

## Supreme M 161

### Chapter 161 Consequences

With three out of four parasites wiped out, the camp had been further divided into three blocks instead of two. The third new one was for those that had been cured, to make it easier to check on their conditions in case the treatments had short term side effects.

The second block now consisted only by a few tents, allowing the security to be further increased, since the second one was low maintenance. The survivors were in high spirits, finally free to get out of their beds, pain was no longer a big part of their days.

After Garith's death, Lith was urgently summoned in Varegrave's tent. Based on what Kilian had told him, Garith was one of Kandria's great powers. Killing him like that, in front of witnesses after a small provocation, could have been a mistake.

But it was one Lith would be happy to repeat, if necessity arose. He had never liked Garith Senti, and the fact that he had been willing to assault the only one that could cure him, was a testament of how dangerous he was.

Lith had never left an enemy alive, it would mean to give him the possibility to bite his back. Thanks to his mask and uniform, only two people in the whole camp knew his identity.

Even if the guards took a bribe and told Kandria's mercenary guild what had happened to their leader, they wouldn't know where to look. The only problem was Varegrave, being a sucker for rules, he probably wanted to reprimand him.

Lith wasn't worried, though, he was playing a much bigger role in the crisis than everyone would have expected, even him. If push came to the shove, he could simply ask to add a full pardon to his reward.

The Kingdom owned him, and he wouldn't let his services come cheap.

Reality, though, was different.

"Lith, thank the gods you are all right!" The Colonel was so eager to check his health, to not even wait for Lith to remove mask and gloves.

"I'm really sorry for what happened. Those soldiers are supposed to be elite, yet reacted too slowly. I'll make sure they will be heavily reprimanded, and their lack of judgment noted on their personal file."

After making sure Lith hadn't as much as a scratch, Varegrave went back to his chair, sighing with relief.

"There is no need for that, it is all my fault." Lith replied.

"I should have anticipated his reaction, given his character and the nature of the news I had to inform him. He had always behaved properly before, so we all lowered our guard. The soldiers simply followed my instructions, leaving me space to freely move when I'm around my patients."

"I really appreciate your understanding." Varegrave nodded.

"But you are a healer, and you are doing your job magnificently, so such a slip up is understandable on your side (?). The men I assigned to your detail, instead, are professionals, their only job was to ensure your safety, and they failed.

Even if they got accustomed to the routine, even if given the most boring task, they should always be on their toes. They need to be disciplined, next time, they couldn't be so lucky. If anything happened, I would have demanded their heads, as the Crown mine."

Varegrave glanced to Kilian for a second, with a mix of scolding and worry. Given the Queen's fiery nature, his old friend's life could be endangered as well. If the guards were at fault, Kilian's situation was even worse, being their supervisor.

"Will there be consequences for me killing a guild master?" Lith was a bit baffled by Varegrave's care.

"Heavens, no. Attacking a military officer in a zone under martial law alone is a crime punished with the capital punishment. Considering your role, he had it too easy. We would have tortured him before the execution for a few hours, minimum."

"Then what was the urgency for this meeting?"

"The Crown wants to personally hear your report."

Varegrave stood up, setting the blue communication gemstone above his desk, before stepping away and kneeling, promptly followed by both Lith and Kilian.

The gemstone activated shortly afterwards, projecting again the image of the throne hall. This time, only the King and the Queen were present.

"Please, tell me you have good news, Mage Lith." It was worded as a request, but King Meron's voice was stern, making it sound as an order.

"I do. Aside from the last parasite, the situation is resolved with minimum losses. I am confident to have devised a treatment that will take care of that too. It's already in final testing phase.

Once I'm sure there are no side effects, it can be passed to Professor Marth for him to assemble it in a single spell. I'm sorry it's taking so long, but my capabilities are limited, and I need time to double check every step."

Lith lied. He had devised two possible cures since the day he first visited Lady Zeir, the only reason he had not wrapped up everything and went back to the academy was to make sure that Solus' worries didn't come true.

"You have nothing to apologize for." Queen Sylpha intervened.

"Barely two weeks have passed since your arrival, yet it was enough for you to turn the Crown's predicament from desperate to manageable (?).

You have identified the source of the plague, helped in devising the cure for three out of four parasites, and now you are going to provide the cure for the most dangerous one all by yourself. The Crown and the Kingdom are greatly indebted to you."

"You are overestimating my contributions, your Majesty." Lith lied again.

"The cures are mostly Professor Marth's doing. I gave him the idea for the first, and then I deconstructed and modified his cure to make it fit the mana blocking parasite."

"See, my King? Humble and efficient. I wish we had more subjects like him." Sylpha's tone was cheerful, but when her eyes met Varegrave and Kilian they were cold like steel, blaming them for their incompetence.

Kilian swallowed a lump, of saliva. The Queen clearly knew about the accident, and wasn't willing to let it slide.

"We have yet to discuss your reward, Mage Lith. Do you have anything in mind?"

"Yes. I'd like two thousand gold coins (?)." It was a sum big enough to raise his family status to the middle class, leaving him enough to buy all he needed for his future lab equipment and something to spare.

"That's it?" The King was surprised. "Wouldn't you prefer a noble title? We could easily make you a Count. Between the lands and the annuities, you would earn much more."

"May I speak freely?" King Meron nodded to his request.

"With what is going on in the Kingdom at the moment, with the old nobles fighting the new ones, it would be like painting a target on my chest. I already have enemies inside and outside the academy, and I don't wish for more.

Also, it would mean responsibilities that as a twelve years old I cannot shoulder.

My whole family would have to relocate in a new County, were they would not be well received. They are farmers, your Majesty, I'm sure they'll enjoy a quiet and slow life much more than social events and dabbling in nobility.

I myself am still too young to already set my future in stone. I don't know what I want to be or do, accepting a title would shut more doors than it would open. Money, instead, is always useful, and I can use them to keep increasing my family's living standards like I have always done, little by little.

Not to mention that receiving a title now, would make my involvement in the plague too obvious. Even if it was deferred, it would rise too many questions."

- "And more importantly, if I get a title, I would be forced to swear my allegiance to the Crown, giving you the right to constantly meddle into my life. Thanks, but no thanks." –

He thought.

"That's too little." The Queen blurted it out.

"Are you sure there's nothing we can do for you?"

"At the moment, no. But if Your Highness feels so grateful, I would be relieved from knowing that in case necessity arose, I can ask for your support. We live in dangerous times, there's no telling when I could need help."

"Agreed." The royals said as one.

- "I really hoped to rope him in with a fancy title, but an 'I owe you' it's the next best thing. If he ever needs our assistance, we can push things to make him feel indebted, creating a cycle he would not want to escape from." – King Meron thought.

"You are free to go, Mage Lith. Colonel, Captain. We have much to discuss yet." The kindness in the Queen's voice died as soon as she averted her gaze from Lith, who promptly left.

The curtain closed behind him, leaving the tent sealed from the external world.

"Your Majesty, I know that during yesterday's events I have failed you." Kilian said. "But maybe it was actually a blessing in disguise. There's something about Lith that I would have never discovered otherwise."

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- "Did you notice that while confronting Garith you used water and dark magic?" Solus asked.

"No. Really? How?"

"My idea is that Small World isn't the work of a true mage. It doesn't really block the mana flow, only makes it heavier. It's like you wore weights all this time, like in those martial arts comics, and now you are used to them."

"Did I power up because of it?" He asked enthusiastically.

"You wish!" She giggled. "It's just that now you can use a bit of magic, and I can change form again." –

Sighing in disappointment, Lith entered his new tent. Since the second block had been partially dismantled a lot of bigger tents had become available, and he had received a much bigger one as living quarters.

He had to change into his plague doctor uniform and wait for Kilian, before going to treat Nindra. If everything kept going like he expected, it was only a matter of a couple days before he could go back to the academy.

As soon as he stepped in, a cold sharp blade was pressed against his throat.

Three masked figures dressed like soldiers, two women and a man, were waiting for him, their weapons unsheathed and ready to strike.

"Lith from Lutia, you have much explaining to do."

Solus immediately recognized the mana coming out of their tattoos and weapons. They were once again in the presence of the talons.

Chapter 162: Consequences 2

- "The security of this place is supposed to be ironclad, instead is a f\*cking swiss cheese! First the traitors and now this?" – Aside from the initial surprise, Lith didn't know if to be angry with the guards or scared for his life.

- "Let's keep our cool. If they wanted to kill me, they would have slit my throat on the spot. Then we would have discovered the hard way how tough my skin is and how strong my regenerative abilities are. Solus?"

"The bad news is that all their equipment is enchanted and razor-sharp. The good news is that inside the Small World they are just very sharp, very deadly weapons. These guys don't have access to dimensional items or even their tattoos, for that matter. All they have is what you see."

"Tattoos? What tattoos?" Lith had been so focused on the plague, to have forgot the details about the group of mercenaries that nearly killed him a couple of weeks before. Solus projected in his mind the highlights of their last encounter. –

What they ignored was that for once Varegrave wasn't the one to blame. The talons had spent a small fortune corrupting one of their old contacts, now in the administration department.

She had provided them authentic uniforms and IDs, otherwise going past the checkpoints would have been impossible.

Magic seals and documents couldn't be counterfeited, and to have access to such tools they had to pay their contact enough gold to allow her to leave the country and live the rest of her life in luxury.

It was a sum that outshined even Lith's reward, but they didn't care, since it came straight from their contractor's pockets. The mandatory use of the masks had made their work easier, allowing them to move unnoticed until they had found Lith's tent.

The talons were unaware of his plague doctor persona, they couldn't care less about the Griffon Kingdom's crisis. This time they hadn't come only for Lith's life, but also for information.

Killing him was just the icing on the cake, erasing the failure that now stained their name. It was a desperate move, because once Lith returned to the academy, they would never get a chance to approach him.

Inside his academy, a Headmaster had godlike powers, even if they managed to infiltrate, they would immediately be discovered and killed by a snap of Linjos' fingers, activating one of the countless arrays that enveloped the castle.

The academy's forest was a no-go too. A squad had gone exploring it, and only one man had returned, babbling about a monster Scorpicores that had slaughtered the whole unit with a click of its tongue, releasing a barrage of light blades that turned them into shreds, ignoring all their defences.

The survivor reported that the creature had spared him intentionally, to bring back a message.

"I'm sick and tired of humans hunting for cubs. The next time someone messes with my turf, I'll come looking for you." Then, it bit both of his arms off before Warping him back into their allegedly secret base.

Alas, the mating season had come, turning the Lord of the forest into an angry murdering machine, having cubs of its own.

The talons hadn't taken the threat lightly. Sure, an offensive light spell was something out of the legends, no one in his right mind would believe it. Yet the limbless man had traversed hundreds of miles, bypassing the hideout's protections.

If the Scorpicores knew their location and could come and go freely, the light spell was the least of their worries.

The next option had been capturing Lith's parents, but they were guarded by two units of the Queen's corps, every single step they took was protected by arrays. There were more men stationed there than the surviving members of the talons, and they had the field advantage and months of preparation.

As absurd it sounded, the quarantine zone was their only viable option, with a very tight time window. Soon the disappearance of their contact would get noticed, and all her work would be subjected to scrutiny, blowing their cover.

"About two weeks ago, you were supposed to die during an ambush on your way here, yet you survived. Who saved you? What happened to your detail and your aggressors?"

The knife was pressed against Lith's throat, but it only managed to shave his few facial hairs. The skin was harder than leather, yet elastic. The woman needed to use the tip to spill some blood and make her point.

- "Damn, this array is more dangerous than we thought. It can also make non military weapons lose their edge. – It was the only explanation she could think of, so she informed her teammates of the discovery through their hand signs secret code.

Lith saw the other two switching their heavily enchanted knives and short swords for less powerful ones of the same kind. Both their actions and their questions made no sense to him.

In that moment, though, he was more than happy to indulge their curiosity and stall for time.

- "These guys are persistent. Just killing them would be useless, others may come. I need to find out who they are and what they want." –

Despite Small World wasn't capable of blocking spirit magic, the arrays were still able to slow down its effects. Unlike elemental magic, pure mana had no effect per se. It could be used as a form of telekinesis, but it required for the mana to reach and envelop its target.

Small World made the invisible mana flowing out of Lith's body spread like a fog, instead that like a river. Hence Lith's needed some time to wrap them up and take full control of the situation.

In such close space, with the weapons already close to his vitals, even his speed wasn't of much help.

"The men and women of the Queen's corps saved me. They fought bravely until the end, despite the cowardly trap laid by the assailants." The mask covering his face prevented the talons to see his grin spread, as the spirit magic did the same.

"The Queen's corps?" The woman holding the knife was about to spit in disgust.

"We kill those losers regularly! It's impossible for six stooges to defeat more than half of the talon corps. Quit lying, kid. Tell us the truth, and I'll grant you a peaceful death."

"First of all, that's my line. Second, more than half you say? This means that once the three of you are dead, this so called talons corps is extinct."

Lith's sudden spunk enraged the three mercenaries, mostly because he was right. They had never stopped cursing the day they had accepted Archmage Lukart mission. Between those killed in the failed ambush and the ones butchered by the Scorpicores, only a handful remained.

They needed the money to cut their losses and rebuild from scratch. As long their success rate was flawless, no matter the price they asked, people would pay, just like Lukart did.

"You'd better not waste my time, kid. Otherwise..."

"Otherwise what?" Lith scoffed, moving away from the knife.

The three reacted instantly, or better, they tried. The mana around them was so thick and strong it was like moving through molten steel.

With a flick of the wrist, Lith ripped the masks off their faces with spirit magic, destroying them immediately with a burst of dark energy.

"Even if you manage to escape, I'm afraid you'll die because of the plague." Lith's voice was stone cold.

"Now tell me how many of you are left and who sent you." He unsheathed his knife, pointing it to the eye of the nearest talon.

"Believe me, compared to the plague, I'm merciful."

Everything was going according to Lith's plan, yet Solus felt restless.

- "This is the first time since we entered the Small World that he is using so much mana. Necromancy was fine, since dark magic is not blocked. I hope this artifact doesn't have any more surprises in store for us.

Otherwise the situation could turn volatile in the blink of an eye." –

The talons refused to speak, so Lith started cutting their faces, only to heal them and start over again. The mercenaries felt cornered, not only they couldn't react but not even scream.

If any noise came out of the tent, their death would be assured, but until they kept silent, there was still a hope to escape from the deadly trap. Luck shined on them thanks to their tenacity.

The use of spirit magic was normally perceived by Small World like a fluctuation of energy, a harmless magical peak. Its prolonged use on such scale, though, was interpreted by the system like an anomaly, hence it provided to remove it.

Through her mana sense, Solus saw myriad of runes flowing into the tent, suppressing the magical restraints so fast that she barely managed to warn Lith of the impending danger.

But it was too late. As soon as the woman was free, she swept Lith with a kick, grabbing the knife at her feet, all in a single fluid movement.

Lith was taken by surprise, losing the knife trying to adjust the fall without offering his back. He was completely disarmed when the talon struck towards his left eye, aiming to pierce his brain.

Chapter 163 A New Power

Cursing his bad luck, Lith attempted to block with his left forearm. The knife passed from side to side, giving him the feeling a hot iron was branding his inner flesh. Lith wasn't new to pain, he needed just to grit his teeth to bear it.

His right fist struck fast as a snake, but thanks to her superior training and rich battle experience, the talon managed to dodge it in the nick of time. Lith's knuckles still managed to graze her chin, the impact made her feel dizzy, forcing her to switch from a dodge to a roll.

The talon's view was blurry from the near hit, without that last second adjustment she would have collapsed on the floor, incapable of standing. Lith jumped back on his feet to finish her, but the other two were already on him, aiming for his vitals.

- "Damn, with no magic nor weapons, I can only block with my body. Solus, help me withstand the pain in case I lose some fingers."

"Not on my watch!" She mind yelled. –

Lith wasn't the only one that had been training to explore the limits of his new body. Ever since their almost clash with the Scorpicores, she had made several experiments about her shape-shifting abilities.

After being in the Small World for so long, she was able to overcome some of its restraints, if she put enough effort to it. Her ring form expanded covering Lith's right hand, forming a stone gauntlet.

This new form was silver in colour, with runes of power glowing all over its surface. She had no idea how to synch again her mana core with Lith's, but at least she could offer him some protection.

Lith was surprised as much as his two assailants, but none of them hesitated, keeping their emotions in check. The gloved hand supported by air and fire fusion, deflected all the strikes that could kill or incapacitate him, while Lith tanked the others with earth fusion.

Between his natural toughness and the magical hardening effect, the wounds he sustained were shallow enough to ignore them. They would only bleed a bit before starting to heal without him even needing to cast a spell.

There was a creepy sensation in the pith of the talons' stomach, telling them they were facing the thing that had killed their comrades. Every one of Lith's blocks would make their blades vibrate like they had clashed with a charging bull.

Their hands were getting numb with each strike, making increasingly harder to keep the grip on their weapons.

- "What the f\*ck is he? Magical items are supposed to not work, what in the gods' name is that gauntlet? How can a kid be so strong and fast? His movements are all over the place, but he manages to keep up with us. If only we could use our tattoos..."

The talons' tattoos were another one of Coirn Hatorne masterpieces. Despite not being a true mage, she had found a way to inject her potions directly in the client's skin, making it possible to activate them with a thought thanks to the imprinting process.

With Hatorne gone, they would be conservative in using them, since there was no way to replenish the tattoos. But in the face of death, they would have gladly spent them all.

Actually, their situation wasn't as desperate as it seemed.



- "Careful! Do not use fusion magic for too long, otherwise Small World could detect and block it too. Only use short bursts."

"Thanks for the advice. It's easier said than done, though. These guys are good, even with my enhanced reflexes I'm no match for three of them in such an enclosed space. What about you? Can Small World shut you down?"

"It can try." She sneered. "I'm already following my own advice, boosting my defence only a moment before the impact." –

Being the first time Solus used such a trick, Lith was amazed by her ability in micro managing her abilities. She wasn't as good as she made herself look, though. The gauntlet form was a desperation move by itself, made even harder by the Small World's dampening effect.

Every time Solus missed the right timing, the Damascus blades would carve her thin form, if not even chipping away small pieces of stones. For her it was like being slashed and stabbed, but she held on bravely.

- "I'm just a piece of rock. I can heal from everything." – She thought in a hidden corner of her mind.

Lith too kept getting hit, but he would return each attack with double the violence. Two of the three talons were women, without their equipment and magic, they were like children compared to Lith's physical prowess.

The man of the group wasn't in a much better position. Despite Lith being unarmed, during every clash with his opponent, the talon would gain new bruises and cracked bones. The only reason they were still standing was because of their elite training and teamwork.

Lith was just an amateur, yet he had all the advantages. Small World wouldn't affect his abnormal body, fusion magic could substitute for potions and Solus was an excellent shield.

The stalemate would have lasted long, if not for a talon's lucky shot. The man short sword hit Lith's right hand heavily. His two teammates had flanked Lith, forcing him to take the strike head on.

Lith managed to deviate the women's weapons at the last second by using quick elbow strikes, not leaving enough time to dodge or deflect the incoming attack. The blade managed to crack the gauntlet, making Solus yelp in pain.

It took a breath's time for him to strengthen their connection becoming finally aware of all her suffering, how battered she was. A seething hatred exploded within Lith, focusing his thoughts like a laser, erasing everything but the urge to kill.

Spirit magic surged, overcoming Small World pressure enough to allow Lith to push his opponents away and trigger the Death Call spell. Darkness magic condensed in the form of tentacles, before starting to mutate.

In his frenzy, Lith wasn't just merging his mana with the world's dark energies, but also those born from the abyss he kept in his mind and soul. Under the mask, his eyes glowed with a yellow light, like torches, the pupils reduced to vertical slits.

Solus felt the darkness spreading through Lith's body, flooding her with power. The stone pieces scattered around the tent reunited with the main body, fusing back into place like the damage had never happened.

The tentacles turned into a black fog, destroying everything on its path.

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"What do you mean, Captain?" Queen Sylpha asked.

Kilian told them in the details the events leading up to Garith Senti's death.

The Royals were unimpressed.

"That's nothing new. We already knew that Lith from Lutia has no qualms killing. That idiot had it coming." King Meron snorted.

"That's your great discovery?"

"Yes, it is!" Kilian was baffled by their blindness.

"Sure, great mages and soldiers intimidating an enemy with just their aura is a common occurrence. But here we aren't talking about an expert, but about a kid, and a healer at that.

Yet he managed to scare the leader of the mercenary guild enough to make him kneel. The pressure his mana exerted made me and the soldiers take several steps back without even realizing it.

There was no greenhorn in that tent, yet we acted as such. Also, I could swear that the temperature dropped by several degrees."

Those presents were already sceptical about Kilian's words. After the last phrase, they started doubting his sanity. Varegrave couldn't believe his old friend coming up with such a childish excuse. His failure wasn't so big, after all.

Kilian could see the doubt in their eyes, but he didn't let it discourage him.

"Think about it. How come he is the only survivor of the ambush that took the lives of a whole unit of the Queen's corps? How come he is single-handedly solving the plague? How can he strike fear in battle hardened veterans?"

His words struck a nerve. There were still too many questions left unanswered.

"I am almost certain that he is hiding his real skills. I believe that he is capable of much more than just healing. No one can release a killing intent like that without talent and lots of practice.

I suggest we change his evaluation from A to S, but only in the royal records."

The idea that Lith was a talent on par with Manohar or Hatorne, with enough patience to keep his act for so long since so young was too disturbing to dismiss it without further inquiry.

- "If Kilian is right, then maybe he really is an Awakened one." The Queen used their telepathic link to share her worries with her husband.

"Agreed. We must ask Lady Tyriss to make haste, she's the only one that can discover the truth." –

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Meanwhile their conversation went on, an alien force started to seep in the world energy, creating ripples that reverberated through the entire continent, that only beings attuned with the world could perceive.

Tyris the griffon, right under the throne room, Leegaain the dragon, from the north, and Salaark the phoenix, from the south, they all turned their heads in the direction where the encampment was settled.

Rarely something capable of piquing their curiosity happened, and distance was no obstacle when they wished to speak to each other.

"It's not an Awakened, nor someone attempting to become a lich." Tyris pondered.

"And definitely it's not an Abomination turning into an Eldritch, nor a Monster evolving into a Guardian. I've never seen something like that before." Salaark added.

Leegaain was left with nothing to add but the obvious.

"That leaves us with a question: what the heck is that then?"

#### Chapter 164 Interludium 5

No one would have ever believed Milea Genys, if she told how before becoming the Gorgons Empire's Magic Empress, she was just a second rate magician of humble origins.

What set Milea apart from her fellow students, was that despite she hadn't been deemed worthy of being accepted into one of the big academies, she had never stopped believing in the infinite potential magic held.

Ever since she was a child, she had read the stories of the Magi of the Empire until she knew them by heart.

- "Many of them have an unclear past, were considered trash for most of their lives, until they have found their path to greatness. Whatever they discovered, I can find it too. Talent is not just innate, you have to develop it. There must be a way to break through my limits!" –

So, Milea decided to follow their lead instead of accepting a menial job, like the other graduates from the minor academy, the Red Basilisk, she attended. Milea didn't visit the hometowns of the Magi, nor she travelled through the places recorded in their biographies.

- "Gods know how many people journeyed through those locations. If there ever was any clue, it would be already known. Worst case scenario, the first one to found their legacies took them for himself." – She thought.

So, Milea decided to bet everything on rumors and legends, hoping to find the proverbial kernel of truth. What she found, instead, were tourist traps and hoaxes that costed her most of her savings, and in more than one occasion, almost her life.

After months of useless traveling, she had lost over ten kilograms (22 pounds), the care for personal hygiene and most of her trust toward mankind.

She wasn't a beauty, but a fresh and naïve sixteen years old girl had a strong allure to certain men, and since she travelled alone, Milea was often considered an easy prey. At least until she revealed to be a mage, and left her assailants crunchy and well roasted.

One day, she heard of a cursed mountain, from which no one ever returned. Some rumors talked about an evil spirit dwelling into a cave, others stated that on the mountain slopes there was a gateway to the netherworld.

When she expressed her interest to visit such place, no one offered to accompany her and the locals tried to discourage Milea. In her experience, that was a plus. It meant there was really something.

Reaching the destination with a flight spell proved to be child's play. There was no trace of monsters, the birds chirped loudly while fawns and squirrels would fearlessly come close, letting her cuddle them until they lost interest in the new visitor.

The surrounding vegetation was so lush, that Milea thought it had to be the most elaborate prank she had ever suffered. More than cursed, the place seemed out of a fairy tale.

The cave was in plain sight, the trail leading to it was clear from weeds, as it was often used. Once she got closer, a shiver went down her spine. The cave was perfectly arched, while the walls and the pavement were too smooth to be natural.

Curiosity got the better of her, so after activating a spell to light the way, Milea went in. The corridor wasn't high, around 2 metres (6' 7") high, and so narrow that only one person at a time could pass. She took note of those details to calm herself down.

Whoever lived there couldn't be too big, and in case she was forced to escape, being outnumbered or surrounded wasn't a problem in such enclosed space. The tunnel stretched downwards for several hundred meters, and when she finally reached the end, she couldn't believe her eyes.

Milea was in a library bigger than her hometown. It was a single circular room, with bookshelves extending on multiple floors, connected by stairs and enchanted elevators. The library's dome had a glass ceiling, from which Milea could see the sun, as the first floor had glass doors leading outside into a wood.

The whole thing made no sense, she was supposed to be underground. Milea cast her doubts away, using her flight spell to explore the library. Tomes and scrolls were orderly arranged by topic.

Among them she found ancient books written in unknown languages, legendary grimoires that were supposed to be lost in history, and even recent ones like her academy's textbooks.

Then, her eyes met a book spine with the inscription "Magus Lochra Silverwing's Grimoire" carved in golden letters. She took it out, opening a random page and discovering that it wasn't written in code.

She spent the next hours sitting on one of the many couches, trying to learn from her most beloved Magus, the foremother of modern magic. Yet the only thing she understood, was that despite all her studies and the centuries of magical progresses after Silverwing's death, the Magus' wisdom was still beyond Milea's reach.

Milea was really tempted to take the a few books as souvenirs.

- "Even if I prove to be incapable to step up my magical abilities, I can always sell them and settle for life. Just one of these books is probably worth more than the entire Red Basilisk academy." –

In the end, though, she decided to put the grimoire back and leave empty handed.

- "Even if I managed to sell them, instead of getting killed, those poor books would just become the trophy of some pompous idiot. Here, instead, they can help someone like me, but with more talent, to achieve her dreams." –

"Well thought, human!"

Before she could turn around to discover the owner of that voice, the space around Milea blurred, Blinking her in front of the master of the house. The new room was as big as the previous one, but instead of bookshelves it was filled to the brim with gold, platinum and gemstones the smallest of which was as big as her fist.

Ingots, coins and jewels were piled up randomly, forming small hills, surrounding a literal mountain of treasures, atop which there was the biggest creature she had ever seen.

Leegaain's form was so huge it was impossible for Milea to see its entire body. The dragon's black scales were bigger and thicker than a tower shield. Milea's whole body was barely the size of one of its claws.

She couldn't avert her gaze from the creature's yellow eyes, the pupils a vertical slit, resembling those of a cat. Its heartbeat was deafening, while the simple act of breathing produced gales strong enough to force her to seek shelter behind a gold pile.

"I'm sorry." It said after noticing her distress. "I almost forgot how fragile humans are."

The noise stopped, and so did the wind.

"You have come into my home and acted as a guest, and that deserves a reward. You didn't arrive here in a righteous frenzy to slay the beast, nor acted as a marauder, giving knowledge the respect it deserves."

Now that the fear was leaving her body, Milea could notice the bony protuberances on its head, resembling a crown, and the gentle curve of the enormous membranous wings resting on its back.

"Choose one thing, in my home. Be it riches, knowledge or a weapon, its yours to take."

"I want knowledge!" She blurted out before the dragon changed its mind.

Leegaain chuckled in satisfaction, it was an interesting fellow indeed.

"Name a book, and it will be yours."

"I don't want a book. The knowledge I want it's yours. Please, teach me how to become a Magus!"

Leegaain was flabbergasted, that was something it hadn't predicted.

"So be it." It nodded.

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In the following months, Leegaain taught Milea the secret of the Awakened ones.

"Very few Magi in history weren't Awakened ones. The principle behind it is simple, but achieving it is incredibly rare. No matter how strong a mana core is, it cannot generate a flow strong enough to be detected.

The only way to Awaken, is being able to perceive the world energy that surround us, and let it flow inside you."

Milea was sitting cross legged, with her eyes closed, while Leegaain was curled up around her, gathering a huge amount of world energy through Invigoration, to make it easier for her to perceive it.

"There are only two ways of becoming an Awakened one." He kept explaining, his tone giving Milea a rhythm to follow during her breathing.

"The first is to feel the world energy by yourself. The event is very unlikely, unless you reach a state of enlightenment, find a place much more abundant than normal of world energy, or you are a newborn.

Newborns are empty things. The mother gives them life, the world gives them mana. If only they could be taught, creating an Awakened one would be easy.

The second way, is to be Awakened by a Guardian like me. That's how my old friends Tyris and Salaark create their new toys, giving them power but not knowledge. I'm different from them. I don't care about any country anymore.

They betrayed me, so I abandoned them in return."

Milea really wanted to know what was Leegaain talking about, but she was afraid to lose her focus.

"The Gorgon Empire can go die in a fire for what I care. I will not set it ablaze but I will not extinguish it either. But I digress.

An Awakened only enemies are other Awakened ones, be they humans, evolved from magical beasts, or even worse Abominations. Just like us, Abominations came in all kinds and forms, just like Guardians are born, so they grow into Eldritchs.

The most dangerous Abominations are those that manage to possess a suitable body, be it bestial or human. Here is what you have to be wary of..."

#### Chapter 165 Leegaain's Wrath

"Abominations are creatures mostly born out of greed, when someone pushes his body beyond its limits, destroying it. Unlike what most creatures think, Abominations aren't only Awakened ones gone wrong.

I have fought and destroyed Abominations that spoke only gibberish, others that had no idea what had happened to them, having no concept of the mana core or world energy. They were simply born like that.

What I do know for certain, is that once an Abomination is born, there are three possible outcomes. The most common, is that the Abomination dies, either because of a prolonged lack of nourishment or because it gets killed.

They cause too much damage to go unnoticed, so humans or beasts usually hunt them down before they can learn to control their abilities. The second possibility is for the Abomination to seize enough world energy to stabilise its form and regain part of its senses.

They are called Empowered Abominations, and are much more dangerous than their younglings. They can use magic properly, control their hunger to a degree and live forever, or at least until they get destroyed.

Their greatest weakness is the lack of a physical body, which makes them impossible to blend in. They have to hide to survive, yet they manage to do great harm to the world, draining its mana to keep living.

The last and rarest outcome, is for an Abomination to find a proper host, becoming able of permanently stabilising its form and getting full control over the hunger. They are called Puppeteer Abominations, and are the most dangerous ones.

They usually prey someone of their same species, so a beast will target beasts, a plant another plant. The ideal body is freshly dead, in mint condition, and stronger than the one the Abomination previously had.

A dead body has no mana core, making it easier for the Abomination's to settle in. It's possible to possess a living body, but in such case, until the host is alive, the two cores will fight for control, making it impossible to use magic. (\*)

The body's conditions and strength are related to the need for it to be able to contain the Puppeteer. Without these requisites, it would be ripped apart by the chaotic energies, just like the old one.

As long a Puppeteer is able to control its urges, it goes unnoticed. The only way to identify them is to use Invigoration and check for the presence of corrupt energies. They are hybrid in nature, allowing them to develop unique and unpredictable abilities.

Both Empowered and Puppeteers can further evolve into Eldritch Abominations. Their powers are on the same level of the superior Monsters, like Scorpicores, Wyverns or Treants."

Milea had become used hearing Leegaain's voice every moment of the day, even now that she was showering. The dragon demanded from her to keep the breathing rhythm during her meals, reading time and bathroom pauses.

Milea was avid for knowledge, the voice in her head had stopped bothering her after the first days spent together.

"Wait. I thought Eldritchs were the Guardians corrupt counterpart. You know, good versus evil? Are you saying they are weaker than you?"

Leegaain guffawed at such preposterous idea.

"Good? Evil? That's a human concept that the world never cared about and never will. And to be honest, neither you humans actually do. You just like to fill your mouths with righteous words, before feeding on those of your kin that are too weak to retaliate."

Melia felt insulted by such cruel remark, but then she remembered all the fake offers for help she had received, all the misery and pain that her kind inflicted on itself in the name of profit or pleasure. So she changed topic.

"Well, good to know. A Guardian Abomination is too scary even to think about. How does one become a Guardian?" She asked.

"That's a complicate question. Do you know what the real difference between the magic you learned at the academy and the one I'm teaching you is?"

Melia shook her head while applying the shampoo.

"Human magic is egotistical. You try to do everything on your own, using only the mana that your body holds. That's why you couldn't use powerful spells before, because your mana core was too weak.

Human magic forces its connection with the world energy, making a spell easier to cast, but doing so requires a great inner strength.

Now, instead, I taught you how to strengthen the core and how to borrow the world's mana. It's like the difference between lifting something using only the arms and doing it while coordinating your arms, legs and back.

That's a trait that permeates mankind's whole life, just like Abominations' lust for power. That's why you can become true mages, even evolve into Magi, but never before one of you became a Guardian.

To become one, you must accept the world, and the world must accept you back. Only by giving back what the planet has given you, it's possible to pass the world's tribulations and reach the Guardian state."

Milea sneered at her Mentor's contempt.

"Really? And what did you give to the world? A huge scaly a\*s?"

They both laughed heartily. They were getting fonder of each other with each passing day.

"It's easier to show than to tell. Have you finished showering, or must I drain another waterfall?"

"Ready when you are, smartass." A sudden gust of warm wind dried her up, covering her with a white silk roman toga with a deep neckline and side slits that left most of her legs exposed.

"What the heck is this thing? It looks so ancient." Milea had materialized in what seemed a grass field for the livestock. Leegaain's lair had countless rooms, some so big that it seemed to be in a world of its own.

The dragon's mastery of dimensional magic allowed him to stretch the mountain cave into a continent.

"Back in the day, when people believed me a god, and I let them worship me, this was the standard dress of my priestesses. It feels nostalgic seeing it worn by a beautiful young girl again."

Thanks to the constant refinement of her mana core, the cleansing of the impurities and Leegaain home cooking, Milea's looks had improved by leap and bounds. She doubted her own mother would find easy to recognize her anymore.

"Wow, I would have never taken you for such a perv!"

"Hey, I'm ancient, not dead. Back to your question, kid. Do you know why the Gorgon Empire is named so?"

"Of course." She nodded. "Gorgons were a violent race of monsters, that plagued our lands, turning the living into stone. Then, before the Empire was unified, our forefathers discovered that their skin and bones were made of adamant, one of the strongest metals.



After slaying the beasts, they forged what later become known as the Empire's Arsenal. Without those weapons and armours, the Gorgon Empire would have never been born. The Gorgon Empire's foundations are the Gorgon's flesh and bones."

Leegaain clicked its tongue in disgust.

"Propaganda. That's how you make a lie so close to the truth."

They Warped again, getting close to what in the distance seemed a herd of cows. Milea discovered they weren't cows at all. They had red eyes without pupils, and their skin was made by something that resembled opaque emeralds.

They didn't react to the dragon, nor to the girl, lazily grazing the grass.

"Do they seem violent to you?"

Melia didn't hesitate caressing their odd skin. It felt like stone, but was warm and elastic to the touch. They were living beings, not stone constructs.

"Are these..."

"Gorgons? Yes." Leegaain completed the question for her. "Take a closer look at the grass, please."

Melia knelt down, discovering that the grass became hard and shiny under the monsters' breath, and that was such metal the Gorgons were actually eating.

"The real story is a bit different. Gorgons are a rare sub species of magical beasts, that happens to spawn only in some regions of the Empire. If the bull or cow is too meek, instead of evolving into a Tyr, they become a Gorgon.

Gorgons only eat adamant, and that's why they are capable of turning grass into adamant.

Back in the day, before Davross was discovered, it was the hardest and rarest metal known to man. When your forefathers discovered the Gorgons, they made them breed, and once they had enough metal, they made sure Gorgons become almost extinct.

So yes, the Gorgon Empire's foundations literally are the Gorgons' flesh and bones."

Melia was flabbergasted.

"But why?" Centuries of history were crumbling before her eyes.

"Because they were afraid others could steal their monopoly. And because if any more weapons were produced, they would have lost their market value."

"How do you know?" Melia still refused to believe such story.

"Because I was there. Back when I still gave a sh\*t about the Empire, I told them about the Gorgons. I taught them how to forge adamant. And then I had to spectate the slaughter."

"Why didn't you stop them?"

"Unlike other Guardians, I believe in free will. When your forefathers asked for my help, after the Griffon Kingdom was born, I offered them my wisdom, not my power, and they accepted. And then they betrayed my teachings."

Leegaain voice roared like thunder, his rage raised the temperature of several degrees.

"Don't you understand, already? My library, the animals, everything in this lair is what I am for the world. I am the keeper of everything and everyone that has been discarded before its time.

I will right all these wrongs, but only when the time is ripe and so are the people."

"That's why you abandoned the Empire? For the Gorgons?" As much it was an act of unwarranted cruelty, Melia couldn't believe that her country was the only one without an active Guardian for such reason.

"No. A species going extinct is hardly a novelty. I left because back when Lochra Silverwing left her legacy and magic was born anew, the Emperor went back on his word, preferring the use of the slave collars instead of pursuing equality.

I never joined the Empire because I cared for the glory or the riches. Everything you see here is mine. I collected it overtime from forgotten cities and sunken ships. I never stole or pillaged; I salvaged these things like I hoped to salvage your people.

The promise was that in exchange for my knowledge, they would have built a fair society, whose long-term goal was equal rights for everyone. Instead they chose once again the easy way, betraying their own people, betraying me for the last time."

## Chapter 166 Retribution

The use of slave collars marked one of the Gorgon Empire's darkest pages of history. Milea was young, but not stupid, she could hardly blame Leegaain actions, especially considering that she would wear one too if things didn't change for the better.

It took her a few days to find the courage to ask the dragon about one of her worst fears.

"Leegaain, what's the origin of violent monsters like goblins, orcs or trolls? Are they an evolution gone wrong of magical beasts, or are they man-made?" The question haunted her mind after reading some books.

Seeing her Mentor outrage towards human, she had started to doubt her kin more and more, especially after Milea found out that aside from rare exceptions, undead were all artificially created by humans.

"Some of them, yes. Humans have performed countless experiments trying to rob magical beasts of their magic, giving birth to the werefolk. Undead are simply a by-product of their search for immortality.

Those you mentioned, though, are what we Guardians refer to as the Fallen. Races that lost most of their magical abilities by going down the wrong branch of the evolutionary tree. As humans keep doing, if you ask me.

Why, what did you think?"

"I hoped they were the result of the Abominations' work, to destroy mankind and rule the world." She blushed in embarrassment. The idea sounded incredibly silly now that she had said it out loud.

Leegaain softly smiled at her, patting Milea's head with one of its giant fingers.

"Kid, don't fool yourself. The world is in danger only if you small guys decide so. Abominations are natural magical disasters, they do not plot against anyone, nor do they care about world domination. They only care about survival, just like you."

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Two years later, Milea left Leegaain's lair, with a new set of clothes and a cape that covered her from head to toe.

Her mana core wasn't yellow anymore, but bright blue, and as soon her body finished adapting to the changes, she would be ready to turn it violet. After expelling most of the impurities in her body, she had become faster, stronger and sturdier than most magical beasts.

The reason for her disguise, was that during those years, it wasn't only her mana core to have changed. She had entered as a scrawny girl, 1.52 meters (5') high, with frizzy unruly hair, and had come out as a 1.75 meters (5' 9") high woman, with long wavy honey-hued hair and twenty more kilos (44 pounds) all in the right places.

Milea wasn't stunning, but she was a beauty nonetheless. Even Warping hundred miles at a time, she needed to rest, and didn't want to make a massacre on the way home.

Her achievements allowed her to join the Gorgon Empire's Magic Council at only twenty-three years of age, becoming its youngest member ever. At twenty-seven she was crowned Magic Empress, and her rule began.

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Gorgon Empire, one week before Lith was summoned to the encampment.

After over a month of fruitless investigations, Milea's spies had found out the details about the situation in Kandria. The existence of a highly infective plague thwarted her plans of invasion.

The reports spoke about it as something that defied logic and all the rules of light magic, leaving flabbergasted even her best healers. Attacking now was suicidal.

If the plague could be spreaded through the deceased, the Griffon Kingdom could use the infected corpses as projectiles, turning the army of mages the Empire had spent years to train in the most expensive field hospital ever created.

In their shoes, that's what Milea would have done if cornered.

As long the plague was contained, it was their problem, she had no interest in making it her own. As far Milea knew, she was the only Awakened one in the Empire. Leegaain refused to create others, and she didn't trust anyone enough to pass her secrets.

If the Queen and the other seven Awakened ones at her service had yet to solve the crisis, Milea was afraid of what could happen if the situation spiralled out of her neighbours' control.

She was confident about finding a cure, her Mentor had trained her well. The problem was how much time would it take, and how exposed the plague would leave the Empire while she was unavailable.

For that reason, she had all the armies at the borders withdraw and alerted all the best physicians, healers and alchemists to stand ready if necessity arose.

She would read the reports along with the stolen medical files over and over, trying to understand the nature of the infection, but to no avail. Fake mages were unreliable sources, the only way to find out the truth was to examine one of the infected herself.

That, or get hold on the one that engineered that whole mess.

"Your Majesty, the prisoner is ready to be delivered to you anytime you wish."

Milea nodded at her attendant with a sigh. She had ordered to carefully search Hatorne after her capture. Milea had predicted that the genius alchemist would have left her home country and attempted to reach one of the small states surrounding the three great Countries.

In such a place, her abilities would have been greatly appreciated, allowing Hatorne to rebuild her life from scratch and never having to look her back again.

Going through the Blood Desert was suicide, only the tribes knew the safe ways to avoid storms and monsters, and if they caught her, death was the best ending Hatorne could hope for.

Her only option was passing through the Gorgon Empire, bribing her way to the border. Hatorne had discovered at her expenses that the Empire was much less corrupt than the Kingdom, getting caught in a matter of hours after her arrival.

Coirn Hatorne stepped inside the throne room, her hands cuffed behind her back, chained along with her ankles to her waist. The countless hours spent working on her experiments had left her with a hunched back, that made her hard to walk without a cane.

She looked at least seventy years old, with immaculate white hair in a bob haircut. Her clothes were in pristine conditions despite the traveling and imprisonment. The thing that struck Milea the most were the eyes.

Hatorne's face was full of wrinkles, resembling a spiderweb, but her eyes were young and full of energy. Most importantly, they were cold and soulless, like she was the one in control.

Milea looked at her with Life Vision, discovering several magical items that had escaped detection. Later she would examine them to determine if Hatorne's genius was to blame or her attendants' incompetence.

"Your Majesty, you are really as beautiful as the rumours say." Hatorne didn't even attempt to hide the envy in her voice. Milea was over thirty years old, yet she hadn't aged a day past her twenties.

"Spare me your niceties. Prove me you can be useful to the Empire and you'll live, otherwise, I'll send you back without wearing down my stairs again." Milea pointed at the balcony.

Hatorne scoffed at her words, spitting in disgust.

"You can't possibly be that stupid, if you managed to reach the status of Empress, child. What you already know should be enough to grant me safe passage through your Empire one hundred times, if not for you to be beg me to remain here."

Milea snapped her fingers, lifting Hatorne like a ragdoll with spirit magic and making her get close to the balcony at walking speed. Suddenly Hatorne didn't feel so confident anymore, she valued her life above everything.

"Wait! I can give you potions that can break any men's will, parasites that turn the most powerful mage into a lump of meat, hidden weapons that cannot be detected. Isn't that enough?"

Another snap and Hatorne stopped moving.

"What you are offering me are new forms of slavery, diseases that can raze a country, tools that even the lowliest of fools could use to kill a powerful mage. Just one of those things could destroy the world as we know it!"

Milea couldn't believe her own ears.

"Weapons don't kill men. Men do. I am only an artisan, I'm not responsible for what others do with my creations."

"That's where you are wrong!" Milea was outraged. "You create without thinking of the consequences, selling nightmares to whoever can afford them. Power without control is the greatest madness."

"Naive fool, with my help you could have ruled the world. Instead you chose to die for your pathetic ideals!" Hatorne pushed one of her teeth with the tongue, releasing from her mouth a barrage of poisoned needles, each one enchanted with a small array that would allow it to ignore air magic.

Milea simply raised her hand, blocking all of them in mid-air, like time had stopped. Hatorne was still shocked, when the needles turned around and darted again, striking her to death.

Milea destroyed Hatorne's corpse and belongings personally. The legacy of such a monster couldn't be allowed to survive.

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Gorgon Empire, the day Lith killed the three Talons.

"Why are you staring so intensely at the window?" Milea asked.

"Because something unknown is happening, and it's baffling us Guardians." Leegaain replied, tapping with his clawed finger on the frame. After Milea had become Empress, she had managed to convince him to give the Empire a second chance.

The deal was the same as in the past, knowledge, not power, in exchange for whatever law or regulation he wanted to be implemented over time.

"Unknow how?" Milea considered her Mentor to be nigh omniscient and omnipotent, something unknown to him couldn't be good news.

"Look at it yourself." Leegaain's human form hand touched her forehead, allowing her to share his vision.

Very far, somewhere inside the Griffon Kingdom, the world energy was seeping violently into a small figure, while the small figure emitted a pillar of darkness that the world accepted as its own.

"That's the beginning of a world's tribulation. Someone has been recognized by the world and his offer accepted."

"Someone is becoming a Guardian?" Milea almost choked at the thought.

"Heavens, no. Not even close, but it's a beginning. There are countless tribulations each year, and they end up in failure. What's baffling is that the darkness is typical of an Abomination, but it's not.

The tribulation is the one that usually happens to beasts, but it's not. The mana it's drawing upon seems human but..."

"It's not." Milea caught his drift. "So, what are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing. Whoever it is, is barely stronger than you were when you found me. Also, I don't care what it does, as long it doesn't mess with my turf. It's Tyris' problem, not mine."

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Griffon Kingdom, Lith's tent.

Since the tribulation had started, the Talons had been experiencing excruciating pain. The darkness that surrounded them wasn't eating their life force like it was supposed to, it was robbing them of their life span.

They aged decades each passing second, their nails and hair growing non-stop to absurd lengths.

"Please, stop." One of the women managed to beg with a hoarse voice, her body dried up and thin like a mummified corpse.

"Shut up and die!" Lith replied, making the energy pulse even stronger. He didn't care anymore for information, their numbers or the contractor's identity. He wanted all of them to die, no matter if young or old, noble or commoner.

He had grown sick of mankind's madness; a culling was needed. Unbeknownst to him, the world had heeded his call, and was considering the offer.

The energy coalesced around him, into an aura that resembled a much bigger figure, enveloped in fire and shadows, with claws on his hands and wings on his back, before dissipating. No trace was left of the Talons, the energy storm disappeared as fast as it had come, leaving Lith and Solus flabbergasted.

Chapter 167 Hard Times

Aside from the pungent smell of decay and his once again tattered clothes, there was no trace of what had just transpired in Lith's tent. Solus' gauntlet form had completely recovered from all her injuries, and was now brimming with power.

- "What the heck? Death Call shouldn't work like that. It was like an entirely different spell."

"Well, for what's worth, you also seemed an entirely different person. Your eyes turned inhuman, and when the energy flow reached its apex, your whole body started to pulse according to its rhythm. You had started to mutate into a..."

Solus couldn't find the words to describe the monstrous silhouette that had almost overlapped with Lith.

"...thing, but thanks heavens everything stopped before it was too late." –

Lith had no recollection of such changes, but by checking Solus' memories, he was able to see what exactly had happened. After his eyes had turned yellow, glowing from the inside with a vertical slit pupil, the dark aura around him had taken a physical form.

Instead of shadow tentacles, his body had released emerald flames, while the shadows in the tent had seemingly taken life, attacking the Talons along with the flames.

The result was sadly impeccable. Nothing had survived the joint assault, not even the weapons, leaving him empty handed for his troubles.

Lith had never experienced anything like that, so he sat cross legged on the floor, activating Invigoration in search for answers. He first scanned his body, then the mana core, finding out that nothing had changed.

Then, he did the same thing on Solus, but the results remained the same.

Everything had happened so fast that it seemed to be just a dream. Yet he felt emptier than ever, like he had grasped something meaningful just to forget it a second after waking up.

He tried several times to conjure those energies and sensations, but to no avail. More confused than ever, he wore his plague doctor uniform. Kilian would arrive any second now, and Lith was eager to iron out the last steps of the cure and get back to his life.

\*\*\*\*

Despite their strong, almost friendship-like bond, Tyris didn't like how Leegaain had left their communication channel open, while he was discussing the anomaly with his new apprentice.

Not only because that had triggered Salaark's hilarity at her expenses, but also because it had struck a nerve. The anomaly was in her turf, adding another responsibility to her already heavy workload.

Unlike him, she hadn't slept peacefully over the last centuries, giving the middle finger to the all the problems of his country and only taking action when something major happened.

Nor she had a fine-grained control over her subjects like Salaark, allowing her to delegate at least some of her duties to trustworthy Awakened ones. Her role as a Guardian wasn't to keep, or dominate, it was to spark the change.

Tyris had triggered the unification of the Griffon Kingdom, prompting others to follow its example and putting an end to centuries long wars.

She had taught true magic to Lochra Silverwing, who in turn had managed to adapt it in forms that ordinary people could use, spreading a ground breaking knowledge that had improved the lives of millions.

With every passing century, she was more tempted to throw in the towel and just mind her own business. Nudging a country in the right direction without directly interfering, while keeping the balance was a mammoth task.

The plague itself was proof of how desperate her situation was. She hadn't taken care of it personally not because she didn't care, but because her plate was already full. In the recent years, Tyris had noticed an increase in the number of Abominations appearing in the Griffon Kingdom.

Normally they were rarer than Awakened ones, but now they were popping out like mushrooms, two or even three each year, too fast for the phenomenon to be a natural occurrence.

The origin points were always near the borders of the Kingdom, where her senses were at their weakest, so that Tyris would notice only when it was too late. She was convinced to have understood the twisted logic behind the Griffon Kingdom being the only target.

Leegaain wouldn't have cared, while Salaark, thanks to her servants, would have found the source of the threat faster than Tyris ever could. Someone was using her to test the powers and resources of the Guardians, but Tyris had no idea why.

She would have loved to ask her colleagues for help, but Guardians were highly territorial. Even if each one of them supervised one third of the biggest continent on the planet, it was never enough, they could barely tolerate each other.

The anomaly was but a small potato, it could wait. First, she had to put an end to the Abomination threat, then she had to make sure that Arjîn was really dead and give the Corpse a new seventh member. Only then she would take a look at the anomaly.

All the while hoping that the Kingdom would still stand by her return, that her descendants would manage to avoid a civil war.

Just the thought of all she had to do, gave Tyris an headache. She sighed deeply, while Mother Earth, her Invigoration technique, informed her that another Abomination had appeared near the northern borders.

"I really need a vacation." She said before Warping away, to catch her mysterious opponent before it could flee again.

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After learning that her treatment was almost complete, and that Lith would leave soon after he was done with her, Nindra had become quite assertive. She would often sit straight as an arrow, emphasizing her breasts, fiddle with her hair or laugh heartily whenever he would say something barely close to being funny.

Not to mention she would prolong physical contact for a couple seconds longer than it was appropriate.

"Can't you at least tell me your name? I don't think your parents were so imaginative to give you an abstruse name, so there's no harm in me knowing it."

She said while Lith was removing the last parasites from her arms. After that, she would be completely healed, and after giving his final report to Varegrave, Lith would be able to go home.

He couldn't wait to get out of the tent. With the excuse of privacy, Nindra had convinced him to close the curtain, and was whispering every word in his ear.

Being subject of a woman's affections that wasn't his relative or a kid, was arousing ancient instincts, of which the rumours about their death had been greatly exaggerated.

"I'm sorry, but that's classified." Lith replied with a husky voice, like he had a tennis ball stuck in his throat. In another life and other circumstances, he wouldn't let such an opportunity go to waste.

Alas it was the right person but at the wrong time.

"Also, miss Luce, despite I'm flattered by your attentions, I'm afraid that without this mask, you would discover I'm a little too young for your tastes."

She giggled, making her hair tickle Lith's skin, making him almost wish to throw away the mask and experience a true kiss after over thirteen years of abstinence. Almost.



The situation was quite different from his mad crush for Professor Nalear, his emotions were in check and his priorities straight.

He realized that even if Nindra were to accept him despite his age, which according to the new world moral customs was farfetched, would mean violating every security rule of the camp.

It would likely cost Nindra her life and him all the reputation and trust gained so far, branding Lith like a lustful idiot. So, he quickly finished his work and pulled back the curtain, regaining some personal space.

"Nindra Luce is officially cleansed." He told to the guards.

"Escort her to the third block for the final check-ups before her release. Miss, I'm sorry we had a rocky start, but it was a pleasure to meet you." Lith extended his hand like during their first meeting, only to have it ignored again.

Nindra hugged him tightly.

"Thank you so much doctor. I spent my days here waiting for death before your arrival. I really hope sooner or later I will be able to make it up to you." It was just a subtle movement, but she managed to rub her hips against his during the hug, with predictable consequences.

"If you ever change your mind, you know where to find me." She said with one last whisper before letting him go.

The guards and Kilian extended their hands too, but much to their disappointment, she just shook it while smiling.

"Ready for your last report?" Kilian asked with a tinge of envy in his voice.

"Yes. Now that the last cure has been perfected, there is nothing else for me to do here."

The two men walked in silence, but Lith and Solus talked all the way to Varegrave's tent.

- "It's really flattering for such a woman to be attracted to me without even seeing my face. It means she really appreciated me as a person, instead that for my looks."

"Yeah, but I'm inclined to say it's more likely to be just the suspended bridge effect. Not to mention you are the only decent man she met during her imprisonment. Loneliness is a cruel beast. I know it well." Solus replied.

"Aren't you being a little sour with jealousy on top?" Lith sent a soft mind smile in her direction.

"Well, duh! Of course I'm jealous. She has everything I dream of." Solus sighed, her life in stone form was getting too little for her by the day.

"Can you imagine what would have happened if I took out the mask?" Lith changed topic, trying to cheer her up.

"Of course I do!"

Solus projected the image of a closed door, and a voice screaming:

"Open up! FBI!"

Before busting it open and make them both chuckle. –

After their arrival, Varegrave used the blue gemstone, opening the channel with the Kingdom's royals.

Lith gave them the good news, explaining how to cure the mana blocking parasite in the details. They weren't as happy as he had expected to, though. Kilian's words were still ringing in their heads, the idea of Lith hiding his skills was reinforced by his masterful analysis.

"It's of the utmost importance to start the process from the abdomen, letting the patient rest for at least three days before continue the treatments."

Nindra's core was the strongest among the last infected, and only needed a day and a half to completely recover. Lith extended the timeframe to remain on the safe side.

"I have noticed that all the patients affected by the mana blocking parasites have an erratic behaviour, probably caused by the toxins messing with their minds. To avoid withdrawal syndrome after the cure, liver and kidneys must first recover their full capacity.

Otherwise they may turn violent, harming themselves or others, like it happened to Garith Senti. His death taught me better to not underestimate the problem."

Lith was really pleased with the excuse he had come out with. Professor Marth was already stressing out the idea of fusing medicine and healing magic, Garith's death was the final push he needed.

"Outstanding work, Mage Lith." King Meron said.

"The Griffon Kingdom is indebted to you. If there is anything you wish for, before leaving, feel free to ask."

Lith needed not to be told twice.

"I'd like to ask for leniency in the matter of Colonel Varegrave. He was grief stricken at the time, but he is a good man, and a loyal servant of the Crown. After this experience, I am thinking of following my brother's lead, and perform the voluntary military service. I would love to serve under an officer that I know and respect."

- "More importantly, under someone that owns me big time. Having someone in the military could always prove useful in the future, whatever I actually decide to do." -

## Chapter 168 Domestic Affairs

The King was so happy at those words to need his sheer willpower to prevent himself from gloating openly. He didn't want to lose someone of Varegrave's calibre, but as too often happened, his wife was right.

Showing leniency after a major blunder in times of crisis, would be regarded as another sign of weakness from the Crown. Unless of course they had a good reason for it. That good reason had just been served to King Meron on a silver platter.

- "Seems that I have lost a battle, but in the end, I have won the war, dear Sylpha." He rejoiced via their mind link.

"We cannot deny our saviour's request. It would be impolite beyond reason."

Sylpha mind grunted, she had been looking forward for Varegrave's execution.

"I don't think there is nothing to be happy about. Peace after war is good, prolonged peace is great on paper, but it's turning out to be a venomous snake in the grass. The upper echelons of the Kingdom have forgotten that discipline and loyalty are key to survival.

They are so engrossed in their dirty secret pleasures to turn lazy, profligate or even treacherous. I am already purging the Mage Association from the bad apples. Keeping them on their toes is the only way to make them fall back in line.

The army needs some pruning too, Varegrave would have set a perfect example. No matter how loyal, influent or successful one is, treason has to be punished fiercely and mercilessly.

Endangering the Kingdom, no matter if by mistake or on purpose, must be treated as treason, otherwise all officers will come up with excuses or pettifogger arguments."

"I partially disagree, Sylpha." Meron replied.

"Everything you said is right, the decline of the Kingdom is due to our and our predecessors' inability to recognize the temptations that the long peace aroused in our most dissolute subjects. But killing Varegrave would set a dangerous precedent.

If loyalty and past success hold no value, then there would be no way to inspire devotion in our officers. They must know that their actions, be it time of peace or war, matter. Otherwise we would have only lazy bums that do nothing afraid of making a mistake that will cost them their lives.

Leniency, if bestowed at the right moment, is not weakness, it's strength."

Sylpha wasn't convinced, but felt some truth in her husband's words, so she didn't raise any more objections.

"Still, I don't like this turn of events, it's too sudden. Varegrave's life will hang on a thread more in Lith's hands rather than ours. He's been waiting for his death for so long that the sudden relief could potentially compromise his loyalty.

He is bound to feel indebted to his saviour, especially after having wronged him many times. If Kilian is right, we are facing a first class schemer, who is bound to have a hidden agenda."

Meron's good mood popped like a bubble.

"Gods, I hate when you are right. But maybe you and Kilian are overreacting. He may be a dangerous sociopath, but is still very young. I don't think he can plan so far ahead."

"Think what you want. I never underestimate an opponent, especially one that might be a natural Awakened one. I'm really curious about what Tyrus will do if our suspects are right."

The King, the Queen and Salaark's Feathers were all artificial Awakened ones. There were only a couple differences with a natural one. The first was that despite their body would age much slower than normal, their lifespan wouldn't be extended much.

Were a normal mage in good health would live around one hundred year, they could live around one hundred and fifty, but rarely more. The second and more important difference was that they had no idea how to turn others into Awakened ones.

They all had been kept unconscious, while the Guardians had emptied their mana cores, allowing them to perceive the world energy upon waking, in a way much similar to Hatorne's parasites after their removal.

The incomplete Awakening was the last safeguard against betrayal the Guardians had devised, and why both Tyriss and Salaark only bestowed such power to a fixed number of humans at the time.

"Do you think she would conscript him or just kill him?" Meron pondered.

"In her shoes, I would either kill him, to stay on the safe side, or take him as apprentice, friend, boy toy, whatever rings her bell. Just like Leegaain did with the current Magic Empress.

Tyriss already had a human husband, giving him an offspring. If it happened once, it can happen twice."

"By the gods, he is just a child!" The thought disgusted Meron deeply.

"And she is millennia old. Waiting a few more years or even decades would not be a problem." –

Lith's request took everyone by surprise, even Kilian and Varegrave. After the communication ended, everything that the Queen feared happened like in a script. Having removed the sword of Damocles that had hovered above Varegrave's head for so long, the Colonel was on the verge of tears.

"Thank you, thank you so much!" He couldn't stop himself from holding Lith's hand like it was a lifeline.

"I'm so sorry for misjudging you. I can't wait to see my family again." Kilian took out Varegrave's last will from his pocket and burned it on a candle to celebrate the crisis' double happy ending.

"If you ever need anything, don't hesitate to ask." Lith and Varegrave linked their communication amulets. Surprisingly, Kilian did the same.

"Sorry if I barge in, but I want you to know you have my gratitude too, Lith. Also, I have a family too. If something bad ever happens, you are the best healer I know, and I'd really love to have you on my speed deal."

Having someone in the Queen's corps and the Mage Association was an unexpected bonus, but Lith wasn't the type to look a gift horse in the mouth.

- "Are you really going to join the military? Or was it just an excuse to pursue an angle?" Solus was too used to Lith's web of deception to think he had helped Varegrave out of the goodness of his heart.

"I'm considering it, at least for a while. I will be able to travel freely only once I reach sixteen years of age, and I am considered an adult. But even then, I would be nothing more than a nameless mage, at least outside the Marquisate.

I need some real training and a badge, if I want to have free access to the information I need. The Mage Association would ask me for favours and knowledge in exchange for what I want, and I don't want to waste time bartering for every single piece of information.

According to what Kilian told me, as a full fledged mage, I'd have access to special corps, like the Rangers, that would allow me to move freely inside the Kingdom and act solo.

Sure, I'd have to complete missions and obey orders, but thanks to Varegrave, I can skip a few ranks and get the freedom of movement that I need.

Instead of traveling as a nameless adventurer that has to comply with idiotic requests, is much better to move with the Crown watching my back, with a badge that both nobles and mages have to obey to. Also, I can gain more merits and be paid for it. Many birds with one stone."

Kilian and his unit personally escorted him outside the camp and opened a Warp Steps to Derios, the capitol of the Marquisate.

According to Professor Marth's prediction, it would take at least another week to wipe out the last remnants of the plague and return back to the academy. Lith could afford going back home for a couple days, at least to make sure everything was fine.

He wanted to reassure his parents about his well being. The few times they had talked, he could see how worried they were. Now that he was outside the Small World, he could finally use the communication amulet and check how the others were doing.

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House of Yurial Deirus, two days after Lith had left the academy

Being the lessons suspended, most students had returned back home, either because of nostalgia or forced by their parents. Even with the information blackout, the news of the problems in Kandria had spread like wildfire after all the academies had been shut down.

The six big academies were like small countries, following their own rules. Even in time of war, they were supposed to continue their activities. The only exception in the past had been when the country was invaded, hence all hands were needed on deck.

The situation was so serious that many noble families had packed their things and left the Kingdom with most of their wealth. As soon as the Crown had noticed the rats abandoning the sinking ship, it exploited the opportunity take out some trash.

A decree had been issue, that whoever left the Kingdom in times of need, would be considered a deserter, losing his noble title, the lands and having all their assets frozen and confiscated by the Crown.

Many of the old nobles' faction, discovered to have become homeless commoners while they were still traveling past the borders, to reach their distant relatives in the Gorgon Empire.

Yurial was discussing with his father, Archmage Deirus, the opportunity to expand their lands by reclaiming the title their neighbours had relinquished due to their escape, bringing into their grand duchy another of the six big academies.

Their lands accommodated the Fire Griffon academy already, with the Black Griffon they would have a major role in the Mage Association's business, achieving an authority on par with the Distar Marquisate.

"Great minds think alike, my son." Velan said, puffing his chest with pride. Unlike his useless siblings that did nothing but drink, gamble and have s\*x all day, Yurial was being recognized by the White Griffon academy thanks to his hard work.

He was also demonstrating a very practical and scheming mind, exploiting every opportunity he had at hand. Maybe the Deirus household wasn't doomed, after all. If even Yurial turned out to be like the rest of his children, Velan would have been forced to adopt.

"But it will not be easy. With a title of Grand Duke we already have too much land and money. By getting more, we could be considered a threat to the Crown."

"But that's ridiculous!" Yurial was outraged.

"The Deirus household never had any political ambition, we have always served the Kingdom, improving the lives of our subjects."

Velan sighed.

"You are still too naïve, my son. I know it, you know it. The King doesn't, though, and would be stupid of him not thinking of the consequences of letting a single individual get his hands on so much power. We need something big, and I think I have just what we need."

Being his heir, Velan shared everything with Yurial, because he trusted his judgment and because he wanted to prepare him for the moment when he would inherit everything.

"Since Lukart attacked you, I have started to suppress his assets. Remember, attacking someone's life is a crime, but bringing down a rival's business empire is perfectly legal. It also hits that pompous b\*stard where it hurts the most: his wallet."

Velan took out several papers, filled with numbers, places, names and dates.

"I know he is behind all this civil war bullsh\*t, and I bet my magic that he is also behind Kandria's problems." He showed Yurial a stolen document bearing the Lukart's emblem, that reported several massive payments from the household to Coirn Hatorne.

"Always follow the money, son. Now, this Hatorne is already one of the Kingdom's top most wanted. Guess where one of his main labs was?"

"Kandria?" Yurial had a greedy light in his eyes, matching the one in his father's.

"Exactly! Ever since the Kandria incident started, this insignificant piece of paper has become my beacon. I'm digging all that I can from banks and credit institutions, investing a fortune bribing underpaid clerks to get things like this and you know why?"

"Because if Hatorne turns out to be the responsible, and we can link her to Lukart, we can legally get rid of him and get the Black Griffon too!"

## Chapter 169 Domestic Affairs 2

House of Phloria Ernas, a week after Lith had left the academy.

After Headmaster Linjos gave the announcement about all the academy's activities being suspended, the students were left with two alternatives. Remain in the castle and self study, or return to their homes.

The Professors were busy helping with Kandria's situation, either by providing materials, magic ingredients or searching for Manohar, but the academy would remain open.

Its size was the same of a small city, many clerks and their families lived there, just like most of the kitchen personnel. Several students were orphans or had complicated family situations, hence once admitted, the academy would be their home until graduation or expulsion.

It was one of the reasons that galvanised all those of humble origins to give their best in their studies, to the point of overcoming their limits. Once in the academy, they would never again fear cold, hunger or the abuses from their relatives or caretakers.

For them bullying was a small price to pay, because at least in their rooms they were kings and queens. Before departing, Yurial had offered the girls hospitality in his home for as long as necessary, but they had politely refused.

Time, stress and the growth spurt had brought him to bloom as a man. Whenever he wasn't focused on his magic studies, Yurial would hit on girls, jumping from one to another like a bee dancing among flowers.

Phloria didn't like how often she had caught him staring at her legs and a\*s, just like Friya couldn't stand how whenever they started a conversation, it seemed to be directed at her bosom, since his eyes would rarely move from such spot.

"My eyes are up here!" She would often repeat, achieving only a temporary truce.

Quylla was the most bothered of the three, since he would not give her a look, if not by mistake or for asking her advice about school subjects. She had stopped liking Yurial in a romantic way months ago, but his behaviour was aggravating nonetheless.

With his looks, charms and status, Yurial was a lady-killer, and receiving his attentions was a badge of honour for all girls, relegating the ones he ignored in the "Homely Girls Club", of which Quylla's cruel peers had made her a founding member.

So, when the opportunity arose, they all left the academy's toxic environment and moved to Phloria's house. Friya was determined to not follow her mother's plans anymore, to the point of sealing her communication amulet in a dimensional object to not have to hear from her again.

Phloria lived in a Duchy quite far from the academy, but thanks to the use of Warp Gates they reached her home in less than an hour.

The manor was surrounded by high white crystal walls, generating an array that prevented anyone to fly or Warp past its boundaries without the use of a special amulet. The park around the manor extended as far as the eye could see.

The air smelled of freshly cut grass, flower beds adorned the cobblestone paths that went across the front gardens.

Trees and bushes were all artistically trimmed to resemble mythical beasts, like unicorns and griffons. Even the benches, offering cool shades to the visitors, were made of white marble, engraved with runes that made them water and dirt proof, keeping them dry and clean no matter the weather.

The manor itself was bigger than Quylla's whole village, cultivated fields included. It extended for at least 3,000 square meters (3,588 square yards), divided into a main building, a left and a right wing forming a reversed U shape.

It wasn't anything special for Friya, her house was even bigger, but for Quylla was akin to the royal palace she had dreamed about as a kid. It took her a couple of days to recover from the shock of being served night and day, and being called "young miss".

The academy was a spartan environment. Despite even a single one of its stones was more expensive than the whole park, in the White Griffon everything was designed without pomp. Looks held no significance for the academy's buildings, only practicality did.

Hence, despite being full of magical wonders, it resembled more a military boot camp rather than a mystical place where dreams could come true.

Quylla felt like a beggar suddenly admitted at the King's Court. Aside for her uniform, she had no other dress. The problem was quickly solved, since both the noble girls had plenty of unused clothes, that just like the uniform, were capable of shrinking to fit the wearer.

To make things worse, she had no notion of etiquette, so every meal was a nightmare. There were so many plates and silverware, which she had never seen before, that made picking the right one for each dish harder than opening a Warp Steps.

When she was first offered a bowl of water and lemon juice, a nobles' tradition for washing hands before a meal, she asked what kind of soup it was, making even the highly professional staff smirk for a split second at her blunder.

After that, they only consumed their meals in Phloria's quarters, to avoid Quylla further embarrassment and teach her the basics. Phloria provided them amulets, allowing the girls to spend most of their days practicing dimensional magic.

With nothing to worry about and the mansion's relaxed environment, Quylla managed to teach her friends how to open a Warp Gate in less than a week. The last thing they needed to pass Professor Rudd's class with flying colours was learning how to Blink.

During their stay, the girls were completely isolated from the outside world. Phloria would often receive dispatches, often getting pale after reading them and always burning them afterwards. She refused to discuss their contents, no matter how her friends insisted.

Between the rumours about a world ending plague, the slithering civil war and now the decree that allowed to confiscate everything from runaway nobles, unrest was growing in the Kingdom.

No one had predicted such a move from the Crown, crippling the old nobles' faction in one fell swoop. Along with their mansions and estates, the royal police had acquired many incriminating evidences, that was triggering a domino effect.

The noble faction was losing ground and influence fast, forcing their hand. They had to either speed up their plans or give up and submit, before it was too late to do both.

Phloria didn't want to alarm the others. In her mind, it was only a matter of time before they were conscripted and sent to the battlefield, there was no reason to spoil their last carefree days with such news.

Their peace was broken the day that Phloria's mother suddenly returned home.

Their relationship wasn't good to begin with, so Phloria had her friends dress up for the occasion, to not give a bad first impression to her demanding parent.



After they were summoned in her mother's chambers, Phloria instructed them about what to say and how to behave.

"After your introduction, just make a curtsy and then only speak when questioned. Try to keep the answers short, if she starts nagging at us, we'll lose all day!"

Lady Jirni Ernas was a petite woman, barely 1.52 m (5') high, with blonde hair and sapphire blue eyes. Despite being at home, she wore a beautiful light blue day dress worthy of the Court, her hair was perfectly curled, framing her face like she was out of a painting.

The first thought Friya and Quylla had after seeing them together, was that Phloria may have been adopted. The two couldn't be more different. Jirni had aged gracefully. In her soft round visage, there was still a spark of youth.

She was quite different from the monster Phloria had described time and time again.

"Mother, is wonderful to have you back..." Phloria started to say, but Jirni froze her with a stern look.

"Good gods, I swear on my children's life that wearing a skirt from time to time will not do any harm! How can we find you a husband if you dress like this?"

Phloria cursed inwardly her stupidity. She had been so worried about her friends to forget about herself, still wearing her training suit and smelling because of the physical exercise.

"I'm really sorry, I..."

"Where are your manners? You should first introduce your friends to me. I'm so sorry, despite all my efforts, my daughter acts and behaves like she was raised by bears. I'm Duchess Ernas." She interrupted Phloria again, making her guest a curtsy.

"Miss Quylla, Miss Solivar, it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

The girls were so stunned by the exchange that could only return the curtsy and thank their host.

"It's Lady Solivar, mother." Phloria rebuked, happy to be able to return a hit.

"Really? Didn't you hear?" A cruel smirk marred Jirni's otherwise kind visage.

"After several documents incriminating Duke Selimar, General Lizhark and Mage Fernath(\*), your father and the royal constable went to interrogate them. Alas, they were found dead, but their assassin didn't make in time to erase all the evidences.

The three of them were secretly in league with Duchess Solivar, who after being summoned for questioning, preferred to flee to the Blood Desert. The poor Duchess is now considered a traitor, and we hope to seize her lands for the Ernas household."

There was no trace of pity in her voice, and Phloria knew why. She was the royal constable. Countless people had fallen for her innocent and naïve look, until the questioning began.

Friya went pale, needing Quylla's help to not fall on her knees from the shock.

"I'm so sorry, dear." Jirni patted Friya's hands with an odd motherly tone.

"I thought you already knew, otherwise I wouldn't have been so blunt." Phloria didn't believe a word coming out of her mouth.

"Not everything is lost, dear. The Ernas household is always looking for talents, me and my husband would be more than happy to adopt you both."

"What?" Phloria blurted out, incapable of holding back anymore.

"Are you crazy? How can you say something like that so abruptly?"

Jirni clicked her tongue in disapproval.

"Because is the perfect moment. Miss Quylla, despite her great talent, has no roots or backers. Our family is full of soldiers and no healers, I'd say is a match made in heavens.

She could carry on our name, even if not our blood, and will be much easier to marry compared to a certain tomboy!" Her cold gaze made Phloria swallow her reply.

"As for Miss Solivar, having her in our family, will make much easier for us to beat the competition for the Solivar's lands, while at the same time giving her a place to call home and avoid her mother's action ruining her future career.

With a figure and talent like hers, finding suitors will be a snap.

It's a win-win situation for everyone."

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Going back to Lutia from Derios (\*\*) took Lith only half the usual time. Between his core's breakthrough and the constant practice of magic under Small World, Lith felt the mana flow with unprecedented clarity, enhancing all his spells.

- "Cr\*p! If only I had the time to practice dimensional magic, by now I would be able to Blink. I bet everyone else is at least able to open Warp Steps." –

For once, his pessimism was right.

On his way home, he was flying over the village when his heightened hearing perceived a familiar voice screaming.

Tista was suffering once again from Garth's unwanted attentions. He was the son of the richest merchant of the village, which made him feel entitled to do whatever he wanted.

He had courted her for over a year, obtaining only rejections and spite in return. Since Tista had always said no but never roasted his a\*s, his father had convinced Garth that her 'no' meant 'yes', and that it was time for a more manly approach.

"Garth Renkin, let go of my arm immediately, or I swear that..."

"Or what? Without your gestures and gibberish, you are just a woman like any other. If even your mentor does not step in to stop me, who do you think will?"

From her office, Nana was sighing, facepalming herself every time Garth spoke and Tista didn't kick him in the nuts or hit him with chore magic like she had instructed her countless times.

"Why are you doing nothing?" Said Elina, Tista's mother holding an axe and barely resisting the temptation to split Garth's skull in half.

"Because your daughter is too kind. This is a learning experience. Sometimes violence is necessary, words aren't going to stop all the idiots out there. She needs to learn to stand up for herself before it's too late.

I mean, look! She saved half the passers-by's lives, help the other half being born and no one is doing anything. Too much kindness will make her die young."

Since Garith was dragging her away and Tista still refused to act, Nana decided to step in, before Elina turned into a murderer, the street into a mess, and then she would be forced to clean everything up.

She was about to open the door and give the youngster the beating of a lifetime, when suddenly the sky went dark, the temperature dropped by several degrees, and a thunder roared in the distance.

It was like the shadow of death was befalling Lutia.

"I swear, I was willing to take care of him." Nana said in an apologetic tone to Elina.

"But it seems that the shadow of death has returned home."

### Chapter 170 Domestic Affairs 3

The members of the Queen's corps tasked to protect Tista were pissed off beyond reason. Most of them had a family back home, with one or more kids around Tista's age. In their files, they had classified Garth Renkin as an insufferable pompous a\*s, but a harmless one.

This time, by acting as a troll in heat, he had crossed the line. The only reason why he was still alive instead of chopped to pieces, was that unless in case of a deadly threat, their utmost priority was to remain undercover.

They had to wait either for him to push his luck or to go away from prying eyes before intervening.

To make things worse, the passive attitude of the bystanders, that aside from whispering and commenting were doing nothing, made more than one officer ponder setting the village ablaze after the situation was resolved.

In their eyes Tista was basically a saint. The only things she did were helping her family and providing magical care, sometimes even for free, behind Nana's back, to those who couldn't afford it or were going through a rough patch.

Seeing such a person harassed by a pig-brained man amid public indifference was too much to bear.

"Gods, as soon that idiot goes back home, I'm going to rip his b\*lls off." Said a member of the unit in her communication earpiece.

"Get in line, Toman." Replied her Captain. "I called dibs on the left one since he grabbed her arm."

"And I on the right one." Added a second voice.

"Fine! Then I'll cut his d\*ck and have him choke on it." No one laughed, it wasn't a joke. The problem with long term detail assignments was that once you knew your target better than your own family, it was natural to get attached.

Being professionals, they were able to keep their emotions in check, but that didn't make them one bit less ruthless or dangerous, only worse. So, when they recognized the environmental signs of a powerful mage being royally pissed, they moved away to better enjoy the show.

Snacks and bets were the natural follow up.

"Okay, guys. Garth getting killed is 1.1-1, maimed 3-1, crippled 2-1, going home unscathed is 100-1."

When overwhelmed by emotions, it was natural for even fake mages to affect their surrounding by subconsciously connecting to the world energy. Lowering the temperature, summoning strong gales, it was all mistaken for an involuntary use of first magic.

The stronger the mage, the stronger the effects, that was the rule.

Lith's situation was quite different though. Being an Awakened one, his thoughts were naturally connected to the world energy so his inner turmoil would have a bigger impact than normal.

Unbeknownst to him, after being accepted through a world's tribulation, the surge of his violent emotions would trigger the planet's attention making the resonance even worse. That was the reason why clouds were gathering, a thunderstorm brewing.

Nana and the corps' members thought it was a spell, but it was merely a reflection of Lith's fury.

- "Lith, I know you are angry, but you must hold back." Solus warned him.

"Not this time, Solus! I get you love unicorns and rainbows, but the f\*cker went too far. There is no place for mercy."

"Mercy? By my maker, he can die in a fire for all I care. I meant that there are several witnesses, including some powerful magicians, maybe from the corps. They are supposed to watch your family after all. So do your worst, but do not blow your cover.

That pig is not worth it." –

Having doubted Solus' loyalty only made Lith angrier, making Garth's tab even more nasty. Yet she was right, he had to be careful.

Maybe.

Lith descended quietly instead of making a crater on the ground like he would have loved to. His eyes were closed shut, perceiving his surroundings only through earth magic and Solus. Lith knew that if he looked at the b\*stard's face, he would lose his self-control.

Yet the temperature kept plummeting and despite it had been a sunny spring day until a few seconds ago, Garth could see his breath steam. The hair on the back of his neck stood up and his skin was covered with goose bumps from the terror.

And he wasn't the only one. Lith's killing intent was aimed at all those present but Tista, Nana and his mother. Its intensity was similar to what Garith Senti and Kilian experienced, but with two big differences.

Here there was no Small World smothering Lith's magic and while Garith and Kilian had been battle hardened veterans, Lutia's residents were farmers and merchants. The worst thing they had ever experienced was being mugged.

Garth's natural reaction was letting Tista's arm go like it was frenzied snake and wet himself, a warm puddle drove away the cold from his nether regions and feet. Most of the bystanders fell to their knees, some started to puke in panic, a few even fainted.

"Lil' brother!" Tista didn't seem to notice anything, there was only Lith in her eyes now. Her warm smile and adorable voice made him all soft inside, turning the seething rage into a full blown inferno.

"Tista!" His right arm pulled her close in an embrace, while his right fist struck Garth behind her back with the strength of a sledgehammer. Lith held back, so instead of pulverizing his jaw, he just dislocated it, making Garth spat a mouthful of blood.

"I missed you so much." She was crying. "Where have you been? I worried every day, fearing the worst."

She was crying.

"I'm so sorry." Lith replied holding her even tighter.

"I was on a mission for the Mage Association, but there was nothing for you to worry about." His arms held her close, but his hands and mouth kept moving, conjuring wind pillars that pinned those present to the ground.

Lith mentioning the Mage Association turned fear into terror, but for Garth there was only horror. He hadn't seen Lith in years, almost forgetting how monstrous he was. Garth was the only one not pinned, Lith was taunting him to run away.

She was crying.

Lith brought Tista back to Nana's house.

"I'll be back soon. Whatever happens, do not watch." Lith wiped her tears while caressing her face before closing the door and casting the Hush spell all around the house. Then he opened his eyes causing another bolt of lightning to come down, closer than the previous one.

The flash drew everyone's attention away. When they looked back, Lith was straight in front of Garth having crossed dozens of meters in less than a second.

"How did..." Garth managed to ask despite the maddening terror.

"You blinked." Lith replied like it explained everything.

After that, he grabbed Garth's right dominant arm, twisting it like it was just a twig.

"Is this the hand you used to touch her?" A magic word and his fingers dancing in the air was enough to turn the limb into a block of ice. Lith twisted it again, shattering the arm like glass from fingers to shoulders.

Garth wanted to scream, the pain was crushing, but so was Lith's right hand around his throat.

"Is this the mouth with which you dared to speak her name?"

The men from the Queen's corps were laughing their as\*es off from the rooftops.

"That was a good line. I must use it the next time my daughter picks a bad boy." Said one of the women of the unit.

"This is no laughing matter." The Captain was suddenly serious.

"I don't care about the pig." He explained facing their dumbstruck stares.

"I mean the killing intent. I can feel it from up here and it's twisting my guts. How the f\*ck can a twelve-years old be so ferocious?"

The whole unit sneered.

"Captain, what if that was your daughter?" Asked his second in command.

"I wouldn't give a f\*ck if it was Garth Renkin, a prince or the f\*cking King himself. I would rip him to pieces and no one would ever know." The Captain's killing intent burst over the street, making even more people faint.

"That's how." Replied the second in command. "Now shut up, this is getting good."

Gurid Renkin, Garth's father had just joined the fray.

"Please, don't kill him! He is my firstborn and my heir. He will never bother you again." Gurid kneeled down, banging his head on the ground.

"That's a given." Lith sneered, while ice started to cover Garth's face, turning each breath into an agony.

"I beg you! It's all my fault. I told him that rebellious women like to be tamed. Take it out on me, not him."

Lith's right kick crushed Gurid's ribcage, puncturing his lungs at the same time. Yet it was also infused with light magic, healing the injuries as soon as they formed. Lith didn't want for him to die so fast.

"Tamed? My sister... You..." Gurid's words almost drove Lith mad, making it impossible for him to speak coherently. Lith shattered Garth's legs, all three of them, before dropping him on the ground.

The women of the corps giggled, while the men instinctively covered their crotch.

"There are only two ways this story can end." Lith's eyes were burning red, like fire pits.

"Number one, I kill him here and now, you step aside and maybe, just maybe, I will not kill each and every one of your family for your crimes." Gurid was crying out of fear and desperation.

"Number two, you stand in my way. In such a case I will still kill him. Then it will be your turn, and I will call the Count, the Association and every single person that owes me to make sure your whole bloodline is wiped out."

Gurid had two more sons and as many daughters. The thought of even his brothers, sisters and nephews getting killed because of his foolishness was too much. He inwardly cursed at himself.

How could he forget that Tista wasn't just another farm girl that Garth could use and throw away once he was tired of her? This wasn't a problem that money could solve. He was about to step away when a second kick sent him sprawling away coughing blood.

"Stand up again and it will be the last time."

Lith grabbed Garth by the neck, lifting him in mid air before burning him alive, for everyone to hear.

"I shouldn't have saved your life years ago (\*), you piece of trash. This is partially my fault too. I gave you your life and now I'm taking it back with interest."

Only after the body turned to ashes did the screams stopped.

"And now, it's your turn." Lith said to the bystanders still pinned from the beginning. Or at least, to those still conscious.

"The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing. That's what you did, and now you shall pay the price!"

Lith started to manipulate the thunderstorm's energies to kill all of them in one fell swoop.

Inside Nana's house, Elina was still hugging and kissing Tista, to soothe her nerves. She didn't give a damn about what Lith would do. If it depended on her, she would have killed all those that had allowed harm to come to her baby.

Tista was trying to calm her mother, trying not to think why there was so much silence. Nana had watched everything from behind a shutter, and after a good shrug, she closed the window for good.

- "I don't give a f\*ck about them. I just live here." –

On the rooftops, the Queen's corps gave a small round of applause to Lith's display of magic mastery.

"All in favour of saving them?" Asked the Captain.

Not a single hand was raised.

"It's unanimous then." The whole unit shrugged, returning to their initial positions.

Lith was about to unleash the fury of the elements on the whole village when a big and strong hand grabbed his wrist.

"Being weak is not a fault and neither is being stupid. No matter how aggravating it is, rabbits will run away and fawns will dumbly stare until it's too late." The voice was strong and wise, but more importantly, it was a familiar one.

"You already killed the one that attempted to harm your cub. You can kill his pack, if you want, but that's cruel and unnecessary, just like killing other innocent cubs. Brother Scourge, do not ruin our reunion by forcing me to pray for so many souls."

The man in front of him was a barbarian, at least 2.1 meters (7') high, wearing a hunter set made of deer skin with boots bigger than a bucket. His face was rough and savage with a square jaw and a cleft chin.

His long hair and his stubble were flaming red having never been groomed. Despite his brutish appearance, his emerald eyes were calm and wise. There was no way Lith wouldn't recognize those colours and his smell.

"Protector? Is that you?"