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Chapter 171 Reunion

The barbarian nodded to Lith's question.

"Your senses are sharper than ever. It seems that since our last encounter we both have changed greatly. Do not call me Protector though. I go by the name of Ryman now. Humans are still diffident of newcomers. If they discover my name is an alias, it could bring out the worst in them.

You should know it better than anyone else."

"Then do not call me 'Scourge'." Lith replied freeing his wrist from Ryman's grasp.

"My name is Lith." The piece of news left Ryman quite baffled.

"I thought it was an endearing term, since few calls you like that. You have many names, like Scourge, young spirit, little b*stard and others I will not repeat because they make me want to bite heads off."

"Ungrateful b*stards!" Lith yelled making most of those present run away.

"After all I and Tista did for them, I would expect that protecting her from a single idiot isn't a mammoth task. They stood idly instead, like she was a complete stranger. Someone is going to die for that. I always return favours in kind."

"I'm sorry for not stepping in earlier." Protector scratched his thick hair with an embarrassed expression.

"I still don't understand the human's mating rituals. I thought it was some kind of courtship, yet it seemed odd that despite the female being stronger the male was so aggressive. I expected her to bite him away or something."

"That makes the two of us." Lith's rage was being smothered by his old friend's soothing presence.

"Me and Tista definitely need to talk and so do we. Where can I find you?"

"That's easy!" Ryman gave him a very wolfish smile.

"We are neighbours since I'm living with Selia in the house next to yours."

"You what?" Lith's eyes almost popped out from the surprise.

"I can't make clothes out of thin air." He waved at his attire.

"And she is the only human I know besides you. I often saw her hunting in the woods, I know she has a good heart."

"A good heart? Are we speaking about the same woman?"

Ryman nodded.

"She respects the woods and its inhabitants and never takes more than she needs. So when I came out of the woods after transforming into a human for the first time, I went to her place. She was very kind to me. Selia washed me and dressed me.

I was surprised by her attentions, but it seemed rude of me reject her, since she is very attractive for a human. Your females are incredibly aggressive in mating and quite flexible. Selia is..."

"Too much information, dude! Spare me the details, I beg of you." Lith's head was spinning. First the idiot's threatening Tista, then the villagers' betrayal and now his wolf friend was human and living with his old mentor.

That was too much for a single day.

"She is practically an aunt to me. The image of you two having s*x together will haunt me for days!"

"There's nothing wrong with that. Don't your parents have s*x too? They must be pretty vigorous to have many offspring." Lith's words didn't make sense to Protector.

"Yes, they do, but not in front of me, and absolutely they do not share any detail. It's a human thing." Lith decided to cut the conversation short.

"See you later. I want to know everything about your transformation."

Ryman nodded and then went to buy the groceries Selia had requested.

Lith went back to Nana's house, bowing to his old mentor before hugging her.

"Master, why you did not intervene?" He asked with a tinge of pain in the voice.

"I'm sorry, young spirit. I hoped to do some good." Nana caressed Lith's cheek gently.

"Is the idiot taken care of?"

"Permanently." Lith's tone was stone cold.

"This is all on you, child." Nana was scolding Tista for the first time since she had started to work with her.

"You can't always depend on me or your brother. Being good and being stupid are two different things. A mage as powerful as you acting as a damsel in distress is an affront to all those poor girls that are actually helpless.

If you had kicked his a*s earlier, none of this would have happened. Far be it from me to put the blame on the victim, he was a lustful fool that would have died anyway, sooner or later, but you could have prevented things from escalating.

Why do you think your mother has my firewood axe? Why do you think your brother was so furious? You need to learn to stand up for yourself and fight your battles, otherwise someone else will and blood will be spilled anyway."

Tista blushed with shame, staring at the floor while fiddling with her hair. Seeing her mother and brother react like that had been a shock for her. Tista had never thought to be in real danger, she considered the whole village like her extended family.

When she had realized how aggressive Garth was and no one, not even Nana, had intervened, Tista had panicked, completely forgetting about chore magic.

Once back at home, the whole family, Rena included, first hugged Tista and after checking she was unscathed, they scolded her in turns until she started crying uncontrollably, forcing them to stop.

"Dad, something feels off. Our village was never full of saints and geniuses, but assaulting Tista in broad daylight is too much. Also, our community is quite tight knitted, why no one did move a finger to help her?" Lith asked.

Raaz sighed, hiding his face in his hands.

"It's actually my fault. Now that all you kids are independent, and with the money you and Tista give to the family, I had the time and the resources to develop the family business. Right now, our farm is Lutia's biggest."

"No offence dad, but that's not a big deal. How are the two things related?"

"Because for a month now, rumors about an impending illness are becoming more and more frequent. At the start people considered them just a bad joke, but over time they started panicking. In times of crisis, only two things really matter: long lasting food for survival and weapons to protect yourself and the food."

The blacksmith, despite raising his prices, has sold out everything weeks ago. While he is waiting for new supplies, people bring him their tools to turn them into weapons. You can't rush food, though, nor make it appear out of thin air.

Our barn is filled to the brim, but unlike some of our neighbours, I refused to restrict supply and raise prices. That angered those that hoped to profit off the mass hysteria and Renkin in particular.

He offered to buy supplies from me in bulk, to hide them away while waiting for their value to hit the roof and make a fortune. My answer was always no. First, because I'm not so foolish to make money in the short term just to starve later.

Second, because I didn't want so many people, good people, that I know and have respect from years to become poor because I exploited their fears. If the rumors turn out to be just rumors, half the village would have spent all their saving for nothing."

Lith whistled with admiration for his father's adamant morals, wondering if he would be capable of doing the same.

"So, you are the reason why farmers and merchants cannot speculate on the food's price."

Raaz nodded.

"Exactly. Because of that, some of our neighbours resent me. They hoped to get rich by selling their provisions at inflated prices. As for Renkin, when he understood I wouldn't budge, he sent his son to do the dirty work."

Rena is untouchable, being the blacksmith's daughter in law. Gurid probably thought that you being away and with Tista's meek attitude, he could force his way into the family and change my mind."

"Dad, you are a true hero. I'm proud of you" Lith put his hand on Raaz's shoulder.

"The Kingdom should award more people like you."

- "And less like me." He inwardly added. -

"With your actions, you have saved countless lives from low-life vultures. Those who resent you were never your friends in the first place, they were just snakes in the grass. As for the others, they'll be grateful once they find out it was all a lie.

There is no such thing as an illness threatening the Kingdom."

- "Not anymore." Solus giggled. –

"Really? Are you sure?" Lith's words lifted a huge emotional burden from Raaz's conscience.

"Of course I am. Until this morning I was working as an assistant for Professor Marth at the White Griffon." He lied through his teeth so easily that it made him feel guilty. Lith hated playing with their feelings, but it was the only way he had to keep them safe.

"He had been tasked to verify these rumors and he personally told me there is nothing to worry about."

"I can't wait to share the good news with the others!"

"Sorry to burst your bubble, but no one will believe you. I am just a student and you are already considered a party po*per, do not make things worse. Wait for the official announcement to be made before gloating."

Lith and his family spent the time until after lunch to make up for the lost time, forcing him to lie about everything that had happened to Lith in the last two weeks.

After the meal, he went to find Protector telling him the background behind Tista's harassment.

"So it wasn't courting? The male's father risked his own pup's life for pieces of metal?" Even in his human form, Ryman managed to snarl.

"Humans sure have a talent for disappointment."

"Never mind that, tell me how did you manage to change so much in less than three months."

- "Yep, from Ry to humanoid and from a bright cyan mana core to a deep blue one is a huge step." Solus pointed out. –

"Soon after you left, a Scoricore came to the Trawn woods. She was looking for a Scourge and she had learned that it was the title of the king in the west."

"She? That thing, it's a female?" Lith was flabbergasted.

"That's very rude of you." Ryman snorted. "Why 'it'? We are not things, we are living, intelligent beings, just like you, young pup. She is stronger and older than us both and most importantly, wiser. You should learn to respect your elders."

"Sorry." Lith said lowering his eyes in embarrassment.

"You know, when I talk to you I have always the impression of speaking with my magical godfather or something. You always scold or lecture me."

Ryman laughed out loud.

"Sorry, but after having sired more than fifty pups, being a father is second nature to me. As I was saying, the Scoricore could have demanded answers from me, instead she just asked.

She was stronger than me, but instead of stealing my territory she treated me with respect and courtesy, so I replied honestly."

"Great! So she now knows where I live. What did you tell her exactly?"

"That you are not the monster she thought you were. Just a broken and twisted pup searching for its purpose."

"That's it?" Lith could not believe his ears.

"Yes. Scarlett wanted to learn about you, to decide if you are a threat that needs to be put down or one of us. I think you are safe now."

Lith didn't know whether to laugh or cry at the thought of having dodged a bullet he wasn't even aware of.

"How the heck did that lead to you becoming humanoid?"

Ryman's eyes blinked in surprise.

"I think that saving your life deserves at least a thank you."

"I'm sorry, again. I'm a rude jerk. Thank you very much." Lith gave him a small bow.

"What about your transformation?"

"Humans and your curiosity." Ryman snorted, then proceeded to tell him the whole story.

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"After clearing the issue about you, the Scoricore told me that I was ready to move forward, and that I should better hurry because I had left only a few more years to live."

"What?" Lith had known Protector since he was four years old. In his eyes the Ry had only gotten bigger and stronger over time, not older.

"I lived for more than eight years as a wolf, before becoming a Ry. And thirty more after that. For a magical beast I was quite old, Scourge. The thought of death didn't surprise me as much as her words, since they made no sense.

She noticed my confusion and explained to me that being a magical beast is not the end of the journey, but just a step. At least, if you are able to Awaken."

All that news was giving Lith and Solus an headache.

- "Magical beasts do not hide the secret of Awakening? Are they insane?" Lith thought.

"It's not just that. Based on what he says, seems that Awakening is not as easy as we thought." –

Lith expected to hear a reiteration of his own story: breathing technique, feel the world energy and after a while becoming able to sense the mana core inside the body. Reality was different, though.

"Scarlett brought me to what she called 'a special place', close to where we fought the Abomination months ago." Lith knew exactly the place. It was where Solus was able to take her tower form, above the mana geyser.

"She had me stay there for days, forcing me to practice my magic over and over."

"Days? Practice magic? This is all so wrong!" Lith blurted out in surprise.

"Right or wrong, this is my story. Let me finish it, please."

Lith raised his hands in an apologetic sign, letting Ryman continue.

"I do not know how to describe it precisely. It was all too abrupt. Suddenly I became able to perceive how my magic would interact with the world energy, and in turn see its flow.

It was such a magnificent sight, revealing to me how everything in this world has mana, and through it, we are all connected. I felt hot inside, discovering a cyan ball inside of me..."

"Mana core." Lith chimed in.

"...that was capable of interacting with the world energy. I started to absorb it without even realizing how, and while my mana core grew and changed so did my body. The metamorphosis was long and painful, I expelled even more black goo than when I became a Ry..."

"Impurities." Lith corrected him again, making Ryman snort in annoyance.

"...but that was far from being the end. I spent the following months learning how to manipulate other elements outside air and fire. It was a nightmare, especially for light and darkness magic. I have yet to grasp their basics.

Scarlett was so fed up with me being such a slow learner, that she left right after teaching me how to change form into a human. She said I am too big and clumsy in my new form to interact with humans and that disguised like this I can travel the world and learn about myself."

Lith's eyes were brimming with curiosity.

"Can you teach me how to change form or did she restrict you from sharing this technique?"

"She did not." Ryman replied frowning his brows.

"But Scarlett told me is very dangerous for humans. You have a frail mind and a very strong sense of self. Most of you go mad just attempting to change form."

Lith scoffed.

"Guilty as charged about the frail mind, but I don't even know if I still have a sense of self."

- "Who am I? Derek McCoy from Earth? Lith from Lutia? Or some kind of monster born by fusing one's memories and the other's body? This face is nothing more than bone and muscles, it's not me." Scarlett's words still echoed in Lith's mind, about him being unnatural. –

Then it was Lith's turn telling Protector all about his own meeting with Scarlett, the dryad, Kalla. How along his journey more and more beings referred to him as not human, and how he recently had almost changed into something else.

"I must admit that your smell is unique among humans, but it always was, ever since our first meeting. You smelled like hatred and pain, and no pup should carry such a heavy burden.

I don't know what Kalla perceived, but I can understand her confusion. Your human smell is very diluted now, is more similar to mine and Scarlett's. You smell like power, but it's unbalanced toward darkness, like an Abomination.

Even this morning I could feel your wrath, clawing to escape. But no matter how many you will harm, sharing your pain will not make you feel better. It can temporarily relieve your burden, but it will turn into hunger.

You are not a monster, but as any human, you can turn into one. You must decide if to ride your inner demons as a tool for an end, or to become their steed, enslaved by your urges. That's something I can't help you with.

All magical beasts face your same trial every day, and the final outcome is rarely obvious. I'll teach you what I know, so if you really change like I did, turning back to human will not be an issue."

Ryman offered Lith his hand, which Lith took between his hands while activating Invigoration at the same time, letting their mana flow freely between them, like two bodies with a single heart.

"Thanks. As I said previously that's all wrong. I'm an Awakened too, but you should have already got that by now. I bet I can teach you better than that grumpy cat. By the way, you still have to show me your new form."

Ryman took a few steps away from Lith and started undressing himself.

"Is this really necessary?" Lith asked with a tinge of envy. Protector was equipped with heavy artillery; it was no surprise the huntress had taken a liking to him.

His body was a mass of dancing muscles that would have put to shame a Greek god.

A light pillar erupted from Ryman's body, that soon was replaced by an enormous wolf like thing.

Its shoulder height reached two meters and a half (8'3"), with a flaming red fur with shades of white and yellow. Its whole body was enveloped in a deep blue flame, that erupted more intensity out its neck, almost looking like a mane

The monster had two curved horns coming out of its forehead, right in front of the ears, eagle-like feathered wing coming out from his back and the tail was made out of dancing flames.

Lith whistled in admiration.

"How are you called now?"

"No idea." Ryman replied. "Every superior monster is unique, unless he has offspring in the old fashioned way. According to Scarlett, I'm the first of my kind."

"Then I'll call you Skoll, like sky wolf that in the legends chased the Sun trying to eat it."

Protector didn't like the name's backstory much, it was something that suited Scourge more than him. But he had an horrible sense for names, and Skoll had a nice ring to it, so he decided to keep it.

Near the northern borders of the Griffon Kingdom, Tyris was still looking for the one responsible for the sudden raise in the Abomination's numbers. Now that she was close to their origin point, Tyris was able to easily follow its tracks with Mother Earth, her Invigoration technique.

Tired of chasing shadows, she had asked for Leegaain's help. He was the most knowledgeable among the Guardians, thank to all the centuries spent minding his own business. There was very little he couldn't find out, once he put his mind into it, of course.

She considered herself lucky. Not only Leegaain had managed to track down the approximate location of the next event, but had also promised to help. Even in times of war, when he still cared about the Empire, it was very rare of him to leave his turf.

Tyris telepathically sent him her coordinates and a Warp Steps immediately appeared next to her. The one who walked out the dimensional gate was barely human in appearance

It looked like an albino man, with pure white skin and hair, with bright red eyes and clad in a black war armour. On his exposed face and hands there were multiple spots where the skin turned into scales.

He had claws instead of nails and fangs instead of teeth. His smile would have struck terror in any living being with a shred of sanity.

"Tyris, my dear, you are always so flashy. If Milea was here, you would crush her self-esteem."

"The pot calls the kettle black." She replied.

"I have many forms. Unlike you I spent a lot of time around my country, I need a suit for every occasion."

Tyris snorted, considering herself less lucky with every passing second. Guardians were very proud, and didn't like their flaws being pointed out. For every superior magical beast, assuming their first form was relatively easy.

It was the one they had in their heart. In Tyris' case, it was the one she had chosen hoping to please her first love. After that, she had interacted so rarely with humans that she had never bothered acquiring another.

Leegaain, instead, after his self-imposed exile, had often walked among humans doing his best to go unnoticed. To do that, he had to spend a lot of time and efforts to achieve multiple aliases, be them humanoid or animals.

It wasn't possible to modify a form, even changing a single detail required to start everything from scratch, no matter how similar it was to one already available.

Instead of fighting a lost cause, Tyris moved toward the source of the anomaly, forcing Leegaain to shut up and focus to keep up with her speed. In the blink of an eye, they had covered dozens of kilometres, stopping only from time to time to use Mother Earth again while chasing their prey.

When the hunt came to an end, they couldn't believe their eyes.

Three fully developed Abominations attempted to ambush them. They were an Empowered one and two Puppeteers, respectively in the body of a human and of a Byk.

"That's impossible!" Leegaain blurted out avoiding the Empowered deadly touch with a side step. The creature was entirely made of shadows, with no facial features.

Despite the complete lack of a body, the energy mass was so dense that it was almost impossible to distinguish it from a real one.

"According to my intel, they have spawned barely a day ago. How can they have evolved so fast?"

Tyris was surprised too, but decided to attempt a non violent approach.

"We don't want to harm you. As long as you are able to control your urges, you are living beings like anyone else. Just tell us what happened to you and we will let you go."

Instead of reacting to her words, the Abominations emitted an inhuman shriek relentlessly attacking the two Guardians with physical and magical attacks, with the only result of angering them.

There was no method or strategy behind their actions, it was just a suicidal series of attacks.

Tired of their madness, Tyris clenched her fist, squashing the Empowered Abomination like a bug by using only spirit magic, paralyzing the other two in her magical grip.

"This is your last chance, speak or die!" The Abominations just kept shrieking, almost breaking free from Tyris' grasp with sheer brute force.

"This shouldn't be happening." Said Leegaain.

"Developed Abominations should aim only for survival. These things look even more senseless than newborn. Let me attempt to read them."

Tyris nodded, focusing her strength on not letting them escape. It wasn't only their mind to be apparently broken, even their powers were out of scale. It was just them being too stupid to use them properly.

Leegaain let out two tendrils of mana, attempting a telepathic communication with the two anomalies. As soon as the link was established, Leegaain fell on his knees screaming in pain.

Tyris squashed them mercilessly, going to aid her old friend.

"What happened?"

"It's worse than we thought. Not only something is creating artificial Abominations, in a way similar to what you use for your artificial Awakened ones, but it's also fusing themselves together to force them to evolve faster.

Each one of those things was several Abominations merged into one. That's why they were so strong."

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"What do you mean?" Tyris asked.

"We already know how Abominations are usually born. An Awakened one gets too greedy, impatient or both, and ends up losing his body. After that, either they find a way to stabilise their energy form or death ensues.

In this case though, someone has purposely Awakened humans, beasts and monsters against their will and then attempted an experiment as brilliant as much as twisted. Newborn Abominations are made entirely out of energy, with little to no sense of self at all.

By merging them together, our culprit has found a way to stabilise their ethereal forms while at the same time making easier for them to possess a body. Since they are almost mindless hungry beings, they offer no resistance to the merging process.

Energy is energy after all, they perceive it as feeding until it's too late. Also, being hybrids of multiple species, they can inhabit almost any body. On paper it's a great idea, but once they start regaining their minds, the conflicting personalities are incapable of coexisting.

As we have witnessed, their constant fight for control turns into madness."

"Are you sure about this?" Tyris was pondering about the implications of their discovery. The situation was already bad, but if Leegaain was right, it was just the beginning.

"Very." He nodded.

"Once I established the connection, I was assaulted by at least one hundred different minds, each one of them marked by the pain of captivity and of being forcefully turned into Abominations.

Too bad that before I could sort out their memories and ask some questions, they recognized me as a foreign mind and piled up on me all at once."

"For once, I think you are wrong, old friend." Tyris started pacing in circles, trying to ease her nervousness.

"When everything started, I would find single Abominations, indistinguishable by normal ones except for their abnormal spawn rate. Now we have faced a small group, that not only had evolved, but despite their madness coordinated their attacks, both in the physical plane and psychic one.

What does this tell you?"

"That our opponent has spent quite a lot of time perfecting his method, and now he's attempting to further step up his game."

"No, you are underestimating whoever this is. Yes, they were mad, but still able to work together. Also, you told me that once they recognized you, they stopped fighting and attacked you as one. This means that their maker already has a degree of control over them.

He left them behind in order to escape from us, even predicting that we would have tried to probe their minds, leaving a trap behind. How badly would you be injured without my help?"

Leegaain inwardly cursed at his stupidity. Either the mental attack had been stronger than he had suspected, or he was really becoming an old fool.

"Physically, not much. Even giving them hours, their attacks were still too weak. Their combined psychic attack, though, took me by surprise. I would have needed weeks, if not months to heal the telepathic scars."

"Exactly. Our enemy is getting bolder with every success. It's only a matter of time before the Gorgon Empire starts getting targeted too."

"I wish you were right, but we are past that point already. In the last months, a few Abominations wreaked havoc in several border cities. At first I was happy about that. Milea never fought one, so I thought it would do her good to have some practice.

But when she reported me to how many of those monsters she encountered, I couldn't help but worry. There were more than usually spawn in a year. Why do you think I accepted to come here? It was obvious that your problem had turned into our problem."

Hearing those words, Tyris couldn't help but worry.

"This explains a lot. He conducted the first step of his plan in my country, the second in yours, probably hoping I would not notice, and then escalated things here again. We need to warn Salaark. Her territory is the biggest, and has so many uninhabited areas you could hide whole armies. She could be the next target."

"Are we talking about the same Salaark? The harbinger of chaos? The scorching Sun? The red death? Unlike us, she has never kept a low profile. It would be crazy messing with her."

"If I'm right, the one behind this madness knows about us Guardians and it's testing our limits. Getting on the black list of three Guardians instead of two is not a big deal."

"What do you mean you have lost them?" Captain Locrias of the Queen's corps couldn't believe his ears.

Toman was the most skilled member of the unit at tailing their target, yet she had lost track of Lith many times during his last visit. He moved so fast and erratically that it was impossible for her to keep following him and not get discovered.

This time though, things were even worse. Lith and his odd friend had met outside the huntress's house and then had disappeared like ghosts.

"I'm sorry Captain, but I had to keep my distance and couldn't use any eavesdropping air spells to maintain my cover. I don't know how he does it, but in the past that barbarian has been able to perceive me every time I got too close or used air magic.

He then just suddenly pops behind my back and asks me why I was following him, forcing me to escape, but never attempting to chase me." Having suddenly become incapable of doing her job frustrated Toman to no end.

"Dammit, with what face can I report this to the Queen? It was fine not knowing anything about this Ryman guy, as long as he was just the huntress' lover and kept a low profile. After what has happened today however, he is now one of our priorities."

"Indeed. Someone that can put his hands on that sociopath and get it back in one piece could be useful leverage." Said Peicus, the second in command.

"That's why I hate backwater villages." The Captain said shaking his head in frustration.

"It's impossible to perform a decent background check on newcomers. No one knows him and no one cares about his past. According to Toman's report he is a great expert, even able to use Warp Steps for instant movements.

We need to find out who he is and bring him to our side. The fact that he can keep Lith's murderous impulses in check is just the icing on the cake." Actually, Ryman was incapable of using dimensional magic, he was just that fast.

"I'm sorry, Captain." Vykáros, the liaison with the Mage association, had an embarrassed expression that didn't bode well.

"No one matching Ryman's name or description has ever attended an academy, nor is registered in any guild based in the Griffon Kingdom. The guy is a ghost."

"Oh, come on! Just because he walked out of the woods in his birthday suit a month ago, it's impossible for him to have no past. Men do not sprout like mushrooms!"

Much to Captain Locrias dismay, it was exactly what had happened.

Lith spent the next two days making up for the lost quality time with his family. Too much time had passed since their last treatment, so he was forced to expel the newly accumulated impurities in their bodies that were making them age faster due to the daily fatigue, deteriorating their health.

- "It seems that unlike Awakened ones, that progressively get rid of the impurities they are born with, normal humans and fake mages keep producing new ones. It must be the reason my looks are improving over time." Lith pondered.

"Or not." Solus giggled. "That's a very natural phenomenon called: 'growing up'. Sure, having a smooth skin and silky hair helps, but your main problem has always been the perpetual glaring." –

It was one of those arguments where they had to agree to disagree.

Ryman's magic abilities grew by leaps and bounds under Lith's supervision. He had no idea how true magic worked. In his Ry form, air and fire magic were natural for him like breathing, turning his thoughts into reality.

The other elements however, were another story. He had no skill or experience with them, so Lith taught him first magic, giving the foundations to improve his talent. Lith also taught him about Invigoration and Accumulation, something that Scarlett had overlooked doing.

"Probably she wanted me to learn everything by myself." Ryman pondered.

"In nature, power without wisdom is the greatest madness. I'm very sorry I can't give you anything in return."

Ryman had tried teaching Lith how to change form, but with no success. Lith understood the theory behind it, but whenever he attempted to do it, nothing would happen. There was no pain, no tickling sensation running through his body.

He would just circulate his mana uselessly.

"It doesn't matter. If what occurred in the camp happens again, at least I should be able to control the process of transformation. Also, thanks to you, now I know how to teach Tista true magic if the necessity ever arises."

"Be careful, Scourge. A great power can be a curse for such a gentle soul."

"Tsk!" Lith scoffed. "As much as I love my sister, she needs to grow up. Gentle or not, one can't remain a cub their whole life. There is a time when one has to learn how to use his fangs to bring the hurt."

"I could not have said it better." Ryman laughed.

Before going back to the academy, Lith forged him a dimensional ring to avoid being forced to see Ryman undress every time he took his Skoll form.

Later that week, Gurid Renkin was found dead in his bed, and Nana certified him to have died of a natural cause.

- "A huge blast of dark magic naturally causes the heart to stop, hence it's a natural cause." – She inwardly added having recognized the effects of her beloved spell Ekidu Ruha(*). But that's another story.

Back at the White Griffon, Lith was surprised to find that all of his Professors were willing to teach him privately until the academies officially started operating again. Of course, there was a sour note.

Unlike his peers, Professor Rudd didn't like his new task. By royal decree, he had to teach dimensional magic to Lith by actually giving him pointers and explanations, violating everything Rudd believed in.

Ignoring a royal decree was an act of treason though and Rudd treasured his possessions and head more than he hated commoners.

"You already know the initial steps." Rudd snarled each word like someone was taking them out of his mouth with a clamp.

"First comes materializing a core made of earth magic, amplified by air and stabilised by water. The trick here is balance." Lith nodded, while Rudd executed a short spell that conjured a small ball of light.

"Then comes creating an entry and exit point. To stabilise them water magic must flow from one to another, like they are two ends of the same limb. The key is finesse." The ball of light dissipated. Rudd performed another spell that created two small black spheres.

"Third, you need to stretch and enlarge them by giving them the same amount of mana at the same time. The key is timing." Lith nodded again, this was the step he was stuck at.

"Last, you must connect them. To do it, you need the two cores to become one again, their energies must flow one toward the other and meet exactly halfway through. The key here is patience."

"That's it?" Lith was flabbergasted.

"You had educational spells all this time and yet you had us needlessly bang our heads? Why you didn't teach us those in the first place?"

"Because every idiot can learn dimensional magic that way!" Rudd lied through his teeth. He had taught those spells in the past, for a price, and the success rate of his students had never changed.

"Dimensional magic is too powerful for anyone to handle. Power without wisdom is the greatest madness!" Lith would have rebuked, but Professor Rudd had unknowingly quoted Ryman, with whom Lith agreed.

"If it wasn't for the orders of a certain someone, I would have never wasted my time like this. So instead of flapping your gums, get to work!"

Lith inwardly scoffed. He couldn't wait to get rid of that old coot.

Professor Rudd sat down on his chair, waiting for the little runt to beg for pointers. Rudd knew he would be forced to help him, but that didn't mean he would make it easy for Lith.

The minutes passed and Lith kept practicing relentlessly. Rudd was about to get up to stretch his legs a bit, when a perfect Warp Gate opened in front of his incredulous eyes.

Thanks to all the practice in controlling the flow of magic under the effects of Small World, Lith's magic sensitivity had improved tremendously, and so did his control over the mana's finest movements.

"Not bad for a commoner. Right Professor?"

Chapter 174 Second Exam

A few days later, when the White Griffon academy resumed its normal activities, Lith was still practicing how to convert Warp Steps into true magic while also trying to learn Blink.

It was supposed to be the final milestone of Professor Rudd's class and Lith was eager to cut his ties with him. After Lith had learned Warp Steps, the old Professor had become even more cranky and unfriendly, making him regret his sassy attitude.

- "Back then I should have kept my mouth shut. Between my excitement and Rudd's provocations, I let pride get the best of me. I'm so dumb sometimes."

"Nobody's perfect. Live and learn." Solus consoled him. –

Despite their renewed hostilities, Lith never missed a lesson, squeezing as much knowledge as he could from the Professor before things went back to normal. Dimensional magic really was the hardest subject for Lith after all.

Since both Manohar and Marth were still away, that left him a lot of time to practice Forgemastering with Professor Wanemyre, allowing him to get ahead of his peers and to learn from her how to forge communication amulets.

After meeting Kalla and witnessing Ryman's growth, Lith decided it was better to remain in touch with his non human allies. The problem was that the amulets were very expensive to buy, making him realize how big of a present the two he had received from the Marchioness were.

Forgemastering the amulets was a complex task, though. The blue gemstone, the key item required to make it work, was an uncommon mana stone and beside that, several enchantments were needed.

Transmitting images and sounds, receiving them, the ability to scan items and documents, memorizing another communication amulet's signature. Every single function required a spell of its own.

Wanemyre had accepted showing him the blueprints only to make Lith realize his limits. She had always been amazed by his theoretical knowledge, that actually depended entirely on Soluspedia, but now that she had only him to teach, she realized that his practical skills were lacking.

He knew enough to make up for it, but in the long run, it could become a fatal flaw. Hence Wanemyre allowed him to bite more than he could chew. After realizing the task was beyond his current abilities, Lith gave up on the idea and focused on the basics instead.

The Professors he worked with during that time became fond of his hardworking nature. Especially since Lith would never show conceit for the privileges they were forced to grant him, only respect and gratitude.

He spent his nights using Accumulation to further refine his core and searching for a way to open the boxes in his pocket dimension, losing quite a few in the process.

Going back to the basics not only allowed him to become a better Forgemaster, but also to better understand how to crack that mystery.

When his friends finally returned, he had made much progress in all his endeavours, but no breakthrough.

Yurial was the only one brimming with confidence, looking like a million dollars. The girls instead, looked dejected, like they had been forced to swallow too many bitter pills too often.

"Hey, I thought being dark and gloomy was my thing." Lith said trying to lighten the mood, but to no avail.

"If you knew my mother, you would understand. These last few days were a nightmare, especially for them." Phloria sighed, while pointing at the other two girls.

"And as for me, I should just be glad to be back here. There was more than one moment when I seriously thought I would never wear pants again. Also, I never expected to go away with two friends and return with two sisters."

Lith furrowed his brows. This wasn't the Phloria he used to know and respect, confident and strong-willed. It wasn't like her to speak in riddles, her words made no sense.

Yurial knew everything already, but feigned ignorance to appear more natural in case one of the girls needed emotional support from a couple of strong arms.

Seeing their confusion, Friya explained to them everything that had happened. From the fall of house Solivar to their adoption by Duke Ernas.

"I didn't have a choice." At the request of the girls, they had met in Lith's room to speak privately.

"It was one thing to be the rebellious daughter of a noble and proud family. I could have always exploited my mother's dire need for a mage in the family to bide my time before becoming independent.

Being the lone survivor in a line of traitors is another." Just repeating her story was too much for her shaken nerves, so after a few sobs, Friya started to cry.

"I had nothing left. My house is gone, my siblings and relatives are all dead. I hated them, but they were still my family. How could my mother abandon us all, letting us pay for her crimes?"

Having already said those words countless times back at Phloria's home, Friya didn't feel like burdening her sisters with her weakness again, so she instinctively sought comfort in another friend, throwing herself on Lith's chest.

At least she was sure that his hands wouldn't 'accidentally' slip. Yurial was disappointed by the missed opportunity, but his poker face remained impeccable.

"My mother is really a monster." Seeing her friend's suffering made Phloria turn back to her old self, seething with rage.

"As soon as she finished with the Solivars, she rushed back home the moment she learned about my guests' identities. She even gave them an ultimatum. They had only until the academy's reopening to accept, take it or leave it."

Lith was flabbergasted by Jirni Ernas' ruthlessness. Exploiting two young girls' suffering was something that even he would have hesitated to do.

Maybe.

Instinctively he hugged Friya tight, sitting on his bed and rocking her in his arms, like he used to do with Tista back when she was in too much pain to fall asleep. One hand gently stroking her hair while supporting her back with the other.

After a bit, she seemed to calm down, the crying reduced to an occasional sniff.

Yurial inwardly admired his technique. To so casually lift a girl like she weighted nothing was something that required practice.

- "Maybe he isn't made of stone after all." – Yurial thought.

"What about you?" Lith asked Quylla with a worried tone.

"I'm still overwhelmed by how quickly everything happened." She looked at Friya with more than a tinge of envy.

"I was in a daze from how wonderful Phloria's house was. I have always wanted a family and after Friya accepted, the idea of becoming sisters, to have a place I belong, was too good to turn down.

After I accepted too though, the dream became a nightmare. I spent more time trying on clothes and learning a lady's etiquette than practicing magic. To make things worse, Duchess Ernas kept going on about marriage and what a lovely bride I would be."

Quylla blushed up to her ears, looking at Lith in search of a reaction from him.

"Do not let that woman fool you with sweet words and pretty dresses." He seemed really angered.

"Adoption or not, she doesn't own you. A house name is just like blood, it's only as thick as you allow it to be. If the Ernas family is a prison instead of a home, you have no reason to sacrifice your happiness for them.

No offence, Phloria."

"None taken. It's the same thing I told them." Phloria nodded, feeling like his words were addressed to her too. Lith knew how rough the relationship she had with her mother was.

Because of those words, Quylla felt happy and sad at the same time. Happy because he seemed to care for her, sad because his words once again sounded like those a concerned brother would speak.

The gap between them never felt so wide.

Meanwhile, Friya had completely recovered, happy for her face to still be hidden, since she was blushing wildly while her heart was racing.

She had never liked Lith as a boy. He was too cold, too serious, and most importantly she knew what Quylla felt for him. Yet his arms projected strength and confidence while his touch exuded a sincere paternal care like she hadn't felt since her father died.

Initially she had thought about remaining there until she had calmed down, but things were only getting worse. The more time passed, the more aware she was of his warmth and good smell.

So she detached from him gently but firmly and ran into the bathroom saying she needed to wash her face.

"How was the quarantine zone?" Yurial asked while Lith removed tears and snot from his uniform with a darkness spell.

"Classified." He replied with a stern voice and a stone face that he let crumble after an instant.

"Off the record? It was the stuff nightmares are made of. Believe me, you don't want to know. So much death and misery in a single place that is beyond imagination, and it's better for it to stay that way."

Lith sighed, borrowing Solus's words.

- "Shame on you." Solus rebuked him. "Using my words to fake feelings you don't have. I forgive you only because you have been great with Friya. Her situation is the worst among them all. She needs all the help that she can get."

"I did? I mean, thanks. Now she is even worse off than Quylla, since she can leave the Ernas family whenever she wants as a free woman, while in the eyes of society Friya would just be a traitor without them." –

The group spent the rest of the day catching up with each other, resuming their usual routine from the following day.

Between the pointers that Lith had extorted from Rudd and Quylla's talent, all of them managed to open Warp Steps, coming close to even completing the Blink spell. Everyone was on edge, knowing that the second exam was around the corner.

As Lith predicted, Friya became a target for all those kinds of harassment that no Ballot could stop. Not even the name of the Ernas could protect her from the spite and the scorn that came from her being branded as a fallen noble and a traitor.

"The only silver lining in all this situation, is that I'm putting so much effort in my studies to relieve my stress, that not only my grades are improving, but I am also in the upper tier of my Magic Knight specialization." Friya said with pride.

"Yeah, seems a lot of people have been slacking off while we were working our as*es off." Phloria pointed out.

The three weeks break had caused many students to relax and lose their rhythm.

Not to mention that between the impending civil war worrying the nobles and the harassment most commoners experienced, it was easy to fall behind. With the academy's competitive environment, making up for the lost time was nigh impossible.

When the day of the second exam came, it took everyone by surprise once again.

"Since many of you complained about the last test, I have decided to use written tests again." Headmaster Linjos said to the student body assembled in the main hall.

Many of the old noble families smirked in defiance, feeling victorious over the now tamed Headmaster.

"But that will bring your grades only up to rank B. If you are fine with that, raise your hand." Linjos continued, enjoying their spunk turning into stupor.

"For those who want a Rank above B, I have prepared a special test, modified according to your input. This time you can make up your teams as you want, up to 4 members.

Each team will have a supervisor, a student from the fifth year. It will be their responsibility to make sure that foul play isn't involved and that you come out alive. Per your request, there will no more monitoring or help from the Professors.

Whoever wants to take part in the test must first fill a liability release form. The academy will not be held responsible if anything befalls you."

The students jumped from their seats, running toward those they believed to be their best bet to pass the exam, while others preferred to give up and take the written test instead.

Lith was discussing with his group how to come out of that mess, since only four out of five of them could form a group, when Linjos joined them.

"Don't worry my students. The nature of this test is such that some people, like Lith, cannot be part of any group." Before they could express their surprise and outrage, Linjos raised his hand, forcing them to shut up with air magic.

"He can still get a rank above A. You'll understand when the test begins."

Chapter 175 Second Exam 2

The main hall soon fell into chaos, the best students being fought over like they were cattle. It didn't take much for the situation to devolve into an auction where people would attempt to bribe or blackmail their targets.

Friya sneered at all those that had previously acted all high and mighty, drowning her daily with their venomous words, now fighting among themselves without a shred of dignity, like hungry wolves over a slab of meat.

When Kippa, a girl that had been particularly obnoxious to Friya in the last month, had the gall to ask for her help, Friya gently smiled to her and politely refused. Friya even gave her a small bow, right before punching Kippa in the face, smiling the whole time.

"Our group may be quite unbalanced but I trust your skills, and more importantly I trust all of you as persons. In a life or death situation, I couldn't ask for better teammates."

Phloria said extending her arm with the open hand in the middle of the group.

"Indeed." Yurial was the first to place his hand above hers.

"If there is no supervision, trust and teamwork are of paramount importance to survival. That's what we learned from the mock exam. Knowing the Headmaster, I doubt firepower will be essential. It's probably another learning experience more than a test of pure strength."

The girls as always, remained flabbergasted. It was like there were two Yurials. One was a lady-killer, sometimes even a bit lecherous, that always appeared in the safety of their rooms or when flirting with girls.

The other was very similar to Lith, calm and calculating.

"Yeah, but I will still miss Lith's hunter skills and battle experience." Quylla sighed. During the last month her feelings for him had waned quite a bit. After the caring attentions Lith had given to the crying Friya, she had expected him at least to ask her out.

Instead nothing had changed. Wherever Lith's heart was, it was clearly devoid of everything but brotherly feelings, for all of them.

Linjos watched the events unfolding in the main hall with a big smile.

"This will teach those snotty brats that commoners or not, in life talent and hard work are much more important than a piece of paper attesting their nobility." He said.

"And also, that they cannot expect to receive help or cooperation by those they treated like inferior beings, right?" Lith asked.

Linjos nodded, while Lith curled up his upper lip in disgust, seeing how quickly things were escalating.

"That will not prevent them from coercing others, though. A leopard cannot change its spots." Linjos dismissed that observation with a wave of the hand.

"You are underestimating me. Besides, I didn't bring you here because I want your opinion on my plans, but to talk about your future."

Lith furrowed his browns. He did not like being taken by surprise.

"As you have surely noticed, after your return you have received special treatment. That's because I have received several calls, from Professor Marth and the Crown."

"The Crown?" Lith echoed, swallowing a lump of saliva.

"Sometimes from the Queen, sometimes from the King, others from both. Bottom line, all the three of them told me how splendidly you performed under a nightmarish situation, fighting against the odds like a professional.

At this point, you could sit on your hands until the end of the year and still get promoted. Normally, I'd just let you skip the second exam, since it's useless to you. After how easily Captain Velagros was found and killed, though, I'm certain we have one or more traitors within the academy. Hence I'm short of people I can trust.

And since I know you wouldn't like anything bad happening to your friends, here is my proposal..."

The announcement of the second exam had been sudden, but its execution was delayed for a few hours. First the students had to form a group, appoint a team leader, and then the leaders would bring their list to one of the Professors.

Unlike the past test, the members of each team were summoned one by one in a special room where they would be questioned to find out if they had been the victim of blackmail or coercion during the selection process.

Unbeknownst to everyone, the main hall had been constantly monitored the whole time. Everything that happened after Linjos had left was recorded and had been examined for future disciplinary measures.

Those who denounced their aggressors were once again asked if they wanted to take part in the test. In case of affirmative answer, they would be grouped together, forming new teams.

Those who didn't were automatically excluded from the test and sent back into the dorms. Linjos had decreed that those who weren't able to stand up for themselves even when offered help and protection, couldn't be evaluated above Rank B.

Strength of character was universally considered a prerequisite for first class mages. A meek mage, no matter how talented, was bound to not get far in life.

While waiting for their turn, Phloria's group received an unexpected surprise. Orion Ernas, her father, had come to pay them a visit.

"My little Flower, come to papa!" Before Phloria could even react, Orion lifted her from the ground like she was a doll, spinning her around the room. He was over 1.96 metres (6'5") high, he had to bend a little to walk through the door.

"Dad, what the heck..." Her protests were muffled by a hug as sudden as it was tight.

"I'm so sorry little Flower. I was away dealing with the traitors; I had no idea your mother would do something like that. When I learned what had happened, it was too late."

Phloria was red from embarrassment, but Orion didn't seem to notice, patting her head like she was still a small child.

"So you two must be my two new daughters." He finally let Phloria go. She really wanted to give her father a piece of her mind, for treating her like that in front of her friends, but she was too embarrassed for that.

Friya and Quylla gave him a small curtsy, not knowing how to react to the sudden intrusion.

"I'm really sorry for what my wife did. I know you will find it hard to believe, but she is actually a good woman." He gave them a deep bow. Orion had black hair and brown eyes like Phloria. His physique was lean but muscular, his perfectly shaven face showed only honest regret.

He had some wrinkles around the eyes and temples, but every movement of his was full of vigour.

"Don't worry about all her marriage talks, the Ernas household is mine, my opinion matters as much as Jirni's. At least when I'm home." He sighed.

"Dad, what are you doing here? How did you manage to enter into the academy?"

"I have my connections." Orion winked. "And I couldn't let my daughters go empty handed." A rapier and a long knife materialized from his dimensional amulet. Both had the Ernas household crest engraved on the handle, the blade and the scabbard.

"I made them myself, using a secret family crafting technique." He gave the rapier to Friya, who only needed a few swings to appreciate its prowess. It was light as a feather, cutting the air without emitting a sound.

"And this is for you." Orion handed the knife to Quylla, who looked at it as at an angry snake.

"I never used a blade." She said in embarrassment.

"That's the easy part. Remember, the pointy end goes in the other guy." He laughed ruffling her hair.

"Little Flower?" Yurial asked, breaking the following embarrassed silence.

"Yes, it's my little baby's moniker. We named her after an ancient goddess of fertility."

"Dad please, stop!" Phloria was so red no one would have been surprised if she suddenly caught fire.

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about, little Flower. As I was saying, my little Jirni hoped that it would make Phloria grow delicate and graceful. Instead, she resembles me a lot."

Orion had just started telling what was likely to be an embarrassing anecdote about Phloria, when one by one their names were called, transporting them into Linjos' office. Phloria had never been so happy seeing the Headmaster's long face before.

"Your task is simple." Linjos explained. "I will send you in the dungeon below the academy. All you have to do is come out alive. The test has no time limit. Whenever you feel you can't go on anymore, just tell your supervisor and he will take you back.

In such event, the exam will be considered as failed."

"Since when does the White Griffon have a dungeon?"

"What kind of creatures will we face?"

"Where is our supervisor?"

Linjos ignored all their questions, opening a Warp Steps with a wave of the hand.

One after the other, they walked through the dimensional gate, finding themselves in a closed and humid space, devoid of any source of light except for two glowing red eyes staring at them in the dark.

"You took your sweet time." Lith's voice echoed along the walls, making them jump.

Yurial used first magic, lighting the small cave they were in.

Lith squinted his eyes for a moment, but his eyes remained red. The group could see him holding a wooden staff which ended in a half moon shape, with a red gemstone floating in its middle.

He also wore several bracelets and rings they had never seen before. They were all presents the Crown had sent to him as a special thank you for his services during the plague and the exam.

- "Between all these alchemical and enchanted items, I can freely use true magic. Not even a Professor would be able to notice." He thought. –

"Lith? Are you really our supervisor?" Phloria asked.

"Yes. Your task is to get out of here alive, mine is to not let you die. I don't know how exactly the grading system works, but I guess that every time you force me to action, your score will be lowered." He shrugged.

"No, I mean you are a fourth year just like us. How is this possible?"

"Sorry, can't answer that."

Linjos' story about no supervision was all a lie. The so called fifth year students were actually elite alumni, young enough to pass for students, but with their loyalty already proven.

Phloria's group didn't need control, only support in case of need. Linjos had estimated that because of the nature of the test, and with his new equipment, Lith was skilled enough to cover for the role.

"Why the red eyes?" Quylla asked.

"A personal spell to see in the dark without becoming a beacon like you lot." Years had passed since the last time Lith had activated his Fire Vision spell. It granted him an improved version of thermal goggles, allowing him to see in the dark in a scale of colours according to the temperature of his surroundings.

Lucky for him, light magic didn't emit heat, otherwise he would have been blinded.

Meanwhile Yurial was racking his brain, trying to understand the purpose of the test. The group started moving in a single line, with Phloria on point, followed by Yurial, then Quylla and Friya in the rear.

The stone corridor was large enough to allow two people to walk side by side, but they were mages. They needed enough space to move without messing with each other.

- "Think Yurial, think." He thought. "Linjos' tests are all actually simple once you understand what he is trying to teach you. I already have all the pieces of the puzzle. Something that doesn't need a balanced team, something that a mage must learn.

"But more importantly, something that Lith already knows. That's the only possible explanation for his role. What separates him from the rest of us? There lies the answer." –

They kept walking for several minutes, the only sound beside their steps was the water dripping from the ceiling into small pools. The humidity of the place made it a perfect environment for mushrooms and mosses of every kind.

Suddenly, a small head appeared behind a corner. It looked like a deformed child, with skin made pale, almost translucent, by having spent its whole life underground. It had huge eyes, a bumpy button nose and pointy ears.

"Goblins!" Phloria yelled while unsheathing her sword.

The creature rushed forward fearlessly, holding a club between its hands, quickly followed by a dozen more creatures, all armed with rudimentary weapons.

The goblins screamed in a frenzy; they hadn't had meat in months.

"Oh f*ck me sideways!" Yurial screamed, finally solving the riddle.

"None of us has ever killed a human being!"

Chapter 176 Trial by Murder

Yurial's words struck everyone, making them freeze for a split second, even Lith.

He immediately understood why he had been forbidden to take part in the test as a regular student. For him it would have been a stroll in the park.

With their skinny limbs and bloated bellies, the goblins almost resembled the pictures of starving kids that humanitarian associations back on Earth would use in their fundraisers.

They were short, between one and 1.2 meters (3'3" and 3'11") high, and their disproportionately large eyes emphasized their childish appearance. Their bloodlust and their hungry, lustful gazes, though, revealed their true nature.

It was the first time for the whole group seeing humanoid monsters. They usually lived in the wilderness, far away from populated areas. Unless of course, the humans had been so stupid to chase or hunt away the magical beasts.

Humanoid monsters travelled in small tribes, needing time to settle up and grow their numbers before becoming a real threat. Magical beasts were the natural predators of such creatures that disrupted the natural flow of things.

They would hunt, cut down trees and destroy their surroundings recklessly since once humanoid monsters exhausted the natural resources, they would simply move to a new region and start over.

Magical beasts would react to their presence, slaughtering them before the cycle of destruction, rape and murder could begin. In the new world as long as the balance between humans, monsters and beasts stood, no race was allowed to grow unchecked.

When the goblin with the club entered her range, Phloria did not hesitate. She slashed down with her estoc aiming for the neck. Thanks to its instinct, the creature managed somehow to react, blocking with its stone weapon.

The estoc crushed the club, but in the process it was deflected, cutting off the goblin's left arm instead. The creature's scream was human like, its blood splattered on the cave's walls staining them red.

Phloria had never wounded someone intentionally, so her first instinct was to stop and provide first aid. The goblin perceived her weakness and exploited it using its now sharp stick to stab her throat.

Phloria inwardly cursed at her stupidity, while all her training kicked in, allowing her to deflect the stick with the shield and to cut the goblin's head off for good. In the time she needed to do so, however, two goblins managed to slip past her.

What she had never thought about, is that after decapitation the heart would keep pumping for a few seconds, generating a fountain of blood that blinded her long enough for even more goblins to pass, while the others surrounded her from all sides.

One goblin was enough to throw Quylla on the ground, pinning her down with its weight while trying to rip off her uniform and slash her with a knife at the same time. She hadn't expected Phloria to fail, so she was still chanting a tier three spell when it happened.

She started to yell and cry at the same time, helplessly attempting to get it off her. What the creature lacked in strength, it compensated in fury and hunger. The uniform protected Quylla from the poisoned knife, but she could still feel the hits.

Another girlish scream quickly followed. Yurial had fallen as well for the sudden attack. Unlike Quylla, armed or not a single goblin wasn't enough to bring down someone of his height and build.

Once a second and a third one joined the fray, though, he fell to the ground, his vision blurred by the blood coming from multiple hits to the head.

The scene almost paralysed Friya too, but Quylla screams woke her up immediately. Her new rapier made short work of the goblins that got close to her, blood and guts spattered everywhere, releasing a disgusting smell of sh*t and bile.

Friya repressed the urge to puke, moving forward to help Yurial, the closest one to her. Her weapon was too long, though. With so little space and the mass of piled bodies, she had no way to be sure not to stab him in the process too.

"Why didn't I bring a short weapon too?" She cried in desperation, hitting the back of the enemies with her shield, to force them to retreat.

Lith remained in the back, flabbergasted by their incompetence.

- "Why do Quylla and Yurial hesitate to aim for the vitals? They are healers too. Why tier three magic instead of first magic? In such an enclosed space speed is more important than raw damage, not to mention these things are so small and weak."—

Since their appearance, Lith had thought about dozens of ways to effortlessly wipe out the goblins. By crushing them with spirit magic, slicing them down with a hail of ice shards, or simply cutting them apart with air magic.

They wore no protections, it wasn't a matter of if they could kill them, just how to do it and how much made them suffer.

Lith didn't like that situation one bit. To hold himself from intervening, he grabbed his staff strong enough to turn his hands white.

- "They are mine! How dare these monsters put their hands on them?" His mind was burning with rage.

"But everything is still under control and no one is really injured. If I help them now, they'll learn nothing, becoming even more reliant on me. I would only cripple their growth. Is this what Linjos meant when he told me I would benefit from the test too?

Is he trying to teach me restraint?" -

In the front line, Phloria had quickly recovered, cutting down her enemies like grass. The goblins surrounded her more than once from multiple angles but they died all the same way.

With a single thrust of her estoc.

"Wish for it to get shorter!" She screamed to Friya. Orion's gifts weren't simple blades, they were a forgemastering treasure, able to contract and expand at will, making them suitable for every combat scenario.

Friya followed her advice, and her rapier turned into a short sword that she used to safely free Yurial.

"Use first magic, you idiot!" Lith screamed, incapable of standing idle anymore.

His voice shook Quylla from her terror. She released a jolt of electricity that stunned and paralysed the goblin. Her magic couldn't harm her, so she ignored the current flowing through their bodies and unsheathed her knife.

Quylla stabbed the creature over and over, screaming in frenzy. Only after reducing it to a bloody mess she managed to stop.

When the fight was over, the group was covered in blood, guts and sh*t. The stench surrounding them was suffocating, making it hard to breathe. Quylla was the first to start crying, realizing what she had done, but refused to let her knife go.

Then it was Yurial's turn, cursing himself for being useless, then Friya and lastly Phloria. They had experienced the hard way how different it was hunting some defenceless game from killing a sentient being for survival.

Their sobs quickly turned into a violent cough; the pungent smell was irritating their noses. Between the shock derived from the fight and the gruesome scene in front of them, they started to puke one after the other.

- "What the heck? How can they be so stupid? First thing they should cleanse to zone, otherwise the smell of blood will lure other creatures. I doubt monsters will patiently wait for them to stop puking before an attack."

"Don't be so hard on them." Solus' mind sounded full of motherly affection.

"They are just kids. Quylla told us more than once that she never used magic for aggression before the academy, the worst things she has ever faced were hunger and solitude.

As for the others, they are the lucky ones. Until now they have been served and pampered, only worrying about meeting their parents' expectations. When it happened to you, would you rather have had someone yelling at you or a hug and a good word?"—

Solus' words only brought back bad memories. Lith's first kill had been his own father, back on Earth, but even then he needed neither. He had been too busy protecting himself and Carl from that poor excuse of a mother to leave any space for feelings.

- "I wonder why it has always to be me being the bigger person." He thought.

"Well, maybe because you usually are the bigger person in the room." Solus chuckling somehow lifted his spirit. —

According to Solus there were no magical items in the cave, aside the ones they were wearing. Maybe Linjos had been sincere about the lack of supervision, and maybe not.

Before intervening, Lith put the bracelet meant to bring them back into the main hall inside the pocket dimension. Then, he tapped the staff on the ground, releasing a wave of darkness magic that cleaned the corridor, dissolving every trace of the fight into nothingness.

"Be strong, Phloria." Lith patted her shoulder, almost getting stabbed in return. She was still on edge, jumping at every noise.

"You can't remain here, other creatures may lurk nearby. You all need a place to rest and recover."

Normally he would have also pointed out how he was already helping them too much, not only by advising them, but also by keeping the light alive while they were all panicking.

In their current state, though, it would have been rude, not to mention he doubted that any of them cared for the exam at the moment. Phloria and Lith helped the others to get up, healing their wounds and prompting them to regain their cool.

Not even half an hour had passed from the beginning of the test, and everyone was already in dire need of sleep. They kept walking for a while before finding a proper place to rest.

The underground maze was composed by corridors connecting a series of caves that varied in size. Some were so small they needed to crawl, others were bigger than the academy's classrooms. Luckily, they didn't encounter anything else on their way.

The group settled inside a cave with a single entrance, but only after Yurial made sure there were no hidden passages or tunnels in the walls. After that, he conjured a series of arrays that would turn anyone walking inside their lair into mincemeat.

Meanwhile, Lith handed Phloria a piece of paper and an inkwell.

"What is this?" She asked after passing out warm blankets to the others, while Friya lighted a fire from the wood she had carried in her dimensional amulet. Unlike the mock exam, this time they had come prepared.

"First rule of dungeoning: always draw a map." Lith imparted her the knowledge coming from his experience with Dungeons & Looting.

"Damn, I had completely forgot." After opening up the scroll, she noticed that he had kept track of all the rooms they had passed through.

"Aren't you going overboard by helping us so much?" Phloria was worried for him, but at the same time was really happy having Lith covering their backs.

"It's just a grade." He shrugged.

"Knowing Linjos, the bigger part of it will depend on how much we learn from our mistakes, rather than being punished for making them. This is an academy, after all, not a slaughter house."

"Done!" Yurial had a prideful expression while walking back into the makeshift campsite.

"Right now the arrays are on standby, to not waste their magical energies for nothing. Normally only the Warden can activate them, but since I need some sleep too, I consumed a few mana stones to make the arrays respond to whoever holds this."

He showed a red mana stone the size of a chalk.

"Great thinking!" Phloria complimented him. "Now we can rest easy."

After deciding the shifts, everyone took their places around the fire, which served more as a moral comfort rather than for light and heat. There were always things that no matter how powerful, magic wasn't able to accomplish, like soothing a restless mind.

No one managed to fall asleep, the images of the goblins' corpses still flashed in front of their eyes. Friya was the first one to leave her place and snuggle up on Lith, soon followed by all the others.

She still remembered the sensation of safety he exuded while she was between his arms, and now she needed it more than ever. Despite all that had happened, Lith had remained unfazed, like a mountain in the face of a storm.

Quylla, and even Phloria and Yurial, despite being too proud to admit it, felt the same way. In their hearts they firmly believed that his murderous gaze they had grown fond of overtime was capable of send back whatever horror was lurking in the shadows with the tail between its legs.

In fact, after discussing again the guard-duty order, the group fell asleep as one, leaving Lith as a mother goose surrounded by ducklings.

Not knowing whether to laugh or cry, he stood watch listening to their snoring.

Chapter 177 Unexpected Encounter

When the group awoke, the number of yawns instantly put everyone on alarm. They instantly realized that no one had stood guard, leaving them completely defenceless except for the presence of their theoretically neutral supervisor.

Phloria and the others felt greatly embarrassed, but nothing could compare with the exhaustion and disgust that still lingered on their minds. Despite using darkness magic to cleanse their mouths and teeth before going to sleep, they could still feel the taste of puke and blood.

"How do you guys feel now?" Phloria asked.

"Like a dirty rag." Friya answered, causing the others to agree.

"Good gods Lith, do you really do stuff like this for a living?"

"Yes, it's part of the job." He nodded. "And soon it will be part of yours too, except maybe for Quylla. Friya, Phloria, you are Mage Knights your swords aren't made to scare or protect, but to kill.

Yurial, as a feudal lord and a Warden you'll have the lives of both your enemies and allies in your hands. Quylla, even if you choose to become an academic, like Professor Marth or Manohar, you still need to know how to defend yourself."

The group pondered on Lith's words and on the implications of the test. They had trained for years on dummies or with sparring partners, never fully understanding what their skills were meant for.

Linjos was forcing his students to put them into practice, to experience the consequences of their choices up to that point, before deciding what path they wanted to take in their future life.

"Before we move out, is there anything else Quylla and me need to know about our new weapons?" Friya asked. There was no blame or resentment in her voice, but Phloria felt guilty anyway.

"Sorry for not telling you before." She blushed in shame.

- "Gods, I'm so stupid." Phloria thought. "Now I am supposed to be not only their leader, but also their elder sister. Not teaching them about the Ernas's custom blades was a major blunder on my side." -

"It's just that my... I mean our father's gifts and this exam left me so dumbfounded that I completely forgot. Our weapons have been forged and enchanted using a secret technique of the Ernas family.

It makes them unnaturally sharp, allowing even a light weapon like your rapier to cut as well as to pierce. You are no longer limited to stabs. As long as your opponent doesn't wear heavy armour, you can also slash.

It also makes them sturdy enough to cut through rock without a scratch. Last, but not least, they have a limited ability to change size to adapt to confined spaces without hindering their wielder. I don't know the details, though. I'm no Forgemaster.

Quylla, your long knife can turn into a short sword if you need extra range in battle."

Quylla nodded, trying out the weapon for herself. Her movements were awkward, but the blade was light and easy to use, giving her a sense of security.

"Can I see it, please?" Lith extended his hand to Friya, who passed him her rapier.

Lith used Invigoration on the weapon, studying its complex pseudo core. He was no swordsman yet, but even he could appreciate its workmanship. He used it against a small rock, that was easily pierced producing a silvery sound.

The blade was unscathed, and with Fire Vision, after giving his back to the bonfire, he could see the whole blade turning green for a second.

"I don't know how your father achieved the mass displacement, but I have an idea or two about the rest. The weapon is enchanted with air magic, making it vibrate on hit and enhancing the edge's effectiveness.

Also, I don't think it's actually sturdier than a normal blade, more like it absorbs impacts and dissipates their energy as heat via earth magic."

Lith was amazed by the effects forgemastering could apply. Kinetic shields and vibro-weapons were things he had only read about in sci-fi books.

"Well, duh!" Phloria replied. "Everyone knows they are enchanted with air and earth magic, but not how. Also, I didn't understand a word of the gibberish you just said."

Lith sighed, he couldn't explain them what kinetic and potential energy were, nor how the vibration frequency could affect solid matter. They were all terms that did not exist in the new world.

It would have been like trying to explain the television to someone that didn't know about electricity or waves, so he dropped the matter and returned the weapon to Friya.

"I have something to say." Yurial chimed in.

"Since we are in a dungeon, it's better to avoid using fire magic. There isn't much air to begin with, so we could suffocate if we consume too much of it. Also, despite fireballs are a mage's best friend, both the flames and the noise could bounce off the walls.

Just the noise could deafen us, not to mention that only the caster would be immune from the spell's direct effects, while the rest of the group would suffer from the heat. That's how the term 'friendly fire' was coined, after all."

Yurial felt that he had to prove useful to redeem his honour. So far he had been as helpless as Quylla, but she was just a healer with no specialization. Not to mention she was three years younger than him with.

"Those are all good points." Phloria nodded. "Now we need to coordinate our actions, we cannot repeat the earlier mistakes."

The group spent the next hour making plans and preparations for the rest of the trip.

In the new formation, Phloria would walk in the middle, ready to block any incoming enemy. Quylla was tasked of holding the map, and to keep note of their movements, since she was the only one beside Lith that could write with water magic.

Friya and Yurial exchanged their position, allowing her to easily assist Phloria or protect Quylla. It didn't take long to meet another group of goblins, but this time things went very differently.

Phloria ignited her tower shield blocking their path, while Quylla and Friya used tier one magic to slash and stab their assailants with ice shards and air blades. Some of the creatures had slings and bows, but their projectiles were easily deflected by Yurial's air shield.

They managed to cleanse the corridor right after the fight, but Friya and Quylla puked again nonetheless. The wounds made by magic were even more gruesome than those made by the swords, and they had yet to get used to spilled guts and bloody stumps.

As for Phloria and Yurial, their pride was stronger than the nausea.

In the following hours, they met more and more goblin's nests, getting better at every encounter, to the point that not an enemy managed to reach Phloria's shield anymore. Yet Lith was disappointed.

They would always make a mess of the cave, needing several spells each to get the job done.

"Let me give you a freebie, guys."

Thanks to Life Vision, Lith knew they were about to meet another nest composed of about twenty goblins, so he took point.

"You have already cleared bigger nests, so this should not influence your score at all. Please watch."

Lith let the goblins run toward him offering no resistance, until he tapped once with his staff, making the cave's humidity coalesce into a layer of water on the ground. A second tap turned it into ice.

Goblins had no concept of ice so they kept charging, falling head first on the ground because of the now slippery surface and incapable of getting up. A third tap turned the ice into blades that sunk into their eyes, hearts and brains, killing them on the spot.

The group was in awe, their mouths agape for the surprise.

"Was that first magic?" Yurial asked, still not believing his own eyes.

"Yes. That's why no chant, no hand signs, no warning for the target."

After checking with Life Vision that no one else was around, Lith turned back, facing his friends.

"You are just like I was until a few years ago. You use magic like a club, instead that like a scalpel. If properly used, the simplest spell can have the most destructive effect."

"Did Lady Nerea teach you magic like that?" Phloria couldn't help but admire his skills.

"No. I had... a lucky encounter." Lith had no other way to explain his mastery of magic. He had learned from life and death fights against Irtu and Gerda (*), and by fighting alongside Protector.

If he had not met so many magical beasts, he wouldn't be half the mage he was.

Lith left them to ponder about his words, resuming his position in the backline.

Even if fighting was getting easier, it was still exhausting both physically and psychologically, so the group rested again, this time with a proper guard-duty order. Lith didn't sleep, only pretended to, using Invigoration to recover his strength.

When they started moving again, they passed through several corridors and caves, sometimes ending up in dead ends, but never losing the way thanks to the map. They kept finding traces of past struggles and goblin's bones chewed clean, but they met no enemies.

Phloria could feel the tension in the air, they were getting inside the territory of a bigger predator.

"Wait!" Yurial said, stopping the group.

"The next corner is too narrow. If we get attacked while crossing it, the group would be split in half, making hard for us to coordinate properly."

"I know, but it's not like we can make it wider or see through the walls." Phloria replied.

Lith inwardly smiled, since he had just done that with Life Vision.

"True, but we can set up the board properly. It's an ambush only if you are unaware of it."

Yurial casted one array after the other, marking their borders with true magic to make it easier for his teammates to spot them. When he finished, Phloria moved several steps in front of the others, keeping the shield up in front of her and ready to retreat.

She peeked behind the corner, discovering a short corridor leading to another sharp curve. Phloria was about to signal the others to move forward, when she heard sounds of battle.

There were screams and yelling in a guttural language she was unable to identify. The source of the noise kept getting closer, until a group of humanoids came rushing toward her.

They were all very tall, above 2 meters (6'7") high, with muscular bodies that could have passed for humans if not for the greenish skin, the spiky red hair and the long and pointy ears and nose.

"Ogres!" Phloria yelled.

"Um-pha!" Yelled an ogre, pointing at her with a claw ending finger.

Unlike goblins, they wore clothes, mostly made out the skin of other ogres, goblins and whatever they usually had for lunch. An ogre wearing a necklace made of skulls from small animals waved a huge staff toward Phloria hiding spot.

"In-foi!" A fireball flew from the staff, leaving Phloria only enough time to step back and take cover behind her tower shield before being engulfed by the explosion. Her magic shield shattered, but still took the brunt of the spell.

Her uniform was burned in more than one spot, and her ears were ringing, making hard for Phloria keep her balance. Friya took point, while Quylla started healing her injured friend and Yurial casted another array.

As soon as the ogres stepped inside the first array, Yurial activated it, turning the space they were into a thunderstorm that burned many to a crisp, lightnings assaulted them from all directions. Even the survivors didn't come out unscathed.

The ogres were already looking forward for the rare taste of human flesh when the second array activated, turning the ground into quicksand and making them drown.

- "Yes!" Yurial thought. "A clean victory without having to attack even once. Wardens rock!"—

The ogre shaman was as clever as ruthless. He had survived the thunderstorm by using the other ogres as meat shields while casting a protective earth spell only for himself, shielding others would have required time and compassion, and he lacked both.

He also survived the quicksand by using the others as stepping stones, brandishing his staff as a club towards the nearest enemy, Friya.

Despite being injured and smaller than the other ogres, the shaman still hit with the strength of a kicking horse, almost shattering the magical shield from the impact.

Friya was at disadvantage, the opponent was heavier, stronger and had a longer attack range than her, since the staff was over 2 meters (6'7") long. The shaman followed up with a kick, catching her unprepared and sending her tumbling on the ground.

The shaman smiled, pressing forward and ready to crush her skull like a melon.

"Joruna Harti!"

Quylla's ice spears pierced the ogre from all side. Blood instantly gurgled from its mouth while its knees hit the ground, having no more strength to stand.

Lith felt flattered, the spell closely resembled his Checkmate Spears.

"In-foi!" The shaman weaved his staff one last time, unwilling to die alone.

Alas, Yurial had already completed a very small array that negated fire magic. He had prepared it since the moment he had noticed that one of the enemies was crazy enough to use fire magic inside the corridor.

The shaman looked at his staff with a dumbfounded expression, the pain from the betrayal of its only true friend showed on his rough visage.

Friya expressed her condolences by piercing its head in one fluid motion.

The group was about to celebrate, when something else walked past the corner.

It looked like an alligator, but it was humanoid. It stood on two legs, at least 2.5 metres (8'2") high not considering the tail.

It wore a belt to which were hanged several trinkets, while his hands wielded a double headed axe and a hammer axe respectively. It was chewing what seemed to be an ogre's still bleeding thigh.

It stared at them with a playful look, before taking the thigh out of its mouth and saying:

"Ah, fresh meat!"

Chapter 178 Scheming

White Griffon academy, Headmaster Linjos' office.

From his desk, Linjos was examining the data coming through the academy's magical network. Barely more than a day had passed, yet the number of groups taking part in the test was almost halved.

It was way worse than he had predicted, but looking at the reports of his subordinates he couldn't doubt that his method was the right choice.

- "Professor Trasque is right, too many students have no combat experience, I need to invest more manpower and funds in the 'Theory of Combat Magic' classes. The mock exam helped the students only so far.

"The scenario was too simple, and without any real injury many of them underestimated the risks. Next year I have to introduce humanoid monsters earlier and make the Professors let students get hurt a bit, or I'll be back at square one."— He thought.

His communication amulet drew his attention and so did the rune glowing because of the incoming call. Linjos could not help but shiver whenever the Queen called him.

"Your Majesty, to what do I owe the honour of this call?" He stood up, giving her a deep bow.

"Linjos, what's the meaning of these numbers? Are you really going to flunk two thirds of the fourth year students?" Queen Sylpha ignored etiquette, neither using his title or giving him even a nod of the head in response.

Her voice wasn't angry as much as worried.

"The answer to your second question is no." He replied with a firm tone.

"The first one though, is a complicated question and requires a complex answer. I require your permission to speak freely."

"Granted." Sylpha nodded with no hesitation.

"The numbers tell us that two thirds of the students are cowards, ill prepared for combat, cheaters or all of the above. Twenty percent gave up as soon as they knew their lives would be at risk.

"Such mages cannot be rated over B, because those who consider themselves to have too much to lose can be easily intimidated or convinced to switch sides. Entrusting them with vital information or missions would backfire, since they would rather give up than fight and risk dying.

"Another twenty percent either froze at the sight of blood or refused to denounce their oppressors, despite the clear intention of using them as meat shields. Both types are useless assets. The first are unsuited for combat, the seconds are spineless cowards.

"The last twenty percent are those who attempted to bribe or threaten their supervisors to get protection and a safe way out of the dungeon. Their behaviour speaks for itself.

"I don't plan on flunking them all, there is always the third test and the next year to prove themselves better than this. My aim is only to give them a glimpse of real life. Too many of these young master and ladies, except a few deviants, have never dirtied their hands, always delegating to their retainers.

"The problem with the previous teaching methods is that they emphasized theory and memorization over practicality. In fact, the mortality rate of the graduates is always very high, no matter the academy they come from.

"The old methods created mostly parlour magicians, good only to attend social events and flaunt their superior instruction. Mine will instead separate the wheat from the chaff. It's not the destination that matters, but only what they learn during the journey."

The Queen pondered for a while before agreeing with him.

Lukart Household, Archmage Lukart's private quarters. Before the second exam started.

"Are you sure everything is set up properly?" Lukart asked.

"I am not sure about anything at this point." The voice from his communication amulet replied.

"After the mess you made during the plague, Linjos doesn't trust anyone. He used fifth year students instead of Professors as supervisors, cutting us off from most of the preparations for the second exam."

"I'm tired of your excuses, Yurial Deirus has to die or we are both finished. His father is onto me, it's only a matter of time before he corners me for good. With Yurial's death, not only will Deirus be forced to focus on finding a replacement, but it also will divert his attention to Linjos, holding him accountable."

"And I am sick of your madness!" The voice retorted, burning with anger.

"I have no way to know what path Yurial's group will take, nor the ability to prevent his supervisor from using the bracelet Linjos provided to return to the main hall in case of danger or heavy injuries.

You have to pray to your ancestors that he meets creatures strong enough to slaughter his group before his supervisor can intervene."

The communication was cut off, leaving Lukart banging his head against his desk in desperation. Once again, he had to stake everything on dumb luck, hoping for the fifth year kid to be as unlucky as incompetent.

Lith's mind accessed Soluspedia, instantly recognizing their new opponent from one of the academy's bestiaries. It was a Kroxy, a rare form that crocodiles and alligators could achieve after evolving into magical beasts.

Instead of becoming just a bigger and smarter version of the original reptile, capable of using water and earth magic, a Kroxy would develop a humanoid physiology gaining the ability to use weapons.

Lith stepped forward, ready to intervene. Linjos had warned him about the dungeon's wild and unpredictable environment. The test was all about the ability to overcome the trauma of the first kill of a humanoid being.

The weak and magicless goblins were just an appetizer, followed by the much stronger and dangerous ogres, that yet used fake magic too, making them an opponent Phloria's group could still face.

- "A rare magical beast capable of using true magic though, isn't something on their league. Heck, maybe is even above mine." Lith thought.

"In such a humid environment while being surrounded by rocks, there isn't much I can do. Even going all out with fusion magic is useless. That thing weighs at least half a ton, even with my enhanced strength it can swat me like a fly."

"Not to mention its bright cyan mana core." Solus pointed out.

"It's control over the most abundant elements is far superior to yours. Please be careful."—

Phloria was still recovering from the fireball, helped by Quylla. Yurial would never make it in time to cast another array, leaving Friya the only one ready to fight. Lith round up his friends erecting a barrier around them and took out Linjos' amulet.

No exam was worth his life, Lith would never risk getting killed for a stupid reason like pride or a grade.

The Kroxy though, didn't pay the group any further attention. Instead it kept collecting the ogres' corpses storing them in the dimensional amulets hanging from its belt.

The ogres in the quicksand were still alive and when they saw the beast walking toward them, they screamed in terror. Ogres were much more similar to humans than goblins, their shrieks gave everyone goose bumps.

The Kroxy walked over the quicksand like it was solid ground, needing only one hand to lift an ogre before biting its head off.

"It's a pity I can't store them alive, I like my meals feisty."

"It talks!" Despite still being stunned, Phloria couldn't keep herself from expressing her amazement.

"I do. And I'm not a thing, rude hatchling. My name is Phillard."

- "This creature is not afraid of speaking in front of humans." Lith observed.

"Either it's arrogant like Irtu and doesn't care, or it's benevolent like Ryman or Kalla."—

"By the way, what are you doing down here?" Phillard continued.

"More exactly, what the heck is going on? I mean, I'm not the type to look a gift steak in the bone, but usually there are no goblins, ogres or trolls in the dungeon, only humans. And you don't smell like enemies to me."

"Smell?" Yurial asked, incapable of relaxing.

"Yes, the Lord of the man-made mountain and the Lord of the forest have a deal. When the Lord of the mountain catches an intruder, after he is done with them, he gives his enemies two choices.

A swift death or the dungeon, where they become our prey. You have no idea how many pick the dungeon, hoping to find a way out. And usually they do, it only takes up to five or six hours to get out of my a*s."

Phillard emitted a gurgling laughter, drooling all over the ground.

"But he usually marks them with a distinct smell to make it easy for us to distinguish them from his servants. Are you his servants?"

The whole group nodded furiously as one.

"If it's the truth and you are lost, just take the first left, the third right and then the second right after that corner and you'll find the door to the castle. Someone will open it for you.

If you are lying, you'll be stuck here and I'll have you for dinner on my way back."

No one dared to move, Lith kept the barrier on and the finger on the escape button until the Kroxy disappeared from their view, its steps fading away in the distance.

Then, they started moving toward the exit, hoping for that to be their last hurdle.

Chapter 179 The Real Deal

The group followed the directions given by the Kroxy, updating their map along the way. At first they had been dubious if to trust its words, but after thinking about it for a while they decided it was worth giving it a shot.

"If Phillard really wanted to harm us, he would have done it while we were at our weakest." Phloria pointed out, the other agreeing with her.

"Gods, I still can't believe magical beasts can talk and reason just like us humans. If I had known that during the mock exam, I'm afraid I would have experienced the same hesitation I had at the start of the dungeon."

Her words made the others think hard about their previous experience. Magical beasts were capable of using magic just like them, if not better, to fight tactically and to care for their teammates.

- "It's been really stupid of me ignoring all the facts and let prejudice guide my reasoning." Yurial thought. "Just because they have a different form, it doesn't mean they are incapable of having feelings.

"I must talk about this matter with my father, he never mentioned this issue while discussing how to manage our grand duchy. Befriending them could be really profitable."—

The further they progressed through the dungeon, the more crossroads they encountered. By using Life Vision, Lith could see that there were no more big life forms lurking in the other paths, just insects and what he hoped to be rats.

- "It seems that goblins and ogres were all we add to face." Lith thought. "It makes sense if Yurial is right and the purpose of the exam was imparting practical experience about fighting humans. Any more would just be plain cruel."—

Lith knew he was right when after the last turn Linjos' amulet emitted a green glow, indicating that he was free from his role of supervisor, yet since they were still cautiously walking instead of being transported into the main hall, he was also wrong.

"I think that the test has yet to end, it's just that my role has been changed from passive spectator to active player." He explained to the others making them even more nervous.

Of all the reasons they could think of for allowing Lith to help them, not a single one did bode well.

The last cave was a big one. The ceiling was over ten metres (33') high and the room was at least thirty metres (33 yards) long and twenty meters (22 yards) wide. On the other side of the cave there was visible a huge glowing door that seemed to be made of silver.

There were three humanoid figures near the exit, and the light was too dim to distinguish their features. They were bigger than goblins but smaller than ogres and that alone normally would boost the group's confidence.

It was the first time they outnumbered their opponents and they had also the element of surprise. Knowing Linjos though, they assumed that the last opponents were bound to be the strongest.

"They have yet to notice us. We can snipe them all from here." Yurial whispered, after the group had retreated back in the previous tunnel.

"I would love to." Phloria replied with a sigh. "Have you considered how devious Linjos is, though? What if those are other students and not enemies? What if they are waiting for the door to open or serving as bait to see how reckless we are?"

Maybe it's just an impulse control test. Linjos made Lith join our team to make us overconfident and rush things. Is anyone able to identify them?"

At such distance and with so poor light, not even Lith could see much. According to Solus their physical condition was poor, and even if they had cyan cores, they hadn't much mana left.

- "I wish I could share this information with the others. Phloria is probably right, this is just another damn test."— Lith thought

At Phloria's sign everyone activated a flying spell from their rings, to not make any noise while moving forward.

The group spread out with Phoria, Friya and Lith on the first line, while Quylla and Yurial stayed in the rear. The spacing between them was enough to help each other if the necessity arose, but also allowed them to scatter in case of attack.

Because of the cave's dimensions it was possible to use fire magic, also if their opponents were capable of using magic, a single fireball or even a lightning could take them all out at once if they kept walking in a single line.

Soon they were close enough to recognize the three well dressed humans.

Phloria felt really proud of herself and couldn't wait to boast in front of the others, when she and the other three received a pat on the shoulder with air magic from Lith, the convened sign for danger.

When they turned to look at him, he was repeatedly tapping his nose.

They suddenly remembered Phillard's words. Linjos' enemies were marked with a distinctive smell, and now they were close enough to be able to perceive it.

Lith was able to see Phloria's expression freeze into a panicked one, while she and the others sweated bullets.

- "Phloria was right all along." Lith thought. "Those three are still part of the test, but she has underestimated Linjos. He isn't as devious as she believed, he is much worse. Linjos is testing their resolution and my self control at the same time.

If I am right, they are allowed to kill, while I am not."—

Quylla's line of thinking was very similar to Lith's, yet she was on the verge of tears.

- "How could I have ever thought that killing someone is cool when Friya told me about Lith's background check? I pictured him like a fairy tale hero, slaying monsters and criminals, but reality is different.

Taking a life is terrible, it leaves a void in your heart like your very soul is withering. Even if they are enemies of the Headmaster, I can't kill them in cold blood. They did nothing to me, they may be innocent."—

Becoming used killing in self defence and overcoming the trauma derived from killing humanoid beings were two entirely different matters. Not even by sleeping close to each other and keeping a light was enough to drive away the nightmares.

Killing someone of your own kin was the supreme moral taboo, just the idea was enough to send their minds into chaos.

The choice was taken off their hands when one of the three turned in their direction.

"Watch out!" She yelled. "Enemies incoming!"

The three had rough looking faces, they clearly lacked food and sleep for several days. Their fear was evident, making the group even more hesitant to attack. Being surrounded and outnumbered, the three attacked only using first magic, hoping to quickly beat such young opponents, before their remaining strength ran out.

Phloria and Friya hid behind their magically conjured shields, while Yurial and Quylla could only dodge. The three chose to use first magic not only because it didn't require much mana, but also to prevent their opponents from casting spells.

One of the biggest differences between true and fake magic was that while true mages would consume mana only after conjuring their spells, a fake mage would spend it as the casting was initiated, so being interrupted resulted in a waste of mana.

The three were doomed nonetheless. They were disarmed, while Phloria's group only needed one spell stored into their rings to kill them. The problem was they were unwilling to, even under such attack.

Lith sighed, realizing his role in that charade. He pumped his mana into the staff, activating its effects once more and sending six needle sized ice shards into the eyes of his enemies, blinding them.

The staff was an experimental hybrid between an enchanted item and an alchemical one.

It enhanced a mage's focus and mana sensitivity allowing even fake mages to alter the trajectory of their spells after the cast, something usually only tier five magic could achieve.

In Lith's case it granted him an extremely fine control over the mana flow, to the point of being able to hit even small targets with pinpoint accuracy. Of course everything came with a price and limitations.

The mana stone floating in the middle of crescent moon shaped end of the staff was a consumable. The more powerful the spell it focused, the faster it would lose its magical energies, making the staff useless until the gemstone was replaced.

They were quite expensive, hence why Lith had only used it with first magic.

Also the staff was incapable of focusing spirit magic or any spell above tier three, making its use limited.

The very moment the three were paralysed by pain and fear, Lith conjured a tier one lightning rendering them unconscious. He then proceeded to blindfold, gag and bind them to prevent even first magic from being used.

A clapping sound could be heard echoing through the cave, coming from a life sized hologram of Queen Sylpha that had appeared in the middle of the cave.

Everybody but Quylla recognized her and knelt down. No one missed such detail, making his noble friends wonder how could a commoner like Lith know the Queen.

"At ease, no need for formalities. Congratulations, you are the first group of students that managed to come so far. I commend your speed, your skill and most of all your humanity." Her eye fell for a second on Lith, expressing approval.

Linjos walked through the silver door that opened without a noise carrying a blade in his hands.

"Sometimes though, humanity must be set aside for justice to be carried out. Take these three for example. Baron Lazot, who took part in a slave trade, destroying hundreds of lives before being caught red handed."

She pointed to the young, handsome man that Lith had just finished tying up.

"Or mage Syalle, who bathed in the blood of newborn believing it would keep her young and fresh forever." Sylpha was now pointing at the one that had spotted the group.

"And last, but not least, Duchess Hileo, who for trivial reasons wiped out entire villages. Not all humans are bad, but they aren't all good either. This test is maybe the hardest in your young life, that's why I'm here with you today.

Mages are the backbone of the Griffon Kingdom, and must be able to defend it from its enemies, from both outside and within its borders. Even when it comes at a huge personal cost.

Lady Quylla, considering your young age and your nature as a healer, I think it's too early for you to face this hurdle. May our ancestors bless your path, you are free to go."

Quylla ran away without turning back. Tears flowed from her eyes at the thought that no matter her decision, those people were already dead. She cried for them, but also for herself, realizing that she was leaving in that cave her childhood innocence.

"Mage Lith, you can leave too." Sylpha didn't give an explanation, but addressing a simple student with the title of Mage was more than enough for those present to understand how well the two knew each other.

Lith left without rushing, there was nothing he could do to help them this time.

"Lord Deirus?"

Following the Queen's voice, Linjos offered him the sword.

Yurial hesitated at first, but then took it from the hilt, plunging it into the Baron's heart. He had recognized that sword on first sight, it was the Kingdom's ceremonial blade used for public executions.

His father had used it countless times, and Yurial had been forced to spectate since he had accepted becoming the next heir.

"Your Kingdom thanks you for your sacrifice." Sylpha gave him a small bow of respect, before Warping Yurial back in his room. She could tell by his face that he was about to cry, puke or both, and wanted to spare him doing it in front of others.

"Lady Phloria?" The sword floated in front of her.

"I'm sorry your Majesty, I can't." She fell on her knees, crying. Phloria remembered the day when she asked his father, Orion, how it felt killing the bad guys. Orion went to the kernel, handing her a puppy and a knife, asking her to kill it.

Even then, Phloria refused to do it, crying for her life.

"That's how it feels. Every single time." Orion said.

"When it stops hurting, it means you have become the bad guy."

Sylpha warped her away too. There was no reason torturing such a young girl any further.

"Lady Friya?"

Friya knew Duchess Hileo very well. She had been her mother's best friend as long as she could remember. Now she finally understood what they were always talking and laughing about, when they thought she couldn't hear them.

- "The world sucks, people suck. First my mother, then Lady Ernas and now the Queen. No one really cares for me, I'm just a tool for their sick games. I'm the only one I can rely on."— Friya thought while slashing down in an arc.

"Glory to the Kingdom."

The Duchess head rolled on the floor, its tumbling echoing in the darkness of Friya's heart.

Chapter 180 Guilt and Punishmen

As soon as Friya was Warped back to her room, Linjos' expression became worried.

"Well, how do you think that went?" Queen Sylpha asked.

"Not bad, but not good either. I never expected any of them to actually kill one of these scums."

Linjos sent a powerful darkness magic impulse into Mage Syalle's head, giving her a painless death.

After days of torture and interrogation, even she deserved it.

"They all come from a sheltered environment, or in the newest Ernas ladies' case at least peaceful. I wanted my students to realize that sooner or later they will have to make hard choices, so that when the moment comes, they will be prepared.

Not turn them into cold blooded killers. I predicted them reacting like Lady Quylla or Lady Phloria. The other two went completely overboard."

"It's evident you never had children, Linjos." Queen Sylpha sighed.

"Teenagers are unpredictable, it's their nature. Take the young Lord Deirus. He clearly didn't want to do it, but he is so eager to meet the expectations that are placed on him from his father and the Kingdom that he let pride get the best of him.

He even mimicked the Kingdom's ritual execution method. I will tell Archmage Deirus to cut him some slack or sooner or later the boy will crumble under the pressure.

As for Lady Friya, you have underestimated all she has just gone through. The betrayal of her mother, the death of her family and the 'adoption' from the Ernas family.

That girl needs help. All of them do, but she does more than anyone else."

"I'll inform the families to provide them all the support they can. And remove the last part of the exam from now on. I'm really sorry your Majesty, I've let you and my students down with my incompetence." Linjos lowered his head in shame.

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Linjos. You can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs, and something good can come out of mistakes too. Take Lady Phloria, for example.

She has turned out to be one of those rare cases where duty and heart are able to meet halfway. It took a considerable amount of courage to not submit like the young Deirus did or run away like Lady Quylla.

I have great expectations for her, put her in the special list and keep me posted about her progress."

Linjos bowed deeply, doing as instructed.

"What about Lith?" He asked.

"That part has been a complete success, Linjos. I commend your efforts. Thanks to you, my worst fears have been dispelled. He has shown self control by not slaughtering the prisoners, care by protecting his teammates from their own kindness and wisdom by completely restricting the captured enemies."

"Doesn't this mean that he could also have understood what we wanted and acted accordingly? In such case he would be a skilled manipulator capable of hiding in plain sight. Wasn't that what you feared?"

Sylpha nodded.

"Indeed, but whatever the case, we now know that he is capable of controlling his impulses. It's just that normally he doesn't seem to care. In the future he may not be the asset we want, but the one we need and that's the only thing that matters."

Back in his room, Yurial was still on all fours, puking his guts out. He had tried to control his nerves long enough to reach the toilet, but had failed after just a few steps. The acid taste of bile in his mouth was getting mixed with the salty one from tears and snot that he couldn't stop from running down his cheeks and nose.

- "Oh gods, I have killed a man." The thought kept echoing obsessively in his mind.

"Why did I do it? It was just a test, saying no was an option. What's wrong with me? I'm really such a monster to place a grade above a human's life?"—

When there was nothing more he could throw up, Yurial curled up on the floor, uncaring of the filth and the stench surrounding him, crying until exhaustion relieved him from his suffering.

Phloria was still having a tough time controlling her nerves. Orion Ernas, her father, could recognise only half her words between all the sobs and tears, but still managed to understand what she had gone through.

"Cry as much as you want, little Flower. You need to get this thing out of yourself or it will eat you alive."

"Dad you were right. You were so right and I didn't really understand your words until today." She said between the hiccups.

"Please, don't get mad at me. I know I screwed up, but I just couldn't do it. I'm afraid of what mom will say or how this will affect my career, but I'm more afraid of what would have happened if I had taken that sword."

"Shush little Flower, now you are just being silly. Mom would never criticise you for something like this. Worst case scenario, she'll nag at you for wearing pants in front of the Queen again." Phloria couldn't help but laugh at the thought.

As ridiculous as it sounded, it was exactly something that her mother would have said, no matter the circumstances.

"As for Linjos, may the gods forgive him if he dares doing anything after putting a bunch of kids in a warzone, because certainly I will not! I will call him immediately, and if he hasn't more than proper explanation, I will give him a piece of my mind and my sword!

Or my name is not Orion Ernas anymore!" A worried barking interrupted Orion's threats.

"Lucky!" Phloria called through the communication amulet, triggering a happy bark in response. All those years ago, she had refused letting go of the puppy, afraid something bad would happen to it.

She had named it "Lucky" and they had become inseparable friends.

"He is happy to see you too." Orion voice wasn't very enthusiastic.

The puppy was the new world equivalent of a Tibetan mastiff, 80 kilograms (176 pounds) of love and enthusiasm that gave little to no consideration to staff members or furniture when it was wagging its way towards its master's voice.

Lucky jumped on Orion, almost knocking him off his chair, trying to lap Phloria's hologram. Its valiant efforts were foiled by the treacherous magic that made the hologram intangible, but still managed to ruin an hour of Orion's work by drooling and clawing his paperwork.

"Bad dog! Sit!" Albeit unwillingly, Lucky obeyed the outraged Orion. Usually that voice meant no chicken for dinner. Being fed on scraps was Lucky's worst nightmare, so it whimpered exposing its huge belly in submission, hoping to avoid the punishment for whatever mistake it had made.

Phloria was laughing her heart out at the scene, her tears turned from pain to joy.

"The only reason I don't put you on a diet, fata*s, is because you made my little Flower happy. Bad dog! Scram!"

Lucky left the room in a hurry, leaving father and daughter finally alone.

"As soon as you feel better, go to your sisters. I pray to our ancestors they had the good sense you demonstrated by refusing the sword. Sorry to leave you like this, little Flower. They too need a father."

Phloria went to the bathroom to wash her face before heading out to the girls' rooms.

Right after walking out of the dungeon, Lith had been transported to the main hall, and from there he went straight for the canteen before going back to his room.

- "Aren't you going to check on the others?" Solus' voice sounded worried.

"No, I'm not. Let's be real, me and Quylla have been spared from the last test, so she is safe. Yurial and Phloria are just two pampered kids, there is no way one of them obeyed.

"The only one that could have played executioner is Friya." Lith thought. "She is in a situation that reminds me of my own back on Earth. With nothing to lose and too much rage eating her from the inside."

"The rage part hasn't changed much." Solus pointed out.

"But you are right, the others had too much of a quiet life to do something so extreme. My only hope is that during the last month Friya managed to put herself back together. Shouldn't we check on her? What if something bad happened?"

"Solus, I get you have a big heart, but life is not that easy. If Friya actually killed someone, what could I possibly do or say to make her feel better? If she really is in a dark place, she either needs a hug or a kick in the a*s, but not from me.

Only family or a true friend can do it, while me and Friya barely know each other. We hang out together only because of the academy and Quylla, we are not that close.

"That Linjos is insane, though. Doing such a thing to a bunch of kids. I have never been so happy about Tista never going to an academy. This exam would have crushed her, and I Linjos!"—

Being the youngest, Orion called Quylla first. After consoling her for a bit and promising her to visit again soon, he called Friya.

"What do you want?" From the opening line Orion could already tell that something was terribly wrong. Friya had been part of his household for barely a month, but he had never seen her like that during his brief homecomings.

She had been stressed and often gloomy, but after all she had experienced it was a normal reaction. They had barely spoken before, because he was always short on time and felt she needed her space.

Now, instead, her gaze was cold as ice. There wasn't a trace of tears on her cheeks, her eyes weren't red, but that only made things worse.

Orion had led countless troops on many battlefields, so he had no trouble recognizing that expression.

"Oh gods, what have you done?" His voice was outraged, but not with her. All his fury was aimed at Linjos, but Friya had no way to know it.

"What I had to." She scoffed.

"I made your precious Ernas household proud, doing the Queen's bidding. Unlike your real daughter, I might say." Her voice was full of spite and hatred.

"Don't you dare to talk that way about your sister!" He scolded her.

"Sister? Please! We've barely known each other from six months, she knows nothing about me and nor do I about her. We are not sisters! The only reason you adopted me is to spread your f*cking name and get your hands on my lands!" Friya yelled in outrage.

"I'm not your daughter, I'm your tool. And you aren't my father. My real father died a dog's death pursuing my dear mommy's ambitions. She and your wife would be best friends, they are both b*tches." At the thought of her mother, Friya's voice went stone cold.

"That does it!" Orion closed the call, and much to Friya's surprise appeared right in front of her less than a minute later. He had to pull a lot of strings and call in a lot of favours, but for him every second was worth millions.

"Get out of my room." Friya yelled as soon as she recovered.

Orion suddenly grabbed her by the shoulder, preventing her from running away. Friya saw his hand moving fast, so she closed her eyes and clenched her teeth for the incoming slap.

But the slap never came, Orion was instead hugging her tightly, refusing to let her go no matter how much she struggled, kicked or punched.

"Let me go, you f*cking b*stard!"

"That's it, little one. Beat me, yell at me, do whatever you want but don't you dare ignore me."

Friya could feel warm tears running down her shoulder. She was so shocked seeing him cry to be frozen in place.

"I'm so sorry. When I brought you in my home, I promised to treat you like one of my own and yet I have already failed to protect you. I never wanted for you to suffer like this. I don't care about my name, nor about what the Queen thinks.

You are just a child, for the gods' sake, how could they do something like this to you?"

In Orion's hold Friya didn't feel any anger or violence, only warmth and affection. It was similar to what she had experienced in Lith's embrace, but hundreds of times stronger.

She clung to him desperately, crying her eyes out. A silent rage started seething inside Orion. He didn't repress it, but didn't let it manifest either. It was like a volcano, building up its burning fury.

He held Friya until she passed out from the crying, then he used his own version of the Hush spell so that no noise could disturb her rest.

After shielding her with everything he had, Orion went into Linjos' office and gave him the beating of a lifetime.