

Supreme M 131

Chapter 131 Blood in the Deser

Their spies had brought news that a civil war was inevitable, it was the perfect moment to start planning their invasion.

Speaking in their name, was Ashun Dagfuur, Feather of the Red Lion tribe, temporarily appointed as High Feather, first among equals and spokesman of the tribes. He was a tall man, around 1.84 meters (6') high, with a lean and muscular body, an olive complexion and a long but well-groomed beard.

Like all the Feathers, he wore heavy white pants and shirt to endure the coldness of the night, and a turban on his head, with a huge ruby on its centre to represent his status in the tribe.

The meeting was held in a ceremonial tent, golden in colour whose sides and floor were covered by carpets and tapestries depicting the collective history of the desert.

The roof of the tent was enchanted to be able to turn invisible at will, since the Benefactor hated constricted spaces, and this way was still able to gaze at the moon and the stars.

The space was perfectly lighted by twenty-seven black iron braziers, one for each tribe. Their fires were fueled by the magic of their respective Feather, used both to symbolize his strength and vote once a discussion had come to an end.

As always, Ashun spoke with passion, describing all the green lands and water springs, waiting for tribes to seize them from the weak and stupid plainsmen. His black eyes searched for the other Feather's approval and support, but he found none.

After he had begun his speech, all eyes were fixated on the lonely figure standing on the other side of the tent, watching its every movement.

It was a fiery red bird, three meters (9' 10") high, with the body of an eagle and the tail's feathers resembling those of a peacock. The legendary phoenix Salaark, also known as the Benefactor of the desert, that centuries before had united all the tribes under its rule.

It was whispered that from each of its feathers, a peerless weapon could be forged, and that its blood held the secret of immortality. To fit into the tent, it had shrunk remarkably, and was now in its most vulnerable state.

Despite that, no man or woman among the Feathers felt any kind of emotion aside from respect and fear.

Salaark stood still, its eyes closed, knowing it would not be able to control itself if it opened them.

Once Ashun had finished, it asked a simple question.

"So, are you going to leave the desert?" Salaark's voice wasn't loud, but still sounded perfectly clear to all of those present.

"No, my liege. The Red Lion would never do that." He raised his hands and lowered his head in a sign of submission.

"I'm only proposing for us to take revenge against the plains and secure new resources."

"Revenge?" It asked opening a single eye. "To bring death to the living will not make their ancestors suffer. It sounds more like a petty excuse to leave because you are unsatisfied with what you have now."

"I will not leave and I'm not ungrateful." He said trying to appear strong and confident, but cold sweat ran down his spine.

"Then how do you propose to keep the conquered springs? What good is a fertile soil if not tilled?"

"Well, of course some of our men will have to stay behind with their families. But only to establish a supply chain that will benefit all the tribes."

"I don't care for your sweet words, only for their meaning." Salaark harshly replied.

"You want for your people to move away, to grow their children in a foreign land, afar from the desert and from me! I have no objection to your plan." The last phrase left everyone shocked, leniency had never been its strong suit.

"But at the same time, I will give it no support. Those who wish to take part in it are free to do it, as long they first return to me all my blessings." The second part, instead, was perfectly in line with its character, making all the Feathers turn pale.

"Just to be clear, are you speaking as High Feather, as Feather of the Red Lion tribe, or just for yourself?" Salaark's eyes opened, releasing a massive amount of killing intent that brought Ashun to his knees, its talons tapping on the ground had the rhythm of war drums.

"He does not speak for the Golden Eagle tribe." Said a middle-aged woman standing up from her chair, just to kneel on the ground, her forehead touching the floor while her brazier turned black, denying the High Feather's words.

"He does not speak for the Silver Wolf tribe." One after the other, all the Feathers knelt down, the black light from the braziers projecting an eerie atmosphere.

"He does not speak for the Red Lion tribe." Recognizing Ashun's failure, the elders that accompanied him disowned their leader, hoping to spare their people from being banished forever.

Through a collective effort, they managed to snatch the flame from Ashun's control, turning it black and leaving him alone. The turn of the events had shocked him, but not to the point to not recognize what had happened.

Beneath the tension and fear appearing on his peers' visage, he could see their lips curling into a barely contained smile. He knew to be unpopular due to his overbearing character, trying to benefit his tribe at everyone else's expenses.

But that was because under his leadership, the Red Lion had grown to be one of the most populous and strongest desert tribes. Ashun had used that in the past to put pressure on the neighbouring tribes, to gain more and give less, boosting his status in his community.

When they had appointed him High Feather, he had thought they were finally ready to submit. Instead it had all been a ruse to take him out without a war, in perfect accord with the laws of the desert.

Whatever the outcome of the Council, they would have gained a profit, either by invading new lands or by eliminating a powerful rival. They had used his ego against him, turning Ashun in an unwitting sacrificial pawn.

He knew what was going to happen next, after being stripped of his title from the elders, the Benefactor would take away all the artifacts and the books Salaark had given him through the years. Lastly, it would strip him of her greater blessing, the gift for magic.

Ashun had been a talentless youth before meeting the Benefactor. The phoenix had been fascinated by his passion and dedication to the tribe, sharing with him her secrets and wisdom, turning the boy into one of the mightiest magical warriors of the Red Lion.

And now it would take everything back. Ashun didn't know how Salaark had boosted his mana capacity and magical strength; he had been made unconscious every time it "treated him". But he had seen many times how it would revert the effects.

A simple glance and the victim's body would twist and writhe, the veins would turn blue and bulge out, while the mana would literally be squeezed out through excruciating pain, until nothing was left.

Ashun had lived his thirty-six years as a warrior, a leader, a man among men. He couldn't bear the thought of losing so much and live the rest of his life in disgrace. Before the sentence was carried out, Ashun used magic one last time, stopping his own heart.

In death, his honour would be saved, and his family would be treated as the grieving relatives of a dead Feather, instead like those of a traitor.

The Benefactor looked at the corpse, nodding slightly at Ashun's final decision.

Salaark had liked him as a boy and loved him as a man, but once he had become a leader they had grown apart. The more power he acquired, the more dissatisfied he became.

First stealing from his own tribe, then twisting the arms of the neighbouring ones to quench his thirst for glory. And now, he had even the gall to ask for Salaark to consent to a senseless migratory war.

If the phoenix had ever wanted to leave the desert, it would have already done it. If it wanted to bathe the world in fire and blood, Salaark wouldn't need to spend centuries teaching the tribes magic and how to prosper in the harsh environment it called home.

"I am Salaark, the desert's sun! My path, is the only path! My words are law!" It roared spreading its wings, setting the whole tent and its occupants ablaze, yet burning none.

"I can be like the sunrise that harbingers a new era, or like the sunset that preludes a dark night! Summon me again out of petty greed, and all the tribes will need new leaders."

Chapter 132 Suffering

After Professor Marth finished healing Lith's arm, the bandages were removed, revealing that it was back to normal, except for one small detail. Unlike the rest of his body, that still retained his normal colour, it was pale like it had never seen the light.

Marth didn't miss the silent question in his eyes.

"Sorry, I don't know how Manohar manages to do that. In theory it's impossible for new skin to retain any kind of tan, but that doesn't stop him from doing it anyway."

Then, whispered in Lith's ear:

"It's better if you go to Manohar later, if the skin problem bothers you. I don't feel like bringing him back here would be a good idea."

Lith nodded, both the Headmaster and his father probably wouldn't be able to take in another one of his pep talks.

"Professor, you have yet to tell me what happened after I lost consciousness." - Thanks to Solus, Lith already knew the answer, but he needed to pretend to be curious about it.

"Yes, indeed. But it's better if you hear it from the ones that actually saved your life. It took quite some effort to force your friends to leave your bedside and get some rest."

His parents were moved, hearing their son had such dedicated friends, Lith not so much, since it made crumble another chunk of his personal beliefs. It also raised a creepy question.

- "Solus, since now I'm wearing an hospital nightgown, please, tell me Manohar didn't strip me in front of the others."

"No, he didn't." She giggled. "But there would be nothing wrong with it, you are all doctors after all."

"True, but if the situation was reversed, do you think any girl would like being seen naked by three of her male friends?"

"It depends on the friends, I guess." There was a hint of malice in her words.

"Okay, that's it." Lith decided to solve the matter once and for all.

"Solus, what's happening to you? Ever since we came to the academy, from time to time you try to fix me a girl or another, say something inappropriate, like right now. People aren't just slabs of meat, they have feelings too."

"That's rich, coming from you!" For the first time since they had met, Lith could sense her anger. He didn't reply, waiting for Solus to vent out.

"Since when do you care for feelings? All you do is lying to manipulate everyone, fight like a madman, amass power, rinse and repeat. Have you ever thought about my feelings? About how scared I am every time you do something stupid, putting your life at risk like it's nothing?

Or how envious I am of all of you, free to talk, laugh, walk in the sun, while I'm trapped all the day inside a ring of stone, living my life through you? And to be honest, is not much of a life.

You have so many people that love you, so many chances to get close to others and become real friends, instead of just pretending. Yet you always reject them like trash, and that makes me furious.

You know, maybe the Scorpicores were right. Maybe I really am a cursed object, because this life sometimes really feels like a curse." –

Despite she had no tears to shed, to Lith it was like she was bawling her eyes out.

It made him feel terribly guilty and helpless. Too often he had closed himself to her, either to study or practice, speaking only to ask her help. They had been together for so long, yet he still sometimes treated Solus like some kind of home appliance.

Lith couldn't deny anything she had said. To him people were just tools, while feelings were a useless burden.

- "I'm sorry, Solus. I don't know what to say. All this time I never stopped considering how you felt, always taking your happiness for granted."

"It's not entirely your fault." She mind-sniffed. "I never shared my worries with you, because I was afraid you wouldn't care or understand. Thanks for proving me wrong." A warm aura spread from her consciousness, the equivalent of a hug.

"By my maker, it was all so much easier when we just met. With me being content just with surviving, learning new things every day. But now, knowledge is not enough anymore. I want to feel, I want to experience, and you are my only window to the world.

I should be the one apologizing, for being so pushy all this time."

"Well, maybe between Necromancy and Forgemastering, we can find a way to give you a proxy body."

"A corpse or a golem? Thanks, but no thanks. I already feel like a monster, sometimes, I don't need to also look like one. Besides, I think life isn't a problem to be fixed, more like something I need to decide if it's worth having." –

Lith didn't like at all how the conversation had turned out. His only true friend was suffering, and that wasn't something he could just passively accept.

After changing into a new uniform, he let Professor Marth call for his 'friends', that despite the short notice arrived incredibly fast.

Normally, Lith would have found a way to avoid the inevitable group hug that ensued, but Solus' words were still ringing in his ears.

- "Progress, not perfection." – He repeated in his mind, like a mantra, resisting the revulsion that the physical contact with those four strangers arose at instinct level.

They drowned him in questions about his health, repeating more than once how they had thought to have lost him. Elina was moved to the tears, seeing their affection for her child.

"Guys, allow me to introduce you to my parents, Raaz and Elina."

At those words, they finally released him.

Raaz shook their hands, while Elina embraced them tightly.

"If you ever come to pass in our village, you will always be welcome in our home. I'll never be able to thank you enough."

After a few niceties, Lith prompted them to tell him what had happened after he crashed into the spatial crack.

Despite already knowing everything, he remained impressed by their focus and dedication during such a critical moment, to the point of remembering the finest details. Obviously, with Linjos present, they overlooked all the punching part.

Then it was Lith's turn to express his gratitude. A simple thank you and a handshake was fine for Raaz, who was a stranger to them. Not to mention he was quite intimidated. For all he knew they could all be prince and princesses.

Lith had no choice but to put a big smile on his face and hug them one by one.

While for the others he managed to perform a "in and out" kind of hug, when it was Quylla's turn, she locked him in place. Lith could feel her hands running over his back, while she sunk her head in his chest, sobbing a little.

After a few seconds, the situation became really awkward. Everyone was looking away, until Raaz saw the silent plea for help in his eyes and said:

"Son, what do you want to do? Do you want to come back home, change academy or stay here? We'll respect your decision, whatever it is."

Only then Quylla finally let him go and hid behind Friya, blushing wildly after having realized what she had done.

Lith pondered for a while. Despite all its flaws, the White Griffon academy was still the safest place for him. Other academies would probably discriminate him for his origins and past, forcing him to constantly watch his back.

Also, he still had to solve the mystery of the boxes in his pocket dimension, find a way to avert the dryad's prophecy and to save Solus from her misery. She could refuse his help all she wanted, Lith would never give up on her without a fight.

"I want to remain here, dad. I think I need them as much as they need me."

Chapter 133 Contingencies

"You'll not regret your choice, Lith." Professor Marth patted his back, with a proud look on his face.

"Once you graduate, you'll discover that A ranked mages, like you and me, are treasured almost as rank S, if not more." He chuckled.

"What? Why?" Lith didn't know if to consider it a good or bad news.

"Because as you have seen, geniuses like Manohar aren't just brilliant. They are also wilful, fickle and unpredictable. We may not be as productive, but are much more level headed and easy to handle."

After the accident in the training hall, Professor Rudd had lost much of his nastiness. He now replied when someone asked him explanations, and whenever he saw Quylla or Lith, he would sigh deeply shaking his head.

In the following weeks, Lith put his heart and soul in Forgemastering, relentlessly pestering Professor Wanemyre with questions. He was researching both the runes that kept the boxes locked and a construct that was able to feel like a human.

The library helped him greatly on his first task. Even if the exact sequence of runes wasn't to be found anywhere, Lith was able to determine their power and purpose. He came to the conclusion that opening at least one of the boxes was feasible, if he had Wanemyre level of mastery and a proper research team.

Since that was impossible, he decided to take a roundabout route. Instead of attacking the lock from the outside, like a normal Forgemaster, he would destroy its pseudo core like only an Awakened one could.

The lock and the box had a pseudo core each, both held in place by the respective mana pathways their maker had surrounded them with, thanks to the rune patterns. The main difference between a pseudo core and a real mana core, was that the former had no way to replenish its energies without the mage that had imprinted it.

Hence, if somehow Lith managed to damage the pathways, the energy stored in the pseudo core was supposed to leak without triggering the explosion, and the lock spell would be undone.

Before doing this kind of experiments, Lith would always use his Hush spell and several barriers, to prevent a resulting explosion to destroy his room or be noticed from the outside.

After a month since the beginning of the second semester, Lith had already lost three boxes. All of them had exploded without leaving any trace behind, but he still considered it a success.

Neither he or his belongings had suffered any damage, and with each box the explosion was getting weaker. It was only a matter of time before Lith could find the right way to puncture the runic pathways without the pseudo core becoming instable.

- "Now I get why the vision wanted me to save Nok and get to meet Kalla. (AN: the small Byk and its mother.) With only the box from Rodimas, I would have never managed to open it.

I could either give it to the Marchioness or Linjos, leaving me empty handed, or try and fail on my own." He sighed.

"Well, for being self-taught you are doing great. Marth and Wanemyre always praise you for your talent and achievements. I think Wanemyre already considers you the best student of the fourth year."

"Yeah." He sighed again.

"Someone is bound to get angry at me, again. Not to mention that I am falling behind in dimensional magic. Without the all-nighters, even Yurial is slowly catching up with me, and I have yet to learn the Restoration spell, that Quylla already knows. I must work harder!"

"Maybe it's because Quylla has only one specialization, while Yurial just two, and they are hardworking too. You, instead, are such a slacker." Solus' voice was oozing sarcasm.

"Top of both your official specializations, learning other specializations on your own and converting them into true magic. All this while working on that lock, researching a body for me and refining your mana core during your spare time.

Which usually means when you are forced to use a bathroom or during theoretical lessons. You don't sleep from almost a month. Honestly, I'm amazed you achieved so much with only twenty-four hours a day.

Progress, not perfection. Remember? You need to slow down."

"Can't do. The second trimester's exam is nearing, and no one knows what's going to be about. Must make every second matter!" –

Since the explosion of Coirn Hatorne's Alchemic laboratory, the city of Kandria had quickly plunged into mass hysteria. Just a few days after the event, strange diseases and murders had started to happen all around the city, and with the passing of time, things had only got worse.

Healers from all the Marquisate and beyond had been called for help, but despite both the Crown and the Mage Association were sparing no expenses to get at the root of the problem, they were getting nowhere.

An information blackout had been enacted, to avoid the panic to spread outside the city borders. Those who knew about the phenomenon, talked about a mysterious plague haunting the province of Kandria, and were worried about it spreading.

The body count had already reached the hundreds, and with each passing day more and more cases arose, forcing the Crown to declare the status of quarantine two weeks after the start of the outbreak.

Whoever tried to get in or out the city would be executed on the spot, the whole region had been enveloped by an array that prevented flying spells and Warp Steps to work.

Sylpha, Queen of the Griffon Kingdom and supreme head of the Mage Association, was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. She hadn't slept properly since the old nobles' rebellion had started, and now with the unsolved mystery of the plague, she felt she was losing her mind.

The Queen hadn't missed how the current predicament had occurred right after Arjîn went missing in action, the problem was determining how the two events were related. Knowing Arjîn's prowess, she suspected it was all the work of an Awakened one.

It was impossible for a member of the Corpse to be killed by conventional means during a simple recognition mission. Also, the fact that the best minds of the Kingdom were still clueless, was proof enough it wasn't something fake magic could achieve.

Her problem was that aside from the members of the Corpse, the Crown had no Awakened ones, and Lady Tyris refused to train more than seven at a time. The remaining six members were already engaged in life or death situations, otherwise she would have never recalled Arjîn so soon.

The rescue teams were still looking for him under the lab's debris, but so far nothing had come out. Out of desperation, she took out her communication amulet, trying to reach for Krishna Manohar, the god of healing.

He was the best healer of the Kingdom, and her last hope. Aside from a magical plague, it could have been the effect of an ancient artifact. Such powerful weapon, if it even existed, once found had to remain a secret, and that was the reason why she had kept him as a last resort.

That man was a loose cannon, discretion and reliability weren't his strong suits. The amulet gave no response, even after multiple attempts.

Having no time for his antics, Sylpha called Linjos, instead, demanding for Manohar's whereabouts and the reason of his unavailability.

"I would never dare to disobey a direct order of yours, you Majesty, but alas, your first request is beyond me. Even I do not know where he is. As for the second, I think you wouldn't believe me without hearing it from the horse's mouth."

The Headmaster took a piece of paper and placed it on the amulet's gem, allowing the Queen to read its content.

{Dear Linjos...} The name was followed by a doodle depicting a horse bearing a striking resemblance to the Headmaster, even wearing his clothes.

{...I'm on the verge of an incredible magical breakthrough. I can't risk my research to be ruined by the constant pestering of mediocre minds, so I'll be gone for a while.

K.M.}

"How dares he to disappear again? It's already the third time this year!" Sylpha punched her desk hard enough to break it in half.

"Send me your second best diagnostician. If he/she doesn't solve my problem, I'll have your head beside Manohar's in my trophy room!"

Chapter 134 Tough Times

Although Invigoration allowed Lith to avoid sleeping, it wasn't without side effects. Back when he was still at home, he had several opportunities to relax, like when hunting for food, teaching Tista fake magic, or simply spending quality time with his family.

Now Lith was relentlessly working like a machine, piling up stress without any break outside his three daily meals. Over time, the accumulated mental fatigue made him more cranky, nervous and aggressive.

It was something the Professors would not notice. Lith treasured them, and did his best to hold his temper and treat them with the respect they deserved. The same applied to his 'friends'.

After his last heart to heart with Solus, he tried to spend more time with her, to give her what she needed, more emotions and human interaction. It would soothe her depression and wear down his nerves, but he didn't care.

- "Solus always does so much for me. Not only she is basically my moral compass, helping me on all the academical subjects. She also restricts my most violent urges, making me almost human.

Heck, if it was possible, I would gladly trade place with her. She would make a much better person than me." –

Solus was moved by how strong were his feelings for her, and how many sacrifices he was willing to endure for her sake. At the same time, thought, she was very worried.

The prolonged lack of sleep had only made more apparent that his mind and body were experiencing a major change. Since overcoming the bottleneck, Lith's body kept getting stronger every time the mana core was refined.

As for his mind, the recent events had put a lot of stress on his already twisted psyche. Ironically, while near death experiences were the norm since Lith had started to practice high level magic, it was finding people that actually cared for him outside of his family that triggered an inner conflict.

Changing life-long values wasn't easy, it was like admitting to have always been wrong about almost everything.

On the other hand, the same could be said about her. The quality and quantity of her nourishment had dramatically improved, and her mana core was on the verge of turning green.

But what bothered Solus the most, were her new feelings. Thanks to Lith's new enhanced senses she could hear all the mean comments people would make behind his back, all the petty grudges that every praise he received would arise.

The more she knew humans, the more disgusted she became. After he had almost died protecting everyone from the spatial cracks, the kindest comment she had heard was:

"Even after losing an arm, we can't get him out of our hair for a whole day? That guy is worse than a cockroach!"

Solus was starting to think it was her being wrong all along.

Lith was summoned by the Headmaster less than an hour later Queen Sylpha had expressed her newfound interest for turning Linjos' head into a toilet brush holder, instead of mounting it on a wall.

After consulting with Professor Marth, the second-best healer of the White Griffon academy, Linjos was left with no choice.

"If it's a life or death situation..."

"Cut the 'if'! There are lives on the line, mine included!" Linjos interrupted Marth.

"...then I'd definitely send Lith from Lustria. Is the only one whose diagnostic skills are at Manohar's level."

"A student instead of a Professor? How low have we stooped? What will become of the prestige of this academy?" Linjos moaned.

"Stooped?" Marth knitted his eyebrows in disapproval.

"The new replacing the old is the way of life. Also, accepting someone that all the other academies rejected out of prejudice, is not stooping. Especially if he succeeds."

"But what if he fails?" Linjos was about to cry. "We'll become the laughingstock of the Kingdom. Everyone will think we are so incompetent we have to rely on a child!"

"Well, we can always send a couple of Professors and hope for the best. At least you would fail with dignity."

Linjos groaned, his neck suddenly hurting. Failure wasn't an option.

"What about that other student? Quylla from Cerea? At this point, sending one or two makes no difference."

"It actually does." Marth objected. "Her talent for light magic is outstanding, I believe that if properly nurtured, she can become the next Manohar..."

"Stop saying that name!" Linjos' neck felt a new pang, feeling the executioner's axe nearing.

"I mean in a good way."

"There is nothing good about that man!" Seeing the Headmaster being unreasonable, Marth dropped the matter.

"As I was saying, she is a magnificent mage, yet she is too young to witness such horrors. Not to mention that her diagnostic skills are about my level. I'd rather go myself instead of putting her future at risk.

As for our new star, he is... quite special."

Marth tapped on Lith's complete personal file. A folder almost as thick as a book, where the experts from the Mage Association had classified him as what on Earth would be called "high-functioning sociopath".

At that point, Linjos had stopped resisting and accepted his fate.

When Lith entered, he was wearing his old set of frown and glare.

"I didn't do anything wrong, and was about to have a magical breakthrough!" When he had received the call, Lith was about to clear the second last exercise before attempting a real Warp Steps.

After the sabotage, the fourth-year lessons had been suspended for a few days, until the internal investigation was concluded. He had used that time to further practice under Quylla's guidance, and was close to placing eight opening a Gate.

While most students had been scarred by the event and needed psychological counselling, he had continued his studies like nothing had happened, managing to catch up with those more talented than him.

Lith's choice of words only intensified Linjos' feeling of impending doom.

The Headmaster gave him a file, containing all the relevant information about the events in Kandria, explaining to him that his presence was required to shed light on the matter.

"I'm just a student." Lith replied giving back the folder.

"What does this have to do with me?"

"What Headmaster Linjos forget to tell you, boy, is that this isn't a request. This is an order from the Queen herself."

The voice belonged to a man about thirty years old, 1.82 meters (6') high that walked out of a Warp Steps that opened right in the middle of the room. He had light brown crew cut hair and moustaches of the same colour.

He was wearing a deep blue uniform, bearing on the heart the Royal crest, a triangular shield representing a prancing griffon with a crown on its head and holding two sceptres in his front claws. One representing the magical power, the other the military one.

"Lith, allow me to introduce to you Captain Velagros, from the Queen's corps. Captain, this is Lith from Lustria" Linjos stood up, offering his hand to his esteemed guest.

"Were you spying on us, or did you just wait in order to make a dramatic entrance?" Lith wasn't impressed, more like annoyed. His bad mood made him blurt out what normally he would have just thought.

"Kid, this is no laughing matter. People is dying this very moment. If you can do something about it, it's your duty to."

"People dies every day." Lith shrugged. "Usually it happens to the poor, the orphans, the homeless. Yet no one gives a damn about it. But if it happens to a few rich guys in a fancy city, then suddenly it becomes a huge problem.

Also, I have no duty, since I took no oath. So, let me rephrase: what's in it for me?" He said rubbing his right thumb and index fingers together.

Normally Captain Velagros would have been tempted of teaching the arrogant kid a lesson, but he too had read the file. It was clearly stated that because of his upbringing, Lith had no real ties to the Kingdom.

That was the reason his family was so tightly protected. The orders were to not antagonize him, unless it was absolutely necessary.

Chapter 135 Traitor

Captain Velagros could only grin and bear Lith's attitude, and not only because of his orders. The more he looked at the youth, the more wrong everything felt. The cold and dead eyes, the detached attitude, were all things he had seen plenty of times, but never in kids.

They were traits found either in battle hardened veterans or in madmen with an agenda. Last but not least, back when he had stepped forward with an intimidating manner, his body had started screaming for danger.

A member of the corps didn't manage to reach his age without developing a keen instinct, and in that moment his own was telling him to back off and avoid sudden movements.

"How much do you want?" He asked.

"You say it like I'm extorting money. Before being a healer, I was a hunter. And the first thing I learned, is that hunters don't do favours, we cut deals. Here is my offer. I do the job, and if I succeed, I get a safe house for my family.

I don't care if it's because the civil war breaks out, we get invaded or there's a sudden drought. The second something goes wrong; I want them safe and out of the Kingdom. Deal?"

Lith extended his hand and Velagros shook it without hesitation. For a moment, Velagros had feared the kid would ask for a ridiculous sum of money or an artifact. Instead he had demanded something simple and reasonable, albeit expensive, leaving no space for bargain.

"Deal. And what if you fail?"

"If that happens, we both would have just lost a few hours of our time." Lith shrugged.

- "As long I can use Invigoration, there's nothing I can't diagnose. Curing it, thought, is another matter entirely. If the plague is something beyond my comprehension, not even true magic can help me." –

"It will take more than a few hours." Velagros explained.

"Warp Steps are blocked in all the region. First, I need to have an exit point set up for us in the vicinity. Then we'll reach the quarantine borders by flying. It will take a couple of hours to arrange everything."

"I thought we were moving right away." Lith frowned.

"In this case, I want our deal recorded in writing and signed up. Words may fly away, but writings remain."

"Not a problem. Use the time to settle your business or to arrange your baggage before leaving. Depending on how it goes, we may be stuck in Kandria until tomorrow. And remember, you are not allowed to speak about the mission with anyone."

Lith walked away, ignoring the last trivial order. He moved quickly toward his room, his aim to catch as much sleep as possible before departing. Being in his weakened state while inside the academy was one thing.

It was full of Professors bound to help him, and an hospital that could heal him as long he had a single breath of life. But on the outside, he didn't care if he was with the Queen's corps or the Queen herself, he would always act as he were alone.

- "I'm so happy you took this mission." Solus mind-smiled. "So many people are suffering, we should help if we can."

"And that's where you are wrong." Lith objected. "If you volunteer every time someone is in danger, you'll live your life for the sake of others. Give an inch, and they will take a mile. The demand of payment served multiple purposes.

First, if I succeed the vision should be foiled, at least the part that I really care for. Second, it showed them I'm no puppet. Only soldiers obey without questions, and only idiots and saints work for free when they could get the right compensation." –

Solus pondered on those words. Once she would have dismissed them as Lith being cold and cynical, now she wasn't so sure anymore.

After Lith left the Headmaster's office, Velagros started arranging the last details for the mission, while Linjos couldn't stop sighing.

"Is this the society we really want to create? A world where heroes are actually cold-blooded killers? At this point, I don't care what the Queen will do with me. I find way more terrifying the idea that if he succeeds, such a person will become a role model.

I hoped that nurture could beat nature, but it seems I was wrong once again."

Captain Velagros laughed out loud at those words.

"Dear Headmaster, I don't know where you lived until now, but when I attended the Water Griffon, it was a nightmare. The pranks, the competition, the stress. So, what nurture are you talking about? Do you coddle the students here? Take them by the hand?"

Linjos shook his head, blushing a little from embarrassment.

"I've seen a lot of people like that. They usually end up in jail, join the military or become successful merchants. It depends on how much they are able to restrain themselves, usually picking jobs where they can legally ruin the lives of others or use violence.

Think about the adventurers or speculators. Most of them are like him, yet everyone dreams of becoming rich with quests or being acclaimed as a self-made man. Have you ever stopped considering how much death is hidden behind their fortunes?

If he does his job and doesn't go on a murder spree, then he is fine by me."

Not even a minute after Lith was summoned in Linjos' office with the academy's public announcement system, a call was made from within the White Griffon to Archmage Lukart.

"Lukart, you idiot, the Queen has asked for our help."

"Who cares?" Lukart didn't like being insulted, but decided to let it slide. Having a traitor in the academy was worth enduring a foul mouth.

"I already made sure that Manohar got the ingredient he was looking for, so he is out of the picture. According to Hatorne, there's no one else that can understand the 'plague's' nature. Despite the accident in the lab, everything is going smoothly."

"Smoothly?" The voice sneered. "Triggering a quarantine and alerting the whole world about your experiments, is far from what would I call 'going smoothly'. Also, Linjos has just summoned Lith from Lutia, so you'd better take action fast."

"Who cares about a kid? He can die in a fire, together with his filthy little village."

The voice laughed out loud.

"If you keep underestimating the same 'kid' that saved Distar's daughter from your prized poison, taking away the only silver lining in your utter fiasco of an assassination attempt, and later stopped the spatial breakdown with no casualties despite my sabotage, then you are a bigger fool than I thought."

Lukart snarled, both failures still haunted his dreams. The first was supposed to take out Marchioness Distar's whole family, but because of Ainz's presence they had only managed to injure the daughter.

The second had gone even worse. The death of the students would have caused an uproar, setting the foundations for the next step, leading to Linjos' execution and force the new noble's faction to either drop all their claims or start a civil war.

Both scenarios were perfect, since in Lukart's mind they would end up the same way. His faction would win, and the commoners would have to submit or die.

"Can't you just turn off the protective system and kill him?"

"You really are stupid. After the sabotage, our rings have been stripped of several functions. Now only the Headmaster himself can interact with the academy's control system."

"You really are useless!" Lukart slammed his fist against the table, bleeding a little.

"Useless?" The voice gasped in outrage.

"I arranged my lessons so they would be much easier for your sons. I made sure that the Clackers would haunt the location where the most promising commoners would appear. I deactivated all the protections, so that a class full of students could be decimated.

If I am useless, then what about your precious offspring, that keeps getting outclassed by commoners? I'm starting to think this is all a big mistake. Maybe we should just accept the change."

"Never!" Incapable of bearing any more of that nonsense, Archmage Lukart hung up the call.

Chapter 136 Traitor 2

A little longer than two hours later, Lith was woken up by a clerk, prompting him to go back to the Headmaster's office. The sleep hadn't been much, but enough to take some of the edge off his mind and partially reset Invigoration's effectiveness.

Velagros welcomed him, giving Lith a copy of their agreement and keeping the other for himself, before Warping out the office.

They materialized on a grassland, in the middle of nowhere. Lith looked around, instinctively searching for familiar landmarks, finding none. The only structure in sight was a circle, formed by rectangular wooden rods, from which they had emerged from.

The rods were about 2 meters (6.5 feet) high and 3 centimetres (1.8 inches) thick.

Each of the four sides was engraved with bright red runes, pulsing with power, that went opaque as soon as the portal closed behind them. Waiting for them there was a group of three women and two men, all dressed like Velagros, and with various weapons dangling from their belts or backs.

They immediately started to disassemble the circle, storing the rods in dimensional amulets.

"Is it your first time seeing a temporary waypoint?" Lith nodded in response.

"Crossing hundreds of kilometres at once would be impossible without such a device. By knowing its frequency, I can use it to lock into these coordinates, while the others pumped their own mana in it, allowing for us to get here with minimum mana consumption on my side."

- "Solus, how strong are these guys?"

"Each one of them has a blue mana core, so in theory they are stronger mages than you. Also, everything they have is heavily enchanted. Compared to their clothes, your uniform is like a firefly besides a torch. Invisible." –

They were all of different ages and builds, the youngest one seemed to be barely over twenty years old while the oldest seemed to be nearing the fifties.

"Our destination is in that direction." Velagros pointed towards south-southeast.

"It shouldn't take much by flight. Half an hour, tops."

At his command, everyone cast his personal flight spell, advancing with a wedge formation with Lith as its center. He used that opportunity to activate Life Vision, discovering that despite they had superior cores, their magical forces weren't much stronger than his own.

On the contrary, Lith's physical prowess outclassed everyone else's, even without using fusion magic.

After a few minutes, though, their spells disappeared abruptly, sending them into a free fall to the ground. Luckily, they were flying low, around 5 meters (16') high, to avoid being visible from a distance, so they ended up tumbling on the ground instead of splattering.

The corps' protective vests absorbed much of the impact, but Lith wasn't wearing one, and his uniform's weak point was offering no protection against blunt impacts. He made the earth under him soft and elastic, bouncing and rolling to disperse the momentum.

"Ambush!" Captain Velagros roared, while he and his men assumed a defensive position.

Lith and Solus activated Life Vision and mana sense respectively, discovering that they had stepped into a very complex array.

- "This is clearly a high-level Warden formation." Solus observed. "Besides disrupting air magic, making flight impossible, somehow it also compresses space. I can't access to our dimensional pocket, and I bet that even Blinking or using Warp Steps is impossible." –

Cursing his bad luck, Lith alerted Velagros of Solus' discovery, while readying both fake and true spells. He would do everything to keep his secret, but dying for it was not an option.

"Cr*p! The kid is right." Velagros had just tried to Warp them away, but to no avail. "Fall back, we are sitting ducks here!"

Velagros had no idea how Lith had assessed the situation so fast, but that wasn't the time for questions. With no movement spells, escaping the encirclement would be difficult, and with their dimensional amulets sealed, their resources had been dramatically reduced.

"How deep are we into the array?" He asked noticing how Lith's eyes were burning with mana.

"Very. They probably waited for us to be in the middle before activating it."

"Makes sense." Velagros nodded. "I would have done the same."

Any direction was good as another, they were still in the open, with no natural formation offering them cover or protection. Velagros picked one at random, making his team move fast but keeping the formation, to not leave blind spots.

To his surprise, despite being the shortest, Lith had no problem keeping the pace of their jog.

- "Since this was a last-minute operation, the only possible explanation is that there is a spy in the Royal palace. Otherwise it would be impossible to set up a trap like this on such a short notice." –

Velagros inwardly swore to find the traitor and give him a slow and painful death.

Suddenly, several Gates opened in the air, from each emerged a person wearing a guerrilla combat suit, that unleashed a tier five spell on the corps unit. The air filled with countless spheres of fire the size of a house, while the ground all around them exploded in razor-sharp rock shrapnel.

Lith realized that the Queen's corps unit was doomed. The aggressors could turn on and off the jamming field at will. Wiping them out with hit and run tactics was just a matter of time.

He quickly activated all the barriers he had ready, only around himself, opening at the same time a deep hole in the ground right under his feet with earth magic.

The assault continued for several seconds. The earth trembled like there was an earthquake, forcing Lith to keep digging away. The shockwaves from the surface only grew in intensity over time.

- "Dammit, and to think that Yurial always nag about useless a Warden is! I can't believe a whole unit of the Queen's corps was done so easily." –

One after the other, the life forces of the six people assigned to escort him faded away. Lith was shocked and angry, there was nothing he could have done to save them, even by revealing his status of Awakened one.

The attack had been too quick and well-coordinated to open a hole big enough for everyone. And even if somehow he managed to, the enemies would have noticed, using tier five earth magic to squash them like bugs.

It wasn't the first time that Lith had been forced to retreat, but it was the first time that such an act left him with a bitter aftertaste. He had never experienced such helplessness before, making him aware that he could only cower and hide, like a rat.

A few hundred meters to the east, the leader of the Talons was admiring the result of their work through a surveillance mirror. Once again, no survivors, no witnesses, no proofs. Farion Negal and his men were the best at their job, and they were proud of it.

The Talons was a mercenary unit, whose members were once part of the elite troops from the armies of all the three great Countries, but had been dishonourably discharged for violating the warrior code, by either pillaging, raping and/or murdering in the territories that they were supposed to protect.

A few of them were actually wanted criminals, but the Talons knew how to take care of their own. Offering their services to the highest bidder, they lived a life of luxury, being the living proof that their countries had made a big mistake by discarding them like trash.

"Captain Seephit, check for survivors." Negal ordered to their Warden.

"Come on, General! There's nothing left but a crater. It's a waste of my considerable skill!" Despite not being part of the army anymore, each one had a military rank and a status in the unit, according to his/her talent.

"Do it anyway. We have a reputation to uphold."

"Yes, sir!" Seephit was the third in command, yet sometimes he forgot how anal retentive the General was.

Seephit disabled his arrays, allowing him to open a Warp Steps right above the crater and then cast the Life Detection Array, a Warden spell that in many aspects resembled Lith's Life Vision.

From underground, Lith was still able to see the magic portal opening with Life Vision.

- "What the heck are they doing now? In their place I would either wipe down any trace of the massacre or check for survivors, if not both." –

"Good gods, General, you are right for once! We have a rat!"

Thanks to his heightened senses, Lith was able to hear the Warden's snarky remark, and react accordingly.

In all his years as a soldier first and a mercenary later, Seephit had never seen anyone moving so fast. Charged to the brim with air fusion, it took Lith but a second to get out of his hiding spot, cross the Warp Step, and rip Seephit's head from the neck with his bare hands.

Chapter 137 Despair

Although his entry appeared overbearing and dramatic to the members of the Talons, Lith was actually quite desperate, and so was Solus. The moment the snarky man had revealed his presence, he knew that he had just went from the frying pan into a volcano.

Whoever those guys were, they had mastered the discipline of spatial magic to the point of making it an art form. Lith could only run or fly, but against an opponent that could bend space, Blink or Switch it was useless.

His only option was to get in and kill them so fast they would not even understand what had hit them. It was time to test the limits of his new body.

- "First thing first, we need to kill the Warden." Lith thought, not knowing it was his intended target's head that he was throwing to the nearest enemy, making both heads burst open for the violence of the impact.

"Our only hope is to find him before he casts another array, otherwise we are screwed. The only silver lining is that Warden's spells are slow a*s."

"You focus on the killing." Solus replied.

"I'll collect as much intel as I can about our opponents. If I see the slightest hint of Warden magic, I'll tell you." –

Sadly, the Talons unit was comprised only by veterans, hence as soon Lith beheaded Seephit, it took them barely a second to recover and regroup. The one Lith had killed with an unconventional headbutt, was simply too close to dodge the projectile.

Farion Negal, the General, instantly issued coded orders, that his men were ready to execute. The element of surprise was already lost, and Lith had yet to face nine more people.

"Black two! Red three! White four!" Despite the target was just a kid, Negal employed an extremely aggressive tactic. His creed was that no matter the opponent, never underestimate, never relax, never talk until the kill was confirmed.

The two most skilled melee expert would kill him, o worst case scenario, keep him busy while three mid range specialists would cover for them and stall enough time for the four long ranged spellcaster to put an end to the struggle.

Cursing his bad luck for the umpteenth time since he was born back on Earth, Lith prepared to face his incoming enemies. First, he pushed his mana core to the limit, emitting a light cyan aura that enveloped the space around him with a mana so dense that the air started to crackle.

Then, he infused his body with all the six elements, while casting one of his new spells as fast as he could. The two Talons were a man and a woman, the first using a sword and shield combination, the second twin swords instead.

Bloodlust and madness twisted their features, to the point that not even Yurial would have wasted time pondering if she was hot or not.

- "Beware! All their equipment is on par with the corps! Even their tattoos seem to be enchanted." Solus warned him.

"Just my luck. I need a damn weapon to block enchanted blades, but I still can't afford the academy's prices!" –

A chunk of the tattoos disappeared, boosting their speed like a high grade potion and allowing them to reach Lith before he could finish casting. They placed in opposite directions, forcing Lith to create a blind spot in his visual field.

Much to their surprise, he didn't even try following the movements of them both with his eyes. Instead, he turned his back on the shield man, focusing only on the double wielding woman.

Nonetheless they didn't lose focus, executing a two pronged attack where each strike was meant to corner the prey, by making the attacks coming from the partner harder to evade. Yet Lith dodged them all flawlessly, even those coming from his back.

The first exchange was more than enough for Negal to understand what was happening, forcing him to violate his creed already.

"What are you doing, you idiots?! That's Full Guard! Red, white fall back!" To prevent their target from escaping, Negal started weaving the anti air magic array.

For a split second the Talons froze, thinking their General had gone mad.

Full Guard was a common Mage Knight spell, that created a spherical blue aura with a radius of 1.65 meters (5.41 feet) all around the caster.

Thanks to Full Guard, a Mage Knight had no blind spots. Whatever entered the sphere would be detected, allowing him to counter attack and dodge with surgical precision without even looking.

What Negal said didn't make sense, though. The cyan aura surrounding their target had a radius of over twenty meters (66'), something every one of them knew by experience was impossible.

The spell range, even at tier five, was supposed to cover only the length given by the arm plus weapon length. When their instinct and discipline kicked in, making them obey the order, it was already too late.

Lith had previously ignored the earlier football coach gibberish, but now, violating his creed Negal had exposed himself.

- "Warden at three o'clock!" Solus shouted the moment she recognized the energy pattern. –

Lith exploited the opening, darting toward Negal while extending his arms, with a motion that made no sense to his enemies. At that distance, any spell coming from a ring could be easily avoided.

The red and white team moved backwards, without stopping their chants, trying to keep the distance from the prey while the black team was in hot pursuit. Their problem was twofold, though.

Lith was too fast for his chasers, and no one in the Talons knew of spirit magic's existence.

Fast like a snake, tendrils of pure, invisible mana travelled the space between predator and prey, coiling around Negal's head. Spells rained on Lith from all directions.

Some he managed to dodge, others he had to tank in order to not lose focus, letting the combined effects of earth fusion and his uniform to block most of the damage, while light fusion regenerated the wounds as soon as they were opened.

With each step he took, Lith's magical force became strong enough to overcome Negal's enchanted protections, horribly deforming his head before popping it like a balloon.

Spirit magic's range had already reached fifty meters (54.7 yards) back when he had saved Count Lark's family.

Now it could hit as far as Lith could see, yet the farther he was from the target, the weaker the effects.

- "Okay, the Warden is down. Eight more to go. With a bit of luck, the shock from my use of spirit magic should stun them for a couple of seconds, giving me plenty of time to evening the field." –

Yet, luck was a fickle mistress. What Lith ignored, knowing nothing about military except what he learned from the movies, was that in such tight knitted units there were two only two kinds of generals.

The ones whose death would destroy the morale, turning them into sitting ducks, like he had hoped, and the ones whose death would turn his soldiers into battle frenzy demons unafraid of death.

Farion Negal belonged in the second category. Most of the members of the Talons were either psychopaths devoid of empathy or cold blooded killers, they didn't care about anything but themselves.

Killing Negal was the equivalent to cutting their lifeline, they had no idea how to survive outside the battlefield without him. A few were even grateful to him for having rescued them before their execution.

Each and every one of them took it personal.

To make things worse, Brigadier Phita Beruit, second in command, quickly regained her cool, avoiding the situation to devolve into chaos.

"Black four! Red two! White two! Don't let the General's death go to waste. F*cking kill him!"

Brigadier General Beruit was an ex member of the Queen's corps. It was thanks to her knowledge about the corps' protocol and equipment that the mission had gone so smoothly, up until Seephit's death.

Unlike the others, she had already seen someone moving so fast. Once, Beruit had been a member of the Queen's detail, witnessing her inhuman speed. During an ambush, she had killed three assailants before her bodyguards could even move.

In her mind, now everything finally made sense, all her questions had found an answer. Why six members of the corps had been sent to protect an insignificant commoner. Why the pay was obscenely good, even for the Talons' standards.

"The f*cker is a member of the royal family!" She shouted.

"We have to make this quick, before they send someone looking for him!"

Everyone in the Talon had heard Beruit's tale at least once. No one had ever believed her, thinking it was a self-delusion from when she was still a rookie. But now things had changed.

Beruit couldn't believe that Negal had hid from them such a valuable piece of information. She knew not even the General took her story seriously, but being so meticulous that act of carelessness seemed so out of character.

- "I'm what?!" Lith couldn't avoid to inwardly sneer at that rubbish.

"First, I'm the bastard son of Count Lark, and this time of the Queen?"

"Two more enemies coming up close!" Solus warned him.

Lith could only sigh with relief.

"Just what the healer ordered." –

Then, he activated the spell he had previously casted, turning the world around him dark.

Chapter 138 Despair 2

Being a self-taught true mage with very little knowledge outside of tier three, had always been a problem for Lith. He had to make up from scratch most of his spells, and not having much free time, if not none at all, his toolkit was quite limited.

For such reason, most of his spells were derived from imitation. Phloria's Full Guard, the Ry's slipstream effect or the Wither dark aura were all tricks that he had picked up along the way.

His fight with the plant Abomination had allowed him to further understand darkness magic, and how to overcome its obnoxious limitations.

Darkness was an element capable of inflicting an enormous amount of damage overtime, and to add insult to injury, it was extremely hard to defend from it. On the other hand, though, darkness based spells were so slow that outside niche situations they were nigh useless. freewebnovel.com

Vampiric Touch required physical contact, hence it was a last resort. The Wither's dark aura had good range, but required a huge mana expenditure compared to the damage dealt.

That was why Lith had thought long and hard about it, trying to figure out a way to use darkness magic to cover for his weak points. No matter how much he planned in advance, he was still an amateur fighter, lacking any professional training.

Despite being much slower than Lith, two members of the Talons were enough to force him to go all out just to not be turned into mincemeat in a few seconds. Thanks to their rich battle experience, they were able to anticipate his movements and adjust their attacks accordingly.

Not to mention that even speed could do only so much in front of such refined teamwork. The moment they closed in, they had used the range advantage granted by their blades to restrict Lith from escaping or counterattacking.

To gain the upper hand, he needed to fight dirty and shamelessly like before, exploiting the fact that his opponents knew nothing about true magic. When the four melee experts approached, black tentacles emerged from Lith's body, trying to grab whoever came near.

The Talons' first instinct was to cut them down, but the tentacles were made of pure energy, so they passed through the blades like a breeze, lashing at the enemies' bodies, sucking out their life force and giving it to their master.

Death Call was the answer Lith had devised to his problems. Anyone that came too close would have to endure the vampiric touch of the tentacles, that were nothing more than a dense mass of dark magic guided by his will.

The compact form meant that, unlike the dark aura, the draining effect was fast and efficient, while the mid range of the spell made the slow speed irrelevant. Thanks to Full Guard, Lith was completely aware of his surroundings, therefore able to manipulate every single tentacle like it was one of his limbs.

Combined together, the two spells offered a perfect defence. Come close, become food. Stay away, suffer true magic. Lith didn't need to attack anymore, he could simply focus on dodging while the tentacles did the rest.

Barely a few seconds after the activation of Death Call, the close range Talons realized what was happening. They were out of breath, their movements getting sluggish, each strike sloppier than the last.

Their opponent, instead, was suddenly fully healed, either dodging or deflecting their combined attacks with his bare hands, without even breaking a sweat. But the most shocking part was when the five of them, Lith included, noticed an unforeseen side effect of the spell.

The four Talons seemed to be aging by the second, their hair getting thin and grey, while their faces were now full of wrinkles, the skin starting to sag. It was actually a mere cosmetic effect, caused by the sudden loss of moisture and life force.

Nothing that a few drinks and some rest couldn't fix. No Talon feared death, but age? That was another matter entirely.

For the first time in many years, the members of the Talons started to feel fear. From the moment Seephit had opened that Warp Gate, their day had quickly turned into a nightmare.

Since when kids could rip off heads? Since when spells could be cast with no magic words or hand signs? How could possibly exist someone capable of killing a soldier of the calibre of Negal with just a wave of the hand?

Last, but not least, what kind of monster could summon an unnamed horror?

"Black, fall back! Red, fire at will! White, hold your fire until Red is done!" Fear had never made Beruit falter, and this time was no different.

By alternating the waves of spells from the two teams, she planned of raining on the monster enough destruction to make the nightmare end.

When the four of the Black team tried to retreat, they discovered that the black tentacles had turned solid. Infused with spirit magic, they dragged back their victims, using them as meat shields against the incoming attacks.

It was after the first shockwave arrived, that Lith understood to have gravely underestimated tier five spells.

The four bodies, even with all their magical protections, were barely enough to block the first one, a densely packed chain of lightnings that boiled the four Talons from the inside, turning them into charred corpses.

The second spell from the Red unit ripped them to shreds, forcing Lith to dodge and wave countless wind blades, capable of cutting through rock and dirt like a hot knife pressed against butter.

Those he didn't manage to avoid, penetrated deeply into his flesh, stopping only halfway through the bones. The wounds were too extensive to cut off the pain receptors, otherwise his whole body would go limp.

Seeing that the monster was still alive, and four more Talons had died, their fear turned into despair, but that didn't stop them. In battle there was no time for whining or grieving, only victory or defeat.

Beruit and the last member of the White unit unleashed their spells too.

Lith had no choice left, he could only fly away as fast as he could. He used all his remaining strength to raise a stone wall after the other, hoping that between the distance and the makeshift barriers he would manage to survive.

Whatever it was, it hit with the strength of a volcano.

The spot where Lith had been until a split second before had turned into a vortex of purple flames, that exploded with great violence, turning the stone walls in pebbles, trampling them like they were just domino pieces.

Lith stopped wasting his energies on magic fusion, keeping only the light one to keep regenerating his present and future wounds and earth fusion to try to save his life. Everything else he had, was focused on his speed, trying to avoid being reduced to a pile of ashes by the purple flames.

Despite all his efforts, the explosion kept getting closer and closer. Lith wasn't fast enough to outrun it, his only hope was to get far enough from the epicentre of the spell to take as little damage as possible.

But it was all useless. Even from a distance, moving faster than a bullet, Lith could feel the scorching heat burning his feet despite the magical shoes and earth fusion.

When the flames engulfed him, Lith stopped even flying, letting the shockwave carry him away. A cold shiver ran down his spine, the fear almost made his mind go blank, but he refused to surrender.

In a last gamble he used all his remaining strength, even aided by Solus, to insulate himself with a thick barrier made of air, quickly revolving around his body to deflect the flames and avoid direct

contact, while using water magic on himself, in a way that in any other circumstances would have frozen him to death.

Despite his water magic spell, the air inside the barrier quickly became so hot that he had to stop breathing to not burn his lungs and throat. His skin got covered in blisters, his open wounds immediately cauterized.

The pain was strong enough to make Lith cry, and he was happy for it, because despite keeping his eyelids close like shutters, he still feared that without the tears his eyes could boil.

Chapter 139 Los

The few seconds Lith spent in that blazing inferno felt like hours, constantly wishing for the pain to stop, while his lungs were desperate for air.

When it finally ended, he crashed on the ground, tumbling multiple times before coming to a halt.

The first breath of fresh air he took, was the best he had ever had. His normal vision was blurry, but Life Vision showed him clearly that there was still no trace of his enemies.

Playing dead had no sense, they had discovered him once, they could do it twice.

Lith immediately started healing himself, using Invigoration at the same time. Thanks to the world energy, his wounds healed much faster than normal, the bones mended and the burns disappeared without leaving any scar.

- "Solus, any sign of those b*astards?"

"You travelled several hundred metres because of the explosion, but they are catching up fast. They'll Blink here before you are finished healing."

"Damn Blink! I can't get close, while they can escape anytime. Also, from range they can dodge or block everything I throw at them. It's only a matter of time before they kill me for good. I'm almost out of tricks." –

Determined not to die, Lith stood up, waiting for the enemies while racking his brain for a solution.

"By the gods! He is still alive!" Beruit and the three survivors were all that remained of the Talons.

"That's impossible!" Lieutenant Calant couldn't believe his own eyes.

"That was a f*cking War Mage spell! It's supposed to blow open castles and can't even kill a kid?"

"That's no kid, Lieutenant, that's a monster. I'll cast Raging Sun again, you three prevent him to interrupt me or run away, at any cost! We owe it to our fallen comrades."

The three Talons assumed a triangle formation, but didn't dare to approach. If four had failed, there was no reason for three to succeed.

- "Damn! At this distance, I'm powerless. Think, Lith, think. How can we save ourselves? There must be something we can do. Something only us can do, that will take them by surprise..."

A cruel smile appeared on his lips, there was still hope.

He dashed toward the chanting woman with air fusion, using Full Guard again to not miss any movement. The three performed a Blink, planning on using hit and run tactics to not fall prey of the tentacles.

But thanks to the combination of Life Vision and his enhanced speed, Lith was able to see where the Gates would open, and react accordingly. He changed direction, aiming for the nearest Gate, punching with his full force before the enemy appeared.

The hit crushed the Talon's trachea, even severely damaging the spine in the process. Lith kept moving forward, while the corpse still stood up, with a shocked expression on the face.

The two remaining Talons reacted by instinct, thinking their teammate had simply missed, letting the target slip away.

They Blinked together, one in front of the target, the other at his back, only to discover he was ready for them. Lith grabbed them by the throat, his hands were strong like a vise, snapping their necks with a twist of his wrists.

Thanks to the distance, Beruit was barely able to distinguish what had happened. Just like the Queen years ago, Lith's movements appeared only as a blur, but years of training told her to run away.

Lith's smile grew wider, while his spirit magic was coiling around the last enemy. He twisted her hands behind her back, to prevent her to cast spells or use magic rings, choking her at the same time.

Even if Beruit had been able to talk, Lith wasn't willing to listen. He knew that if not for the fact of being an Awakened one, he would have already died many times. He feared her and what she was able to do.

Letting her live was too big of a risk, blocking her hands and mouth wouldn't stop her from using first magic, nor he had any idea what kind of artifact she could use against him if given the chance.

By clenching his fist, Lith lifted Beruit in the air before crushing her head.

After checking there was no enemy still alive, Lith gave out a victory laughter.

- "I can't believe I'm still alive! It's the first time I had to gamble so much. These guys' strength and teamwork was insane. Who the heck where they?"

"I don't know, and I don't care!" Solus was brimming with joy.

"The only important thing is that you are well and all in one piece. Well almost."

"What do you mean with 'almost'?"

"Your hair." –

Lith's hand ran over his head, discovering that he was almost bald. With Invigoration, he assessed that his hair had almost been burned down to the root.

- "How did I get them back the last time?"

"Manohar." Solus said, like it explained it all." –

Looking at himself, Lith discovered that most of his uniform was gone. Between the cuts and the burns, he was as good as naked. After a quick change in farmer's clothes, he realized he had another problem.

- "Solus, do you have any idea where we are?"

"No. What about you?"

"Well, I know that moss grows on the north side of the trees."

"Yeah, too bad this is a grassland." She sneered.

"And I was being sarcastic! Without a landmark, maps are useless. We could be anywhere between the academy and Kandria."

"Yeah, I think we should... run for our life!" –

Lith didn't know what Solus had noticed, but didn't stop for asking. He moved as fast as he could, casting a flight spell to get the higher ground.

The corpses of the Talons exploded, leaving nothing behind.

"My loot!" Lith screamed.

- "As soon as you killed that woman, I noticed something had changed in the mana surrounding their equipment.

At first, I thought it was some kind of protection that was being depowered by the user's death, but then I noticed that instead of decreasing, the energy was actually overloading. They sure were a careful lot."

"Who cares about that? All this work for nothing!"

"Did you just dare to call your life 'nothing'?" Solus sounded really angry.

"Yes... I mean, no. Damn, where the heck are we?" Lith decided to change topic. –

After thinking a bit about their predicament, they decided the first thing to do was to get away from the fighting scene. Lith would have a hard time to justify how a team of six experts had died, while a simple student had survived.

The simplest explanation was to say he had no idea what had happened to the corps after they had helped him escape from unknown assailants. The self-destruction mechanism had undoubtedly hurt his pockets, but at least helped covering what had really happened.

In a battle involving the corps, the fact that so many of the dead bodies had broken necks and exploded heads, instead of weapon marks, would have stuck out like a sore thumb.

- "If you think about it, it's a blessing in disguise." Solus pointed out. "If the equipment remained along with the bodies and you looted it, there was no possible way to justify how a naked unit could fight on par with the corps." –

Lith didn't reply, but only because he understood she was trying to cheer him up.

It would have been quite easy for him to make the best equipped members of the Talons disappear and stage a more balanced clash.

After flying for a while in the direction he supposed was south-southeast, getting even more lost, Lith landed near a group of trees. There, he took out his uniform, hoping for its self-repair magic to make it less tattered.

At that point, all he had to do was waiting for someone to notice he had disappeared. First, he ate a lot of food from his reserve, to make up for the body mass lost after healing such extensive wounds, then Lith spent the following hours using Accumulation.

While refining his mana core, Lith reflected on the battle, analysing all he had discovered about tier five magic, searching for a way to reproduce it, but most importantly how to defend from it.

Chapter 140 Paranoia

Tier five magic was much stronger than he had anticipated, making all the other spells he had learned so far look like parlour tricks. From what Lith had understood, tier five was capable of borrowing a huge amount of world energy.

No matter how strong a mana core was, just conjuring once those purple flames should have left the mage exhausted, yet the sorceress seemed perfectly fine. To be able to cast such spell twice in a short amount of time, meant that the burden on her body was limited.

- "We have to learn a way to do the same. Otherwise the next time it happens, if our opponent is a little stronger or luckier, we'll be done for." –

After a couple hours, he had yet to find a solution, but his communication amulet finally activated. It wasn't like a phone; it didn't ring or buzz. When there was an incoming call, the user would experience a pull to his consciousness, like when you suddenly remember something important.

It was a feeling strong enough to wake someone up from the deepest slumber. Lith didn't answer immediately, he wanted to give the impression of having been unconscious.

"Lith, thanks the gods you are all right!" As predicted, it was Linjos.

"I've tried reaching captain Velagros, but to no avail. What happened to you? Why you have yet to reach Kandria?"

"Headmaster?" Lith replied squinting his eyes, acting confused, like he had just woken up.

"Good gods, Lith! What happened to your uniform?" Before answering, he had changed back, to make his story more believable.

"I..." Lith took a long pause, like he was trying to remember.

"Oh gods! The captain and his soldiers are in danger, they need help! You must hurry!" He seemed to be panicking, stuttering at every word, his face going pale thanks to a little spell.

"Calm down, son. Take a deep breath." Lith did as instructed, and after a while, he was able to tell Linjos what had happened.

In his version of the story, instead of using Warp Steps, the enemies had emerged from underground. The last thing Lith remembered, was being hit by some purple flames before losing consciousness.

"Purple flames?" Linjos was shocked.

"I know very few spells capable of generating such destructive force. That would explain a lot. The captain must have used something to save you, but the damage sustained was too much and you have blacked out.

Then, he has brought you to safety before going back to the fight."

Lith gasped, nodding at the Headmaster's words. When playing the "I don't know" card, it was always better let the other party to fill the blanks. The less details he gave, the smaller the chances of contradicting himself.

"Are you alone right now?"

Lith looked left and right at his surroundings before answering.

"Yes. And I have no idea where I am. The only thing I know for sure is that this isn't the same place where we got attacked. What do I do now?"

"You can't stay there, it's too dangerous. At this point, is safe to assume that captain Velagros is either dead or incapacitated. If he is dead, it means that the attackers could still be looking for you."

After pondering for a moment, Linjos spoke again.

"Follow the setting Sun toward west, unless the captain Warped you really far, you will find the river Delilin. Following the river, you are bound to find some settlement. Don't say you are going to Kandria. Despite the information blackout, everyone in the region knows something is wrong with it.

You would raise suspicions. Ask for directions, but for the city of Pabia. It's outside the quarantine zone, but close to Kandria and well connected with the main trading routes. Road signs will help you reach your real destination.

Notify me as soon as you arrive."

Lith nodded, then he hung up the call before taking flight.

- "We already knew of the river from the maps. Linjos' plan is identical to our own, except we would have directly asked for Kandria. Why did you ask for his help?"

Solus' question made Lith sigh, she was still too naïve.

"Because I'm supposed to be a twelve year old, shocked by an ambush from which I barely survived. I need to appear vulnerable and confused, not like a cold blooded machine." –

Lith followed Linjos' instructions, easily finding the Delilin river first, and a farm later. Thanks to a stroke of luck, while looking for Pabia, he arrived on the main road.

After that, reaching the outskirts of Kandria was just a matter of minutes. Thanks to Life Vision, Lith was able to see the otherwise invisible energy lines in the space in front of him, stretching beyond the barricades and roadblocks that were still far away.

- "It's similar to the array used by those assassins to trap the corps' squad, but much more powerful and complicated" Solus observed.

"I suspect that it can do much more than just block air and dimensional magic. I've never seen anything like this before, but based on what we read from the file and your memories from Earth, I'd say it's safe to assume that it can block communications too."

"It would make sense." Lith agreed, while his mind was spinning. –

If Solus was right, and he would have bet good money on it, he was about to throw himself into the wolf's maws. There were countless things that could go wrong once he was isolated from the outside world.

His paranoia required at least a dozen of contingency plans for a situation like that, but he actually had only one. Lith informed Linjos of his arrival, making sure to leave a record of his position.

Traitors weren't the only ones he had to watch out for, there were also the relatives and friends of all those he had crossed during his time in the White Griffon. Lith knew that for many of them, he was a stain on their pride and reputation.

Normally, no one would dare to touch a prized student, but a quarantine zone was a place where laws and common sense held little value. Those who considered commoners like pebbles, would inevitably be tempted to cause "accidents".

Being without a detail, further complicated the situation. There was no one that he knew or that he could trust, and being the sole survivor was bound to raise suspicions. It didn't matter if they were genuine or a matter of opportunity, someone could try to pin their deaths to him.

"I'll inform the supervisor and the Queen of your arrival. Get close to the perimeter, but do not attempt to enter on your own. The soldiers have strict orders, the plague has put everyone's nerves on edge. Use your uniform as proof of identity. I'll call you later."

- "Linjos is a good man, after all. Calling the Queen means he has his fair share of doubts too, and is trying to avoid unnecessary troubles." –

Even from that distance, Lith could see how heavily guarded the zone was. There was a ten meters (33 feet) high wall, that circled the area as far as the eye could see. Life Vision showed him that many soldiers and a few mages were hidden behind it.

Lith flew forward at full speed, pretending to not know what was going to happen. As soon as he entered the array, his spell disappeared, making him fall to the ground. Lith had tried to soften the landing, but even low tier earth magic seemed to be blocked.

The impact left him breathless, and before he could stand up, someone pushed him back to the ground, binding his hands, while several blades grazed his neck puncturing even his unnaturally hard skin. Small droplets of blood started to flow towards his head.

- "Man, I hate being always right." -