

Supreme M 141

Chapter 141 Suspicions

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" Said a raspy voice coming from behind Lith's back.

"I'm Lith from Lutia, coming from the White Griffon academy on Her Majesty's service." Lith appeared to be calm, but he was actually seething with anger. He had expected for someone to come and identify him, not to be treated like a criminal.

"Really?" The voice sneered. "Then why are you dressed like a farmer? Since when the White Griffon has stooped so low that they can't even afford uniforms anymore?"

For a moment, Lith was tempted to break the ropes with brute strength, and then pull their guts through their mouths.

- "Stay calm, you idiot. This isn't your village or the academy. In the outside world you are a nobody, and you will be treated as such." –

"My uniform got heavily damaged." He replied calmly. "What's left of it is on my shoulder. Headmaster Linjos should have already contacted your supervisor."

Someone searched him, while another hand picked the rag that was his uniform. Being on his finger, Solus could see one of the three robed magicians cast a spell. It made Lith and the uniform emit a light glow at the same time.

The mages looked at each other, nodding, before letting Lith stand up.

- "Amazing. It seems there is a way to make apparent the link between a magic object and the one it is imprinted with." –

Lith didn't share her enthusiasm, he was more interested in looking at his captors.

There were five soldiers and three mages. They were all of different heights and builds, but were dressed almost in the same way. They were all clearly part of a military unit.

They all wore leather boots, grey linen pants and shirt, leather gloves and what resembled a plague doctor mask, making their faces unrecognizable. The only differences between them was that the mages wore a robe, while the soldiers had weapons and a thin metal breastplate.

"Sorry, sir." Said one of the soldiers, his voice distorted by the mask.

"But this is not enough proof of identity. No one gets in or out of the quarantine zone without the proper clearance."

One of the mages took out a communication amulet, from which emerged the small hologram of a handsome man in his late thirties. He had thick blonde hair and beard, with the stern look typical of someone being used to complete obedience.

"Why did you leave your post, sergeant?"

"We had a perimeter breach, sir. We are currently dealing with it."

"It". The way they had pronounced that word, not referring at him like a person but as a thing, sounded ominous to Lith's ears.

"Is it perhaps a tall kid, dressed like a farmer, with a bald head and a tattered White Griffon uniform?"

If the sergeant was surprised by the accurate description, he didn't let it show.

"Exactly, sir."

"Bring him to me."

Lith used that short exchange to use Invigoration on the ropes binding his hands. They had no enchantment whatsoever, and that let him sigh with relief. If necessity arose, he could easily free himself.

One of the mages took out gloves and a plague mask from under his robe, making Lith wear them. The beak like mask had two small holes, from which the air would enter at every breath, making a hissing sound.

Lith had the impression of having lost his sense of smell. The air didn't carry any scent anymore, except for that of some kind of disinfectant.

- "This thing must be some sort of gas mask." He thought.

"The situation must be much worse than I expected, if even this far from Kandria no one dares to move without it." -

The soldiers positioned themselves so that two walked in front of Lith, two behind, together with the mages, and one alongside him, keeping the ropes in check.

Once they got past the checkpoint, Lith could see a military encampment the size of a small city stationed behind the wall. It was comprised by several tents divided in two blocks. One block had only circular shaped tents of various height and size, but none bigger than a house.

The other block was situated farther inside. It was heavily guarded as the wall itself, and it was comprised only by large rectangular shaped tents. The smallest one was at least one hundred square meters big.

Each tent of the encampment had small flags near its entrance, probably to indicate its purpose. Lith was led to one of the small circular tents, about 2.5 meters (8.2 feet) high with a diameter of 5 metres (16.5 feet), marked with triangular golden flags.

The space inside was perfectly lit, thanks to glowing gems masterfully placed on the ceiling.

The floor was entirely covered by a thick carpet, that muffled their footstep. Seated behind a hardwood desk, there was the man Lith had previously seen in the hologram.

To his right, there was a man, around 1.9 meters (6'3") high, with shoulder length pitch black hair, and ice blue eyes. He wore a corps uniform identical to the one Velagros used. Lith deduced he had to be a captain too.

The soldiers left him in the middle of the tent, without freeing his hands, and then left. The moment the curtain closed between them, the rattling sound their weapons produced at every step, disappeared. The tent was clearly sound proof.

- "Damn. What the heck is happening? I'm supposed to be an esteemed guest, not a prisoner." – Lith was getting more nervous with every second, but he could only grin and bear it.

"May I know what I did to deserve such treatment?" He asked walking towards the two men.

"Silence! I ask the questions here." The blonde man stood up, slamming his fist on the desk. Lith felt a powerful air current, pressing on him from above, trying to make him kneel.

Lith bent a little under the force of the spell, but refused to submit. His rebelliousness angered his captor even more. The man waved his hand, and Lith felt like an invisible punch had just struck his jaw, making him fall on the ground.

The corps' captain stiffened up, but said nothing.

"Now tell me what happened to Velagros and his men." The blonde man's eyes were reduced to fiery slits.

Lith stood up, before repeating to him the same story he had told Linjos. How they had departed from the White Griffon, get ambushed by unknown assailants, until he was struck by the purple flames and had lost consciousness.

Lith was forced to repeat his story, again and again, but he never contradicted himself.

When the man's anger peaked, and was about to hit Lith again, the captain stopped his hand.

"That's enough, Colonel Varegrave. The boy has already answered to your questions. I will not allow any further harassment to our Queen esteemed guest!"

Despite the captain's lean build, Varegrave was incapable of escaping his grasp.

"Let me go immediately, Captain Kilian. This is a military operation, and this is my camp! I only answer to the King!"

Kilian refused to back down, twisting Varegrave's arm and forcing to look at him in the eyes.

"Make no mistake, you will answer to him. This is a violation of the protocol, and you are acting on groundless accusations!"

Varegrave snorted.

"Do you really want me to believe that a man like Velagros died, that his whole team was wiped out, and that traitorous runt managed to come out unscathed? Isn't it suspicious?" Anger twisted his visage, baring his teeth at every word.

"I know that you and Velagros were blood brothers, but nothing you do can bring him back. Now listen to reason, and let the healer go."

"Not until I have my answers!" Varegrave snarled.

Seeing that reasoning was impossible, Kilian took out his communication amulet. Not even a second later, an unknown visage appeared from it, that made Varegrave turn pale.

"Tell me you have good news, Kilian." Said the man from the amulet.

"Sadly, no, my King. Yet there is a matter that requires your attention."

Lith inwardly smiled, seeing Varegrave's face twitch as Kilian reported everything that had happened.

The King turned towards Lith, that only then realized he could actually see him, and promptly kneeled.

"No need for formalities, mage Lith. Stand up." By acknowledging his name and title of mage, despite Lith was just a student, the King was doing him a huge honour. Lith knew it, and kept kneeling for a couple of seconds before standing up.

"Thanks, your Majesty."

"Kilian, take mage Lith to the hospital. There is much to do, and you have already wasted too much of his time. Varegrave and I need to have a talk. Please, leave us alone."

Kilian bowed, and untied Lith's hands. Then the two of them wore their mask and exited from the tent.

"My King, please, forgive my rudeness. Why are you letting him go? He is nothing but a traitorous commoner that has caused the death of many loyal servants of the crown. And even if he didn't, what could he possibly do?"

He's just a kid, how can he succeed where the best healers of the Kingdom have failed? It's impossible. I would bet my life on it."

The King silently stared at him for a second before replying.

"I'll take that bet."

Chapter 142 Plague

Once out of Varegrave's tent, Lith introduced himself to Captain Kilian Aluria. He discovered that the ranks in the Queen's corps were different from the army. Being elite squads, each unit was allowed to act independently, and was composed by five soldiers and one Captain.

Each Captain only answered to the Queen herself, so despite their low-key demeanour, both Kilian and Velagros were actually big shots. Kilian tried explaining to Lith how Varegrave had being grief stricken ever since he learned about Velagros' alleged death.

The two of them had started their military career together, and been through thick and thin for years, before their paths had diverged. Lith politely nodded from time to time, grateful to the mask for hiding his uncaring expression.

He knew a thing or two about grief and loss, yet he had never attacked someone based on a simple suspicion. In his mind, Varegrave's destiny was set in stone. He would use his success in the current task to ask for compensation as part of his reward.

If that resulted impossible or too problematic in the short term, Lith would simply postpone. He had always considered revenge as something that was best served cold, there was no rush for it.

After asking Lith to forgive Varegrave and Lith pretending to consider doing it, Kilian lead him toward the second block.

"The first block is where soldiers and personnel live. The second, instead, is where the hospitals and the research labs are located. We have healers and alchemists trying to treat the victims of the plague that we managed to stabilise, or at least that was the plan.

The truth is, that even after a month no one has yet understood what the plague really is. So far light magic is completely useless, while alchemy seems to work to some degree, but only as palliative care. It treats the symptoms, not the cause."

The more Lith learned about the plague, the more it resembled one of his old medical cases. He was confident to be able to offer both a diagnosis and a cure, for a proper reward, of course.

"Just out of curiosity..." He asked.

"...in the first block, triangular flags mean a residential tent, right? Then what does the diamond and rectangular flags stand for?"

"What do you think?" Despite having read his file, Kilian was still surprised that even in his earlier circumstances Lith had the presence of mind to notice small details.

"Well, since in here dimensional items do not work, I'd say one is for the food supplies and the other is for the weaponry."

"Correct. And in case you are wondering, the golden flag is for the commanding officer, silver for the officers, bronze for soldiers."

Lith tried to take out his communication amulet, but to no avail. Space was tightly sealed inside the array, negating access to his pocket dimension. Then he tried to use first magic, discovering that even elemental magic didn't work.

The array jammed the connection between pure mana and the world energy, leaving him almost powerless.

"I also noticed earlier that magic and magical objects do not work in here. Yet the Colonel didn't have trouble smacking me around, and you were able to contact the King. How is it possible?"

Kilian smirked at that naïve question. He had almost forgot their esteemed guest was only a kid, with no knowledge about powerful artifacts.

"The array surrounding Kandria is not a Warden spell. Otherwise it would make no distinction between friends and foes. It is created by one of the Crown's treasures, called Small World.

As the name implies, it creates an extended space within which the one that holds its keystone can change the rules of magic at will. The Colonel controls the artifact, so he is immune to its effects and can grant privileges to others.

But every time someone uses a privilege, he is immediately notified. That's how he knew something had happened the second the guards used Warp Steps to surround you."

Lith was flabbergasted by the infinite uses and applications such an artifact could have.

- "That's the most overpowered thing I ever heard about. I really hope your tower form has something similar."

"Me too." Solus replied. "But I bet is not as easy as he says. The affected area is too big and the effect too powerful. The Captain is probably just feeding us public information while avoiding to mention the costs and limitations of the artifact." –

Lith sighed. She may had burst his bubble, but was probably right. It was too good to be true. He decided to drop the matter and concentrate on his task.

"Don't worry." Kilian added.

"Light magic can be freely used inside this Small World. You don't need to ask the Colonel's permission."

After they got past the security, Kilian brought him to block two's largest tent. It was big enough to easily accommodate a whole circus. It was a field hospital, the interior of which was completely white.

Instead of walls, it had countless curtains, that had been arranged creating corridors and defining the space of each patient's room. The first thing that Lith noticed about it, was the silence.

Aside from the conversations between the mages coming and going into the various rooms, the hospital was completely silent. One could hear the patients' moans and complains only when a curtain was opened.

"All the field hospitals have curtains enchanted to be sound proof." Kilian explained.

"It's needed for security and morale reasons. Despite being heavily sedated, some patients are in constant pain. Their screams would disturb the healers and stress the other residents. Avoiding escape attempts and mass hysteria is a priority."

"All the field hospitals?" Lith echoed. "Do you mean there's more than one?"

There had to be hundreds of patients in that tent alone. Lith had underestimated the scale of the plague.

Suddenly, he felt his conscience stinging at him. It was Solus, of course.

Kilian brought him to a patient, a middle-aged man whose right leg was split open like a watermelon. Despite the bandages and the attempts to stitch it, it was constantly bleeding.

According to the chart, he hadn't much time left. There weren't enough Blood Potions and mages for everyone, without constantly replenishing his vitality, he had only a few days at most.

In Lith's eyes, this was the easiest to solve among the plague's manifestations. It was identical to what had happened to Marchioness Distar's daughter. Lith even had a fake magic spell he had later created, in case it happened again and the Marchioness was willing to purchase it from him.

- "Selling it to the Kingdom will be much more lucrative." – Lith thought.

The man was pale as a ghost, his body covered in sweat. The prolonged pain had sapped his strength, he barely opened an eye when the two strangers entered.

Lith pretended to chant a spell, and then placed his hand on the man's balding forehead, activating Invigoration. He didn't like at all what he saw, his confidence crumbled.

"Captain, can I use darkness magic too?" Kilian nodded, noticing that Lith carefully wiped out the sweat with magic before moving forward.

He rushed Kilian, visiting several patients with open wounds, but his findings were always the same. Then, he visited the survivors from the spontaneous combustion and freezing phenomenon, and despite the mask Kilian could tell that something was wrong.

Lith was becoming increasingly nervous, like he had never seen him, not even during Varegrave's violent interrogation.

Kilian stopped, grabbing Lith's shoulder, executing with only one hand a spell that created a small air dome around them.

- "Not only he can use air magic despite the array. Kilian even invented the Mage Knight version of my Hush spell." – The idea of being plagiarized temporarily suppressed Lith's worry.

"These people are the official reason you and us are here. Off the record, though, reality is far more cynical. If words spread that we have a disease capable of stripping a mage of his powers, our neighbours would join forces and burn the Griffon Kingdom to the ground.

I believe that even most mages, nobles or not, would run away at any cost, to not lose years of painstaking work and dedication. That's why the final wing of the hospital officially does not exist. Is it clear?"

Only after Lith nodded, Kilian brought him into an empty room. He then placed an open hand on the curtain, injecting mana into it. The surface became covered in runes, and after Kilian murmured an unintelligible word, he pulled it open.

Lith discovered they weren't in the field hospital anymore, but in another much smaller tent without any exit.

"Dimensional magic." Kilian explained.

The tent had no curtains, except for the one they had come from. It was filled with beds, where men and women lied. Their faces were ashen, many were sobbing like they had recently lost their true love.

They were all members of the Mage Association that had lost their powers.

When they saw Lith using magic on them, some started crying uncontrollably, others tried to assault him in a fit of rage, forcing Kilian and the soldiers stationed inside to intervene to protect him from the angry mob.

After they left the prison ward, Lith couldn't wait to get the heck out of there.

"Thank you for your help Kilian. For a moment I thought they would rip me apart."

"Don't mention it." His voice oozed over eagerness.

"What do you think of the plague?" Kilian steeled himself preparing for his hopes to be crushed once again.

"It's not a plague, it's much worse. To whom must I report to before going back to the academy?"

"Are you saying you have already cracked it?"

Chapter 143 Plague 2

"Cracked is a big word. Understanding its nature is one thing, curing it is another entirely." Lith tried to curb Kilian's enthusiasm.

Kilian seemed to not have listened to a word he said, dragging him away by the arm at full speed while frantically speaking to someone with his communicator amulet.

For some reason, Lith's mind recalled all the times he had seen Manohar pulled around by Marth like a small child. Walking a mile in his shoes wasn't pleasant at all.

Before he could realize what had happened, Lith found himself back in the Colonel's tent. Much to his surprise, Varegrave was kneeling at him.

Lith sneered at that sight, thinking that maybe the Colonel wasn't such a bad man, if he was willing to humble himself to that point, after realizing how wrong he had been.

"Your Majesty, Lith from Lustria is ready to report his discoveries." Kilian said after falling on his knee.

It was only at that point that Lith turned around, discovering that on the floor behind him, lied a blue gemstone, that was projecting a life size hologram of the King, a woman, and several youths that only a blind man could not recognize as their offspring.

Judging from the number of crowns in front of him, Lith was about to share his discoveries with the whole royal family.

Thanks to the etiquette books stored in Soluspedia, he knew what to do. Lith backstepped until he was lined up with the other two men and kneeled, barely holding in a laughter.

- "To think that after almost triggering a civil war because of their incompetence in handling some power-hungry nobles, these royal idiots need the help of a twelve years old to clean their own mess. Pathetic." –

Wearing a mask had been liberating for Lith. With it he didn't need to hide his thoughts and emotions.

Yet, even if behind thick crystals, his eyes were still almost visible. In them, the King didn't see awe, respect or nervousness, like he would have expected from a commoner child, but only contempt and amusement, like it was just a game.

A game that he was winning.

"Take off your mask and gloves, Mage Lith. I assure you that Colonel Varegrave's apartments are safe." The King ordered.

Despite the King's tone was calm and his expression amiable, Lith seemed to perceive a tinge of anger in him.

- "Maybe is just my full-blown paranoia, maybe not. Better play safe." –

Lith obeyed, removing the protections.

Looking at the kid's serious and brooding expression, the King realized that all the accumulated stress of those last few months was pushing him on edge, to the point of seeing things.

"Please, share your findings with us."

"What so far has been considered a plague, is actually something much worse." Lith started to explain.

"Do you remember what happened to Marchioness Distar's daughter a few years ago? She fell victim to a magically laced poison, that disrupted the effects of light magic, turning any attempt to cure it into a new wound."

"That's impossible." The Queen interrupted him.

"We already noticed the similarities with that case. The antidote for that kind of poison has already be tested and proven useless."

"That's because there isn't a plague that manifests itself in four different ways, there are actually four different plagues, and all of them are man-made. I believe that whoever created that poison years ago, has learned his lesson and stepped up his game.

From what I could infer, the plagues are a miracle of alchemy. The weak point of the poison was its being static. Instead of spreading into the bloodstream, it was designed to remain in the place it was injected, to not lose its potency.

Hence, once identified, it could be easily removed. But the plagues that are affecting this area aren't that simple."

Both the King and the Queen knitted their brows. From what they remembered, that poison had escaped the detection of many expert healers.

The only reason it had been later discovered a method to identify and treat it, was because Lith had extracted the poison without degrading it. That had allowed to conduct long and extensive analysis to understand its nature.

The fact that he earnestly used the word "simple" to describe such a nightmare, was the first silver lining in the brewing storm that threatened to sweep away the Griffon Kingdom.

- "Maybe he can become a leading figure in the field of poisons, just like Professor Duke Marth did when he had his age, but in the field of regeneration. Crazy or not, we cannot afford to lose such talent." –

The Queen's line of thought was shared with her spouse via a mind link, that allowed them to comment and discuss any matter. Even if they often quarrelled, no one could tell, since they would deliberate only after reaching an agreement.

This time they were on the same page, yet the consequences of it burdened the King's mind. There would be much to talk about later.

"The plagues..." Lith continued.

"are not static, nor act like any illness I have ever seen before. They all work the same way: once the host is infected, they spread to the whole body and remain dormant until magic is used.

At that point, they alter the mana flow, making it chaotic. The effects are devastating, if not lethal."

"If it's not a poison or a plague, then what is it?" The King asked.

"It's a very small parasite, barely the size of a needle. As long as the host is alive, it keeps spawning. I found eggs in all the patients' bodily fluids, sweat included. I don't know if physical contact is enough or if it needs an open wound to be transmitted.

The one thing I'm sure, is that it mustn't be allowed to spread."

"A parasite?" The Queen was flabbergasted.

"Then how come no one else managed to detect them?"

"Because normally, diagnostic spells look for something wrong with the patient's body. A broken bone, a malfunctioning organ and so on. In this case, the patient is perfectly fine until he tries to use magic.

A healer will be able to detect common parasites either sensing their life force or because they suck the nutrients out of the host.

In this case, their small size, coupled with their ability to mess with mana, make them hard to find, unless the healer, like me, is capable of perceiving even small alterations in the human body.

Also, I have noticed no tissue degeneration near the parasites. The only explanation I can find, albeit is only a guess, is that they feed on mana."

For several seconds, no one spoke. Everyone in the room was struggling to accept those revelations. Kilian was worried for the people, while Varegrave, although sharing his feelings, was also concerned about his neck.

"Can you find a cure?" The King's face was composed, but his hands were squeezing the armrests of his throne hard enough to break his nails.

"No." Lith admitted with a sigh, throwing those present into despair.

"I'm just a student, after all. I never worked on something so big. When it comes down to research, I wouldn't know where to start."

Actually, Lith believed that given enough time, he could cure anything with true magic and Invigoration. But this case was different from all the others he had faced before.

There wasn't a single patient, but hundreds if not thousands of them. Not only he would never been able to cure them all in time by himself, but also the parasites were clearly a biological weapon.

If he declared he could cure it, any sane ruler would have demanded him to share his method, offering any sum for compensation.

Lith wasn't willing to teach true magic, and was not skilled enough to convert an elaborate spell in fake magic for anyone to learn with so little time at hand.

The King and the Queen looked at each other, before issuing their order.

"Well done, Mage Lith." The royal family clapped their hands, almost making him feel guilty for his deception.

Almost.

"You have brilliantly fulfilled your part of the agreement. Rest assured the Crown will do the same."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

"It pains me, but your Kingdom requires a further sacrifice from you, for the greater good. You will remain in Kandria, and use the best of your abilities in developing a cure for this monstrosity."

"What?!" Lith was so shocked that his expression almost revealed the shock and outrage seething within him.

Almost.

"You are the one that discovered the truth about this accident, I'm sure that even with your limited experience, you will be able to offer your guidance and help.

Do not worry about the academy. At this point, we can only declare the state of national emergency and call all hands on deck. We need the help of all the light magic specialists to solve this situation as fast as possible.

From today onward, all the six great academies will suspend their activities until a cure it's found."

Chapter 144 Key Moments

Lith didn't like at all the turn the events had taken. In hindsight, it was an easily predictable outcome. Driven by his desire to stand out among the masses, he had provided them too much information, giving them hope.

His plan to give them just enough to solve the problem on their own, letting him go back to his daily life, had actually backfired.

- "Damn, I underestimated them because of my Earth standards. Back in my world, any prime minister would have turned this scenario into a black op, removing the threat in front of him with extreme prejudice.

Instead, they are willing to put everything at risk to save these people. They could have just turned the infects into guinea pigs, using their bodies, dead or alive, for research purposes." –

"Since no one outside this room knows that we made a breakthrough..." The King continued. "I hereby decree all the new information pertaining the crisis and their source a state secret.

We will divulge them bit by bit once all our assets are in place, using a cover story to avoid Mage Lith becoming a target. Officially, he'll be here only as a consultant. He will convey any further findings only to Captain Kilian, which in turn will share them with the other healers."

The three men nodded, yet Lith kept racking his brain to find a way out.

- "If I refuse, best case scenario I will get expelled from the academy and my family will lose the corps' protection. Heck, I'd be lucky to avoid being charged of treason.

I would be alone versus the Crown, the nobles that I offended in the past and whoever sent those mercenaries to kill me. If their contactor didn't hesitate despite I already was under the Queen's umbrella, there's no telling what he'll do next.

Once again, I can only grin and bear it. The only silver lining is that if I get properly rewarded, I'll not have money problems for the rest of my life." –

"Before we proceed any further, I'd like to know why Mage Lith thinks these parasites are a product of Alchemy." Queen Sylpha's curiosity had been piqued by that particular statement, since she shared the same opinion.

"Because I can't think about any other mean to infuse magic in a poison or parasite." He lied through his teeth. One of the details he had not shared, was that the worm-like parasites he had identified didn't alter the mana flow directly, but by secreting an unknown substance.

Not only that made them living alchemic labs, but was also deviously brilliant. Even with Invigoration, Lith had struggled to overcome the mana distortion effect and identify the real source of the trouble.

Any other mage would have fallen for that trick, devising a spell to cleanse the toxin, only for the "healed" patient to fall ill again in a matter of days.

The reason why even Lith would need time to cure the plague, was that first he needed to find a way to remove the toxins without killing the patient, and then remove the parasites safely.

He suspected that killing them while inside the host, or removing them forcibly would prove to be lethal for the infected.

"Also, I read from the Captain Velagros' file that the plague spread right after the explosion of Coirn Hatorne's alchemic lab. I think is highly unlikely for it to be a coincidence."

The Queen nodded, disappointed from the answer. She had hoped for more brilliance and less logic, more Manohar and less Marth. Geniuses were hard to come by, and even harder to keep.

"As for you, Colonel Varegrave..." The Queen's voice was filled with ill restrained wrath. If glares could cut, the Colonel would have already been turned in pieces not bigger than a postmark.

"I hope you haven't forgotten your bet with the King, because certainly I have not. Your earlier blunder is inexcusable. The only reason why you'll keep your rank and position, is because we cannot afford the time to change the ownership of the Small World.

When the current emergency will be solved, prepare to face the consequences of your foolishness. This conversation is far from over!"

The conversation ended so abruptly, that Kilian checked the gemstone to make sure the magical item wasn't broken.

The truth, though, was quite different.

"I told you not to mention the bet!" King Meron still couldn't believe his fiery wife had forced him to hung up the call.

"We had yet to listen to Lith's requests and find a way to sweeten the deal! In case you forgot, we need more than his services, we need his loyalty! We have to correct the situation as soon as possible, otherwise he will resent us and leave the Kingdom."

"In my book, putting that Varegrave moron in his place sweetens the deal a lot!" Sylpha retorted. "This time, we will do things my way, I want him dead."

"He is a loyal servant of the Crown!" Her bloodlust would never cease to amaze Meron. "You can't kill him off just for one mistake. It would set a terrible example."

"It would be a great example. He disobeyed a direct order and endangered everything because he wasn't able to keep his emotion in check. What if Kilian wasn't there to stop him? What if next time he loses it, we lose another great mage for good?"

"Fine." The King stood up from the throne, like he always did after losing an argument.

"Do you think this Lith is an Awakened one?" He asked after a while.

"Unlikely, but possible. We had high hopes for Hatorne and Manohar too, but they turned out to be normal mages. Being a genius and being an Awakened one are two different things. We'll have to send Lady Tyris to check on him. It's the only way to be certain."

Hundreds of kilometres away, Archmage Lukart trashed his desk in a fit of rage.

"What do you mean, the Talons have been wiped out?"

"Exactly what I said, sir." The voice from the communication amulet belonged to one of the few surviving members of the mercenary unit, that hadn't taken part in the latest assignment.

"Their dog tags have activated, and that can only mean that there were no survivors."

"It's impossible!" Lukart still refused to accept the news.

"They were eleven versus only six members of the corps, and with the element of surprise! How is it possible?"

"We'll investigate." The voice coldly replied. "But we will not follow up on the matter. The mission was an utter failure, we now lack the manpower for a second attempt. Your information was clearly lacking of fake, otherwise a complete wipe out would have never happened."

"At least give me back my money! I could have bought a whole castle with that sum."

The voice hung up the call without even answering.

Suddenly, Lukart felt lightheaded and dizzy. Everything was spiralling out of his control. The fall of the White Griffon academy was just a small step in his master plan.

Contrary to what his associates believed, his endgame had never been privileges, but the Crown itself. Lukart wanted from the beginning the civil war to happen, it was the only way to trigger a war with the neighbouring countries.

At that point, the only thing he had to do was to unleash the plagues that Hatorne had spent years to develop and for what she had been handsomely paid.

The water parasite would have crippled the Blood Desert tribes, forcing them to surrender or die. The mana parasite, instead, would have neutralized the Gorgon Empire magical army, without which they had no defences.

First, he would have repelled the invaders, looking like a hero in the eyes of the people, becoming King by acclamation. Then, he would use them a weapon to bring all the three Great Countries under his heel.

But now, because of that witch's paranoia, the lab was blown to bits, spreading the eggs in the wind. He could only hope that no one would discover their existence, that the Crown would just kill the infected without finding a cure.

Manohar was the only mage whose genius was on Hatorne level, with him out of the picture, Lukart's plan was supposed to be safe.

"What can a little runt do, after all?"

Chapter 145 Regrets

After the King had been forced to hang up the call to the quarantine zone, many things had yet to happen before that long day came to an end.

Using fatigue as an excuse, Lith was escorted to his new apartments. It was a small one-man tent, around two meters (6.6 feet) high with a diameter of barely 3 meters (10'). It was completely bare, outside for a bed and a nightstand.

It was the smallest accommodation he had ever had; the only redeeming feature was that at least he had some privacy. Unless they shoved in a sleeping bag, there was no way another person could fit.

The first thing he did, was to check his powers. As expected, all kinds of elemental magic besides light and darkness seemed to be jammed for both fake and true magic. But while fake magic simply gave no results, with true magic he could feel an obstruction.

It was like touching an object through plastic wrap, he could still feel the world energy all around him, but was unable to reach it with conventional means.

Lith had no idea how the Small World worked, but was quite confident that in case of need, he still would be able to use magic if he pushed forward strong enough to overcome the invisible barrier.

- "The problem is the degree of awareness the artifact grants to Varegrave. There is a strong possibility that successful true magic, if not even my attempts, could be detected. It's best to keep it as a last resort." –

Much to his satisfaction, both spirit magic and fusion magic worked without a hitch. Either the Forgemaster that crafted the Small World was a fake mage, or he had left loopholes on purpose, to not fall victim of his own creation.

Lith sighed, whatever was the answer, it was still a small comfort, compared to the realization he was losing control over his life, becoming a puppet in games he had no interest into.

- "You know, Solus, this may as well be the worst day of my third life. First, I was taken away from the academy, then I almost got killed, and now I have been declared a state secret. All in one day. Just imagine what could happen tomorrow."

"It's not like they kidnapped you. They offered you a job and you took it." Solus didn't believe her own words, she was just trying to lighten the mood. She knew that as long they lived in any country, there would always be offers that couldn't be refused.

"After that, things have got unpleasant, but at least you should be rewarded for your services. You may even get a nice home and a noble title."

"Are you kidding me?" He snorted. "That would be the worst. If I get to choose, I'll pick money, hands down. A title would mean having underlings, responsibilities, becoming an active part of the system from which I'm trying to escape from day one.

Not to mention being forced to attend social life, marry and take part in politics." –

He slammed his hand on the nightstand, making it sink a couple of centimetres in the soft ground.

- "Dammit, I never wanted to be a hero, nor to conquer this sh*tty world. My aim has always been to find a fix to my reincarnation problem, and then live a happy and quite life.

Now, instead, I'm on the verge of being recognized by the Crown itself, and if that happens, my family will always be used as a leverage against me. I can already feel the shackles around my body getting tighter and tighter.

But what options do I have? Kill my own family just to not have any more ties? And then what? Live all my life as the monster I would become, alone, spending all my life running and fighting like a mad dog?

What is the point in having all this f*cking power for if I can't even protect the only four people I do care about?" –

Away from home, away from his friends, Lith had never felt so helpless and alone. Once again, Solus crashed against her condition.

She knew that it was in those rare moments when Lith was showing himself vulnerable, that holding his hand or simply holding him tight would help him get rid of the walls he had built to protect himself.

But she was just a piece of rock with a voice, and there was nothing that mere words could do. Lith had spent his first life going from a hardship to another, with people telling him to stay strong, that all will be well.

Now, as then, he didn't need consolation. Lith needed someone capable of standing by his side and help him facing the incoming tide. Because of the Small World, she was incapable of changing shape or even using her dimensional pocket.

Solus felt useless, wishing for a second to be just a mindless tool, to not be forced seeing the suffering of those she loved and yet being unable to offer any comfort.

In the Colonel's tent, Varegrave and Kilian were planning the future ahead of them while drinking Dragon Water, one of the strongest and most expensive liquors available in the Griffon Kingdom, with an alcohol content nearing 50%.

Kilian was listening to several reports from his team, while Varegrave was revising his last will.

"The kid's story checks out. The scouts have found where Velagros' last battle should have taken place. There are indeed signs of the use of purple flames. Whoever the attackers were, they weren't willing to take risks."

"Any survivors?" Varegrave asked as a formality, without raising his eyes or stopping the quill.

"None. Seriously, I can't believe you are able to write your testament with such a straight face."

Varegrave drank his glass in one gulp, before refilling it.

"I'm a soldier, old friend. I know very well I made a mistake allowing personal matters to intrude in my duty, and I'm ready to bear the consequences."

Varegrave raised his glass in a small toast, before emptying it again.

"That, and five glasses of Water Dragon can turn any mouse into a lion, otherwise I would be already sh*tting my pants." He admitted.

"Is it that bad?" Kilian was used to spend more time on the field than in the royal palace. He was unaware that the recent events had made the Queen quite unforgiving.

"Very." Varegrave sighed. "Nowadays a strong mage is worth hundreds of soldiers."

Let's be honest, our mages do not have the blind loyalty the Blood Desert tribes devote to their mysterious leader, nor we invest so much as the Gorgon Empire in nurturing our talented ones.

We already are on the losing end of the cold war with our neighbours for amassing knowledge and power. If my destiny rested only in the King's hands, I could hope for a demotion or a very hard but not impossible task to prove my worth.

But, alas, as my first mistake in over twenty years of distinguished career, I had the stupidity to cross the Queen on her own turf, almost killing her new golden goose. Gods, I'd give anything to turn back time and slap my stupid self in the face."

Varegrave folded his will, putting it into an envelope before passing it to Kilian.

"Please when this story will be over, give it to my wife. Tell Shya it's all my fault, and not to raise our kids hating the Kingdom."

Kilian grabbed his hand, refusing to pick the envelope.

"You are an outstanding soldier and friend. I'm sure we'll find a way to make them realize that executing you is a mistake and get you out of this pinch. As long there's life, there's also hope.

And by the way, if you croak, I call dibs on your sword."

Chapter 146 Prisoner

The following day, thanks to a full night of sleep, Lith had regained his cool, and started to plan his next moves. First, he needed to find a cure for all the four different kinds of parasites.

It wasn't only a matter of using that knowledge to guide from the shadows the healers and alchemist.

Helping the Crown into developing a fake magic spell or drug was of secondary importance. The priority was to find a cure for himself, so that even if everything went south and the plagues spreaded to the rest of the Kingdom, he would still be the master of his own destiny.

The mana blocking parasite was the one that worried him the most. Unlike the others, it didn't deal any direct damage to the host, but without mana, a magician was like a wingless eagle.

Lith had no idea if it would have the same effect on Awakened ones, but he wasn't willing to take unnecessary risks. The first parasite he would study was the one turning healing magic into wounds.

It was the only one he was already familiar with, having treated its effects in the past. He could use that advantage to quickly understand how the parasites worked and then apply that knowledge to eradicate them for good.

Outside his tent, Lith found a soldier waiting for him.

"Good morning, sir. The Colonel sent me to escort you to his tent for the morning debriefing." Despite both were wearing a mask, Lith could hear the soldier's voice brimming with curiosity.

His farmer clothes stuck out like a sore thumb, but with his pocket dimension still offline, he hadn't much of a choice.

It was barely dawn, but the encampment was already bustling with activity.

When he entered, both Kilian and Varegrave stood up from their chairs, inviting him to join them for breakfast. With all that had happened the day before, Lith had skipped dinner, so he was starving.

He didn't like Varegrave, but in his book hunger beat pride with a tennis score. The furniture in the tent had been changed, the hardwood desk and chair were no longer in sight, replaced by a smaller square dining table.

"This is definitely my kind of debriefing." Eggs, sausages, bacon, everything had a delicious smell. Lith filled his plate, waiting for an explanation.

"Glad to see you have recovered completely. The buzz cut is a smart move, it will help you blend in."

Kilian's words made little sense to him, until watching at his reflection in a glass, he discovered that not only his hair was back, but also all the burn marks had disappeared, leaving no scar or discoloration.

- "Solus, when the heck did it happen?"

"Last night. It seems that when you sleep, your healing abilities become strong enough to border regeneration. There was nothing I could do to stop it, and you were exhausted." –

"What are the plans for today?" Lith tried to change the topic. That kind of healing was too sophisticated for a simple student, and even if he wanted to, he was unable to replicate it.

"The state of national emergency has been declared yesterday. By the end of today the Master Healers from the six big academies should arrive." Varegrave's voice was firm, but from his bloodshot eyes and the dark circles around them, Lith assumed the Colonel had spent a sleepless night.

"To avoid a recurrence of the sabotage that costed Velagros his life, I have sent a detail to escort the groups here safely. It will take at least until tomorrow to arrange a proper housing for everyone and explain the situation.

In the meantime, I have to ask you to keep working on the plagues. Despite the information blackout, the news about Kandria are spreading. We have to solve this situation before our weakness is exposed to the neighbouring countries.

When you are done eating, I would like for you to wear these clothes."

Varegrave took out of his dimensional amulet a grey military uniform consisting of leather boots, grey linen pants and shirt with a white dot on both shoulders, white gloves and a mask of the same colour.

"Your current outfit makes you an easy target. I have reasons to believe that there are traitors even among us. That uniform, instead, will simply identify you as a plague doctor.

Such status will grant you several privileges, among which free movement in all the facilities and authority over the soldiers. Any questions?"

"Yeah, speaking of privileges, can I get back the ability to use dimensional items and all kinds of spells?"

"I'm sorry." Varegrave shook his head. "But I can't fulfil neither of your requests. The protocol to grant such privileges inside the Small World is classified. And you are still a civilian."

Lith gritted his teeth but remained silent. He had noticed how even Kilian kept his communication amulet in his pocket, instead of storing it away.

That, coupled with the fact several tents were employed as food storage, meant that aside from Varegrave, probably no one could use dimensional items.

"Any other request?"

"No."

Lith spent the rest of the morning studying the anti healing parasite. People with open wounds were the perfect test subjects, since it made it easier to extract both the parasite and the toxins.

Also, being the parasite with the highest mortality rate, it would give him the opportunity to study what happened after the host's death.

First, Lith tried to get a hold of a single parasite with spirit magic. It turned out to be extremely difficult, since the creature was enveloped with toxins that disrupted his mana flow.

Once he succeeded, the parasite went into a spasm, causing a lot of pain in the patient, despite already being heavily sedated. His next step was to try to get rid of the toxins before attempting to remove the parasite, but it went even worse.

The creature turned out to not be a picky eater, it would consume not only the host's mana, but also the one Lith spent to flush out the toxins. The double feeding had an invigorating effect on the parasite, that quickly released more toxins restoring the balance.

To add insult to the injury, his attempt triggered their reproductive cycle. Lith didn't know how long would it take for the eggs to hatch, but he assessed that once it happened, it would become impossible even for him to save the patient.

- "Dammit, either their creator is a true mage too or is even more paranoid than I am. I can only hope it's the latter case, otherwise the whole Kingdom is screwed. These things are a masterpiece, while I'm still stuck at the basics of tier four." –

During the afternoon, he decided to change approach. He needed more information to come up with a decent plan, so he went to the morgue. Thanks to the new and improved Life Vision, he was able to see the aura of death surrounding a corpse.

That way, even if Invigoration was useless on inanimated objects, he could still find the parasites, whether they outlived their host or not.

In any case, he could learn a lot, maybe even collect samples for the alchemists to study. Unnoticed to him, three figures stealthily followed him while he walked through the camp, asking for directions.

The morgue was located in a tent bigger than the field hospital itself. There were no curtains inside, it was like one huge room.

It was perfectly lit by yellow magic stones hanging from the ceiling, while several blue crystals were etched into the tent's fabric, constantly emitting a cold air.

The temperature inside was so low that Lith could see his breath steam. The whole space was filled with metal shelves, where countless corpses had been lined up after being wrapped with special blankets that helped to prevent the decomposition.

The recently deceased, instead, were in an open space a few meters from the entrance, still laying on the stretchers they had been brought in with.

Lith was surprised to find the body of the man he had visited just the day before. His leg was still split open, his face had the paleness of death, but at least he seemed at peace, finally free from the pain.

Lith still remembered where most of the parasites were located, so he tried to conjure an air dome to protect himself from blood spatters, and an air knife to cut through the flesh.

- "Blast! I forgot I don't have air magic anymore. I need a damn surgeon. Without magic, I'll end up butchering the body, and bye-bye small, delicate parasites." –

Before he could get out, the curtain of the tent opened. A masked soldier pointed a sword at him.

"Don't try calling for help, the tent is sound proof." His voice was made even more menacing by the plague mask.

"Either you follow me obediently, or your brother will die!"

Chapter 147 The House of the Dead

Those words struck a chord inside Lith's very core, triggering something that he had considered dead for a long time. First, the corners of his mouth turned upwards into a smirk. Then, he couldn't stop himself from a chuckle that soon evolved into a hysterical laughter.

The traitorous soldier was startled for a second. That wasn't the reaction he was expecting.

According to their intel, Lith had a very strong bond with his relatives, using most of his earnings over the years to improve their quality of life and status, instead of trying to buy his way into nobility.

It was public knowledge that there was no love left between him and his disowned brother, Orpal, but the other one, Trion, had been part of the family, until he willingly joined the military. He had been well dressed and fed all his life.

According to the locals, despite having different interests and goals, the two brothers went along. Too bad it was just a ruse, that the two brothers had agreed upon for their parents' sake.

Were Lith felt only spite for Orpal, Trion didn't fare much better, receiving his complete indifference. Their relationship had never mended, since both of them had never tried to solve their differences.

Lith simply didn't care about it. In his twisted vision of the world he had long drawn a circle, separating the people who mattered from the useless trash, where Trion belonged.

Trion, instead, at first had been too ashamed to approach Lith, after all he and Orpal had done and said to him over the years. Having always followed his older brother's footsteps, he had never developed a sense of kinship toward Lith.

They had been strangers to each other for so long, that every apology he could think of sounded fake and forced even to Trion himself. So, he had waited for the right moment to fix that mess, but the moment never came.

Lith had too many jobs, first as hunter and Tista's nurse, then healer and bounty hunter. He would never spend much time at home, and when he did, he focused on those that mattered for him.

It didn't take even a year for Trion's feelings to fester again, while his mood turned sour. As any child, he had always dreamed of one day discovering to have an incredible talent, to be special.

Yet with each passing day, everything changed only for the worse. While he was stuck in his routine of dreams and chores, Lith grew more and more powerful, his talent inspired awe in their parents first, then Nana, and finally Count Lark.

Soon, envy outgrew guilt and there was nothing to mend anymore.

The soldier wasn't aware of all that, so Lith's behaviour appeared to him as that of a madman. His laughter was full of scorn, like he was in front of the biggest idiot he had ever met.

"Do you really have my brother? Then I have a favour to ask. When you kill him, tell him that I didn't give a sh*t about him. I like to pay my debts in kind."

Lith said, while taking a small step back. There were so many ways he could have killed him, either by using physical attacks or spirit magic, but neither of them was safe enough for his tastes.

Moving at high speed didn't go well with the crow shaped mask he wore, and being in a morgue full to the brim of victims of the plague, he didn't want to risk for the sword to even scratch his skin.

As for spirit magic, the guy was too close for comfort. Lith either had to break his neck, losing the opportunity to interrogate him, or attempt to restrain him, hoping his victim didn't have hidden weapons or wasn't able to use them before the binding was complete.

"This is no joke. If we do not get out of here within a minute, my associates will consider the mission failed and order your brother execution." The soldier didn't let Lith get away, even if a sudden fear was twisting his guts.

Despite the cold of the morgue, he found himself sweating bullets, blurring his vision from under the mask, with all his body hair standing up.

"And why should I care?" Lith kept moving backwards, closer to the metal shelves. The mockery in his tone growing with every step.

"Kill him, marry him, whatever. Besides, your plan has several flaws. First, it's easier stealing a dragon egg than taking me alive. Second, I don't believe your communication amulet works.

Third, and most important, staging an attack inside a morgue, when most kinds of magic are sealed is suicidal."

Lith had yet to finish talking, when a multitude of hands suddenly grabbed the soldier by the left shoulder, arm and leg. His first instinct was to jump away, but each hand had the strength of a vise, so he slashed at their wrists, to force them to release him.

Like most soldiers, he had an enchanted weapon, capable of easily cutting unprotected flesh and bone, yet each strike felt like hitting a rock, making his sword vibrate on each impact.

Then, he finally remembered where he was. When he noticed dozens of red glowing eyes, staring at him from the shelves, his mind went blank out of panic.

"Did you really believe I would waste my time talking?" Lith chuckled, reanimating more corpses by the second, infusing them with his mana and will.

Lith had learned during his first day at the camp that the only elements he was free to use were light and darkness.

Light, for allowing the healers to keep searching for a cure, and darkness to sterilize people and clothes when going from the residential block to the hospital. He had simply exploited his opponent's idiotic speech to stall for the time necessary to rise his bodyguards.

The zombies piled up on the wretched soldier, pinning him to the ground.

"Let's see if you were telling the truth about your associates."

Lith activated Life Vision, noticing two human figures sneaking around the morgue's entrance. With a simple thought, he sent a group of undead to welcome the newcomers.

The restrained soldier went into panic, screaming and writhing to get free. The zombies' naked bodies were disgusting to see, but even more to the touch. Despite their strength, the flesh was cold and flaccid.

Many of them had open wounds, either caused by the parasites or by the autopsy, letting their bodily fluids drench him in a matter of seconds.

"Stop screaming. As you pointed out earlier, the tent is sound proof." Lith had one of the undead rip the mask off the soldier's face and shove a hand in his mouth. The man barfed for a few seconds, before falling unconscious from the terror.

When the other two entered inside the morgue, the zombies flooded them. They fought bravely, but were outnumbered and outsmarted. Lith had the undead tanking the strikes and only aiming for the soldiers' masks.

Realizing they were against intelligent plague zombies, the two went into frenzy, losing any will to fight and trying to escape, but the tent curtain, like a closed door in a horror movie, refused to budge.

"How the f*ck can a piece of cloth be locked down?" A feminine voice screamed.

"How indeed." Lith chuckled, using wave after wave of spirit magic to keep the door shut and savouring their terror.

Soon, all the three traitors were either unconscious or wetting themselves. They knew that without the masks, even if they miraculously managed to escape, it would not change their fate.

Their minds were frozen, incapable to decide if to beg for their lives or a swift death.

Lith's eyes glowed with a cold red light under the mask.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have to talk."

Chapter 148 The House of the Dead 2

Back at the White Griffon, Professor Marth was facing an unexpected complication. After the state of national emergency had been issued, all the academy's staff that had even a shred of knowledge in medicine had been tasked to pack their things and reach Kandria as soon as possible.

The Professors had been permitted to bring along anyone they deemed could help, even students. It was part of the cover story the King had devised to make Lith's presence in Kandria seem unimportant.

He would just be one of the many youths accompanying their mentors, hoping their talent would be recognized by the Crown or at least to gain practical experience. Having only one student from the White Griffon among all the experts would rise too many questions.

The departments most affected were two, the light magic and the alchemy department. Despite they were used to cooperate for the most difficult cases, this time the approach on the matter couldn't be more different.

For alchemists, this was a once in a lifetime opportunity. Working without a budget limit with only state of the art instruments, with the opportunity to have them even custom made, was an offer too good to turn it down.

Hence, the alchemy Professors had no qualms about bringing students along. They would have minimal interactions with the infected, studying the disease only through tissue samples and in the safety of their labs.

For, healers, instead, it was a nightmare. Daily contact with the victims, high risks of exposure to the plague, not to mention that according to the reports the mortality rate was akin to a warzone.

It was difficult explaining to the ones that volunteered how dangerous the situation was, without either being rude, or giving enough details to trigger panic attacks.

After turning down many well-meaning amateurs, Marth was at an impasse.

"Please, Professor. Why can't I accompany you?" Quylla from Cerea seemed unwilling to accept a no for an answer.

"Because it's too dangerous!" He snapped after running out of excuses.

"Let's be honest, okay? You are a twelve years old at her first year of academy. What kind of contribution could you possibly offer? You still have a whole life in front of you, I can't endanger your future on a whim.

You are one of the most prized talents your class has to offer, but you are still young and emotional. Believe me, I'm not going on a vacation or a field trip, it's a serious matter."

"Then why Lith has been sent there?" The fierceness in her voice made it more of a statement rather than a question, taking Marth by surprise.

"Excuse me?"

"Don't try to deny it. First, he gets summoned in the Headmaster's office, then he never returns for dinner or breakfast. And the next day the lessons get suspended. It can't be a coincidence."

Her cold logic made him proud, but the worry he perceived made everything clear.

Puppy love, the thing that he hated the most. Because no matter how idiotic it was, there was no reasoning with it. Yet he had to try.

"His case is different from yours."

"How so?" She snorted, stomping a foot.

- "Because he is inhuman! Gods, I wish I could say it out loud, but the Queen would kill me." – He thought.

"With Manohar gone, he is our best diagnostician." He actually said.

"Besides, he has already made several contributions in the theoretical field thanks to his unique understanding of the human body. Otherwise I would have never let him go. Now, if you excuse me, I'm in a rush."

Quylla left Marth's room with a dejected look, the door slamming behind her.

Outside, Yurial and Friya were waiting for her. Her face told them everything they needed to know.

"Why the long face?" Quylla asked, noticing that Friya seemed to be on edge, even more than her.

"My mother just called me. She only said that someone has screwed up big time, and that I must pack my things and be ready to leave the Kingdom on short notice."

"First, I want to know who sent you, and why." Lith was very curious about their attempt to capture him. The other team had spared no efforts to kill him, so either the contractor had changed his mind or it was another matter entirely.

The first one to answer was the soldier that had tried to blackmail Lith using Trion's life as a leverage. According to the nametag on the uniform, his name was Vickas Banut, a plain looking man with chestnut eyes and hair of the same colour.

His cheeks were still bright red, since Lith had slapped him multiple times to force him regaining his senses. Puke still dirtied his mouth and uniform, giving him an even more wretched look.

"Will you let me go if I tell you?" His voice trembled, mustering the courage to look in his captor's red eyes.

"Of course not." Lith laughed.

"It would be useless, since you are all already infected." He lied through his teeth. According to Life Vision, the three of them were still healthy, even without the masks and after having been scratched and bitten by the undead.

- "Either the parasites do not handle well the coldness of the morgue, or they die shortly after their host. Too bad I have no time to infect them and study the plague's progression. I need to get out of here fast, before someone else comes in." –

"Then why should I tell you? If I have to die, I'll bring my secrets with me in the grave!" The certainty of death seemed to have rejuvenated Vickas spirit.

"Excellent question!" Lith clapped his hands.

"Eat him alive, starting from the feet." His orders were meant for the prisoners to understand their fate, rather than for the undead.

The mindless zombies were like puppets, and Lith needed but a thought to make them move according to his will.

Vickas tried to fight back, twisting and kicking every time he could, but the creatures ignored his pitiful attempts. One covered his mouth with a rotting hand, while the other managed to grab his legs, filling the air with muffled screams and chewing sounds.

The other two prisoners tried to avert their gaze, but the zombies kept their heads blocked and their eyelids open.

"As you can see, they are avoiding all the major arteries." Lith explained with the same voice he would use to explain math to a dumb kid.

"I'm a healer, after all. You can't expect me to kill you by accident. You'll die only when I say so, and in a way of my choice. The first one to talk will win a swift death. The others will join my ranks."

The two first tried to scream, but their mouths were sealed as well. Lith hated to be interrupted by hysterical cries when he was speaking.

When Vickas' feet disappeared, leaving most of the bones bare to see, puke seeped through their noses and the zombies' fingers, preventing them from talking and allowing Vickas to make his move.

Lith noticed his hands waving madly, so he stopped the zombies, using at the same time light magic to briefly relieve his pain.

"Yes?"

"Duke Selimar arranged everything, with the complicity of General Lizhark and Mage Fernath." Vickas blurted as soon he was able to speak, pointing at his accomplices, that managed to stop puking, shocked by his betrayal.

"I never heard of them."

"But they know you. They know that yesterday you said something to Varegrave that forced the King to declare the national emergency. It's the first progress in over a month."

"But why kidnap me?" Lith couldn't see the logic behind their actions.

"Because they are scared of the plague. One of their associates, I don't know who, is the responsible. But he did it behind their backs, they didn't even know it existed. When they understood what had happened, they couldn't trust him anymore.

They don't want the plague to be eradicated, it's an all-powerful weapon. But without a cure, they will be forced to either flee or submit."

Chapter 149 Search for the Cure

"So, let me get this straight." Lith still doubted Vickas's words.

"Among the group of traitors that is trying to sabotage the Queen's work, there is someone that lead them by the nose while preparing this plague?"

Vickas nodded, his eyes always fixed on the army of mouths millimetres away from his bleeding flesh.

"What does this mastermind want? What's the endgame?" A zombie lifted Vickas' head by the chin, forcing him to look at Lith in the eyes.

"I don't know." He squealed. The hand holding him was flabby and sticky, secreting decomposition fluids at every movement. The putrid smell would have made him puke already, but there was nothing left but bile in his stomach.

"Then how come you know so much about your friends and their masters? It seems only a convenient lie to me."

Vickas exploded into a feverish laughter. The dreadful experience he was living, being captured, tortured and allegedly infected, had already pushed him to the brink of insanity.

Lith's naivety seemed to be the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back.

"Ha! Ha! Ha! Gods, how could my liege believe that someone so stupid could find a cure? He must be an idiot too! We're dead! We are all dead!"

Lith tried to make him snap out of his hysteria, first with threats and then with slaps, but to no avail.

"Eat his b*lls." He ordered, cancelling the spell that held the pain at bay.

"Please, no! Anything but that! I'm sorry! I really am!" Vickas stopped laughing, the agony flooding his limbs and the sight of those drooling mouths nearing his nether regions forced him to regain his senses.

"Remember, I still hold what's left of your life. If you are so proud of being someone else's dog, then act like one. I say bark, you bark. Otherwise my friends here will teach you how to play dead."

Vickas had served Duke Selimar for years, joining the military and climbing up its ranks only for his master's sake. His parents had abandoned him when he was just five years old, they already had too many mouths to feed to care for a talentless, whiny kid.

It had been Selimar that had adopted him along with his sworn brothers, saving them from the starvation and the daily abuses at the orphanage. Betraying the Crown had been natural for them, they had no loyalty nor gratitude towards the ones incarnating a system that only treated them as trash.

He didn't do it out of greed, but out of love. There was nothing he wouldn't do for his foster father. Betraying his trust was already tearing Vickas' soul apart, being called a dog was too much to bear.

"If only I could use magic..." He snarled, baring his teeth at Lith.

"It would change nothing." Lith gave him a slap, but this time with his true strength.

The force of that simple gesture smeared Vickas's nose over his cheek, making him bleed profusely, and dislocated the jaw.

Vickas had never been hit with such strength, not even when fighting soldiers twice his size. His pride and defiance crumbled, realizing that the zombies were innocent lambs compared to their shepherd.

"After the plague was released, Selimar understood that without a cure, he is bound to lose. If the Crown wins, he will be executed for treason, if his faction wins, they'll become the mastermind's slaves.

He fears him, so he didn't tell me anything, to not compromise their relationship." Vickas dropped the honorifics. He was a traitor now. He didn't deserve to call him master anymore.

"The others, instead, are expendable. When Lizhark and Fernath insisted to have their men assist me, he understood they didn't trust him anymore, so he took precautions.

He gave me enough means and information to frame them and their masters, so when necessity arose, I could expose them and destroy their credibility, giving my lieg... Selimar the time to get to safety."

- "This is good news for the Crown, but not for me. Lith thought.

The accident in Kandria revealed the hidden agenda, which in turn is causing them to infight. These morons are so desperate to put all their hopes on me, and I have yet to do anything. The only way to get them off my back is for the cure to be found, and fast."

"One last question. How could they know what happened and react so fast? How did you bypass the array?"

"It's actually easy." Vickas swallowed a lump of saliva. 'Last question' meant he was about to outlive his usefulness.

"We were already here, so when you arrived, each of us notified to his master. Whatever you did, made the Crown move fast, and that made you a target. As for the array, Small World is not perfect as they say.

Whenever Varegrave makes a call, anyone can use his communication amulet."

Lith was shocked, but thanks to the mask, nothing transpired.

- "Maybe that's because no one uses dimensional items, and why Varegrave refused to grant me privileges. The array is just like a big switch, when it's off, anything goes." -

"And how do you know when he does it?"

"I don't. I only wait for Selimar's calls."

Lith interrogated the other two, but nothing new came up. They were just as Vickas, but with a different master. All of them were plain looking and with the rank of lieutenant.

High enough to be able to move freely though the camp, but not enough to make it hard keeping a low profile.

Lith kept his promise, giving them a swift death and turning both their bodies and clothes into dust.

- "There are traitors among the nobles, the mages, the army and even in the royal palace. Without someone reporting exactly when the King is unavailable, it would be impossible to nail the right timing to call inside the quarantine zone.

I'm in hot waters, Solus. I need a cure to be found, but it would be really nice if someone else discovers it. I'm already a magnet for troubles."

"What about those three we now know about? Will you expose them?"

"How could I possibly explain where did I get such information? And even if there was a way, it would paint an even bigger target on my back. The smartest thing to do is not overstepping my boundaries as healer.

Soon their disappearance will get noticed, and by searching their possessions Varegrave will find the evidence on his own." –

Lith sent all the corpses back to their shelves, setting them free from his necromancy spell before going to search for a surgeon. Thanks to the authority his rank as plague doctor conferred him, everything went smoothly.

No one questioned his orders, they only obeyed. Lith had preserved the corpse of the man with the split leg, untouched by darkness magic, because it was the only one he knew where to look for the parasites.

The body was moved to a safe zone, and after wearing full body scrubs made of white linen, the surgeon cut it open following Lith's instructions. Even with Life Vision, Lith wasn't able to find any traces of the parasites or the eggs he clearly remembered they had laid all around the body.

"It seems they are unable to survive without the host. Yesterday this man was a living colony, and now nothing."

"That would explain how they managed to escape detection so far." The surgeon pondered. "These parasites are almost invisible to diagnostic spells when the patient is alive, and after his death, the autopsy can't find any foreign body."

Lith took several tissue samples, sending them to the alchemist to be analysed. Before developing a proper cure, he needed to know if at the moment of their death the creatures released toxins harmful for the patient.

The answer came in quickly. As he expected, the tissues presented a foreign substance, but it was an unknown one. It was impossible to tell what effects it could have in a living body, since its concentration in the remains was barely detectable.

Collecting and using it for experimentation was impossible.

Cursing Hatorne's name and her ingenuity, Lith went to Varegrave asking for a live subject.

"Based on the information acquired today, I have a theory about the cure. It's unlikely to succeed, high-risk and potentially deadly. Yet I'd like to try it out.

Even if it fails, I can gain invaluable data from it."

"What are the odds of success?" Varegrave's hand subconsciously caressed his last will contained in the breast pocket of the uniform.

"Barely 15%." Considering the difference in talent and experience between Hatorne and himself, Lith felt it was still an optimistic estimate.

"I like these numbers. Let's do it."

Chapter 150 Search for the Cure 2

Lith wasn't new to human experimentation, but he usually did it in secret, using as test subjects only people that had tried to kill him or dared to attack his family, that he would have killed anyway after putting them through excruciating pain.

Hearing his proposal being accepted by a servant of the Kingdom, without even raising an objection, was too much even for him.

- "Is this guy insane? I mean, I don't give a sh*t about people's lives too, but at least I pretend to care, especially in front of witnesses." –

"What do you need?" Varegrave asked.

"An infected from the anti healing parasite, no matter the progress rate of the infestation, at least three competent healers, and a lot of vials.

Successful or not, during the experiment I plan on extracting the toxins the parasites use to control the mana flow and, with a little luck, those produced upon their deaths.

Since both degrade fast without a host, it would be better if the vials are able to replicate the host's life force, or at least slow down the deteriorating process. I know that dimensional items are off limits, but I need something similar, or half the work will be for naught."

"Don't worry, this is not the first time that we use Small World for containing a disease. We are well equipped for all kind of contingencies. When do you want to do it?"

Lith pondered for a while, trying to make it as realistic as possible. He could actually do everything on his own, but the priority was to not make it seem too easy. Last, but not least, by delegating part of the job, he would get the opportunity to better observe the parasites' reaction to his therapy and react accordingly.

"Tomorrow morning would be great. I'm too tired now, I want to be at peak condition for the experiment. By the way, I need to impart one of my personal spells to the healers that will assist me, but I can't take out the scroll from my amulet."

Varegrave gave him a quill and an inkwell, forcing Lith to show his penmanship.

"This is really a bad idea." Lith said while the quill moved clumsily along the sheet, screeching from time to time.

"Since I have learned water magic, I always write with it. Are you sure you can't grant me water magic, or at least let me access my dimensional amulet, even for a second?"

"Sorry." Varegrave shook his head. "I can't do it unless it's absolutely necessary."

After a long and painful quarter of hour, Lith gave him something that looked like an ancient coded language, the spacing between the letters almost random.

The ink was smeared in several points, making Lith's doctor's handwriting even more mysterious and unfathomable.

"Do you think they can learn it by tomorrow?" Lith asked while cleansing the ink from his hands.

"It would be easier for them to recreate it from scratch, rather than deciphering this gibberish. Turn around, please, and be ready to get that scroll."

Lith did as instructed, keeping his right hand behind his back, allowing Solus to spectate whatever Varegrave wanted to keep hidden. The Colonel took a few steps back, positioning himself at the center of the tent.

His left eyes emitted a faint light, revealing numerous rune marks on it, that moved out of the cornea and in the air surrounding him, allowing Varegrave to operate them like a giant holographic keyboard.

Thanks to her mana sense, Solus could see Varegrave connecting himself to the multi-layered array that surrounded the whole region. She already had an idea of the artifact's scope, but only when the link had been established, she was able to understand its breath-taking complexity.

Now that Small World was activated, Solus could see the countless runes of power that enveloped every single millimetre of space. Its magic permeated even the items and bodies of all those under its influence.

An infinite number of shackles, albeit normally invisible, weighted on them.

- "By my maker! This thing is much more complicated than we thought. It's not like a switch, he has to actually rewrite entire strings of runes to make even the slightest change to it." –

"Do it now." Lith could feel the strain in Varegrave's voice, as Solus could see it on his face. He promptly extracted the scroll, raising it over his head, without turning around, for the Colonel to see.

Varegrave silently nodded, reverting the array to his previous status. The runes moved back into the eye, leaving no trace of their powerful magic, except a faint smell of ozone lingering in the air.

"Finally, some human language." Varegrave commented reading the scroll.

"The spell is mine, and I'd like to keep it that way." Lith ignored the remark.

"Don't worry. If it proves to be useful for the cure, you'll be properly compensated. Otherwise, I'll make sure your work does not get plagiarized."

Lith had no idea how Varegrave could be so confident about it. A non-disclosure agreement was just a piece of paper, an ambitious magician would ignore it and claim Lith's detoxifying spell to be of his own creation.

- "Either he plans to employ his most loyal followers or to just kill them to keep the secret, is none of my business. Right now, we have more important things to worry about." – freewebnovel.com

That evening, Lith dined alone, revising with Solus the procedure he had devised. First, they worked on all its aspects, improving the chances of success. After that, they tried to anticipate everything that could go wrong, preparing contingency plans for all eventualities.

The Moon was high in the sky when they finished. Lith was very tired, so he decided to sleep instead of using Invigoration.

- "Seems all the recent events are taking a toll on me. Compared to yesterday, today was pretty quiet, yet I feel beat up."

"I think it's because of the Small World." Solus pondered, recalling the intricate network of runes that manifested when Varegrave activated the artifact.

"Fake mage's mana is still, so they are not affected by it, unless they try to conjure magic. In our case, mana constantly flows inside our body, even when we do nothing. Being inside the array, is like carrying weights under the clothes.

Also, animating so many zombies at once didn't help. Remember what Kalla said? They feed on your life force." –

Lith had barely the time to agree with her analysis, falling asleep as soon his head met the pillow.

The next day, Lith met his medical team. They were already wearing a full body scrub when he arrived, leaving only the plague mask partially exposed. He could infer their gender and age only by the voice.

Lith explained them what the spell he had imparted would do, and what was their role during the procedure.

"That's it? That's your brilliant idea?" Said with a scoff a female voice.

"This is the most basic plan one could think of. What makes you believe you can pull it off?"

"Mostly the fact that before my arrival, you couldn't distinguish the head of the illness from it's a*s. Not to mention that you dare call it simple only because of my spell." Lith's voice oozed contempt.

"I'm explaining all this only because I need your help, not your permission."

"Indeed." Colonel Varegrave was going to spectate. He wanted to make personally sure that nothing went wrong.

"Feel free to leave, Mage Utika. But beware, because your military rank, noble title and all the funds the Crown granted you will remain here, with or without you."

Utika folded her arms, but said nothing more.

Then, Lith went to the patient, explaining all the risks and making sure she understood the consequences.

She was an old woman, thin as a twig, with unkempt white hair drenched in sweat. Her left arm was asunder, barely kept together by stiches and bandages. Her wrinkly face was stretched from the pain.

"Don't worry for this old bat, kid." Recognizing his young age, she forced herself to smile.

"I've lived my life, had a good husband, good kids and lived long enough to see my grandkids turn into fine adults. I don't want to spend the rest of my days suffering like a dog. If you succeed, I'll be healed. If you fail, this pain will stop. It's a win-win for me."

After putting her to sleep, Lith's experiment began.

Like Mage Utika had previously stated, it wasn't complicated.

By using Lith's detoxifying spell, the three mages were extracting the toxins that made healing impossible, storing them in magic vials that were promptly sent to the alchemic labs.

Lith was following their progress with Invigoration, waiting for the right moment. The creatures were rejuvenated by all that mana, but as he predicted, they could not excrete toxins as fast as they removed them.

When the arm was almost cleansed, Lith sent tendrils of darkness magic, enveloping the worms with surgical precision before crushing them all at once. Alas, in death they released a substance that seeped into the flesh and bone, making the arm rot at a speed visible at the naked eye.

Even the darkness cocoon enveloping the worms was not enough to stop the process. But now the arm was free from the worms and the toxins, allowing Lith to use light magic at his fullest, making it whole and healthy again.

While all the others were celebrating, he angrily took off his scrubs.

"I'm sorry Colonel. It's been an utter failure."