

EPISODE 5: Hammers & Scalpels

Alinore Valmont. Venday. Virgo 16th, 2344 AA. 3:12 PM. Arroyo.

“Alinore Valmont?”

[This is indeed the high-strung Asian girl from Episode 3. Lin can be exhausting to write, because she reminds me of myself in junior high and early high school. She’s facing more external pressure than I did, but like me, most of her pressure is self-imposed. She kind of flounders when she doesn’t have a mission or concrete goal. And when things don’t go according to her meticulous plans, she gets a bit flustered.]

Lin turned sharply to face the voice, only to find a portly man of average height in glasses. He had dun hair, gentle brown eyes, and wore the dark green robes of an Arcanist, though Lin noted the numerous pins attached to the mantel of his robes. *He has licenses in multiple disciplines.* The downward facing blade of the Peace Keeping Force, however, was absent from his collection.

He’s a researcher through and through.

“Yes?” she asked, trying not to betray the cold coring her chest.

“My name is Lewin Carroll. I requested you as my protégé.”

“Oh. Yes, sir,” she said, automatically, but barely heard herself.

Shit! Fuck! Why? Why would they give me to this fat old scholar? Does my mother have something to do with this? Is this her attempt at having the last laugh?

[Lin’s relationship with her mother is like, a key aspect of her personality, and I wanted to start foreshadowing it early.]

Master Carroll put on an apologetic smile and gestured a polite invitation for her to follow him. *He knows I don’t want this.* Lin felt guilty for a half-second, knowing she was being impolite, but anger cinched her brow tight. *Good. Better he knows where we stand from the start.*

Carroll was quiet as he led her out of the hall. There were no other students behind him, and he didn’t pause at any of the orientation groups. *I’m alone? No other proteges? Why then? Why me?*

“How are you feeling? Have they given you anything to eat since assessments ended?”

“I’m fine, sir. Thank you,” she said, voice still golemic.

He gave her another sad, sighing smile.

“Fair enough. I’m feeling a bit peckish though. Would you mind if I stopped for some coffee and a sandwich?”

Lin gestured acquiescence. Her fingers were crisp and polite, but her voice and wyrd remained silent. They exited the assembly hall into the late afternoon glare. He paused at the top of the building’s staircase. opened his mouth, and then closed it again, as if he were unsure how to proceed. Finally, he said:

“I am sorry, Miss Valmont. I know you must be disappointed.”

Lin opened her mouth to proffer some polite denial but the words came too slow. And then it was too late to cover herself. *Damn it. It wasn’t supposed to go like this. Everything was going perfectly, and now it may as well be for nothing.*

“I want to be a Peacekeeper,” she said, at last.

“Like your brother and father, I know,” he said, smiling. After another second’s pause, he gestured for her to walk alongside him, rather than following as was customary. “I am the first to acknowledge: I am no warrior. I cannot offer any insights on how to fight with your wyrd, weapons, or martial arts. But based on your assessment scores, I doubt you will need much help with those areas of training. To speak frankly, I believe that curriculum receives enough emphasis already.”

What the hell would a career academic know about peacekeeping? Theory won’t save you from bullets, blades, or fire contracts. When Lin said nothing, Carroll continued:

“Too many people in the Amagium believe that malefaction can be solved if we simply punch people hard enough. Or that if we kill enough monsters and fae, they will eventually... give up, or something. Forgive me for saying so, but your father numbers among them.”

Lin stopped walking as if she had run into a wall. She actually staggered backwards. **[Explain Athenon Valmont from Lin’s perspective.]**

[This was well-developed in my head, but as per usual, I wanted to preserve my flow. Figured it would be best to circle back around to it later.]

Carroll also stopped, chuckled, and turned to face her, emanating apologies and gesturing for her to wait until he could explain himself.

“Please let me clarify: there is no denying your family’s legacy. Their service is an unquestionable tribute to the Amagium, in Arroyo, the Pacific States as a whole, and the world over. He is a hero—”

"Is my mother responsible for this?" Lin asked.

Carroll looked taken aback, and then confused. He shook his head.

"Your brother, actually."

"Athren?" Lin asked.

That makes no sense.

"I once asked my leximancy class to write an essay on how the Amagium's system of governance could be improved. And one student wrote an absolutely scathing, but fair, critique of your father's policies during his time as Archon. Imagine my surprise when I realized your brother was the one who wrote it."

"Please don't lie to me," Lin said, anger surfacing. "Athren is following in my father's footsteps." This drew an infuriating smile from Carroll.

"Is he?"

"Yes!" Lin insisted. "He's declared his discipline as Peacekeeping, and is at the *top* of his cohort, set to graduate with honors next year."

"Have you talked to your brother about the politics of Peacekeeping lately?"

Lin had not, but she was tempted to insist that she had anyway. *Bullshit for bullshit is only fair.* But Carroll continued before she could decide on a reply:

"Your brother has... a great deal more sympathy for people who are critical of the Amagium than your father. Some of the motions and opinions he put forth in my class are quit... well, in my opinion, he is quite enlightened."

"And my 'heroic' father isn't?" Lin asked haughtily.

"Not according to your brother," Carroll said. "Make no mistake. I know he is dedicated to the Peacekeeping Force and he understands its central role in the Amagium. That is something we share. But we believe that the way the Athenaeum goes about training officers is... not only outdated, but actively harmful. The difference ultimately comes down to... Hammers and scalpels."

Lin sighed and crossed her arms, sensing a speech. Carroll kept talking:

“Right now, we beat martial prowess into every aspirant that studies in these walls. We bludgeon them, until they too, become hammers. We neglect more precise applications of talent in favor of brute force—”

“Sir, you have mastered a number of disciplines. But it seems you don’t know anything about Peacekeeping,” Lin said. “We are trained in urdo-forensics, interrogation, conflict de-escalation, investigation...”

“And each of those areas of our curriculum receive roughly half as much as emphasis as combat magic, weapons training, and martial arts. This is true of all members of the keeping force, whether they become field officers, technicians, logisticians, liaisons to asfalis police. We train people to use volatile, destructive contracts that leverage principles they don’t fully understand...”

“So, what? You want me to become a scholar?” Lin asked, exasperated.

“That path is certainly open to you. Your talent permits almost anything, and I believe it would be abhorrent to waste that potential. But I also don’t believe in denying students their aspirations.”

“Then why did you pick me, knowing I intend to be a keeper?”

“If you are willing to trust me, I know I can train you into the finest Keeping Officer the Third Amagium has ever seen. That is not hyperbole. I’ve seen your assessment scores. You are already.... Incredibly sharp. And it would be a travesty for that edge to be dulled by uninspired training, especially when it has the potential to be honed even sharper.”

Lin scoffed.

“I mean, what choice do I have? You claimed me.”

As far as she knew, initial mentorship assignments were chiseled diamond. Transfers occasionally occurred after a student declared their discipline, but before that point, only death or some kind of scandal could break a pairing.

“If you are positive that this won’t work out, I will have you reassigned to Hawthorne, Hemmingway, or... anyone else of your choosing. But if you study under me, I promise you will master every aspect of what peacekeeping entails.” He paused for a second, then held out his hands. “What do you say?”

“I appreciate the offer, Master Carroll,” Lin said. “But I would prefer to be reassigned to Master Hemmingway.”

Carroll took a deep breath, looked down, and nodded.

“I honestly saw this going differently,” he admitted.

“That’s two of us,” Lin said, smiling apologetically.

“Alright. I will talk to the Administratum. But would you join me for my cup of coffee first? Your brother wrote an essay about you as well, and it quite intrigues me.”

Lin knew it was probably a ploy. But if his offer was sincere, she didn’t see how being polite could hurt.

[Gap to fill later - Carroll wins her over.]

[^I actually had no idea how I was gonna resolve this. After I reached the end of the story, her mention of her mother struck me as a good “in.”]

“May I ask a personal question? Something you said piqued my curiosity,” Carroll said.

Lin nodded.

“You mentioned your mother. What was that about?”

“Oh,” Lin said, then snickered a laugh.

[Transition back to Carroll’s offer.]

[^Again, was preserving flow.]

“I know Hemmingway is the obvious choice. He’s a decorated officer. Newly retired and still in his physical prime. Whereas I ...” he gestured vaguely and dismissively at his own body. “...Well, I am not. Worse still, I have disparaged your heroic father and was dismissive of his Keeping Force. You are well within your rights to reject me. But permit me one final offer,” Carroll said. “Study under me, with my undivided attention and support, for one year—as your brother asked me to ask you—and if you ever drop below the top percentile in your classes, I will personally arrange private tutoring with a master of that respective subject.”

[Lin considers it.]

[^As per usual, my goal was to get to the end of the episode, so I skipped over her interior calculus during the first draft.]

“Alright. One year. I will give you my all.” She waited for a smile to light up Carroll’s face before she hit him with the stinger. “On three conditions.”

Carroll gestured for her list them.

“First, I want to read the essay my brother wrote about my father.”

Carroll nodded slowly, and said:

“I will need to ask his permission, but I am certain that can be arranged.”

“Second. I want you to arrange extra lessons with other masters at my request, regardless of where I am in my class. I don’t care if I am excelling relative to my cohort. If I feel like I am falling behind what I know *I* can do, I am wasting my time.”

Carroll swallowed and nodded.

“And the last?”

[Uhh...Time to start tackling these brackets, I guess!]

[Yeah, I knew Lin would have three conditions, but I needed to finish the preceding brackets before I knew how to finish. Sometimes it really do be that way. My betas helped me workshop the end of the draft and come up with firearms training.]