

EPISODE 6: HIERARCHY

[This episode had the working title “Hierarchy” but it was just so... generic that I reworked it once I reached the end of the chapter. Making a Splash is a much more apt metaphor; Lin is throwing herself into a deep lake that is only slightly choppy so far. No permanent damage done (yet), but she is definitely rocking some boats.]

[Beta readers came through big time on this one. The first finished draft was pretty lackluster. One beta reader in particular pushed me to develop Lin’s conversations with her cohort before the fight and I think it radically improved the episode (thanks, Brian).]

Alinore Valmont. Solday, Libra 8th, 2344 AA. 12:12PM. Arroyo

[Gap to fill later: Pensey and Lin meet.]

[I didn’t know how to start this one to be entirely honest. I knew it had to begin with Lin meeting Pensey Hayes, but the obvious meeting point—discovering they are roommates—didn’t really grab me. So... I started with this scene instead.]

— Lunday Virgo, 9th. 11:45 AM. Arroyo —

The first day of training began with aerobic conditioning at six AM, followed by breakfast at seven.

Just before lunch, they had another brief bout of physical training. An eighth-year Aspirant, Cerinna Schweizer, showed them the five fundamental forms of erudensis—the Amagium’s signature martial art, a mix of martial arts and quick bursts of sorcery. A wyrd was an incredibly flexible resource, allowing combatants to buffer incoming hits, enhance their muscular strength, or launch invisible blows that an opponent could only sense and defend with sorcery of their own. Lin tried to make the most of it, though her father and Athren had already showed her how to perform more advanced forms.

After half an hour, the proctor told the girls to partner up and start practicing what they learned.

“Take it slow and easy, okay?” Schweizer said. “We’re just getting used to the movements.”

An intense-looking blonde girl approached Lin immediately.

“Miss Valmont, Will you partner with me?”

While they were practicing, Lin noticed this other girl knew what she was doing. She had some prior practice, moved quickly and comfortably with her strikes. *Good. I think we can get some real practice in.*

"I'd be honored. Please, call me Lin," she said, extending her hand.

"**Kimiss Knight,**" the girl said, taking her hand. Her expression was respectful, but all business.

[We are gonna see more of her eventually.]

They stepped opposite of each other, bowed, and fell into an easy, quick exchange of blows. Both of them knew how to moderate their strength, and Lin was pleased to find herself breathing heavily after only a couple minutes practice.

"Oof!" a familiar voice grunted.

Lin turned to find Pensey squared off against an extremely tall, athletic girl, six feet even if nothing. She was one of the girls who had been drafted into Hawthorne's keeping group. Lin thought she heard somebody call her Vetha. And she was showing no mercy.

Pensey managed to defend her head with her hands, and buffered the blows coming into her chest with her *wyrd*. But the blows were still landing, and to Lin's eye, they were coming in hard enough to leave bruises. Vetha fought like a boxer with solid, but rough technique. She had no idea how to use her *wyrd* beyond making her muscles hit harder, and her guard was virtually non-existent.

Do not suffer bullies in your cohort. Carroll had warned Lin in one of their early email correspondences. *Bullies seize authority without contributing anything to those who follow them, and crush the esteem of those they deem unworthy. And, unfortunately, the Athenaeum often mistakes such meanspirited hazing for productive rivalry. A way to weed the weak from the strong. I am counting on you to set a better example.*

Pensey coughed as the girl landed another blow against her sternum. Lin winced.

But then something magical happened. Pensey launched a wild, desperate punch and hit Vetha directly in the nose. It was a solid strike too, enough to stagger Vetha backwards. Pensey drew her hands to her mouth, horrified, and approached with an apology on her lips.

[Again, a beta reader took me to task for this line being too authorial. Which is the kind of nitpicking you absolutely want, because it makes you reflect on the difference between necessary narration, and your character's third-person close perspective. I reworked this paragraph considerably, and I think it reads much better, and is properly situated from Lin's direct observation.]

“I’m so sorry! Are you alri—”

Vetha backhanded Pensey savagely as she approached, knocking her to the ground. Lin’s new roommate made a choking noise before hocking a bloody glob of saliva on the grass. *Okay. I’ve seen enough.* Lin gestured to her partner to pause for a moment, and Kimiss nodded.

“Vetha, right?” Lin asked.

[I wrote the following fight in one go, and it was a helluva good time. I dunno if the following passage is really that good or not in terms of writing, but I do know I live for writing stuff like this. Action with moral stakes. Fights fueled by character development. General badassery. It is my drug.]

The other girl looked at Lin skeptically and asked:

“Is there a problem?”

“No, I’d say you’re a nuisance at best,” Lin said mildly.

Vetha’s eyebrows jumped.

“Excuse me?”

“I’ll excuse you. As soon as you apologize.”

“She sucker-punched me! I just got her back.”

Lin snickered and folded her arms.

“You were beating her stupid and she landed an honest hit. I could have driven a truck through the gap in your guard. Then, when she tried to extend you a courtesy, you exploited it.”

Vetha looked over to see if their proctor was watching, but she was at the other end of the field, coaching two girls on how to throw proper punches. Seeing they were in the clear, she drew her head back and gestured for Lin to put up her guard.

Exquisite.

The two girls squared off. Her form was decent, but again, she had almost no urdic control. *And I got under her skin. Which means she’ll be impulsive. All I need to do is wait for her attack.*

But after nearly full five seconds of posturing, Lin got bored and swatted Vetha in the ear with sorcery. The literal slap in the face was enough to goad the big girl into action. She rushed forward, telegraphing a thuggish, sorcery assisted punch. Lin easily dodged, and torqued

Vetha's body off balance with sorcery. It was a perfect opening for a follow-up attack, and Lin pointedly ignored it.

Vetha turned, launched a sloppy feint with her wyrd, followed by a reckless stream of punches, like the ones she had initially battered Pensey with. Lin deflected each blow with her wyrd or her hands, stepping back steadily until Vetha tired herself out. Then Lin reached out with her hand and slapped her full in the face. Harder this time.

Vetha growled, emitting an impressive, but impractical kinetic shockwave to drive Lin back. Again, Lin deflected the force with her own wyrd, and stepped to the side. Now that the difference in their skills were evident, the girl was getting more cautious. *But she's pissed enough that if she lands a hit with her wyrd, it will really hurt.* Their fight had also drawn a crowd of onlookers, which was sure to attract the proctor. *I need to end this quickly.*

The next time Vetha took a step forward, Lin coiled her wyrd around Vetha's supporting ankle and yanked with all her might. As the girl pitched forward, eyes wide with panic, Lin considered kicking her in the jaw, but decided that would be a bit much for the first day. Instead, she let Vetha fall on her chest, and planted her shoe on the girl's head before she could get up.

Lin slowly, but steadily applied weight to Vetha's jaw as she spoke:

[I'm really drawing on my Ender's Game influences here. The beginning of Ender's Game, and Ender's Shadow, where you literally have kids killing kids... I dunno if traumatizing is the right word, because I am indebted to those passages, but "raw as fuck," definitely fits.]

"When somebody scores a legitimate hit, you either take it in stride, or yield until you can cool off. Pensey thought she broke your nose. Abuse her kindness again, and I'll show you what a real sucker punch looks like. Do you understand?"

Vetha, who had been winded by the fall, slapped the grass with her hand in surrender. Lin yielded, and waited for the girl to catch her breath before extending a hand to her. Vetha was red in the face and still breathing heavily, but she accepted Lin's hand and got to her feet.

"What's going on over here?" the proctor asked, finally having noticing the disruption in the training ranks.

"I'm sorry, Miss Schweizer," Lin said, bowing in front of the upperclassman. "Things got a little heated and I lost control."

The proctor seemed to smell the lie, and looked to Vetha for confirmation.

"No, it was my fault. I didn't keep my guard up," Vetha said.

Again, the proctor looked to the crowd of onlookers, eyes lingering on Pensey, who looked absolutely terrified. Schweizer knew full well she had missed something, but ultimately decided that prying was more trouble than it was worth.

“Alright. Accidents happen, but please try not to kill each other on the first day.”

— Lunday Virgo, 9th. 9:02 PM. Arroyo —

[I complicated this conversation considerably from the first draft, drawing from the new material I added at the beginning. Tip: If you add something important to the beginning of a story, you need to pay it off later. Not necessarily in the same story, but it helps to touch on the issue again in that same sequence, even if you don't resolve it. Bringing things full circle is generally a good practice in genre storytelling.]

“I'm grateful, really,” Pensey said. “But why stick your neck out for me? Vetha probably hates you now. And other girls might come after you as well.”

They lay opposite each other in their bunks, just a couple minutes after lights out.

“If she wants to carry a grudge, that's on her. And if other girls come for me... better sooner than later.”

“What do you mean?” Pensey asked.

“Bullies are human cancer,” Lin said. “If somebody doesn't put them in place straight away, they only get worse. They inspire others to act the same. And personally, I can't stand people who prey on weakness to feel better about themselves.”

Pensey chuckled.

“I guess I am pretty weak.”

Lin winced and gestured an apology.

“My father always says there are two ways to look at weakness. Justification and motivation. If you use your weakness as an excuse to not apply yourself, you'll stay weak or get even weaker. But if you use the frustration of being weak as fuel, make it a reason to become strong... you don't stay weak for very long.”

Pensey sat up in bed, peering at Lin.

“So what do *you* use as motivation? I mean, people are already talking about this afternoon. Not just our cohort. I heard two third year aspirants talking about this prodigy who took out a girl two feet taller than her.”

Lin bristled.

“I am five foot one!” She protested. Pensey giggled. “It’s not funny! I’m not that short. I’m taller than you!”

[In case anybody cares, Pensey is currently 4’ 11”. Lin is really clinging to those inches though.]

“That’s what I mean, though. You’re so strong you’re already larger than life.”

“That sort of reputation has its drawbacks. Look, the reason I don’t care about picking fights is... Everybody in grade school hated me. I’m a teacher’s pet. I’m stuck up. Bitchy. Awkward. Like, I never know what to talk about, or what to not say. There are these rules that everybody else just... understands automatically. It’s a game I don’t know how to play. And when I try, people assume that I’m being sarcastic or... whatever. Once my own mom asked me if I was prepared to die a virgin.”

[Hmm. Could she REALLY be that bad? (Spoiler: Ya.)]

“What?!” Pensey asked, sitting up in her bed, expression horrified.

Lin chuckled and reclined again, staring at the ceiling.

“That’s a whole other story. But yeah. Everybody else is already making friends, forming cliques... Like, you seem to be getting along with Jenea, Liviam. Meanwhile, you’re the only one who will even talk to me.”

There was a long pause.

“So... what are you doing to turn that weakness into strength?”

[In my opinion, this is where we meet “Real Pensey” for the first time. She isn’t just a squeaky, relentlessly cheerful chipmunk. She has the makings of a lawyer, and a damn fine one at that.]

Pensey’s words were like a needle in Lin’s neck. She had never thought of it that way before. In her head, people were something that happened to you. *After all, how the hell can you ‘train’ yourself to become more social if nobody was willing to give you a chance?*

“Other than studying, getting along with people is like, the one thing I’m good at,” Pensey continued. “If anything, I’m too nice for my own good. If you teach me how to fight, I’ll teach you how to people.”

“How to people,” Lin giggled. “I don’t know. I mean, I appreciate the offer, Pensey, but....”

“Please.” Her roommate’s emanations changed, suddenly serious and almost painfully earnest. “I’m so out of my depth here. I feel useless. And I’ve been racking my brain, trying to think of a way to thank you. If you need my help half as much as I need yours... well. I’d feel better about myself. And you might feel better too.”

Lin waited a long time before answering.

“And if I turn you into an outcast?”

“Then we’ll find other outcasts to join us. That’s the trick really. You don’t need to be liked by everybody. You just need to find the people who are right for you.”

“And if you aren’t right for anybody?” Lin asked, but even to her, the question sounded like an excuse. A reason to stay weak.

“Too late. We’re friends,” Pensey said decisively, and laid down. “I am unilaterally declaring a mutual bond of sisterhood, camaraderie, and fellowship, effective immediately and henceforth.”

[I know I’m getting a bit cute here, but I honestly believe that friendships usually start out like this. Circumstances plant the seed. You nurture it with trust, generosity, availability, dependability, shared humor... all that good shit.]

“I’m pretty sure it doesn’t work like that,” Lin said, laughing.

“You don’t know how it works.” Pensey said brightly. “You said so yourself.”

Lin was at a loss for words. *She’s got you there, Valmont. Maybe she’ll make a good leximancer after all.* Pensey rolled over in her bed, looking at Lin with an enchanting smile on her face.

“Trust me. And I’ll trust you,” she said. “That’s all there is to it.”

Something in Lin’s chest cracked. There was a draft in her heart and it made her shiver. But warmth followed in its wake. Excitement. This was one of the longest conversations she had with somebody her own age in... years. And it was easily the most pleasant.

“Okay,” Lin said. “You have my trust.”