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Chapter 151 An Unexpected Threa

"What do you mean, an utter failure?" Varegrave wasn't jumping out of joy like the others, yet couldn't understand why Lith was being so negative. It was the first time since the plague's breakout that a patient had been cured.

"I saved her arm, yes, and maybe even her life, but only in the short term. It will just take a while for the parasites to invade the healthy arm, and then she will be back at square one.

My experiment had many goals, but I reached only one. I wanted to remove the worms safely, and it failed. And so did my attempt to collect the substance they release upon death, and even to nullify its effects.

It all happened too fast, I was able to save the arm only because it has no vital organ. Had the wound been in the chest or head, the patient would be dead. The only things I managed to accomplish was to collect the toxins, and I could have done that anyway, anytime, and restore the arm.

But as I said, all in all is a hollow victory. I need time to think."

Despite every success Lith achieved brought him closer to gallows, Varegrave didn't share his pessimism. Lith himself had predicted the experiment to be a failure, giving it a low chance of success.

The patient wasn't dead, on the contrary, her conditions had improved. It was a small step, but a step forward nonetheless. After dismissing the medical team, reminding them to not use the new detoxifying spell without Lith's permission, he went back to his tent to inform the Crown of the latest news.

Sylpha, Queen of the Griffon Kingdom, listened to Varegrave's report with ambivalent feelings. She was pleased hearing so many good news, after over a month spent stumbling in the dark.

First, a proper diagnosis for the plague had been found, and thanks to that, healers and alchemists were busy looking for a cure instead of trying to minimise the body count. Two days after that, the conditions of an infected had been stabilized.

Yet she was bewildered by how things were moving fast. It was completely out of her predictions. When Sylpha had forced Linjos to send help, threatening his life, it had been a punishment for his incompetence in handling Manohar.

Every time the runaway genius disappeared, she could only pray for nothing bad to happen. And when her pleas fell on deaf ears, she would inevitably let down the Crown's most loyal supporters, undermining her prestige and authority.

This time it was even worse, thousands of lives were at stake, an entire region was about to be burned to the ground. She had just wanted to teach him a lesson, showing how heavy were the consequences of letting one of their most prized assets slip away.

The recent events were a pleasant surprise, but a surprise nonetheless. Sylpha needed answers, and she knew who could provide them.

Right after hanging the call with Varegrave, she called the Royal Captain, the commanding officer of all the Queen's corps units.

"Your Majesty, to what do I owe the pleasure of your call?"

"Cut the cr*p, Mirim, I'm not in the mood."

"You are never in the mood, Sylpha." Marchioness Distar was at her work desk, as usual, swamped in paperwork.

"We know from over thirty years, so I'm asking you as your friend, not as your Queen. Why did you lie to me?"

Mirim was flabbergasted by the allegation, her eyes wide open from the surprise.

"I have no idea what you are talking about."

"All these years, you have marked Lith from Lutia as a rank B asset, that's why the Mage Association never paid him any attention."

"And that's exactly the value he holds for the Kingdom." Mirim rebuked.

"Yet, once he entered the White Griffon academy per your recommendation, he proved to be a rank A talent. Then, he brought you the box and the coded letter, and now is providing invaluable help against the plague. Do you deny it?"

Sylpha's eyes were reduced to fiery slits, overloaded with mana.

"No. But I never lied to you. I gave the Association a complete file, and they agreed with my evaluation. Being a talented mage and a valuable asset are two different things."

"Please, elaborate." Realizing her temper may have rushed her judgment, Sylpha calmed down.

"When I first met him, he was just eight years old, but you could already see how dangerous he was. Beyond his smiles and niceties, there was nothing but a caged beast. Being able to create such a complex game like chess and being good at it, only made him more unreliable in my eyes.

You know as well as I do that power and brilliance are a hard mix to control. And that is what the Mage Association ultimately wants from its members, control. And when four years later he was a bounty hunter with more than thirty confirmed kills, I knew I had been right all along."

Sylpha nodded. The reason why Miriam Distar had reached her rank in the corps wasn't only because of her talent for magic and loyalty, but because she had proved countless times to have an outstanding skill in evaluating people.

"When Count Lark started pestering us all, my intention was to mind my own business. I knew that with his talent, sooner or later Lith would have joined the Mage Association, and I needed more time to assess what kind of threat he could pose to the Kingdom."

"Then what made you change your mind? Why did you help him?"

"Because in my time of need, you let me down. And he saved my daughter." Mirim's eyes were brimming with determination.

"In that moment, I understood that he could be a second rate asset for the Crown, but an invaluable tool for me. I know that officially I'm just a middle-level noble, and that there's a limit to what you can do for me without blowing my cover..."

Sylpha inwardly cursed Linjos and Manohar again. It was all their fault if back at the time Mirim had been pushed in a corner. The Corpse existence was a secret that had to be kept at all costs.

The Queen would not use them to help a friend, nor to save her own children. If miracles started to happen whenever the Crown or one of their most loyal retainers were in danger, the rumors about them would turn into a certainty.

That was the reason why they had made Manohar the Royal Healer, why he was so important.

"...but if even after everything I have sacrificed for the Kingdom, you can't even guarantee the safety of my husband and daughter, then you can take back my rank and status, and shove them up your ass!"

Sylpha let her old friend rant slide. As a mother, she could understand her feelings.

"What level of threat are we talking about?"

Talking about her job, Mirim regained her cool.

"I estimate him as a Rank A mage, and a Rank S threat for the Kingdom."

"What? Why?" The shock was so big Sylpha could not go past monosyllables.

"Because he isn't like Manohar, that you can bribe with expensive equipment and new puzzles, nor is like Hatorne, that would do anything for money. Lith has his own rules and agenda, but only the gods know what it is.

If you, or anyone else for that matter, try to force him to do anything, he'll bend to your will, bid his time, and then when you least expect it, unleash something that will make this plague seem the common cold.

It's not his talent that makes him dangerous, it's his patience and ability to manipulate others. That's why I'm using the kite strategy, and advise you to do the same."

Mirim was referring to an ancient tactic the Griffon Kingdom used when handling dangerous individuals. Just like a kite, you would not let them fly freely, while at the same time keeping them far enough to be safe and give them the impression of being unchecked.

Chapter 152 An Unexpected Threat 2

"Lith's greatest virtue is that he has no ambition. He never asked me for titles or power, nor has he tried to turn his village into his own small kingdom, like many mages of humble origins do, intoxicated by their new abilities.

It implies that whenever you require his services, he'll never try to harm the Kingdom, since your goals are unlikely to clash with his."

Sylpha thought back at her husband words during their last quarrel. Maybe he was right wanting to arrange Lith's reward as soon as possible.

"I still think that your evaluation is too exaggerated. He is still just a kid, even if he becomes as powerful as Marth, he is still far from a level S threat."

Mirim shook her head, sighing.

"You are thinking too straightforward. He is not going to raise an undead army like the god of death, or unleash a plague like Hatorne. He may not be capable of such feats, but that doesn't make him less dangerous.

What makes you underestimate Lith, is that so far he abides to the law, but that's because it suits him. If there is one thing I understood about him, is that he wants to be left alone.

Think about his past. When his brothers started to antagonize him, one was disowned and the other left of his own choice. When a noble family messed with him, it was wiped out, because after killing several adults without shedding a tear, he had the presence of spirit of bringing proof of their contractor.

And he was respectively five and six years old at the time. Each of his achievements, taken separately is remarkable. But when you assemble all the pieces of the puzzle you get a kid that lacks any conscience, patient, manipulative, unscrupulous towards his own kin, let alone strangers.

And you are letting such a person near the most dangerous disease the Griffon Kingdom has ever faced. Think about it. He accepted to help you because he was promised a reward of his own choice, Lith couldn't care less about the infected.

If he manages to cure it, you'll have to take into account that he probably is capable or replicating it, or even make it worse. If angered, there is no telling how far Lith is willing to go for revenge, and I am not willing to learn it the hard way.

That's why I always bound him only through gratitude, helping him when he needed. Consider him a freelance to call I the times of need, but always remember to pay his due.

Force him to live under your roof, and he'll burn the house down after boarding up doors and windows."

Sylpha mulled those words for a few seconds, drumming her fingers on the armrest.

"I see your point with the kite strategy. Too dangerous to bring him close, too valuable to kill. Good thinking, without him, we would still be in hot waters with the plague. Any idea about how to reward him?"

"It's still too early to tell. Give him something precious, but not too much, otherwise he will not need us anymore."

Sylpha nodded.

"What about the box? Any news?"

"No, the lock is really complicated, and we have only one shot at it. Same for the former Headmistress Linnea and Hatorne. I don't think we have to worry about Hatorne, though.

She has left the Kingdom the same day the lab exploded, and that was a big mistake on her side. Here she could still rely on her contractor, but once the other countries learn what she did, they'll kill her in our stead.

The Blood Desert tribes value honour above everything else, and what she did is the highest form of cowardice, killing hundreds of innocents for money. As for the Gorgon Empire, the Magic Empress would never employ someone that didn't hesitate betraying her own country."

"Agreed. If I had ever suspected she was capable of doing such a thing, I would have killed her years ago."

"Geniuses are erratic." Mirim sighed. "That's why they are so precious yet so dangerous. And that's why I prefer people like Lith or Marth, they are predictable."

The two women kept talking for hours discussing the future of the mages of the whole country.

In the following days, Lith kept searching for a cure, but to no avail. Even after Professor Marth's arrival, the situation remained dire. Lith started to work with the healers from the White Griffon academy, sharing with them over time everything he had learned about the parasites.

Solus racked Lith's brain non stop, looking through all his memories about Earth technology and medicine, searching for a clue. But there were still too many things they ignored about magic; science seemed to have nothing to offer against those monstrosities.

Both of them were at their wits end, feeling their sanity slipping away. Lith was sick and tired of the life at the military camp, with most of his abilities sealed, always looking his back against traitors.

He hated being forced to spend his days with people he didn't like, working on something that had no interest for him, with no privacy at all except during the sleeping hours.

If it wasn't for Solus' constant support and care, he would have gone on rampage, rising from the dead every single corpse available and exploiting the ensuing chaos to run away from that prison.

As for Solus, she was experiencing what Marth feared would happen to Quylla if she took part in the research project. For the first time in her existence, she was facing the darkest side of humans, against which Lith had warned her over and over.

During their work, she had to witness death, misery and pain, knowing it was no accident or natural catastrophe, but the result of the constant war than men waged against other men for the sake of power.

Until that moment, she had always lived surrounded by the love of Lith's family and friends, allowing herself to believe that the world wasn't as dark as Lith painted it, and that he had been scarred by the unfortunate events in his first life.

The plague didn't discriminate between young and old, good and bad people. Every death they were powerless to prevent, left a scar in her heart. Her only solace was Lith's constant nagging about the food, their living quarters, the mask that made him sweat bullets, everything.

Whenever Solus felt she was about to lose herself in the madness surrounding them, she would find a safe harbour in his heart, uncaring for the ever growing body count or their failure, the only thing he worried about was her.

As often happens in the history of science, a crucial element for their survival was discovered almost by accident.

Lith's research team had confirmed that the worms couldn't be killed or removed, either by magic and surgery, without causing them to release the necrosis inducing toxin that lead to the patient's death.

To make things worse, Lith had discovered that even if the parasites' effects weren't triggered by the active use of mana, once their number grew above what the mana capacity of the host could sustain, they would start to feed on his flesh and blood causing his demise.

It was after one of such cases occurred that Lith noticed something he had missed until that point. The corpse, like all the others caused by the worms' reproductive cycle, was perfectly normal.

Temperature, rigidity, everything was as it was supposed to be, with no sign of premature decay.

After consulting with Marth, they devised together a spell that would allow them to confirm his new theory. Being comprised only by experts, it took Marth's team only a few hours to create a trial spell, instead of the weeks that Lith would need if he had worked alone.

Lith had already helped creating a diagnostic spell that would allow even to fake mages to detect the parasites, so he decided to let Marth conduct the experiment. He needed a cure that anyone could use, or everything would be for naught.

First, Marth located the parasites in a patient's limb, then he applied the trial spell. Once again, Lith's core idea was simple. He had observed that the natural death of the parasites would deal no harm to the host, so all they had to do was not to kill them but to let them die.

The trial spell flooded the patient's body with darkness magic, without directly attacking the parasites. The limb progressively lost its mana and vitality, until the point the worms were incapable to draw sustenance from it, starving immediately.

Lith was able to follow the whole procedure via Invigoration, ready to step in if something went wrong. The first to collapse were the eggs, withering as soon the slightest trace of darkness touched them.

Unlike the adult form, they had no protection against it. The keystone in Lith's new spell was that they weren't attacking the whole limb, but only the locations where the parasites resided.

So, once their life force was extinguished, having been tricked in perceiving their host as dead, the healers were free to regenerate the damaged tissues and inject energy in the patient.

The procedure lasted more than an hour, Lith and the other healers had to intervene more than once to prevent the spell from attacking safe tissues. Being only a trial version, it emphasized strength rather than finesse.

When it was over, Marth was drenched in sweat, his mask's eye crystals were fogged by the body heat.

"My dear colleagues, this leg needs to be regenerated a bit, but I'd say this was a success!"

Chapter 153 True Genius

After the success of the trial spell, Professor Marth's team shared with the other healers the details of their discovery. Finding the cure wasn't a contest, but a priority for the whole Kingdom.

Thanks to the new and vital piece of information, the research began anew with the different teams sharing their success as well as the numerous failures. Those who tried to get rid of all the parasites in one go, had a high mortality rate compared to the healers cleansing one limb at a time.

The great numbers of worms, coupled with the high finesse required to control the dark energies without inflicting collateral damages, forced the researches to abandon projects that aimed for a single session treatment.

After a trial and error experimentation, it became apparent that the best approach was a different spell for each limb, arms, legs, chest and head. When Marth told him that their team was going to develop a tier five spells, Lith went back studying the other kinds of parasites, letting them do their job.

He had still a limited knowledge of tier four, whenever the discussion moved to tier five, Lith was able to understand only the general terms, there was nothing he had to offer anymore.

After eleven days, Marth's team had successfully converted the trial spell in four new spells. After testing their efficiency, curing several patients with a very low mortality rate, he went to inform Varegrave of their success.

Those days, the Colonel was often gloomy, no matter how many progresses the researchers did, he had never forgot his foolish bet with the King. The moment the cure was found, it would also be his last day.

When Marth finished his report, Varegrave went pale, his lunch made several attempts to escape the stomach and get back to the plate, but a few glasses of Dragon Water to celebrate the good news managed to calm his nerves.

"I'm impressed by your amazing results, Professor. The White Griffon truly deserves the title of 'cradle of the healing arts'. To think that less than two weeks ago we were considering the idea of incinerating the whole region." Varegrave shuddered.

The thought of so many innocent lives lost only because of his incompetence, hadn't allowed him to have a single good night of sleep since Lith's arrival.

"Just out of curiosity, did Lith help you develop the cure as well?"

"Oh, no. By the gods, if he managed to do such a thing, we would have a second Manohar at hand. Heavens know if one isn't already too much."

Varegrave nodded. His fate was sealed anyway, he decided it was best to understand the scope of his mistake, rather than live his last days in fear.

"It is odd, though. From your previous report, I understood that it was him discovering the key element for the cure and proposing the method."

Marth pondered for a while, searching for the right words to not appear arrogant or ungrateful towards his own student.

"Indeed he did. But saying 'there is a flood, we need a dam', is different from actually knowing how to alter the terrain and engineer a facility capable of getting the job done."

"I'm sorry, Professor, but you lost me at 'he did'. Do you mind to dumb it down for me?"

"Well, it's actually simple. Lith's diagnostic skill is the only thing he has on Manohar's level. He identified the plague's source and then understood how, at least in theory, it was possible to cure it. Yet he had no idea how to do it.

If he was a true genius, he would have assembled four or five tier four spells he already knew and attempted a makeshift cure. Luckily, he knows his limits and the importance of teamwork, so he came to me for help.

Long story short, his core idea was correct, but it was just a vague idea. Turning it into reality was beyond his capabilities. Not to mention how difficult has it been to make it actually work."

As most warriors, Varegrave had always had limited interest in healing magic, but since in the last month it had become his bread and butter. It was now a topic that piqued his curiosity.

"Not to be rude, but what are you saying doesn't make much sense. I read his file. I know he is the only S rank healer that appeared in the last five years. Otherwise, how do you explain that all the great magicians assembled here, you included, didn't manage to do the same, despite the gap in age and experience?"

Marth sighed deeply. He wasn't a prideful man, yet admitting to be inferior to a child always proved to be vexing for his ego.

"It's a matter of vision. All us old coots have taken bad habits during the years, and Lith is our wake up call. Since light magic has replaced medicine, we stopped asking ourselves questions that in this case proved to be vital.

We do not care anymore why a liver doesn't function properly, we just identify what's making the patient ill and fix it. We got so used to light magic's simplicity to became incapable of thinking outside its boundaries.

Since Lith's arrival, he showed us how important was the knowledge of anatomy for regenerative magic, and now, being the only one that spectated to autopsies, managed to caught what we all stupidly overlooked.

He is considered a S rank talent, because while being taught to, we also learn from him. The lesson Lith has been imparting to us old fools is that science and magic are two aspects of the same thing, and that by relinquishing one we can't develop the full potential of the other."

Meanwhile, now that the light magic parasite was off the list, Lith was experimenting the cure he had suggested Marth on the victims of the fire and water parasites too. (AN: the parasites that cause spontaneous combustion/freezing when using the respective elemental magic.)

Thanks to Invigoration, he was capable of cleansing an infected in a matter of minutes.

Before asking Marth's advice, Lith had already verified on his own that the method was feasible, leaving most of the glory to the rest of the team. True magic allowed him a surgical precision in handling darkness magic, even inside the body of another human.

Killing a single worm or hundreds at a time was only a matter of focus for him. Whenever Solus would grow fond of one of their experimental subjects, he would cull the parasites in his body to prolong his life and prevent her to further delve into depression.

While Marth and the others were still busy creating a spell anyone could use, Lith had already discovered two important things. The first was that fire and water parasites could be treated the same way as the light magic ones.

The second, was that water parasites had a much longer reproductive cycle compared to their fire cousins. By checking the mortality data of the four different kinds of parasites, he noticed that water and magic blocking parasites were the ones causing the least amount of deaths.

Unbeknownst to him, only two had been created to infect the soldiers, while the others were intended to be used on the population of the Blood Desert tribes and Gorgon Empire respectively until they had completely submitted.

- "If the cure I have devised works for three parasites, I can hope it will work also for the fourth type. Based on what Varegrave said on my arrival, until a way to eradicate the magic blocking parasite isn't found, they will not let me go.

In a world like this, where quick transportation and communications are entirely magic dependant, the little critters can cause the fall of whole nations, bringing them back to the stone age.

It would be like if on Earth someone controlled a bacterium capable of sapping electrical current. Let's hope I am right. I can't wait to get out of here." –

The magic blocking parasite was the one Lith knew the least about. Since its victims were kept in a separate space created with dimensional magic, he had no way to interact with the infected without the supervision of Colonel Varegrave.

Most of them were powerful mages, that following the loss of their powers had been brought to the verge of insanity. The most common cause of death among the fourth group of infected wasn't the parasite, but suicide.

The second one was the constant rioting, which frequency was only getting worse with the passing of time. The medical ward was isolated from the external world, aggravating the feelings of helplessness and despair that had taken a deep root in the heart of the patients.

The few times that Lith managed to have access to the secret ward, the guards needed to be forewarned to have the time to restrain the residents before his arrival. Once he arrived, he had little time at hand and no privacy, so he could not conduct any experiment.

Now that the other threats were under control, Lith decided it was the right time to convince Varegrave to take out at least an infected from the secret ward and set up a separate tent for his studies.

Chapter 154 The Last Hurdle

Contrary to Lith's expectations, Colonel Varegrave didn't raise objections to his proposal, allowing him to start studying the mana blocking parasites. The only issue was that many preparations were required, and the safety measures were much stricter than before.

Most of the victims had turned extremely violent, so they needed to be hands and feet strapped to the stretchers to avoid escape attempts.

Everything that regarded the magical community needed the Mage Association permission, so Captain Kilian was assigned to him as escort and assistant whenever he came in contact with one of the patients.

There were a couple of reasons behind Varegrave's meek attitude. After speaking with Professor Marth, he had been able to put his wounded pride aside and admit to himself how wrong he had been doubting Lith's loyalty to the Kingdom.

Second, and most important, he was dealing with an internal investigation that had exploded between his hands out of the blue. After Lith had killed the traitorous lieutenant Vickas and his two accomplices, the cogs of fate had started to move.

With the tight discipline the encampment was operated with, the sudden disappearance of middle level officers couldn't go unnoticed for long. By the end of the first day, the military personnel were on alert, looking for three possible deserters.

The worst case scenario was that one of them, if not all, had been infected, and had decided to attempt escaping from the quarantine zone to see their families one last time before their demise.

Varegrave couldn't take any risk, if the plague spreaded in the rest of the Kingdom, the whole world would have been in danger. Their living quarters were tooth comb searched looking for any clue about their intentions or destination.

By the following day, the situation turned even worse. By checking their military records and work schedules, Varegrave discovered that all three of them, at the moment of their disappearance, were on patrol duty in the sector where Lith's tent was located.

Normally he would have considered it to be a coincidence, but after what happened to his sworn brother Velagros, he couldn't dismiss the idea they were traitors sent to finish the job.

Varegrave asked for Kilian's help, and both had their most loyal men search every place the three missing officers had been seen at, looking for clues.

The good news was that thanks to Small World, escaping was far from easy, and all the guards at the checkpoints, the only ways out the quarantine zone, were all elite veterans of proven loyalty.

Even if one of them was a traitor too, in an eight men team it would be impossible for him to help his accomplices without the others noticing. Also, according to the Ward block security, they had been seen going in, but never got out.

Being Lith safe and sound, he couldn't be their target. The thorough search of the encampment lead to the finding of a hidden stash and most of the magical items that once belonged to the three lieutenants.

The stash contained incriminating evidence against three powerful noble families and two of the missing soldiers, marking them as potential traitors against the Crown.

According to a letter found inside the stash, lieutenant Vickas had been approached by his foster father, Duke Selimar, who had asked him to betray the Kingdom in exchange of the promise of becoming his heir.

Vickas explained how he had pretended to accept, while gathering evidence to bring down the noble faction. According to the letter, he had only managed to identify two more, and concluded saying that if anything happened to him, it was likely he had been discovered and killed.

Varegrave was moved by Vickas' brave selflessness, cursing himself for not being a leader capable to inspire trust. If Vickas had come asking for his help, maybe things would have ended differently.

The final nail in the coffin of Varegrave's hopes for a happy ending, was that all the magical items retrieved now lacked any imprinting.

That could mean that their owners were dead.

Discovering how deeply rooted was the noble's faction grasp inside the military ranks, Varegrave entrusted all the gathered evidence to Kilian, letting the Queen's corps do the rest.

Unbeknownst to Lith, his plan had worked almost flawlessly. It had been him forcing Vickas to write the letter on his notebook, to collect all the magical items and putting them where they could be found.

Last but not least, he had found the hidden stash each lieutenant had and put everything together in a single one to make the cover story he had devised work. The only flaw was that he had no idea how to explain the disappearance of the three dead bodies.

If the traitors had overpowered and killed the "heroic" Vickas, getting rid of the corpse was natural, but if even they had died, who could have cleaned the scene?

The evidence contained into the secret stash wasn't enough to accuse one of the great noble families of treason, but it undermined their credibility, linking them to several unsolved crimes.

It would allow the Crown to suppress all their activities and cripple their influence until the investigation was over. Preventing the civil war from occurring was a top priority, so Varegrave could only ignore that mystery for the time being.

- "Dammit, in the King's shoes, I'd kill an incompetent fool as myself without a second thought." He thought. "I was so busy doubting Lith's loyalty that I missed the real traitors right under my nose. I can already hear the King and Queen quarrel about how corrupted the army is."

She will never let His Majesty hear the end of it." –

Considering the matter of the other three parasites resolved, Lith started to examine several infected from the mana blocking parasite looking for the perfect specimen. He was determined to find the worst case of infection possible and use it for his work.

Unlike him, fake magicians weren't able to alter the magical flow of their spells unless they had been expressively devised to allow it. To make things worse, Lith had no idea how a tier five spell worked, so he had to make sure to provide them a foolproof cure.

Lith's plan was to study an advanced case, gathering all the necessary data he needed to create a trail of breadcrumbs that Marth's team could follow. Otherwise they would need to make adjustments every time they encountered a circumstance unknown at the time the spell had been created.

The tent arranged for Lith's studies was quite big, it had a diameter of almost ten meters (33 feet) with two seats and a small desk as its only furniture. Most of his specimens came with a straight jacket and chains at their ankles, if not full body strapped like a salami.

Unlike the others, the victims of the fourth kind of parasite had healthy bodies full of vigour. The restraints were safety measures to avoid escape attempts and limit the risks of infection in case they attempted to bite during a fit of rage.

"You don't know who I am, you filthy military dog!"

Also, instead of treating the soldiers and the healers with respect, most of them would yell all the time, bantering their previous status like they were speaking to a slow-witted servant.

"I'm Garith Senti, the youngest guild master Kandria's guild ever had." Lith's first patient was a handsome man, well-built, tall with blonde hair and blue eyes, that in that moment were staring at Lith like he was dog po*p on top of his morning waffles.

"I demand to be set free and treated with all the honours I deserve! Once I get out of here, I will make sure everyone of you dies a dog's death!"

"Shut up, please. You disturb my concentration, making my work harder."

Even using Invigoration was a challenge. The specimens' bodies were afflicted by a toxin unlike the others Lith had studied so far. It didn't inflict any direct damage, but was capable of scrambling both internal and external mana, turning any spell in a waste of energy.

Overcoming its jamming effect required Lith's sheer willpower and concentration, draining his mana reserves like he was treating a whole village at the same time.

"Your job? Ha! You are but an incompetent idiot, otherwise I wouldn't be rotting in a shabby tent like a vagrant from over a month!"

Then he managed to spit on Lith's right eye crystal with uncanny precision, before erupting into a laughter. Lith had never been a Florence Nightingale.

His usual calm and respectful demeanour came from the awareness that after being held prisoners for so long, those people deserved to be treated with human respect to ensure their cooperation.

"You know what, mister Senti?" Lith cleaned his eye crystal with a handkerchief, and then used it to wipe off some dirt from the sole of his boots.

"They say that you catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar. But flies are actually easily attracted with sh*t." Then, he shoved the handkerchief in Garith's mouth.

Chapter 155 The Last Hurdle 2

Aside from muffled, disgusted moans and the soldiers' chuckling, the room had finally become silent enough to allow Lith regaining his focus. Garith was one of the first infected, and that made him a perfect specimen, at least on paper.

From studying his condition, Lith discovered a few things.

The slow reproduction cycle of the mana blocking parasite had allowed Garith to live that long without side effects aside from the lack of magic. It also gave the parasites enough time to fill him with toxins to the brim.

To add insult to injury, each parasite was enveloped by some kind of cocoon, formed over time by the constant excretion of toxins, that made almost impossible to pinpoint them even with Invigoration.

To get past the cocoons and make sure of the worms' position, Lith had to spend almost all his mana reserves.

"Your treatment was pretty harsh, sir." Kilian couldn't stop laughing at Garith's desperate attempts to remove the gag.

"The young master here is really as powerful and influent as he says." And that was the reason why Kilian avoided referring to Lith with his name, but only using the rank that his plague doctor army uniform granted him.

By the King's decree, Lith's involvement had to be kept secret. He had to report all of his discoveries to Varegrave first, whom would decide if letting him take credit for them or making them pass for information obtained through the use of an artifact.

Hence, Lith always wore the uniform when he wasn't working with Marth.

"Really? Then as soon as I finish examining this idiot, take him away and bring me another patient. I'll make sure mister Senti gets cured last. Arrogant brats need to be disciplined."

The whole tent chuckled, except for Garith that turned pale as a ghost. Because of the masks, the only way he had to recognize someone was through the voice, and even that was distorted, coming out of the nostrils-like holes in the plague mask's beak.

The soldiers weren't afraid of him too. Being forced to babysit a bunch of powerful and arrogant mages, their uniforms had the name tags removed.

Sighing out of exhaustion, Lith prepared for the last test. He wanted to extract a sample of the toxins, hoping that the alchemists could concoct something to neutralize their effects.

Lith placed his hands above Garith's arm, using Invigoration like usual, to use his mana to take control of the flow in the patient's body and force the toxins out of the pores.

Yet this time he failed. He was too tired, and in front of so many witnesses he couldn't access to the world energy to replenish his mana. Otherwise, when others would perform the same experiments and reported how difficult everything was, he would stand out too much.

The problem with working for the army was that Lith was supposed to report everything in his lab notebook. Thanks to his nightmarish penmanship, until that point he had been exonerated from it, doing an oral report at the end of the day instead.

Now, though, Kilian had nothing to do while watching Lith performing his experiments, so Varegrave had asked him to fill the paperwork in Lith's stead, with the result of creating an actual record of his exploits and sealing another chunk of his abilities.

"The sample collection attempt failed, I presume." Kilian noted down, listening to Lith wheezing like a bellows.

"Indeed. Take him back to the tent." Lith ordered the soldiers.

"I need time to recover my strength. I'll extract the sample after lunch from another patient, this one is not needed anymore."

"Yes, sir!" Both soldiers replied while standing on attention.

"What about the handkerchief, sir?"

"Earlier I stepped on horse manure, so he can keep it as a present."

At those words, Garith stopped his attempts to push away the improvised gag with his tongue. His face turned green realizing what was that horrible taste he had been experiencing.

Lith dined in Varegrave's tent, reporting to him most of his findings and his doubts about finding a cure. The Colonel wasn't new to Lith's pessimism, but it was also the first time seeing him so tired.

Lith was a little pale, panting between words, his hair sticky from all the sweating under the mask.

"Don't worry, as soon as you manage to extract a toxins' sample, I'll give it top priority." Varegrave reassured him.

"Thanks." Lith replied. "If we manage to find a way to dissolve or disable the anti mana toxins, it may be even possible to use the same cure for all the parasites. As it is, even locating the parasites is excruciating."

Silence befell in the tent. No one actually believed such a thing would happen, at least in the short term. The gap in talent and expertise between Hatorne and the Alchemists at their disposal had become each day more apparent.

The only answer they would come out with was: "We are still working on it."

Lith knew that without his true magic, there wasn't much magicians would be able to do either. Realizing once more his limits, Lith gritted his teeth and promised himself to work even harder, exploiting every advantage that Solus and true magic granted him to get free from all the shackles others tried to force on him.

"By the way, what about my family?" He asked.

"They don't hear from me from more than a week, they must be terrified."

"Don't worry, they are fine." Varegrave sighed, thinking about his own children he may never be able to see again.

"We told them that you are busy helping your Professors with an important research. You may call them today, if you want. But please, try to keep it short. Time is of the essence."

After finishing lunch, Lith took a quick shower before going back to his specimens. His body was once again at its peak. After the last breakthrough, even his recovery speed had greatly improved.

His next subject was a black haired fat woman in her twenties. She was barely 1.55 meters (5'1") high, with watery eyes, trembling like a cornered mouse. Her demeanour was meek, obeying everything the soldiers said.

Lith noticed her unusual attitude and the lack of restraints, but didn't mind them until the examination started. There was such difference between her condition and Senti that it was hard thinking they suffered from the same affliction.

The number of parasites in her body was small, and so was the concentration of toxins. According to her chart, she had been hospitalized even before Senti, but there was almost no trace of cocoons around the worms.

- "I think it depends on their mana cores." Solus explained. "The arrogant idiot from before had a blue core, hers is barely orange."

"Wait, you could see his mana core?" Lith was surprised. During the previous examination, overcoming the jamming effect had required all his focus. Beside locating the worms, he hadn't been able to ascertain much.

"Yeah, sort of. The toxin overload made everything blurry, but I'm pretty sure it was blue."

"So, the stronger the mage, the harder will be cleansing the parasites? Well, at least in this case, it makes my work easier." –

Both the diagnosing and the toxins extraction process went easy as pie. Her conditions were so mild that with his current knowledge, Lith was certain he could cure her anytime.

"Captain, this woman isn't part of the Mage Association, right?" He asked to confirm their hypothesis.

"Yeah. Not all the patients of the last Ward are powerful magicians. Lady Niha Zeir, here, is just a member of one of Kandria's minor noble families."

"That explains a lot. Thank you very much for your help, Lady Zeir." Lith made a small but polite bow to put her at ease.

"You are welcome, kind sir." Being treated like a human instead as cattle, Lady Zeir gave them a warm and cute smile while performing a curtsy, managing to give off a noble appearance despite wearing a prison grey jumpsuit.

Lith was about to dismiss her and move on to the next specimen, when Solus stopped him.

- "Hold your horses! Her neck, look at her neck. I noticed something odd during her curtsy." –

Lith did as instructed, discovering a single blue bulging vein on the back of Lady Zeir's neck.

- "What the heck does this mean? I have seen something similar before, back when I forcefully injected my mana in that mercenary's core to torture her." –

Lith used Invigoration again, but this time he focused on her mana core, discovering that it had several yellow streaks, but most of them were fading away, turning orange little by little.

- "It's exactly what happened back then. The foreign mana suppresses the natural one, inducing a degradation of the core. That alchemist must be a monster to be able to replicate true magic to this extent."

"Actually, I think it's a very unintended side effect." Solus' tone was worried.

"Why do you say so?"

"Well, I think it's clear that the fire and light magic parasite have been created with the purpose to kill. They reproduce fast and kill their host in a matter of weeks, while spreading their eggs along with the infection."

But this one, it reproduces slowly and didn't kill anyone so far. If not for their sudden lack of magic, many would have not even noticed it."

"What's your point?"

"My point is, that if the plague is man-made, then there is a cure somewhere, and that the mana blocking parasites seems the perfect mean to restrain a mage. The problem is that the parasites not only prevent the use of magic, but are also draining the cores' energies.

As I see it, once we remove the parasites, there are two possible outcomes. In the first one, the degraded cores never regain their old power, leaving the mages severely weakened if not completely powerless."

"That's sad." Lith mind shrugged. "But I still can't see anything to worry about. Is not like it's our fault."

"The second one..." Solus continued, her tone annoyed by the interruption.

"...is that they all become true mages."

Chapter 156 Rush for a Cure

- "Are you kidding me?" Lith's mind refused to accept Solus' words.

"No, I'm not." She replied. "Do you remember what happens every time you overcome a bottleneck?"

"Of course that I do. The world energy flows into me, because after the transition my mana core is empty..." When Lith managed to put two and two together, his mind went blank, and so did his face.

—

"Are you all right?" Kilian couldn't see through the mask, but Lith's sudden silence, freezing in place for several seconds, could only mean bad news.

"Peachy." He replied with a hoarse voice.

- "Exactly!" Solus continued mercilessly. "Nature abhors the void, so once we cure them, if their mana cores have degraded too much, when the world energy fills them, the patients may be able to perceive the mana flow, discover their cores and become true mages.

It's not like it took you much too, right? Your breathing technique is just a crutch to better perceive the energy flow. What if an already powerful core, after being depleted, suddenly goes back from green to blue?

The sudden mana flow would be so intense that only an idiot would not notice it. At that point, discovering true magic would only be a matter of time. Humans and magical beast alike, have a static mana core in their natural state, that grows slowly over time.

But this parasites changes everything, and that's why I think it's an unintended side effect. No one in his right mind would ever make his enemies even more powerful."

"Wait, how is this different from what happened to Tista? After I cured her, her core went from deep yellow to bright green, and it's still evolving. Yet she hasn't Awakened."

"It's completely different, you silly." Solus first giggle after days of weeping she had hoped Lith wouldn't notice, was the only silver lining among the madness.

"Tista had a naturally weak core because of a natural illness. Her body simply couldn't handle stronger energies, so it didn't let the core develop for years. After you cured her, the core started to grow, yes, but slowly, over time. Tista's core was always at full capacity, even if underdeveloped.

For the infected, instead, their core is already fully developed, let's say it's blue, but because of the parasites is temporarily down to green. Just like you after a bottleneck, their core will strive for the world energy, getting filled in days, not in years like in Tista's case.

If I am right, in the worst-case scenario, by recovering their powers, they will experience a 'breakthrough' on a daily basis."

"Lady Zeir, are you aware of this odd blue vein?" Lith tapped on her neck, trying to keep his voice calm.

"Yes, thank you for your care." In any other circumstance her smile would have been contagious.

"The previous doctors and healers never cared about it, even after I pointed it out to them. One of my tent mates noticed it about fifteen days after we got imprisoned. The scary thing is that everyone I befriended in the tent has one or more of them."

Lith swallowed a lump of saliva.

"Everyone?"

"Everyone." She nodded.

"Captain, how many residents has the tent?"

"A little over four hundred." Kilian replied after checking his notebook.

The thought of having so many true mages pop out like mushrooms after a rainy day made Lith's head fuzzy.

He was sure not being the only Awakened one in the world, but at least each one of them had gained his powers with constant study and discipline, just like him. Also, according to his theory, those who were deemed to be unworthy or too stupid to wield such power had been killed throughout history.

Sure, maybe not all those four hundred would become true mages, and a good number would be killed by whoever was in charge of the culling. But Lith wasn't used to plan his life around "maybes" and "ifs".

First and foremost, the infected were humans, and he expected from them to be horrible people. In his experience, power didn't corrupt, it would just bring out a person's real nature.

Lith didn't want someone like Garith Senti having even one more ounce of power, the new world sucked already as it was. Letting a bunch of strangers achieve true magic, was like handing a flamethrower to a pyromaniac.

He wouldn't allow some madman to go on rampage, for a very good reason.

He hadn't spent years, hiding his abilities, just to let a group of idiots ruin the fruits of his hard work. Not to mention that if any of them started to spread the secret behind being an Awakened one, he would lose all of his advantages.

His strength, his speed, even his recovery ability would become the norm. The new world would devolve in a nightmarish and chaotic place were might makes right. With his limited talent and knowledge, Lith had no doubt he would meet a foul end.

Lith tasked Solus to memorize the personal details of his specimens, now determined to find a cure as fast as possible, while keeping an eye on them. He still had the advantage of experience. A newly Awakened one would need weeks, if not months to sort out his new abilities and learn true spells.

Lith decided to exploit that knowledge gap to make sure that an "accident" would befall those he deemed too dangerous.

After Lady Zeir, Lith visited as many infected as he could, before running out of mana. Instead of checking for their conditions, he would only take note of the status of their cores and the blue veins.

At the end of the day, he had barely managed to visit around fifty persons, and the results were bleak. All of them showed signs of deep mana poisoning (AN: the blue veins) and their mana cores were discoloured if not downgraded.

The good news was that the stronger the core, the higher its resistance. Blue and cyan cores had just turned to deeper shades, only from the yellow level and below they had suffered an almost complete colour change.

The bad news was that at high levels, even changing a shade was a big deal. Lith had gained a whole set of new abilities just going past the middle level of cyan. There was no saying what an even stronger mage would experience.

During dinner his mood was gloomy, searching the right words for his report. He needed all the help he could get, but couldn't tell the truth, at any cost.

- "Now not only I must find a foolproof cure, I also need to make certain that no one Awakens. I can achieve it in two ways. Either I make the cure slow and prolonged over time, or I do not extract all the toxins after killing the parasites.

Either way, the specimens wouldn't be able to perceive the mana flow in their body while the cores recover their strength, and my a*s would be out of the frying pan. Both methods have evident flaws, though.

The first one could be improved by other healers not aware of the dangers it will pose. As for the second one, with no more parasites, I don't know how long the toxins would retain their potency. I need more data." –

Lith's trains of thoughts was interrupted by Colonel Varegrave.

"What is the problem with those blue veins that Kilian was telling me about?"

"It's a sign of the infection nearing the critical point. At this rate, the patients will be dead soon." Lith's lie killed two birds with one stone. It would give him plausible deniability if he was forced to kill someone, and ensure his research to get priority.

"I see." Varegrave didn't seem surprised, mostly worried.

"Are you going to extract more toxins tomorrow?"

"Most likely. Why?"

"Because we need to establish a safer chain of custody." Varegrave handed to him a gold ring with the Royal family's crest engraved.

"Only people with one of these will be allowed to handle the vials containing the toxins. Use it to stamp the custody release note every time you produce a vial, and always check the courier has a ring too."

Lith took the ring, pondering about the implications of the sudden increase in security. His mind went to the most paranoid answer.

"Let me guess, you want to weaponize the toxins."

Varegrave was taken aback, he didn't expect a kid to understand the severity of the situation.

"Yes. If we manage to stabilize them and apply them on clothes and armours, we could obtain anti magic protections. But that's not the only reason. Today an alchemist was discovered trying to steal a vial. He is currently being interrogated."

Lith inwardly scoffed at their wishful thinking. If such a thing was possible, he had no doubt that Hatorne would have already found a way to do it and sold her merchandise for a high price.

On the contrary, he expected Hatorne to prevent it from happening. She was a mage too, after all, he doubted she could be so stupid to leave behind something that could take away her greatest weapon. Yet Lith could benefit from their wild goose chase.

"Whatever they discover about the anti mana toxins, I need to be informed as soon as possible. Without a cure, all the infected will die shortly, and with them all your precious toxins will be lost forever."

Varegrave didn't miss Lith's hidden allegation, and was outraged by it.

"Are you implying that the army would care more about a possible weapon rather than the lives of the citizens of the Kingdom?" He indignantly stood up from his chair.

"I'm not implying anything, I know it." Lith replied between mouthfuls.

"I wasn't born yesterday. 'It's too dangerous to let it fall in the wrong hands. It's for the greater good. Collateral damage and all that stuff.' Isn't the way the army works?"

What Lith had just stated were the bullet points a small faction within the army was actually using to try to convince the King to not cure all the infected, but keep some of them as human breeding grounds for the parasites.

The mana blocking parasite, was the one that had raised the most expectations. In a world where a single mage could obliterate a battalion, it would give a chance to those without great magic powers to fight on equal footing.

"What can I do to help you?" Varegrave didn't have the strength to lie anymore to Lith, so he preferred to change the topic.

"I need the strongest mages among the infected. If I find a cure for them, treating the others will be easy. I'm not capable of devising a single spell to cure them, but I'm confident to find the right steps that will later be merged into one."

No one aside me must interact with my patients."

"It will be done." Varegrave nodded.

"I know you have no reason to trust me, but I need a favour from you. Please, find a way to kill those monstrosities before I'm ordered to do something that I would regret for my whole life."

Chapter 157 First Impressions

Kilian was aware of the political struggle that was taking place within the military's highest level. After Marth had created a cure with Lith's help, the fear of the infection had been replaced by personal ambitions and dreams of conquest.

Unlike Lith, though, Kilian knew there was still a silver lining. Varegrave was one of the most loyal men the King had, so if his final decision was to destroy everything, Varegrave would obey, leaving no stone unturned.

Generals and strategists could rant as much as they wanted, the final say on the matter rested on the King alone. Despite that, the pressure on him was bound to be enormous, just like the one the Mage Association was bound to exert on the Queen for that same matter.

It was easy for Kilian to imagine what was happening in the royal palace in that moment.

The upper echelons of the army against those of the Mage Association, with the Crown caught in the middle. Another crack had just appeared in the government of the Griffon Kingdom.

- "Life sure has a twisted sense of irony." Kilian thought. "To think that so many lives rest on the shoulders of someone devoid of mercy. If Lith manages to find a cure fast, the political situation can still be salvaged.

Thanks to the information blackout, the camp is cut off from the outside world. Nothing gets in or out, not even information. We can wipe out the plague, and then pretend to know nothing about the military's plans for the parasites.

Worst case scenario, Varegrave will take the fall for everything, allowing the King to get away with it." –

"Don't worry, Colonel. Even if you didn't ask me, I wasn't going to spare any effort to find the cure." Lith's tone was so full of determination that both men doubted about his psychological evaluation.

He was indeed cold and cynical, but seemed to truly have at heart the safety of the Kingdom.

- "F*ck, that's why I hate the military. They would weaponize even dirty socks if given the chance. If I don't act fast, there is no telling what damage those idiots could cause." – Was what Lith actually thought.

That night, he and Solus had one of their rare quarrels.

- "Are you really willing to kill all the patients in the last ward?" She asked bluntly.

"Honestly? I would rather be at the academy worrying about the second trimester exam, instead of being here playing doctor Fleming. But what do you expect me to do? Wash my hands of everything and hope for the best?"

"But... there are also women, children and elderly. We saw them during the round of visits. How can you even think about doing something like that?"

"How could I don't do it, you mean. Women are no better than men, and being old doesn't make you a saint. As for the children, their cores are too weak, the risk of Awakening is insignificant, I'm more worried about them dying because of the parasites.

I have noticed that most of them have red cores. I don't know what happens when a red core gets downgraded, but I don't think is anything good. Please, Solus, try to understand my point of view. You don't know what someone is capable of, until he is given the power to avoid the consequences of his actions.

A good person can easily be hiding his true nature or simply too scared to follow his instincts. Law and order work because people are afraid of the punishment. Back on Earth, a man called the Buddha said that evil comes natural to humans, while good needs to be taught.

If we are right, and that alchemist, Hatorne, is behind the plague, why do you think she did it? For money. Why do you think the army is willing to sacrifice innocents to preserve a biological weapon? For power. But you know what's the scariest thing?

Ask any bully, any violent man or woman why they do what they do, they all answer the same thing: because they can. If you really want it, I can let all of the patients go, but remember, whatever happens next, all the death and misery they'll cause, will be on you." -

Solus knew how harsh Lith's view on humanity was. After all she had seen, Solus couldn't completely refuse his reasonings anymore. Her only hope was to be wrong about the mana blocking parasite side effect.

The next day, Lith took extra precautions. He was about to meet his main specimen, and first impressions could not be taken back.

In case everything went well, he had arranged a comfortable medical table, a chair and some comfort food.

Hidden behind a curtain, there was a stretcher with leather straps, a straightjacket, a mouth gag and some manure if the specimen turned out to be a troublemaker or Garith Senti.

The person that walked into the tent wore no restraints. Lith would have considered that a good sign, if not for her attitude, with eyes filled with contempt like she owned the place and wasn't happy with her guests.

"Sir, allow me to introduce to you Nindra Luce. She is Kandria's strongest magician, and also the chairman of the city branch of the Mage Association." Kilian knew what to expect from both of them. Diplomacy wasn't the strong suit of any of those present.

"Nice to meet you." Lith extended his hand, only to have it ignored.

"You are a member of the Queen's corps, and a Captain at that." She said recognizing the uniform.

"Why am I forced to stay in a mixed tent, and who is the pipsqueak?" Nindra was 1.67 metres (5'6"), barely a couple centimetres taller than Lith. Her remark aimed to emphasize the difference in their standing more than in their height.

"I'm sorry, but for safety reasons the infected must be kept together, or surveillance would be impossible." Kilian replied with a flat tone.

"He will be your new healer, that's all I am at liberty to say."

"Another quack that would do nothing more than grope and probe me around for another month? No thanks!" She tried to walk away but the guards blocked her path, their hands on the weapons' hilts.

Lith had to admit she was indeed a sight for sore eyes. Nindra was a beautiful woman in her early thirties, with bronze skin, light brown shoulder length wavy hair and hazel eyes.

She had long legs, and enough curves to make her attractive even while wearing a grey prison jumpsuit. Back on Earth, Lith would have asked her out for dinner, but in the new world he was at least ten years too young and lacked a ton of patience.

- "Great! A female version of that arrogant idiot. Luckily I came prepared." –

"Release me immediately! I'm a member of the Mage Association. I demand to talk with the Queen!" She yelled in outrage.

Kilian was about to explain to her that she was in a quarantine zone, not a luxury resort, when Lith's ignored hand turned into a fist that struck a liver blow. The sudden drop in blood pressure, coupled with the pain, made her kneel on the ground, incapable of speaking one more word.

"Strap her to the table and gag her mouth, I had enough of her rants." Lith could have knocked her out by hitting her jaw, but he wanted Nindra to stay conscious. After the soldiers executed his orders, it was Lith's turn to talk.

"I'm sorry for whatever harassment you may have experienced here, but people are dying. I have no time to coddle your ego. Let's cut to the chase: to find a cure and give you back your magic I need your cooperation, but it may take some time.

You may either spend your next days strapped like an animal, or behave as a civil person and be treated as such. The choice is yours."

Lith ignored her gaze full of anger and the countless muffled curses she threw at him, focusing only on his task.

He used Invigoration to determine the status of her mana core. Judging from the streaks, it had once been light blue, but now it was several shades darker. Lith decided to have her treated first, checking Solus' theory at the same time.

He had already devised a way to beat the last parasite, but between thought and action there were countless things that could go wrong. The first part of his plan was testing if the toxins harmed the core by being in its proximity.

Lith tried to extract the toxins from her abdomen, instead that from the arm or leg like he usually did. Not having access to water magic, he could only make them get excreted with the sweat, and let it drip into the vials.

Even with all his considerable magical power, making the mana circulate in Nindra's body was like pushing a SUV uphill. Soon Lith was drenched in sweat, and only after a quarter of hour of unrelenting efforts he managed to bring to toxins at the skin level.

He had Kilian passing him the containment vials, and then grabbed her shirt, preparing to extract the sample. Lith felt her whole body going stiff, her limbs stretching the restraints to the limit.

- "If she has been molested in the tent, it's natural that she doesn't like being touched. I'll try to be quick." Lith thought.

"Yeah, and maybe having a little consideration for her would help." Solus snorted. "She is restrained, surrounded by four men, one of which is about to undress her." She added, since Lith seemed a little slow on the uptake. –

Lith turned around, noticing that all eyes were fixated on his hand. Those present were tilted to get the best view available, holding their breath in anticipation. Even Kilian was eager to spectate the next step, for academic purposes, of course.

"Sorry guys." Lith shrugged, realizing his mistake. Having examined and treated countless patients of every possible age, he had become numb to the allure of certain aspects of his job.

"Doctor patient confidentiality."

The sound of the curtain being pulled was accompanied by loud groans, caused by the awareness that their thirst for knowledge would not be quenched.

Chapter 158 First Impressions 2

Lith unceremoniously lifted the grey shirt all the way up, revealing Nindra's flat and smooth belly. He then enhanced her metabolism with light magic, covering her abdomen in milky droplets of sweat saturated with the toxins.

His eyes and hands moved nimbly, careful to not miss even one bead of the precious liquid. The fate of the Kingdom, but even more importantly his own, depended on the alchemists finding a way to neutralize them or at least analysing their properties, making Lith's work much easier.

Even if her partner didn't care, Solus stared in envy at Nindra's full and perky breasts going up and down while she heaved in panic.

- "If I ever get a body, I would really like for it to be like this one." She thought to herself. –

Nindra's fears quickly got dispelled by Lith's careful touch, filling one containment vial after the other without taking pauses to look at the scenery, or worse taking advantage of her helplessness.

During over a month of captivity, she had learned to recognize the lust in the men surrounding her, be them other infected or soldiers. After the prolonged period of isolation, people were easy to fall in desperation and act like animals.

Guards were relatively safe. They couldn't go past the casual grope because they feared getting infected the most. But her tent mates were something else. With nothing to lose, they would often lose decency, fighting among themselves for a slice of bread or harassing women.

Usually the guards intervened quickly, but other times, when they were bored, they would let things slide, watching at the r*pe attempts like they were just a theatrical performance, laughing and commenting without a care.

They would still intervene before something really bad happened, but that didn't make any of it less traumatic. With her powers gone, pride was the only thing Nindra had left, and she would do anything to protect it.

When she had first met Lith, she had assumed that behind the mask there was just another perverted old man, and treated him accordingly, taking time to remind him her status in the Association and her knowledge of the Queen.

But now, watching him work relentlessly, she couldn't feel anything. He was cold, like a machine, allowing her to hope that for once since her imprisonment, the man in front of her was really a healer.

As the last drop was collected, Lith carefully placed the shirt back down, avoiding any unnecessary contact, before using Invigoration again. The zone surrounding Nindra's mana core was now clear from all the toxins, only the cocoons remained, with the parasites still hidden inside them.

- "Any change, so far?" He asked Solus.

"None, it's still too soon. Even for you it takes some time. Don't worry, if I notice her core recovering or her mana circulating like that of a true mage, I'll let you know." –

Without the toxin's dampening effect, Lith could now spot the worms and attempt to kill them. His plan was to test on Nindra the first cure he had devised. It consisted in cleansing first the mana core, allowing it to recover, while the rest of the body was clogged by the anti mana parasites.

His theory was that even if the core were to be flooded with the world energy, Nindra wouldn't be able to perceive it in such status.

- "If I'm right, I need to make up some medical babble to justify the passing of days before treating the rest of the body. I can't allow other healers to rush things up." –

He then targeted the cocoons closer to the core, sending multiple tendrils of dark energy to seep in and kill their inhabitants. Just as he feared, the cocoons were just a highly packed toxin mass.

Sending magic through them was like pushing the proverbial SUV uphill, but this time with the hand brake on. Since this was within his expectations, he moved to plan B. He used his cleansing spell to remove the outer layers, while he enhanced with light magic Nindra's metabolism.

The effect was similar to doing cardio, the blood pressure increased and the muscle contracted and relaxed cyclically, hastening the dispersion process of the toxins, by both natural flow and osmosis.

The hours passed, and soon Lith was too exhausted to continue.

"This is what we will do from now on, more or less. Can I have your answer now?"

He asked after removing the gag.

Nindra's eyes were still cold, but contemptuous no more.

"Are you aware of what happens daily in that tent?"

Lith shook his head.

"If I accept to help you, I want the security to be increased, and the soldiers to be punished for their behaviour." Nindra asked, after briefly describing to him her dreadful experiences.

"I'm just a healer." Lith shrugged.

"I can talk to the camp's supervisor, but I doubt there's much even he can do. Humans will be humans. I could have him give you a detail, though."

"One more thing. I want your promise that you won't lay a hand on me if not for medical reasons."

Lith found her demands reasonable, and he needed her trust.

Solus believed to be able to determine if someone was Awakened, but that didn't mean that Nindra couldn't manage to feel the mana flow, and by remembering it, Awaken weeks, if not months after being cured.

"Deal." Lith released the restraints, allowing her to shook his extended hand.

"There is one thing you should know. These blue veins..." He tapped with his finger on her arm and behind her neck.

"...are a sign that the infection is nearing the critical level. My procedure should prevent it to become lethal, but it's still experimental. There are still a lot of things that could go wrong, so if you feel anything funny or unusual with your body after one of our sessions, you have to tell me."

Nindra was shocked by his words, looking at her own veins like snakes in the grass.

After the stick, Lith provided the carrot. Upon a small table he placed the comfort food he had prepared, a bowl of water with some towels and a change of clothes.

"I would like to offer you a proper bath, but with water magic unavailable, that's the best I could do."

The delicious smell of real food made her stomach grumble, his offer was too good to turn it down.

- "I'm not going to refuse some clean clothes, since they give us a change only once a week. But why the bowl?" – Nindra thought, before realising that between her panic and the light magic's effect, she was drenched in sweat.

Her shirt was stuck to her like a second skin, her erected nipples piercing through the thin fabric made her feel naked. Before she could cover her chest with her arms, Lith was already outside, pulling the curtain back.

- "I could continue her treatment after lunch, but I want to give it time. I'll resume tomorrow, after a good night rest. Solus says that the core recovers faster during sleep. This afternoon I'll try out my second cure." – Lith thought.

"Captain, I'm done with this patient for today. This afternoon I need another strong magician. I want to try out different approaches and see which one works best."

Lith handed him all the collected vials, and Kilian sent one of the soldiers to call a courier.

"Not a problem, but you already know Kandria's second strongest magician. Do you want me to pick the third best instead?"

The plague mask hid Lith's wolfish smile.

"No, mister Senti perfectly fits my bill."

- "With his talent and experience, if he can't feel the mana core after my treatment, no one can. Also, if he actually Awakens, he is the kind of guy I can kill without losing one second of sleep." –

"Are you talking about Garith Senti, the head of Kandria's mercenary guild?"

Nindra's voice came from behind the tent.

"That's the guy." Lith confirmed.

"He's a little too stuck up, but a good man. I can talk to him, if you want. I'm sure if you make him the same offer you did to me, he will accept."

- "A good man?" Lith inwardly sneered.

"Yeah, aside from his good looks there wasn't much to him. Either we misjudged him, or after all she went through, her standards for 'good' have considerably lowered." Solus pondered. –

Lith needed all the help he could get, so he accepted Nindra's offer.

Later, that afternoon, their second meeting was more polite, but the cold in the tent would have put the ice age to shame. After how Lith had disrespected him, Garith normally would never agree to help a filthy military dog.

But after over a month of prison food, with no baths or privacy, he was desperate enough to accept. Despite all the hatred he felt toward that arrogant doctor, Garith couldn't avert his eyes from the steaming steak in front of him.

Also, Nindra Luce was one of the few people he respected, and when she told him about the meaning of the blue veins, he had been forced to rethink his priorities.

- "When I get my powers back, I can always hunt him down, if I still want to. But if I'm dead, then everything is lost! As much as I hate to admit it, I need him more than he me." – Was Garith's reasoning.

"I'll get food at every session, right?"

Lith nodded in reply.

"I want a detail too. I'm sick of men and women sneaking in my bed while the guards do nothing but laugh at my expenses!"

Lith gave his word, so even with their mutual spite still standing, he could start testing his second theory. Thanks to the experience acquired by treating Nindra, things went faster and more smoothly than in the morning.

The plan was to kill all the parasites, while leaving enough toxins in his system to make impossible for Garith to Awaken while his mana core recovered. During the first session, Lith first cleansed a small patch of Garith's arm, making it easier for his mana to circulate during Invigoration.

Then, he proceeded to extract all the toxins, until he was too tired to continue. In the following days the two treatments diverged more and more. Nindra's was slower, first he removed all the parasites in her abdomen while checking her core status, leaving the rest of the body untouched.

Garith's was faster but much more exhausting. Lith had to partially cleanse the toxins and kill the parasites as soon as he could, always starting from the abdomen region.

As Solus had predicted, she was soon able to perceive the world energy flowing in their bodies to fill the void. Aside from that, their mana would not circulate but remain still, proving that the Awakening hadn't happened.

Thanks to the forced cohabitation, both patients soon came to appreciate Lith's efforts and dedication. After every treatment, while hidden behind the tent, they would try executing the simplest light spell.

All their attempts failed, but they could feel something changing within them. They expressed their joy to Lith, only to rise his worries through the roof.

One morning, Lith was killing the parasites in Nindra's arms. Her core had long recovered, so he decided it was time to cross his fingers and cure her for good.

Lith was about to finish, when a soldier barged into the tent. He held in his arm a child that couldn't be older than two years. The veins in his body were sky blue, bulging out like small hands were trying to rip open his skin to escape.

"Sir, this child has just collapsed. The healers don't know what to do, we have never seen something like this. I've been told to ask you for orders."

Lith was forced to decide if to cure him, risking for him to Awaken, or let him die.

Chapter 159 Crisis

Lith's mind wouldn't have spun so fast not even if his little brother Carl suddenly resurrected in front of him. At least in such case he would only experience two conflicting feelings: disbelief and joy.

Instead, his thoughts were subverted into a chaotic maelstrom. Nurture and nature were clashing like never before, incapable of finding a common ground.

- "I have to save him. I have dedicated most of this life saving strangers, even when they could not afford to pay. Hating humans is all right, but a two years old kid?

My biggest gripe with children is them being noisy and obnoxious, hence I never wanted to have kids of my own. But killing one is another matter entirely. What will happen to his parents and siblings if I let him die? Will they be scarred by their beloved's death, like it happened to me?" -

This was the reasoning of his healer side, the one that had been raised with love and affection by his family over the past twelve years. Its arguments were solid, Lith had experienced first hand the pain of loss, the suffering of a mother that could only watch her daughter die slowly.

He was unwilling to make someone else go through such experience out of mere egotism.

- "It's no big deal. The weak are bound to suffer and are always the first to die, It's the law of the jungle. I don't know and don't care for him. Saving him would be reckless. First, I would show Kilian that I am capable of healing the parasites on my own.

Second, this kid is not like me. If he gains any sort of power, he will become a threat to himself and others. There are countless risks and no rewards. Good deeds never go unpunished, if I help him, I'll pay the price." –

The arguments of his 'human' side were solid as well. Lith actually didn't care about strangers, he never did. When he had helped them in the past, there was always a hidden agenda behind his actions.

He was no hero, he had killed countless times and never lost a single night sleep.

While his mind was frozen, his body acted out of habit, taking the child from the guard's arms and placing him on the table to evaluate his conditions. The number of parasites was low, the child was so magically weak that they couldn't thrive in his body.

Yet twenty-two worms were enough to downgrade the mana core below the red level. It wasn't black, he wouldn't turn into an Abomination. The core had shrunk to the size of a pinhole, turning completely grey. Only a few deep red streaks remained, while the rest was losing its density.

The grey parts were foggy, not because of the toxins, but because the core was falling apart.

- "There's no reason to argue, you dimwits." Lith's logical side chimed in, shutting up every other voice in his head not with feelings or pessimism, but with cold facts.

"Unless his core possesses outstanding recovery abilities, he is as good as dead. The most merciful thing we can do is put him out of his misery." –

Lith would have expected that not having a choice anymore in the matter would make him feel relieved, instead it only made things worse.

- "There are so many things that I still ignore. Maybe I'm wrong, and the kid can still be saved. It's the first time I encounter a situation like this, I can't be sure unless I try. On the other hand, this is a unique opportunity to experiment on what happens when a core turns grey." –

His inner conflict lasted barely a few seconds, but to those present, Lith seemed to have stopped for hours.

"Is there something you can do?" Kilian's voice was dispirited. Knowing Lith, he assumed that all was lost. It was only a matter of time before plague started to reap the youngest among the infected.

"Don't you know light magic's first rule? If the patient is still breathing, there's always hope. Why are you doing nothing?" Nindra wasn't a healer, but she had great respect for them, as for Lith.

She couldn't believe the situation was beyond his abilities. Before meeting him, she had already resigned to live her last days in captivity. She was aware that without a cure, the plague or the Kingdom would have sooner or later killed her.

He had given her hope.

Lith had no answer to their questions, torn apart by his selfishness and the desire to become a better person. Someone real, that his loved ones could be proud of, instead of the mask he used to deceive the world.

He started sweating profusely, yet he felt a cold sensation in the pit of his stomach, like needles were prickling him from the inside. His guts twisted in a painful knot.

- "Solus, what should I do? I never wanted for any of this to happen, there is no contingency plan."

"It's not something for me to decide. I'm your companion, but the life is yours. I know that it's probably the scariest situation you've ever encountered, there is no lying or killing your way out of it.

The only thing I can tell you, is that whatever you'll choose, you'll have to rethink your way of life. After all our talks about changing and growing as a person, it's time for you to decide if you just feel empty or if you really are empty.

Whatever you'll become, I'll always be by your side." –

Those last eleven words were all he needed to hear. Solus knew him, the real him, but she had never judged or shied away from him. She knew every dirty secret he had, everyone of his shameful thoughts and flaws, yet she wholeheartedly accepted him.

Lith decided it was time to become worthy of such affection, instead of basking in its light giving it for granted.

- "I don't really know if this kid can or cannot become an Awakened one. The only thing I know, is that I can't avoid taking hard decisions only because I'm scared of the consequences. If I really want to become a better person, I must at least try being one!" -

Not even five seconds had passed since Lith had completed the diagnosis. His hands started to form fake seals, while his mouth pronounced random latin words, while Invigoration swept away the toxins.

After Nindra's and Garith's treatments, it was all too easy. Not only the parasites had been unable to multiply, the lack of nutrients had also prevented them to form a cocoon, leaving them exposed, easy prey for the dark tendrils.

No one collected the toxins, that went wasted, but nobody cared. It took Lith several minutes to completely cleanse the body, and the effects were visible at the naked eye. The blue veins first deflated and then disappeared, the kid's skin regained some of its colour, yet remained terribly pale.

"I should have cleansed his system. The parasites are still there, though." He lied, to protect his secrets. If the kid survived, Lith had to avoid at all costs that another healer examined him, adding him to the roster of his patients.

That way, he could always pretend to have cured him bit by bit, instead of in one go.

"Then why he is still unconscious?" Kilian asked.

"Because there is no telling what damage his body sustained. I did all I could, now it's all up to him." Aside from avoiding mentioning the mana core's status, Lith had told them the truth.

- "Using light magic or giving him some of my life force is useless. His body is in perfect conditions, the problem it's the core. How is it going, Solus?"

"Not good. Even after you took out the toxins, the mana core has yet to show any sign of recovery."

–

"Bring him back to his parents. There is no point in keeping him here."

"His parents aren't in the last tent, nor in any other." The soldier explained.

"We never managed to find them, they are either dead or have run away when everything started."

Lith nodded.

"I don't want to leave him alone while he is still like this. Do you mind if we postpone your treatment to tomorrow?"

"Not a problem." Nindra replied, afraid to touch the kid's hand and worsening his conditions. She was still infected, and had no idea how the plague spreaded.

"Mind if I keep you company?" Lith shook his head, and soon started pacing around the little tent.

He started to rack his brain, trying to find a way to infuse mana into the kid's body without harming him, but to no avail. Lith knew from experience that sending mana straight into the core was akin to poisoning it.

According to Solus, making his own mana circulating into another's body via Invigoration never harmed it, but it also did not affect the core either. During the cleansing progress, the world energy that Lith had pumped into the little body had not been absorbed, no matter how close he brought it to the core.

Maybe it was because it still retained Lith's mana imprint, but the mana core ignored it, refusing to draw nourishment from it. An hour passed, and the another, until the core turned completely grey before disappearing like a puff of smoke.

- "He is dead." – Solus told as soon as she saw the child's life force disappear.

Lith passed the news to the others. His voice was calm and collected, but inside, he was in anguish, questioning how much was the parasites' fault compared to his own. Maybe if he had not hesitated, things would have gone differently.

Maybe he was just a monster, and didn't deserve to be loved.

Chapter 160 Crisis 2

After the accident with the nameless kid, Varegrave changed Lith's priority, asking him to visit the last tent again, to check the conditions of all the other children and avoid further deaths.

No one was in a near death state, but most cores were past half grey, so he added the worst cases to his schedule, to devise a simplified version of the cure he had almost brought to completion.

To do so, he needed time, so he was forced to postpone Nindra's and Garith's treatments. Nindra was still shocked from the events of the previous day, so she raised no objection, wishing Lith the best luck.

Garith, instead, didn't take it well.

"What the f*ck does this mean? Postpone until when?"

"Until the emergency is resolved." Lith replied with a flat tone.

"Strong mages like you are in no life threatening situation, while most of the others already have one foot in the grave. Orders are orders. We'll resume as soon as I'm done, it shouldn't take much."

Lith was too calm, almost meek, making Solus quite worried.

The man that she knew would have never tolerated such arrogant attitude without a good reason. In normal circumstances, she would expect Lith to kick his ass to the Moon and back.

She knew that he wasn't grieving for the nameless kid. Lith was hurting inside, angry because every time he tried to give mankind a second chance, or to change his attitude toward life, something bad would happen.

- "The crisis would have never happened in the first place, if I hadn't been so arrogant to overlook such a predictable problem. When I examined Lady Zeir the first time, I should have thought that the weaker cores would be the first to collapse and acted accordingly.

Instead, I was so confident about finding a universal cure fast enough, to ignore reality and let the problem fester. I can't forgive myself for being so careless. Not to mention that one mistake lead to another.

I ended up putting to risk my safety, my family, everything I have worked so hard to protect. I have to decide what I want to be, before I screw up again." –

Lith was so lost in his thoughts that barely heard Garith's voice, giving him a nod from time to time.

"You don't understand sh*t, you filthy army dog!" Garith couldn't stand the thought of tripping when he was just one step away from the finishing line. He had everything in life, talent, looks, power, riches.

During that month of imprisonment, he had been brought to the verge of madness, being helpless, forced to sleep in a cot among inferior beings, ordered around by soldiers that normally he wouldn't even allow to lick his boots.

He wouldn't let anyone interfere, not when he was so close getting his life back.

"I don't care if a kid die. Heck, I don't care if every single one of the occupants of that f*cking tent dies. I'm Garith Senti, Kandria's strongest magician! I can't stand remaining like this one more day. It's much better for scum to be almost dead than for me being almost cured."

He jumped from his chair, grabbing Lith by the collar of his shirt before anyone could react.

"Either you cure me here and now, or I swear to the gods that I will find out who you are. then I will find all the people and the things that you love, and will destroy them slowly in front of your eyes, before returning you to your miserable live!"

Garith was 1.9 meters (6'3") high, a whole head taller than Lith, and strong enough to lift and shake him like the kid he was.

The guards and Kilian were about to tackle Garith, to kill him if necessary, when suddenly their bodies screamed in terror, all their hair standing up, forcing them to step back instead that forward.

Lith's maniacal laughter was the only sound filling the tent's air.

- "Human? Monster? How could I have been so stupid, tormenting myself about semantics. If there's one thing that Earth and the new world have in common, is that most humans are monsters.

There is no right or wrong, only power and how you wield it. Until I use my powers to protect myself and those that I love, I'll be a human. When I'll let my ego become my reason for being, and start hurting others for no reason but my sick pleasure, then I'll become just another human faced monster." –

Lith didn't need to use spirit or dark magic to force Garith to let him go. The killing intent he was radiating was so intense that both the guards and Kilian were paralysed by fear.

Garith, instead, that was the target of that murderous aura soon lost all his strength. His knees touched the ground, while his trembling hands were incapable of moving.

They were up and close, so Garith was the only one capable of seeing that their breath was steaming.

- "It's impossible! Water magic is sealed. How can he lower the temperature to such degree without it?" – He tried to warn the others, but his mouth refused to open.

"Once I told you that I would have healed you for last, hence you had no reason to protest." Lith's voice was a hiss, yet everyone in the tent could hear him clearly.

"Now, you dare to threaten me? You have forgotten I'm a healer, not a saint."

As much he wanted to rip Garith's head, he couldn't do it in front of witnesses, so he drew the knife from the belt, slitting Garith's throat left and right, in one fluid motion, forming a bloody V from ear to ear.

Only with Garith's death the killing intent disappeared, allowing the others to move. When Kilian regained his cool, he noticed that his back was against the tent's walls.

- "What in the gods' names is that kid? How many steps back did I take?" –

The guards shared similar thoughts, finding themselves outside the tent.

"He assaulted and threatened me. It was self-defence." Lith's voice was calm, like they were discussing the weather.

"Don't worry, sir. If you didn't kill him so fast, we would have done it in your stead." Kilian said perfectly hiding his surprise.

"Our orders are to eliminate any threat to your safety, sir." Said one of the guards with an apologetic tone, bowing.

"Please, forgive our incompetence. Thank the gods you are a great expert."

Lith shrugged, the matter was of little importance compared to his renewed peace of mind.

"Clean the tent, please. I have patients to attend."

After having Solus check his memories, Lith remembered that the first time he had expelled impurities, was when he managed to refine his mana core from orange to yellow.

Until that moment, except when using Invigoration to check its status, he had never noticed a breakthrough, not even when promoting the core to the next level.

Hence, he decided to use the same method he was using on Nindra, cleansing only the abdomen and leaving all the other parasites. Between the low number of worms and the cores' weakness, even Lith himself considered his therapy overly cautious, but he wasn't the type to take unnecessary risks, no matter how low the chances.

His new specimen was Lady Zeir, the kind noble he had visited first while studying the mana blocking parasite. She had a yellow core, almost downgraded to orange. If the cure worked on her, then Lith could safely let all the non mages get treated.

The procedure went without a hitch, Lady Zeir's core took less than a day to return to full power. The cheerful noble had fallen for Lith's apparent kindness from the day they had met, when she heard he may be able to cure her for good, her admiration turned into blind veneration.

She wouldn't hide any detail, telling him how she would feel itchy and hot after every treatment. Both symptoms had nothing to do with Awakening, they were the side effects of the cleansing process.

All those he had treated, regardless the nature of the parasite, experienced the same thing.

After Solus gave her okay, certifying that Lady Zeir's core was healed and not Awakened, Lith disclosed to Varegrave how to cure all those with scarce magical talent, sorting them himself to avoid setbacks.

Varegrave, in turn, imparted the method on all the other healers. It worked only on those too weak and hence incapable of Awakening, yet in just a couple of days dozens of lives were saved.

Aside from the mana blocking parasites, all the others had been exterminated, leaving none alive in Kandria's region. Varegrave kept only samples of their toxins for future research.

- "Whatever the army's upper echelons decide, I will not let the plague spread anymore. The last thing the King ordered me was to wipe them out, and that's what I'll do.

The only upside of being a dead man walking is that I don't have to worry about the consequences. When those foolish generals learn what has happened here, it will be too late." –