible unless it was orchestrated by an enemy of comparable power. And they certainly haven’t given up.]

It was subtle, but Xaphan could pick up on the defeat in the Thunderbird’s voice.

“You think Leon is going to be killed by these enemies, then?”

The Thunderbird didn’t give Xaphan a verbal answer, but its silence was enough for the demon.

“If you have so little hope for Leon, why bother try and protect him from me? Why bother watching over him with so much concern? Why bother doing anything at all? I mean, these are hardly the actions of someone who has lost all hope.”

[Why *shouldn’t* I do these things, demon? It’s not in my nature to simply lie down and wait for death, no matter how inevitable his death may be. But, doomed though I’m sure he is, I will at least provide this young lion with what little help I can give him. It’s not like I can see the future. Not to mention... I do believe that he has the potential for greatness. He may beat the odds.]

The lightning surrounding Leon began to die down as the Thunderbird finished speaking. The storm had ended, and Leon was returning to lucidity.

The Thunderbird took another look at Leon, then took off from the island and flew back into the mists without so much as one more glance at Xaphan.

Xaphan watched the Thunderbird go and didn't try and to stop it. A few seconds after Xaphan lost sight of the Thunderbird, the pressure that kept the demon down vanished. Xaphan slowly got to his feet while thinking over everything that the Thunderbird had just told him.

'Should I tell Leon what the Thunderbird told me?' he asked himself. After a few moments of thinking, he came to his answer.

[Leon,] he said to the young mage.

[Xaphan? What happened? Where the hell were you?!]

[Well...] he started hesitantly.

Chapter 79: A Subdued Response

[Well...] Xaphan started hesitantly.

Leon staggered to his feet. He was still in the artificial mountains in the western third of the training grounds. His body was filled to the brim with magic power, but the wonderful and energetic feeling that brought was dampened from Xaphan seeming refusal to speak with him during the storm.

['Well', what?] asked a livid Leon when Xaphan paused. [Wasn't part of the contract that you would provide me with your counsel in exchange for residing in my soul realm? Wher-] Leon suddenly stopped and took a deep breath.

[What just happened to me?] he asked with a tone that he was forcing to remain calm.

[That was a side-effect of possessing the Thunderbird's power. Keep that in mind; whenever a storm gathers, you will probably enter a similar state,] answered Xaphan.

[There any reason you couldn't tell me this as it was happening?]

[I haven't been able to speak with you all day. I noticed lightning gathering in your soul realm hours before the storm began in earnest, but it seemed to prevent mental communication.]

Leon took another deep breath. He tried to remain calm, but the sheer amount of energy that came with his current overabundance of magic power was making it difficult. After a few moments, he did feel his anger fade, though he still felt like crushing a few boulders to let off some steam.

[Listen, Leon, there are some other things we should discuss. I know what happened to you not because it was something I already knew, but because I was just told.]

[Told? By who?!] asked Leon as his face slightly contorted in shock.

[While you were out of it, the Thunderbird showed up to watch.]

[WHAT?! And it spoke to you?!]

[It did.]

[Why... It's never even spoken to *me* before...]

Xaphan rolled his eyes at that. [And why *should* it speak to you? You are only a third-tier human, not even two decades old!]

[I'm still its descendant!]

Despite Leon's attitude, Xaphan didn't actually think he was wrong, especially with what the Thunderbird had told him. It said that Leon was its last descendant, so why hadn't it spoken to him? Sure, it had sounded crushed and hopeless, but it had also attempted to protect Leon from him before it knew he was no threat to the young mage.

[Well... perhaps that's something to keep in mind for when you make it to the sixth-tier. You'll have created your magic body by then and will be able to access your soul realm. I'm sure you'll get the opportunity to speak with your ancestor then...]

[Yeah, maybe... did it say anything else other than explain what happened to me?]

[... Not really. It did attack me, though, before it learned we had made a contract.] Xaphan decided not to tell Leon the rest for now. There was no need to tell him about Amon, and certainly no need to tell him what the Thunderbird thinks about his odds of survival in the long run.

[Huh. That's a shame, but not really a surprise. Especially about him attacking you.]

[*What?*]

[I'm just saying, I would be suspicious as hell if a shady character like you showed up where you weren't expected.]

[And with that, I will leave you to your own devices. Good day.]

[Oh, come on, demon! Don't be so sensitive!] Leon chuckled a little. Xaphan seemed to enjoy poking fun at him, so he decided to do likewise.

Xaphan didn't respond, though Leon didn't think he was particularly angry. Whatever the case, he still started descending from the mountains and heading back to the Snow Lion's tower.

—

Gaius stared at the three nobles who had been ambushed by the Snow Lions. They were in quite the sorry state, with bruises, cuts, and slightly swollen eyes or lips. None of their injuries were particularly serious, as they had been mostly inflicted by first-tier mages armed only with training weapons, and they had been taken care of with healing spells for the most part. They'd return to normal in another day or two, but that didn't dampen their anger in the slightest.

"We need to get them back for this act of barbarism!" shouted one of the nobles. His face was red from fury, and it only grew redder when he remembered how Leon's kick made him throw up all over himself.

"They *fucking* dare to attack *us* only a day after we punished them for their arrogance?!" shouted another one of them.

Gaius raised his hand just as the last noble was about to share his opinion. Based on his enraged expression, Gaius was perfectly aware of what it would be, so he didn't need to hear it. The noble immediately shut his mouth and waited for Gaius to speak his piece.

"Indeed, our actions yesterday were only meant to chastise them for that barbarian's arrogance and blatant disregard for his betters, and that they would seek to retaliate against us for attempting to correct them is an act worthy of an extreme response. However, I don't want any of you to do anything stupid. Classes resume tomorrow, so focus on those. I'll speak with Linus and Actaeon and we'll determine the correct course of action." Gaius spoke with a calm and poised demeanor, but inside he was absolutely ecstatic.

He controlled himself as much as he was able on his way back to the top floor of the Deathbringers' tower, just barely holding his smile back until he left the second floor behind.

'They did it! They really did it! It's going to be the easiest thing in the world to get all of this unit behind me now!' he thought. Contrary to what he had told Tiberias the day before, his two fellow third-tier nobles hadn't actually agreed to help so soon.

Had he asked them for something before the combat test, they would've undoubtedly jumped at the chance to help out the son of a Duke; their own parents were only Counts, after all. However, Gaius had lost a lot of respect and prestige when he allowed himself to be thrashed by Leon so completely; so much so that most of the other nobles who knew about the incident now felt comfortable ignoring him.

His undignified behavior after the fact didn't help matters, either.

However, his chat with his brother brought reality crashing back in on him, forcing him to realize just what was at stake. His family's honor and reputation—as well as his own future—were at risk due to recent events, and he couldn't jeopardize that by continuing to give Leon opportunities to make a fool out of him.

Just as he was about to push open the door to the third floor, he paused for a moment. He wiped the unseemly smile from his face and took a moment to compose himself. He was almost jittery from excitement as he entered the third-tier common room, but his expression was sober and serious.

Linus and Actaeon were waiting for him there, quietly discussing something around the central fireplace. They glanced at Gaius as he entered the room, ceasing their conversation until he walked over.

"You two have heard about this morning's incident?" Gaius asked in a solemn tone.

"Of course, we have. The entire training battalion would've heard about this by now," responded Linus, a thin man with black hair and features sharp enough to cut glass.

"We were just talking about what to do in response. We can't let such an attack go unchallenged," said Actaeon, a short and stocky man not even five and a half feet tall with brown hair and a full face.

"I told you two the Snow Lions would be trouble. The barbarian was only the beginning. It's clear that Alphonsus and Castor can't control their own unit," Gaius said.

"Cut the shit, Gaius. I doubt they would've been this bold so early without *your* personal conflict with the savage." Gaius' eyes narrowed in response to Linus' words, but just as he was about to interrupt,

Linus continued. "That being said, it doesn't really matter at this point. What's done is done. We can only deal with what's in front of us, and what's in front of us is another unit who brazenly assaulted our own people less than half a mile from our own tower!"

"Indeed, we need to take our vengeance. However..." added Actaeon, looking over to Linus as he trailed off.

"We've been talking. We want to wait at least another week or two until the Basic Combat classes come to an end," said Linus, finishing Actaeon's thought.

"Why?" asked Gaius as politely as he could, though he couldn't completely hide the anger in his voice. When the other two gave him slightly weird looks he hurriedly added, "It's just that the longer we sit on this, the less anyone's going to take us seriously."

"I spoke with your guys when they returned, and they told me the whole story. The part that stuck out the most to me was the complete uselessness of the first-tier trainees in that fight. The barbarian's lackeys overwhelmed our guys with numbers, but even then, they hardly acquitted themselves well. I want them to have at least some level of competence when we pay the Snow Lion's back."

Gaius unconsciously frowned slightly. He quickly forced it off his face, but the other two had already seen it. However, neither of them addressed Gaius' obvious desire to act quicker than they were willing.

He couldn't really fault their logic, though. Waiting to move against the Snow Lions until they were ready was a hard idea to argue against.

"Every day we spend preparing is another day they'll spend getting ready for us," said Gaius.

"We know. But this is still the best plan," Actaeon replied with a serious expression.

'We'll see how they feel after dinner tonight...' he thought.

—

Dinner that evening was tense, to say the least. Every trainee had heard about the Snow Lion's ambush by then, and even if they hadn't, the Snow Lions who laughed and jeered at the Deathbringers made it perfectly clear what had happened.

The Deathbringers' significantly more subdued response was a little surprising, though, given they were the ones laughing and jeering the day before. A few of more emotional first-tier trainees shouted back insults in response, but they were swiftly silenced by glares from their second-tier trainees.

The Deathbringers made their way back to their tower quiet, angry, and humiliated. Linus and Actaeon didn't change their minds, though, insisting to Gaius that they needed to wait until all their trainees could fight.

Gaius accepted their decision in a calm and measured way, but he showed just how livid he was when he was finally alone in his own room. His face twisted in rage and he had to struggle to prevent himself from breaking things out of frustration.

The Snow Lions, conversely, returned to their tower in quite the celebratory mood. They were feeling exceptionally jubilant, especially when compared to the previous day. Even the second-tier nobles had smiles on their faces and looked at Leon with less dismissiveness than they had before.

Alphonsus wasn't too thrilled, though, and went to his room early. Castor was a little more conflicted. On the one hand, Leon had taken revenge for their own humiliation, but on the other hand, the Deathbringers were not going to take this lying down.

Castor paused and glanced at Leon before following Alphonsus to the top floor but decided against speaking to him.

For his part, Leon was sitting with Henry, Alain, and Charles, watching them practice what they had learned in their Basic Combat classes. After about half an hour, Leon stepped in to show them a few blocks and counters to what they had learned.

As he was doing so, a couple of the trainees who had accompanied them during the ambush approached.

"Hey, um, we couldn't help but notice you all practicing..." one of them began.

"... Yeah, do you think we could join you?" the other finished, looking directly at Leon with shining expectant eyes.

Leon was about to immediately answer no, but he caught himself. He knew that if he was to rise through the ranks he would need to vastly improve his people skills, but he still hesitated; he still didn't particularly like being social.

"Sure! Come on over!" said Henry before Leon could make up his mind. The two trainees looked a little uncertain, even with Henry's assent. But, when they looked over at Leon, the young man finally made a decision and slowly nodded to them.

They then happily joined the four in their training, but Leon ended it a little earlier than he had the previous week due to the unexpected prolonged interaction.

Chapter 80: The Next Week

Classes began again the next morning. The Senior Instructor took the Snow Lions to the training field and separated them again into the usual groups. The trainees of the first two tiers began warming up for their morning training, while the Senior Instructor escorted Leon, Alphonsus, and Castor to the third-tier dueling area.

The Snow Lions were the second-to-last to arrive and they drew quite a few stares upon their arrival. Many of those stares were concentrated on Leon and would flicker between him and Gaius.

The nobleman, for his part, ignored Leon's presence as much as he could. Those paying attention—such as both Marcus and Leon—noticed the slight strain in his smile and the momentary curling of his hands into fists, though.

While the third-tier trainees were waiting for the last unit to arrive, Leon's eyes happened to wander over to where Valeria and Asiya were standing. As he did so, he happened to notice that they had been staring at him. Leon raised an eyebrow in confusion and stared back. Valeria's face immediately went a

slightly red and she looked away, but Asiya flashed him a strange smile and only looked away after her eyes had curiously drifted down a little.

Their behavior utterly confounded him, causing him to anxiously check himself to what they had been staring at. His clothes were fine, his hair wasn't particularly unusual, and there wasn't anything on his face, so he was left confused and wondering what they had been staring at.

It took a few minutes before he remembered hearing what he had suspected were other people when he had been spending time in that hidden pool.

'Could that have been them? No, Valeria at least seems too poised and proper to spend her time spying on people. Maybe I'm just being paranoid? That's probably it. Nothing happened then, I'm just... yeah.'

Despite his self-reassurances, he still couldn't get the possibility out of his mind. He grew more embarrassed the more he thought about the likelihood of having been seen at the pool, especially since the chance that it had been these two beautiful women was now in his head no matter how emphatically he denied it.

Needless to say, despite the two fighting the opening duel as usual, Valeria and Leon did not move as fluidly as they had the week before. Their attacks weren't as fast, and they seemed a little less aggressive, hesitating slightly whenever their duel brought them a little closer. In the end, Leon disarmed Valeria, knocking her spear out of her hand for the victory. That was the only duel he won that week, though, as she returned the next day to beat him bloody, with the two fighting to a draw in their other three morning duels that week.

During the afternoon classes, Valeria continued to sit next to Leon, though she deliberately avoided looking at him as much as possible. She was tempted to find somewhere else to sit, but she eventually decided that being next to Leon and a little embarrassed was preferable to being next to Gaius and wanting to smash his teeth in.

To say that Gaius was less than enthused about the situation would be to put it mildly, but he managed to keep himself under control. Though he wanted to, he didn't challenge Leon again. He forced himself to keep calm while watching Leon and Valeria spar every morning, enduring their increasingly obvious joy in testing themselves against an equal.

He drew a little comfort from seeing that they still weren't speaking much during their enchanting classes, but that Valeria would rather sit in silence next to a barbarian than with him was an insult that cut Gaius exceedingly deep, and only cut deeper with each passing day.

As for the enchanting classes themselves, the instructor had finally gotten around to starting the lectures after having every trainee write out each of the seven basic elemental runes to prove they could do it in a reasonable time. He started with introducing the sixty other runes in the runic alphabet and giving a brief summary of basic glyph structure.

Essentially, one or more runic circles form the core of the glyph, which is where the power source of the enchantment is usually located. Additional runes are added in a myriad of other patterns around the core, modifying it as needed. The Art of Enchantment is often described among enchanters as the 'Language of Magic'. From that perspective, a glyph is a sentence or paragraph made of runic letters, and the core is the first couple of words.

The entire week was spent memorizing the dozens of additional runes, with lecture time dedicated to basic glyph structure. It was a mentally taxing class, and Leon was grateful that the next class he had signed up for was spent quietly reading.

Over the entire week, everyone was watching the Snow Lions and Deathbringers. The trainees were waiting for the Deathbringers' response to the ambush over the weekend. They all knew it was coming, but Gaius, Linus, and Actaeon had been strangely silent on the subject. They ignored the Snow Lions whenever they showed up and didn't boast or threaten them in any way. Even the first-tier commoners in the Deathbringers were reserved and barely looked at the Snow Lions.

Things were so quiet, in fact, that by the end of Friday most of the trainees assumed that the conflict was over and the Deathbringers weren't going to retaliate. They began to put the excitement of the first week out of their minds as they refocused on their classes.

But, neither Leon nor Castor were so convinced that the Deathbringers had let the matter drop. They didn't really speak with each other, but they were both expecting something to happen over the upcoming weekend. That being said, there wasn't much they could do to prepare, especially as they couldn't just have the entire unit stay behind in the tower over the whole weekend just on a hunch. So, they both independently decided to simply wait and see what would happen.

—

"Oh, man! I'm exhausted!" uttered Charles as he collapsed onto a couch in the first-tier common room. "This week really dragged!"

"Really? *You're* exhausted?" asked Henry incredulously. It was Friday and the usual group was training in the corner, plus the two new faces who had joined them since the beginning of the week.

"And why can't I be exhausted?" Charles shot back.

"No reason you can't be, I guess. I've never painted before, so it's not like I know how draining it can be..." Henry responded sarcastically with a mocking smile.

Alain decided to get in on the mocking and said with excessive sarcasm, "Hey! Painting is real hard work, alright?! All that lifting of the paintbrush and running it along the paper—Charles, are you sure you've made it through this week's classes without any permanent damage?"

"Oh, don't start with this again..." said Charles in a tone that matched his exhaustion.

"What's this about painting?" inquired Leon with a curious look.

"... Charles took painting as his elective course after Magical Theory..." answered Alain after a moment of faint confusion.

"You didn't know that?" asked Henry. Leon didn't respond verbally but shrugged his shoulders noncommittally. "How did you not know?! We've been giving him shit about it for the past week!"

"Must've been while I was meditating or something..." said Leon with a little embarrassment. "But why are you giving him shit for anyway? Nothing wrong with painting."

"Indeed, painting is a pursuit worthy of the time spent on it," added Matthew, one of the two new trainees in the group. He was born in one of the merchant cities along the coast of the Gulf of Discord in the south. He had gotten a job in a warehouse transporting crates of beast cores in and out of storage, and it was this constant proximity to magical items that allowed his body to adapt to magic fast enough to ascend to the first-tier before he turned twenty-one, becoming eligible to enroll in the Knight Academy.

"No, nothing's wrong with painting itself. It's just that he chose painting over learning something more practical, like horse riding or military history," replied Alain.

"To each their own," said Bohemond, the other trainee who recently joined them. He was from a village in the Eastern Territories and had advanced to the first-tier thanks to some instruction from a fourth-tier knight who had spent some time recuperating in their village after being wounded repelling a raid by the rock giants in the Eastern Border Mountains.

"And the fact that you're in the same painting class as Charles has no bearing on you saying that, right?" said Henry in a teasing tone.

"Of course, not! Everyone ought to take the classes that most interest them, not simply take what is most practical. We all need some time to relax and learning about things we find interesting is one way to go about it," Bohemond replied.

"He's not wrong. I myself took a class where all I do is read old books. Hardly practical, but it helps me to relax after my enchantment class," stated Leon.

"I guess..." said Henry.

"Although... I am a tad curious as to why you picked that particular class, Charles, you don't really seem the sort that would be into painting..." Leon wondered aloud.

"Well thanks for that. Really appreciate the implication," Charles responded with sarcasm. "Anyway, the late Michael of Vesontio was born in a village less than fifteen miles away from the mining town I grew up in."

"Who's that?" asked Bohemond.

"A famous painter..." answered Charles a little drily.

"He painted the portrait of King Julius Septimius, as well as directed the work decorating the new dome over the new Assembly Hall. Most of his private works go for hundreds of thousands of silvers if you can find the right collector," added Matthew, drawing odd looks from the others. "What? I picked these things up in Palermo. We get a *lot* of cargo going through there, and people talk about it."

After a brief moment of moderately stunned silence, Charles continued. "Well, every year around Michael's birthday, we'd get a ton of traffic going through our town from art students and aficionados traveling to see the old master's home village that inspired most of his early work. I never actually learned to paint, but I spent plenty of time around painters and always kinda wanted to learn."

"Now's as good a time as any," said Bohemond in support of Charles, who nodded back appreciatively.

"Moving on, anyone got any plans for tomorrow?" asked Henry.

"I was going to see Jeanne a little after midday, but my morning's open," said Charles.

"Nah," replied Matthew.

"Nope," said Bohemond.

"I planned to go to the Heaven's Eye Tower," mentioned Leon, causing the other five to immediately go quiet and stare at him.

"Why... What do you need *there*?" asked Matthew, aware that Leon was from the Northern Vales. Those who aren't noble aren't typically welcome in the Heaven's Eye Towers unless they possess extraordinary wealth.

"Was hoping to find a good bow."

"A *bow*? You could find a good bow in just about any forum in the city. If you wanted a *really* good bow you could go to the Blasted Furnace," added Bohemond.

"It's fine. He's been there before, I doubt there'll be any problem if he goes there again," said Charles. He wasn't as shocked as the others, but he was still confused as to why Leon was going somewhere like the Heaven's Eye Tower for something as simple as a bow. The others dropped the matter when he said his piece, but they still gave Leon a few more odd looks.

After they finished their training and made plans for what to do the next day, they all made for bed. Before they all parted ways, though, Leon did remind them to always stick together just in case the Deathbringers tried something similar to what they had done the previous weekend. Five guys are much harder to ambush than two or three, after all.

[So, out of curiosity, why're you really going to the Heaven's Eye Tower?] asked Xaphan as Leon closed the door to his room behind him.

[I didn't take my bow when I left my home back in the north. I've come to regret that decision; I greatly miss shooting and hunting and want to get back into practice. Plus, I wanted to grab some good spell paper to practice writing runes,] replied Leon.

[That all? That Elise girl has nothing to do with it?]

[... No.] Leon's voice trembled a little, something which didn't go unnoticed.

[You don't sound very convincing.]

[Don't start with me, demon,] warned Leon.

[Alright, alright, fine. You're not going there to see Elise. Why would you need to go and see her when you're already spending so much time with... Valeria, was it?]

[Her name is Valeria, yes. And she has no bearing on this.]

[Mmmhmmm,] teased Xaphan.

Leon went silent, which Xaphan kept for a few seconds before continuing.

[Hey, didn't you tell me once that she might've been related to someone who attacked your home? What's with you getting so close with her anyway?]

['Getting close' would imply that we've actually spoken with each other, which we really haven't. And besides, I don't know how 'Adrianos Isynos' is written. It could be completely different from Valeria's name. It's probably just a coincidence.]

[Right. Well, regardless, you'd better make a move, or at least do something other than stammer and blush when talking to a pretty girl, damnit. I'm bored out of my gourd in here!] the demon complained.

[That sounds like a 'you' problem to me. And I don't blush!] Leon said, perhaps a little too insistently.

[Did your face go red and heat up?] asked Xaphan despite that fact that he already knew the answer.

Leon went silent again.

[It did, and we both know it. That means you fuckin' blushed!] taunted Xaphan in a teasing tone.

[Whatever... I just need a bow... no other reason...] muttered Leon.

[Don't say that! If you like a girl then make a damned move! Don't just... You know what? You just do your own thing. I'm going to stay out of it. Of course, 'your own thing' won't get you very far, but it's your own life.]

[Hey, screw you too, demon!]

[Prove me wrong, kid. *Prove me wrong.*]