

Supreme M 181

Chapter 181 End of Trimester

When dinner time came, Lith was surprised no one had come to pick him up. He wasn't worried though, he just thought that his teammates had fallen asleep and didn't wake up in time.

After going to their rooms and no one answering him, no matter how much he knocked, Lith understood that something had happened. He tried using the communication amulet, but no one answered his calls.

- "I told you to check on them! Why you didn't listen?" Solus scolded him.

"I'm sorry, okay? Let's be rational, four people cannot disappear into thin air. Linjos must know their whereabouts. Nothing gets in or out without his permission."—

Much to Lith's surprise, the door to the Headmaster's office was open.

Broken to be more precise.

Lith started conjuring several spells at once, fearing that somehow the one behind the boxes and Velagros' death made an attempt on Linjos' life.

The room was a mess. The Headmaster's desk was cleaved in half, the glass windows were broken at multiple points and several documents were scattered on the floor. Linjos seemed to be all right, though.

Professor Marth and Professor Vastor were tending to his remaining wounds, none of which appeared to be life threatening. From Lith's experience those were the kind of injuries that would inflict the most pain while doing very little damage.

The kind of injuries he was a specialist at inflicting on others.

"What happened, Headmaster? Seems like a cyclone trashed this place."

"Close." Linjos sighed.

"An angry parent didn't agree with my methods and decided to explain it to me how much, up close and personal." Linjos could have stopped Orion at any time, but his sense of guilt prevented him from doing so.

He was the kind of man that would always learn from his mistakes and be ready to suffer from their consequences, instead of hiding behind his title.

Also, a little mean voice in his head told him that it was better not to add the Ernas household to the ever-expanding list of people that hated his guts.

- "Thank the gods Archmage Deirus after threatening to gouge out my eyes and force me eat them, just presented a formal complaint to the Queen. I don't know if I can take another beating of that magnitude." Linjos thought. —

"If you are going to ask me about your companions, they have all left the academy and gone back home hours ago."

- "Hours? Since when does it takes hours to recover?" Lith thought. "Either Linjos fainted and called for help only recently, or that parent really knows his stuff. Wish I could ask him for some lessons." Lith mind-sighed in envy.

"You monster!" Solus scolded him with renewed vigour. "How can you appreciate such violence when your friends are hurting or worse? How could you not flinch when Linjos just called them 'companions'?"—

Her rage was genuine, and so was Lith's indifference.

"Because he was in the ball park. I like them, but not like-like them. Also, they may or may not have killed someone. Big deal! They'll get over it, just like I did. Don't you agree?" -

Then Solus gave a solid demonstration of her vocabulary by yelling at him all the insults she had learned over the years.

Solus' words struck a nerve, Lith didn't know how to answer without being even more of a jerk. Lying to Solus was impossible like lying to himself, also it was something he would never attempt to do. He could only try to be a better person.

"Don't tell me that any of them actually did it?"

"Friya and Yurial." Linjos replied with a sigh.

Hearing those words, Lith remained stunned.

Not only because of what they had done, but also because of how he felt. Or to be more precise, what he didn't feel. Lith honestly didn't care, killing had become such a big part of him that he couldn't bring himself to consider it a problem.

The realization stung hard at him and so did Solus.

- "Wow, your friends... oh, I'm sorry, I mean companions had a traumatic experience and your first reaction is feeling sorry for yourself? That's a new low, even for you."—

It was hard to determine what hurt the most, the sarcasm in her words or the truth they held. Lith turned around and walked away, feeling emptier than ever.

"Wait." Linjos stopped him. "Since you are already here, you can give me your report."

"My report?"

"I need to know how your group performed before the last part of the test, otherwise I cannot evaluate their progress."

Lith told Linjos everything that had happened in the dungeon, skimming only the parts where they needed his help the most, letting the Headmaster know their struggles and suffering.

Meanwhile, at the Ernas household, Orion and Jirni were having dinner alone. Their eldest sons were still away with their units and the girls had preferred to remain in their rooms. Even Lucky was absent, choosing to console Phloria over its beloved roasted chicken.

The big rectangular table in the dining hall had never been so cold and empty. The Lords of the mansion sat at the opposite ends, at the two heads of the table. Given the sensitive nature of their

conversation, the servants had been forced to stay outside of the room, entering only when summoned with the bell.

"Did you really have to assault Linjos? He's the Queen's favourite right now, it could harm our interests in the acquisition of the Solivar's household." Jirni's tone was placid.

She loved her husband and knew that something serious was upsetting him, but she couldn't help being herself.

"He's free to challenge me to a duel or issue a formal complaint with the Crown, for what I care." Hearing Linjos' name almost made him choke on the food, spitting some back in the plate.

"And another thing, dear." He added after cleaning his mouth with a napkin.

"I know that you are not great with feelings, unless you have to torment and manipulate someone into confessing, of course, but I'd really appreciate you not mentioning duties and arranged marriages to the girls until further notice.

Otherwise I'm afraid the next thing you'll hear from me would be an irrevocable divorce petition."

The next day, all the students were gathered in the compulsory courses' class for the end of the trimester. Lith couldn't tell if this time Linjos' speech was addressed more to his students or to himself.

"My dear students, it's my sincere hope that this past semester has taught us a lot. In this life there are some conflicts that are impossible to avoid. What matters is how we decide to face them and what we learn from their aftermath.

I don't blame those who decided to not take part in this exam, just like I don't think less of those that despite accepting to face this challenge head on, lacked the necessary resolution to achieve success.

Remember though, that this is just an academy. Here your choices matter, weakness is allowed and questioning yourselves is encouraged. Only idiots have no doubts. Outside these walls, life is less lenient. Sometimes you will be forced to do the wrong thing for the right reason.

My hope is that when the moment comes, you'll remember this experience and you will be better for it. As for those who attempted to cheat, you'll hear from your parents about the disciplinary measures that await you.

The test has taken a toll on all of us, so I encourage you to return to your homes for the ten days break before the last trimester begins. Dismissed."

Just like the last time, the report cards appeared on the student's desks in the form of blank pieces of paper until imprinting them with mana would reveal their hidden content.

Lith's report card was as following:

"Principles of Advanced Magic: A+; Forgemastering: A+; Healing: S; Dimensional Magic: A-; School points gained from daily evaluation: 4,365. A complete evaluation for the second exam is impossible until I hear back from your teammates.

Headmaster Linjos"

- "What the heck is this?" Lith couldn't believe his eyes. "I didn't perform better than the last trimester on purpose, yet all my grades went up (*). More importantly, why A- in dimensional magic? I can already perform Warp Steps, that should be plenty enough for an A.

Once I learn how to Blink, I will have completed the course, and that's likely to happen soon. How can a student able to achieve so much so fast deserve just an A-?"

"Well, I think they went up because of your role in curing the plague." Solus pointed out. "I am amazed they didn't give you an S+ in healing, if that even exist. As for the other professors, maybe their judgment was swayed by the royal decree."

"Swayed my pale a*s! I bet that Rudd jerk is still mad at me for the only time I responded in kind to his taunts. Me and my big mouth."—

It was still early morning when Lith left the academy, surrounded by gazes full of rage and envy. The second exam had been a total disaster. Those that had refused to participate or attempted to cheat had their grades capped at B rank.

Those who participated and failed had their grades unchanged, but they still assumed to have been penalized because of their poor performance.

Lith could perfectly hear them talking, whispering could not hide the truth from his heightened senses. Despite it was supposed to be a secret, his report card was actually public knowledge and so were those of everyone that had passed the second exam.

Someone was trying to stir up troubles, further dividing the young mages not only by social status but also by their results, ruining all of Linjos' hard work.

As soon as Lith was Warped to the capitol of the Marquisate, he alerted the Marchioness, which in turn informed the Headmaster. Whoever was behind all the recent troubles had always been a step ahead of them.

Having a bad premonition, Lith used the now mastered Warp Steps repeatedly to arrive at the village of Lutia in a few minutes. A normal mage would have his mana depleted by the repeated use of dimensional gates, but Lith used Invigoration each time to keep his peak condition.

Lith's intuition proved to be wrong. Aside from the panic his arrival caused, the village was quiet. As soon the villagers noticed it was him, fear was replaced by more rage and envy.

Lith ignored them, as he had done for the past years.

It had always been like that, the farmers loved him because he healed them at half the price and because he was one of them that had made it. In their eyes Lith's and Tista's achievements were the proof that education and hard work could lead their children to have a better life compared to their parents'.

The merchants and artisans that lived in the village instead hated him. He was an anomaly that had shattered what they perceived as the natural order of things. A dirty poor farm boy that demanded to be paid in full, disrespecting their pact with Nana.

Overtime the hatred had only grown stronger. Lith's household had started as a bottom feeder, but their social standing had never ceased to rise since his appearance. In their eyes, he was a scourge that was stealing from them and their children what was rightfully theirs.

It was impossible for the merchants to accept that despite all the money and the resources they had invested in their children, none of them would ever be rich like Lith or respected like Tista.

Raaz was the third most hated member of the family, having meddled with their business with his self righteous attitude, making them look like vultures and ruining their reputation after the so-called plague had turned out to be just a rumour.

But the most hated was Lith, especially since he had executed Garith in public and caused Gurid Renkin's death. No matter what Nana said, they firmly believed that the merchant's heart had failed to accept his beloved son's death, following him to the grave.

There was only one exception.

Zekell Proudhammer, Senton's father and Rena's father-in-law loved Lith with all his heart. Thanks to the dowry that Lith had provided, he had finally managed to expand his business and buy a last name for his family.

Because of that heaven blessed marriage, they would always receive the best treatments for free and by using her daughter-in-law name, no one dared to bully him anymore.

Thieves and swindlers kept away from his shop, to the point he could leave the door open at night and find everything where he had left it. Sure, there was the occasional death threat every time Rena would get a scratch or a bruise during the daily activities, but it was Senton facing Lith's wrath, not him.

All in all, Zekell's life was damn good.

"Lith, my boy! It's so good to have you back!" He yelled as soon as their eyes met.

"Thanks." Lith replied with a half-smile. He never liked Senton or his family, but since he never liked any of his sisters' suitors, in his mind Zekell was a decent man. No one of the Proudhammer household had ever given Lith a good reason to kill him, after all.

"No, thanks to you, young man. I'll never thank you and your Locrias friend enough for saving my whole family!"

"Who did what now?"

Chapter 182 Tickle

It happened a week ago. The day had started like usual, with Senton and Rena opening the front shop while Zekell heated the forge to take care of the repair jobs. Because of the plague panic, most villagers and farmers were already armed to the teeth, making his business slow.

Except for travellers and local hunters no one bought his weapons, leaving him with only menial jobs to do. Zekell wasn't a greedy man, so that kind of quiet life didn't bother him much.

Repairing farming and kitchen tools was an easy and quick job that allowed him to cover for the daily expenses. It also left him a lot of time to hone his skills and teach Senton all the secrets of their trade.

After getting married the boy had bloomed into a man, taking his responsibilities much more seriously than before.

While in the past Senton would try to complete his tasks with the minimum effort to go out and goof off with his friends, now he put his utmost dedication in every piece he worked on, never being satisfied with the result and often asking his father for advice.

Such change of attitude had made Zekell really proud of his son. All the yelling at him for his laziness and the whacks upside his head were just a bad memory, now he didn't have to worry anymore about what would happen in case he died.

The shop had remained empty most of the day, so when the closing time neared, Zekell sent Rena and Senton back home while he finished cleaning the floor. He gave them all the free time he could afford.

With advancing age and Senton's new character, Zekell couldn't wait to have a grandson or two. He wanted to witness the Proudhammer's next generation and maybe teach them to love the art of turning a bland piece of metal into a masterpiece.

He was about to lock the door when a well dressed handsome youth entered the shop, looking at his merchandise with great interest. Zekell almost bit his lower lip in frustration.

The young noble and his escort wore the insignia of the Rath family, a bunch of well known troublemakers.

The noble purposely cut himself with one of the weapons and used the pretext to demand for a compensation. To Zekell's horror, the youth 'casually' had with him a contract of transfer for the workshop.

Zekell tried to defend his life's work threatening to denounce the noble to Count Lark or to Nana, but to no avail. The Rath family had a Great Mage in their ranks and the name of a fallen outcast like Nana held little importance to them.

Lith's name mattered even less, the noble didn't even know of his existence. Fearing to lose everything and his family, Zekell had almost signed the document, but a firm hand stopped him.

It belonged to Captain Locrias of the Queen's corps, dressed like a country constable and royally pissed off. He and his team had managed to remain incognito for months and now the idiot had forced their hand, blowing up their cover.

"No need to sign anything. This man is under arrest." Said the Captain with a sigh.

"How dare you? You don't know who I am!"

"I think I do." Vykáros, the liaison with the Mage Association, had collected intel about him since the moment the noble had stepped into Lutia.

"You are Tikin Rath, second son of Baroness Rath. With pending charges for murder, r*pe, arson and embezzlement of taxes. You sure like to keep yourself busy, kid."

"My family, what about my family?" Zekell was still panicking.

"Your family is safe." Locrias said.

"All of Lord Rath's men are already dead, now it's his turn." A small dagger appeared in Locrias left hand, while the right one was holding Tikin's collarbone with the strength of a vise.

"You can't do that!" Now it was Tikin's turn to become pale and to panic. "I demand a fair trial!"

Zekell sighed with relief but suddenly fear reappeared on his face.

"He is right, you can't kill him!"

"Don't worry, neither the so called Great Mage or his mother will see tomorrow's dawn." The knife plunged into Tikin's chest, piercing his lung and heart instantly killing him.

"What have you done?" Zekell screamed, while the corpse fell to the ground with a thud and a thick dark pool of blood spread on the floor.

"Good sir, I'm Captain Locrias of the Queen's corps. You have no reason to be afraid anymore. You and your family are under our protection." He said puffing his chest with pride, feeling wronged by the artisan's lack of trust.

"Glad to hear it, but that's not what I'm talking about! You could have killed him out of here, or at least give me the time to put a carpet on the floor. The b*stard sh*t himself dying. Between this stench and the blood stains, no one will enter my shop for weeks!"

"Luckily he used a magic something to make the corpse disappear and clean my floor." Zekell was all laughs and smiles like it had all just been a bad dream.

- "Either this guy is even more thick skinned than me or he is raving mad." Lith thought. –

"If it wasn't for you, Captain Locrias wouldn't have intervened. I'm once more in your debt. If there's anything I can do for you, you just need to ask."

"There is actually something I could use your help for. Based on what you told me, you have lots of free time, right?"

Zekell nodded in response.

"I need to perform some experiments with Forgemastering, but I know nothing about blacksmithing and I don't have the time to learn it. I'd like you to provide me the things listed here."

Lith handed him a piece of paper that Zekell read immediately.

"That's a lot of stuff, kid. They are all common items though, so I can make them relatively quickly. Give me a couple of days."

"I just need a first batch, there is no need to rush it. I am willing to pay you for your work." Not only had Lith asked for many things, the quality of their materials also varied from poor to very good.

Before receiving the Crown's reward for the plague, he could not have spent so much money without affecting his family's quality of life. Also, his experiments required Solus' tower form to be conducted and he never had the opportunity to use it again since the first trimester's break.

"The work is on the house, but I'll have to charge you for the materials. Some are quite rare and I can't afford to have an empty warehouse."

Lith didn't want to abuse his gratitude, so he promptly closed the deal with a handshake.

After leaving Zekell, a call to Count Lark allowed him to make sure that the Rath family wouldn't bother anyone anymore. They had all been arrested several days ago and their properties assigned to a newly promoted household.

Lutia had always been a quiet village, but since the corps officially showed their presence, the worst crime that would take place was a kid stealing a fruit or a candy. After Garith's death Tista had learned her lesson.

Now her suitors knew by experience that her no meant no, while Lightning Bolt meant "Never approach me again".

Lith spent the first part of the morning catching up with his family, before attempting to contact his teammates again.

- "I can't call Quylla, she is still not over her crush and I don't want to give her false hope. Friya and Yurial are off-limits too, they are likely to be traumatized and I fear their reaction after I basically ghosted on them until it was too late.

This leaves me only one option."—

Lith used his communication amulet and called Phloria, who responded immediately.

"Sorry for never returning your calls." She apologised.

"I spent most of these last two days in the bed."

Lith inwardly sighed with relief. She didn't seem to be mad at him, which made it even harder to say what he had to.

"I'm glad to see you are all right and the fact that you answered so quickly means a lot to me. Yet I think you should wear something besides a white nightgown before picking up your amulet." He said diverting his eyes like a true gentleman.

In the new world there were no underwear and with the increasing summer heat, she was wearing a thin cloth while sitting cross legged as always.

Phloria emitted a high pitched scream while the amulet made a thud sound, like it had been tossed away.

Only after a minute or two Phloria's image reappeared, this time wearing the academy's uniform. Even the hologram couldn't hide her beet red colour.

"What did you see?" She asked with the cutest and most feminine voice he had ever heard her talk with.

"Almost nothing" Lith lied through his teeth. "I swear it on both my brothers' heads."

The answer seemed to calm her a bit, allowing them to resume their conversation.

"How are you feeling?" He asked.

"Embarrassed, I mean terrible. I barely get out of my room. I feel guilty not taking care of Yurial and Friya but I already have too much on my plate."

"Yurial is at your house?"

Phloria nodded.

"He and his father. Our dads think that having shared a similar experience they can help each other overcoming their trauma."

"That's a great idea." Lith too remembered how he had needed therapy back on Earth to try to get better. Too bad he never managed to find a Murderers Anonymous association.

"Why don't you call them too? I'm sure they would appreciate the thought."

"Phloria let's be honest, when it comes to feelings, I'm a bull in a glassware shop. I'm afraid I would only make things worse."

After a bit of small talk, Lith closed the call and went into the Trawn woods for his experiments. Until Zekell provided him with the items he needed, he could still practice on rocks or study the boxes more.

After reaching the mana geyser, Solus was able to take her tower form, revealing that the first floor was almost completely rebuilt.

Alas, almost.

Once inside, the access to the upper floor was still barred by debris.

"Sorry, I have no control over any floor until its complete. I do not know why."

Months had passed since Lith had actually heard Solus' voice instead of her mind, yet he didn't miss the change.

"Solus, your voice has become much clearer and more human like than before. I can even hear some kind of accent, even though I don't recognize it."

"You noticed!" He could feel her joy in his mind, she was walking on air. That's why he avoided adding that it was hard not to, since her previous one sounded like a customer service' answering machine.

"And that's not the only change. Ta da!"

The tower's walls started to glow of a faint radiance. The light slowly detached from the stone, forming a wisp the size of a tennis ball that started to spin around Lith's head.

"Now not only can I accompany you, but also you have someone to talk to instead of looking at the walls or the ceiling."

"It's a great news! Is it solid or...?"

"I wish." Solus sighed. "It's just light."

Lith waved his hand inside the wisp without it encountering any resistance. There was nothing inside nor substance to it. It was indeed just an oversized firefly.

Solus started laughing out loud, surprising him quite a bit.

"I like your attitude. I was afraid you would get even more depressed and..."

"Stop that." She cut him short.

"It tickles!"

Chapter 183 Crucible

"It tickles?" Lith echoed her words.

"Do you mean you can actually feel my touch?"

Solus froze for a second, the sudden realization was overwhelming her.

"I can! By my maker, I can feel it. I'm not just a piece of rock!"

She started to move all around the room passing through the walls, the ceiling and the furniture of the rooms, even going outside before returning back to Lith.

"That's odd. I don't feel anything by touching something inside the tower nor external objects, it seems to work only with you."

"Perhaps it's because this new form of yours is still too weak. Remember that we share a body and mind link that makes our interaction unique."

The wisp moved in front of Lith, touching his forehead.

"You are right." She said.

"It's a bit faint, but according to your memories this should be the sensation of skins touching. I can also sense your warmth. What about you?"

It took Lith a while to realize that albeit small, the wisp emitted a faint warmth.

"Same. Solus, can you please lower yourself a bit?"

She had just moved at his chest's height when Lith embraced the wisp with his arms.

"How do you feel now?"

"Like it's the happiest day of my life." Her voice was wavering and even if she didn't have tears to cry for once Solus didn't care about it. No matter how small, she would treasure those sensations as long as she could.

They remained like that for several minutes. It was the first time for Lith to experience happiness from the contact with someone that wasn't a member of his family. It felt odd but natural at the same time.

He could also perceive all the strain weighing on her mind being relieved bit by bit.

"You wouldn't be in hot waters with your friends if you were so thoughtful with them too. When one hits rock bottom, even the smallest gesture makes a world of difference."

Despite her words being true, Solus had ruined the moment for Lith but she realized it too late.

Lith let her go and proceeded downstairs towards the Forgemastering lab. Her comment had brought him back to reality, reminding Lith how little time they had at hand.

"Our biggest issue with Forgemastering is that it's a complex and profound discipline. Once I understand how a fake spell works, I can turn it to true magic and improve it as far as I can imagine it.

The same doesn't apply to Forgemastering. So far I only managed to obtain with true magic the same effects as items enchanted with fake magic already have. We must find a way to take our Forgemastering to the next level, otherwise the specialization will be useless.

If I can't achieve an edge over fake mages by forging my own equipment, I can as well as drop this discipline, buy what I need and invest my time in fields where true magic actually makes a difference."

Lith and Solus revised together several papers he had copied from the academy's library about failed attempts to break past Forgemastering's limitations. They had less than ten days, so they had to pick the most promising ones and hope that true magic would succeed.

"As Isaac Newton said: If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants. I may not be a genius but I can still use their work as a ladder to get past this hurdle."

After much discussing they selected two methods that were both simple and brilliant at the same time, allowing even a novice like Lith to understand them easily.

The first one was the Heisen's principle. It stated that a Forgemaster's work affected matter, so the harder the material to enchant the more difficult the process became. Heisen suggested that enchanting an item during the last steps of its forging would make the effect stronger despite consuming the same amount of mana.

"It makes sense." Solus pondered.

"We have seen how enchanting an item requires creating a pseudo core and carving with magic the runic pathways necessary to keep the core stable and prevent its stored energy from leaking.

By working on something close to its melting point, it should offer less resistance to the magic flow."

"Yeah, that's what Heisen said and attempted multiple times before giving up." Lith pointed out.

"According to these papers, his experiments managed to produce a small number of enhanced items, but he never understood why all the others would blow up in his face. After losing his arms for the fifth time, Heisen declared the process a failure.

Do we have a safe room? I like my arms as they are."

The wisp representing Solus' consciousness flickered a few times while the tower trembled lightly.

"Now we do." A new door appeared in the forgemastering lab.

To no waste precious materials, once again Lith decided to use small rocks of different size and composition as test samples. First he had to find the temperature where the sample would show the first signs of rounding due to melting.

Then he would stop heating the rock and proceed to enchant it while Solus would keep the magic circle active and filled with mana. Thanks to his new mana sensibility, Lith could see the mana pathways form more easily and bigger than usual.

The enchanting process was a success, but when he checked the final result with Invigoration, he discovered it to actually be a failure.

"Damn! The high temperature made things easier but more unstable. Both the pathways and the pseudo core are deformed by the changes that happened during the cooling period." Lith sighed.

"Maybe it's actually a success. Let me try."

Solus threw the enchanted stone in the safe room, making the door disappear before activating it with her mana imprint.

The following boom made the walls tremble.

"Or not." Lith said with a stern look.

"No wonder Heisen gave up on this method and no one is researching it anymore. Well, we still have to try many possible variants of this experiment, maybe one will succeed or at least give us some inspiration."

Meanwhile at the Ernas Mansion Phloria was outraged.

"I knew it!" She was reading again Lith's background check.

"On both his brothers' heads, that's rich. One of them got disowned while the other left the family as soon as he could. It's more likely for me to marry a goblin than for Lith to love his brothers. How shameless can one be, Lucky?"

Lucky woofed and wagged his tail, hoping it was play time already. She threw it a ball while marching double time towards the tailors' quarters.

- "It's not entirely his fault, though. How could I be so stupid to pick up the call while still half asleep? This is so humiliating! Enough with skirts and nightgowns, I need something with pants even for sleeping.

Usually mom would have a seizure hearing such a request, but recently she seems meeker. Guess it's better to strike the iron while it's hot"— She thought.

Phloria was indeed right. Jirni Ernas in any other circumstances would have prohibited the tailors from following her daughter's order. The manor's staff was well informed about Jirni's standards about education and how easy it was to get dismissed without a reference in case someone angered her.

Orion's threat still echoed in her mind though, leaving Jirni at a stalemate. Her husband was a man of his word, so when she heard him talk about divorce she had almost choked on the food.

Their marriage was an arranged one, to join together two of the families most loyal to the Crown allowing both of them to increase their status in the nobility.

Her maiden's heart had quickly fallen for the young knight, at first for his broad chest and his arms as thick as her head that could literally sweep her off her feet. Later for his golden heart and sunny disposition.

They were still deeply in love with each other; hence she was unable to understand why her children couldn't trust her to find a suitable partner like Jirni's parents did for her. Jirni was too scared at the thought of losing her husband to squabble over small stuff, giving Phloria what she wanted.

"I don't know what's wrong with kids these days." She complained to Rose, her lady in waiting.

"Making such a fuss about an insignificant matter like murder, blowing it out of proportions. I killed my first man at six years of age, mastered the art of torture by twelve and yet I grew up as a refined, delicate lady. Right, Rose?"

"Of course, your Ladyship." Rose swallowed a lump of saliva. She knew all too well how her mistress could butcher a whole family without ruining her appetite for dinner. There were many words she could use to describe her, but delicate wasn't among them.

After five days, Lith's experiments had yet to bear any fruit. To avoid deformations in the pseudo core or in the mana pathways, he had tried to quickly cool down the samples as soon as the enchanting process was over.

The final product would be much better than normal, but also extremely volatile, almost killing Lith in the resulting explosion.

Then he had tried working with higher temperatures, discovering that the sample would reject his magic wasting all his time and effort. At lower temperatures he would simply obtain standard quality items.

Even working on the materials that Zekell provided him, the results were always the same. The quality of the sample was irrelevant for the Forgemastering process, at least at Lith's level of comprehension.

- "Dammit, Heisen's principle is an utter fiasco." He thought

"Using true magic to keep the enchanting process until the sample cools down only resulted in a handful of dust. No matter its quality, inanimate matter doesn't seem able to withstand so much magical energy for a longer period."

"At least it didn't blow up like all the other experiments." Solus sighed. –

They hadn't much time left and were still at square one.

Thanks to Warp Steps, Lith could now come and go from his house without losing his tail first. Despite the constant use of Invigoration, both him and Solus were running on fumes.

Forgemastering required massive amounts of mana even for normal enchantments, Lith would have never been able to keep experimenting for so long without Solus' help.

They both needed proper rest.

Lith was really surprised finding a stranger waiting for him in his own home.

"Welcome home, dear." His mother Elina dusted off his chest and shoulders from the remains of his latest failures, since he usually was too tired to notice them.

"This man says he is Orion Ernas, the father of your schoolmates." Orion gave him a polite bow, his face expressed concern.

"He says he needs your help."

Chapter 184 Cornered

Ernas Mansion, the day before

Archmage Deirus and Orion were starting to get seriously worried. Half of the academy's break was almost gone, but Friya and Yurial were only getting worse. Yurial would rarely come out of his room and almost refused to eat.

Before every meal, Yurial had to take a bland sedative or he would throw up immediately. He needed a potion to sleep, another for waking up and many others not to jump at every noise he heard.

Friya on the other hand, was restless. She would barely sleep, focusing all her energies on training without a care for her own body. Friya had also put up a constant frown and during her spar sessions she often injured her partners by launching every attack like her life was on the line.

She would easily fall into a frenzy and only Orion could stop her from doing something that she would have regretted later. The worst thing was that she didn't show any remorse afterwards, blaming her opponent for being weak.

"If they can't even match a fifteen years old, they should stop calling themselves sword practitioners and dedicate their life to knitting." Was what she said every time, making Jirni proud and Orion frustrated.

After changing her nightwear, Phloria had recovered very quickly, but whenever someone asked her why and how, she would just turn beet red and refuse to answer. In her case the new shame had driven away the old one.

Quylla had completely recovered on her own, but she was deeply worried for Friya, that was changing into someone Quylla could hardly recognize as the kind and thoughtful girl she loved so much.

"F*ck Linjos and his idiotic ideas." Velan Deirus was considering following Orion's lead and challenging the Headmaster to a duel.

"He turned my poor son into a larva and to add insult to the injury his group was the only one facing that trial. If only they reached the goal second, this would be someone else's problem." He sighed.

"This is partly my fault too. After all his siblings grew up as profligate spoiled brats, I was so afraid of being hurt again that I always kept my distance. All these years, I kept myself so busy with my scheming and experiments that I never established a proper father-son relationship with him, more like master-apprentice.

Now he doesn't see me as a worried parent but as a disappointed teacher, so my words are unable to reach him.

If Yurial doesn't manage to snap out of it, my son's career is as good as over."

Orion poured an amber-coloured liquor in two glasses and then offered one to his fellow sufferer. It was the new world's equivalent of whiskey.

"I have your same problem. I managed to catch Friya off guard right after the exam and she opened up. Now she refuses to listen to me though, it's like talking to a wall. If I send her back to the academy, she is bound to get expelled because of her violent behaviour.

She doesn't trust me enough to share her burden with me and I can't blame her for that. I was so busy with my duty that even the few times I was at home, I just checked that Jirni wasn't going overboard and left without even saying goodbye.

In hindsight, leaving my new daughters so much personal space was a mistake. It grew into a gap that I don't know how to cross over. That's why I was thinking of asking their friend's for help."

"What friend? Are you talking about the lich?" Velan curled his upper lip in disgust.

"What lich?" Orion almost jumped from his chair hearing that word. Liches were the Kings and Emperors of the undead. Mages that had sacrificed their humanity in exchange for infinite life, allowing them to hoard infinite knowledge and power.

"You should really work less and attend more to social events. That's how the little Lith of Lutia is known among the nobility." Velan explained with a worried look.

"He appeared out of nowhere, with a ridiculous baggage of knowledge and experience for someone his age. Some of my friends that worked together with him during the plague, reported that he is a ruthless killer capable of intimidating even veterans and has displayed a terrifying mastery of darkness magic, hence his moniker.

I think your wife could take a liking to him." The simple thought sent a shiver down Orion's spine.

"I ran a background check on him, but it never reported something so extreme. Nonetheless, I know by experience that traumatized soldiers have an easier time opening up with their comrades. Maybe they will listen to him."

With no other option left, Orion used his royal pass to access from the personal Gate of house Ernas to the Mage Association's branch located in Derios, the capitol of the Marquisate where Lith lived.

Not knowing the region, he was forced to fly and ask for directions from time to time. When he reached Lith's house, Orion was pleasantly surprised by it. It was a smaller cottage than the one he had assigned to his gardeners, but it was in a lot better shape.

The house had clearly been renovated multiple times over the years, it didn't look like a farmer's home, more like the cozy countryside love nest of a minor noble. The walls were entirely made of stone instead of wood, and the sloping-roof was being covered with high quality tiles.

- "The boy must have spent quite a lot for materials and manpower. Someone who takes care of his family like this can't be as bad as Velan said. Unless it's Jirni."—

Orion laughed at his own joke, drawing Elina's attention.

"Good sir, are you lost? There is nothing here for a nobleman like you."

The woman in front of him was stunning. She had to be in her mid twenties, about 1.62 metres (5'3") high with shoulder blades long hair of a beautiful light-brown which red shades danced under the setting sun like a wildfire.

She had such fine proportions and a smile so kind that a lesser man would have been tempted to flirt with her despite the dire circumstances.

- "If I wasn't already married with the most beautiful and loving woman of the Kingdom and my daughter wasn't in need of help, I may have courted Lith's sister... Wait, what's that?"—

The contrast between Elina's gentle voice and the long black stick she held made it appear even more ominous. Judging from the number of yellow runes engraved on its surface and its humming sound, Orion determined it had to be some kind of lighting based weapon.

- "The design is so rough and amateurish to give away the element of surprise, but I bet it packs quite a punch and from this distance dodging is not an option. If Lith made that thing, Velan could be right."—

"There's no need for violence, ma'am. I mean no harm."

Elina emitted the cutest chuckle while covering her mouth with her hand, but never lowered the stick from her unexpected guest.

"I'm sorry, but I trust a noble only as far I can throw him. What business do you have here?"

"I'm Orion Ernas, the father of Lith's classmates. I need his help for one of my daughters' sake."

"Do you have proof of what you say?" Her hand trembled a little.

"I'm sorry?" Orion was flabbergasted.

"My son is pretty famous around here. Everyone knows he goes to an academy, so anyone can say to know him. If you can't prove your claim, I must ask you to leave."

"Your son? Aren't you his sister?"

Elina's smile disappeared.

"Flattery will not get you my trust. I don't want to use this thing but I'm ready to!"

Her trembling intensified, but Orion knew that look. She wasn't bluffing. Luckily Phloria had told him about her meeting Lith's parents, so all he needed to do was to call his daughter and make her vouch for him.

"Sorry for earlier." After speaking with Phloria, Elina went back to her normal self.

"But after a noble tried to kill my son, I don't trust any stranger, no matter their social status. Lith should be back in a while."

The house was a little miracle of magic, which only made Orion's fears grow. The air lacked the humidity and heat of summer.

The fireplace was empty, yet the room was perfectly lit by some small glass containers emitting a warm light and no bug or mosquito pestered him once he stepped inside.

Lith had used Forgemastering to recreate air conditioners, lightbulbs and bug spray by devising small elemental stones respectively of water, light and darkness attribute. They were a lesser version of magic holding rings, that could store only first magic spells and needed to be recharged often.

Orion and Elina talked about their respective children, sharing anecdotes and happy memories until Lith arrived. The youth looked like a dejected miner that barely escaped from the collapse of a tunnel, he was completely covered in dust and debris.

After Elina introduced Orion, Lith immediately cleaned himself up with a spell before giving him a deep bow.

"Duke Ernas, I heard a lot about you. It's a pleasure finally making your acquaintance." Both his choice of words and etiquette were flawless, turning his fears into horror.

- "I knew it, he felt familiar the moment he walked through the door. He's exactly like my wife when she was his age! If Jirni sees him, she will never let me hear the end of it. I don't want any of my daughters to go through what I had to before managing to reason with her!"—

"What can I help you with?" They sat at the table while Elina went to the kitchen.

Orion snapped out of it, remembering why he was there.

"Well, as you surely know, both Friya and Yurial are in a bad shape after the second exam. The final test took a heavy toll of them..."

Orion saw Lith's eyes widen, quickly pointing at his mother and then pressing the index finger over his lips.

"Yes, I know." Lith cut Orion short.

"Getting rid of so many pests was a dirty job. I'm sorry they got the short end of the stick."

"They have lost most of their confidence and are in a rough patch." Orion caught Lith's drift and kept vague to prevent Elina from finding out the real nature of the exam.

"I would like for you to try to talk to them. They need all the help they can get."

"I don't think it's a good idea." Lith lowered his gaze in embarrassment.

"I'm not really good with people. Also, I feel I have failed them by not noticing their distress until it was too late. I'm afraid they might be quite angry at me. Anything I say is likely to backfire rather than help."

Thanks to his years together with Jirni, Orion was able to see past masks and charades, noticing that Lith's words were sincere and so was his concern.

- "If you really feel guilty, you should go." Solus said. "If you face them now, you can still make up with them. Abandon them again and they will never forgive you."—

"That's not true, dear." Elina chimed in.

"You always did an amazing work with your patients. All the farmers love and respect you. Your friends saved your life, whatever they are going through you must help them at the best of your capabilities.

I don't remember raising an ungrateful son."

Finding himself between a rock, a hard place and his mother, Lith accepted.

Chapter 185 Crucible 2

Going back to the Ernas mansion was a matter of minutes. As soon as they were away from Elina's ears, Orion briefly explained to Lith how the act of murdering someone had affected his two companions.

Lith just listened, pondering about what he could do about their mental state. The situation appeared to be hopeless.

When they walked out through the last Warp Steps, Jirni Ernas was waiting for them. The surprise froze Orion long enough to allow her to take the initiative.

"Dear Lith, I heard a lot about you. I'm Duchess Jirni Ernas. It's a pleasure making your acquaintance. I think our meeting is long overdue." She gave him a curtsy before offering him her right hand.

By introducing herself first, the lady of the house had done him a great honour. It was a really uncommon situation, to which there was only one possible answer.

"The pleasure is all mine. I'm at your service, my Lady." Lith half kneeled while kissing the back of her hand.

Their eyes met, studying each other's expressions and reactions.

- "This woman is being too polite toward a commoner. She clearly has a hidden agenda. If she hopes to catch me off guard with her petite build and kind visage, she's sorely mistaken. Whatever she sells, I don't buy it."—Lith's thoughts were spot on.

- "So young and so knowledgeable of rituals and etiquette." Jirni thought. "This is the perfect occasion to see if the reports about him are correct. I should be able to test his worth and if he is a potential suitor for one of the girls."—

"Jirni, dear, what are you doing here?" Orion said with a stiff smile, making them both furrow their brows in disapproval for his poor acting skills. It only lasted for a split second, but they noticed each other's reaction.

Lith and Jirni became immediately aware of the ongoing mutual deception and changed their plans accordingly.

"My dear husband, I understand how sensitive this matter is for you and the children. I just wanted to introduce myself to our esteemed guest. He must know how grateful we are for his help in times of need."

Her voice was worried, but her eyes were hard as steel.

- "Which translates into: I don't trust putting my family in the hands of a stranger without letting him know he cannot afford to screw up."—

Lith's interpretation was once again correct.

"I'm grateful for your trust, my Lady. A true friend can't remain idle when you ask for his help. I'll do the best that I can, it's all that I can promise you." Lith's voice was kind while his eyes were cold.

Like Jirni, he kept up the polite façade but didn't try to fool her anymore. Due to their similar nature, they had established a silent understanding and respect between them.

- "So you came here only at my husband's insistence and you don't think there's much that can be done. So far so good, young man."—

Their conversation between the lines was driving Orion insane, but he didn't know how to make them stop without being terribly rude. Luckily, Phloria came to his rescue.

"Hi, Lith." Her cheeks reddened seeing him. Phloria was still self-conscious about their last call. She was wearing a sleeveless emerald evening dress, that highlighted her fair skin and back hair.

Lith gave her a cold but polite bow to which she awkwardly responded with a curtsy.

Jirni didn't miss a single detail.

"Sorry to bother you, mom, but the staff is having problems setting the dining hall, they need your supervision."

Her words forced Jirni to take leave of them and follow her daughter.

"That's the boy who made you change your undergarments?" She asked with a whisper as soon as the door was closed behind them.

"No!" Phloria blatantly lied turning beet red up to her ears.

"Really? Then why are you finally wearing a gown instead of your beloved pants?"

"Maybe because you pestered me all day about putting a dress on at least for dinner?" Jirni clicked her tongue, Phloria was right.

"Too bad he doesn't seem interested." Jirni continued, not willing to let her have the last word.

"I always told you, to capture the heart of a man, the best undergarment is no undergarment at all."

"Usually by this time Yurial is already sleeping." Orion guided Lith through richly decorated corridors until they reached the guests' quarters.

"Wait here, I'll let you in as soon as he is fully awake." Orion knocked on the door before entering, leaving Lith alone with his worries.

- "The only thing I know for sure is that Yurial's father and Orion must be really desperate. My schoolmates already performed a background check on me, hence the parents should know my past as well. Seeing how I turned out, what kind of help do they think I can provide?"

"Consider this an opportunity to help them and yourself at the same time. You never had anyone to share your burden with. First you had to protect Carl, then to feed yourself and save Tista." Solus said.

"Your quest for power lead you to a lonely path. You couldn't allow anyone to know what you were going through, always shouldering everything yourself. Think of them as of the young Derek. Tell them what you would say to your younger self if you had the opportunity."—

Solus' words reminded Lith what his therapist back on Earth had told him multiple times. That for his wounds to heal he needed to be open and honest about his feelings.

Following Doctor Shore's advice, Lith/Derek had even volunteered at a shelter for victims of domestic abuses, but instead of empathizing with them he ended up being proud of having caused his father's death.

He was as miserable as they were, but at least he had a life and a home. Unlike them, his days as a victim were over. The people he worked with, instead, were trembling lumps of fear, constantly watching their backs.

By listening to their stories, Lith/Derek would only become angrier, hating humankind more and more. After only a few weeks, Doctor Shore had noticed the negative changes in his behaviour and asked him to stop.

When Orion let him in, Lith noticed the presence of a man who closely resembled Yurial. Before Orion could introduce them, Yurial lashed at Lith.

"Some friend you are! Showing up now is too little and too late. Where were you while I was curled up in a pool of vomit and tears? I remained like that for hours before my father contacted me. It's been five f*cking days and you never called or visited. What's wrong with you?"

Velan Deirus was very embarrassed by his son's rude behaviour, but at the same time also very happy.

Yurial seemed to have found his strength. Seeing him angry was already a great improvement.

Yurial's words made Lith feel guilty, even managing to hurt him a little. Having decided to follow Solus' advice, Lith put his guilt aside and took his gloves off.

"Friend? That's rich coming from you. Do you even remember how we met? How you threw trash at me and never apologized until you needed my help?"

Lith didn't yell, yet his words made short work of Yurial's outrage and self-righteous attitude.

"Since when are we friends, exactly? You have been using me the whole time and I returned the favour. Otherwise tell me something about me unrelated to the academy. What are my sisters' names? What are my dreams for the future? Heck, do you even know what is my favourite colour?"

Yurial suddenly realized that despite all the time they had spent together, Lith was still a complete stranger to him.

"See? You know nothing about me and so do I about you. Don't worry, though, things are about to change. Lord Ernas, could you please bring the girls here? I think that some things need to be said, but I'd prefer doing it only once."

Lith and Yurial sat down in silence, waiting for the others to arrive. The more Yurial thought about his previous outburst, the more it appeared childish and ridiculous.

- "Lith is right, we were never friends. It was just an assumption I made on my own. We shared hardships and schoolwork, but I never once cared for his life outside the academy. Some friend I am."—

When Friya saw Lith, the temperature in the room dropped by several degrees. She didn't yell or attack him, choosing instead to sit as far away as possible.

Lith didn't cut her any slack, repeating the same speech he had given Yurial, making her turn red from anger first and pale at the realization of how shallow their relationship was.

When the group was gathered, he could finally start.

"Let me introduce myself properly. Hi, I'm Lith and I'm a murderer." At those words, the room turned awkwardly silent.

"I want to tell you a story. Your background checks are wrong, I didn't kill my first man when I was six, but when I was only four."

Lith couldn't tell them how he had killed his father on Earth, so he needed to mix two truths to make a half lie.

"Back then, life was terrible for me. I was always starving, so I ran in the woods whenever I could behind my parents' back and I hunted using magic. What no one knows, not even my family, is that I wasn't alone.

There was a poacher, an obnoxious, violent man that stole my game whenever we met and gave me a complimentary beating every single time. I couldn't tell anyone. I was too ashamed of my weakness and afraid my parents would lock me in the house, so I made up excuses to keep them from discovering the truth and keep hunting.

I endured it for months, until one day I managed to catch a few white rabbits. With their meat and pelts my family would have been well fed and clothed, allowing even my ill sister to take a walk from time to time.

Too bad the poacher found me again, robbing me of my prey again. What he didn't know was that we weren't alone. A magical beast had been following me too and when he walked away from me, I decided not to warn him."

Lith's eyes became watery thinking back at his father, at how much he had to suffer before those wet stairs did the dirty work for him.

"While the beast devoured him, I didn't call for help nor did I attempt to drive it away. I just took back my game and stood watch to make sure that the poacher would never harm me ever again.

I may have not killed him directly, but I consider him my first victim."

Seeing all his friends sniffing with watery eyes, Lith shook his head.

"I'm not trying to belittle your suffering. This is not a measuring contest about who had it rougher. I just want you to know me, the real me, before giving you an unsolicited piece of advice."

He took a deep breath, watching each of them in the eyes.

"Friya, Yurial, you too have killed someone. Maybe because you felt pressured by the academy or simply because after killing so many monsters it seemed the right thing to do, it's not up to me to judge.

Phloria, Quylla, sooner or later you'll kill someone too, either out of self-defence or because it's your duty. When that moment comes, please remember my words.

Life is a cruel crucible that breaks us apart over and over, forcing us to put the pieces back together. Sometimes we come out of it stronger, sometimes weaker and most of the times there's so little we can do about it.

Failure is not falling down, it's not getting up. I couldn't share my burden with anyone. How could I say to my brother, to my family, that our happiness was built on the death of another man?"

"You are not like me. You have a lot of people that care for you, that know of your struggle and are willing to help. I don't know how long it will take for you to recover, but you don't have to face this alone.

Instead of walling everyone out like I did, try to accept the hands they are offering to you. Otherwise you'll end up like me, and believe me when I say it's not pretty at all. I am missing so many pieces, I'm mixed with so much sh*t that I barely feel human anymore.

Do whatever you want with your lives, but remember that today I gave you a part of me and a choice. A choice I never had."

Chapter 186 Crucible 3

With his new body, Lith was capable of lifting an adult with one hand and of running as fast as a magical beast for several minutes before getting tired. Yet after giving that speech he was already panting.

Speaking those words out loud had been one of the most difficult things he had ever done. Opening up, willingly showing his weakness, it went against everything he lived for during his past three lives.

It was the closest thing he had ever done close to self-injuring himself, forcing so many old wounds to open up and bleed in public. He still had so many things that he wanted to say, how he envied every single one of them, even Quylla, for being born with talent in a world that gave them limitless potential.

They were so young, while he felt so bitter and old. They could take whatever path they wanted in life, while he was struck on a one-way railroad.

- "I already said too much. If I keep going, I'll do more damage than good to them. Unlike me, they are really children. Their minds are still frail, they need time to really understand what they have just heard."—

Everyone in the room was crying, even Lith and Solus. She had no tears to shed, yet Lith could perceive her suffering like he did for those physically present. Unlike them, though, that were temporarily being swayed by fleeting emotions, Solus was also happy for the small, painful step forward Lith had just taken.

"I think we are done here." Lith said wiping away the only two tears he had shed.

"I won't outstay my welcome, so I'll take my leave."

He walked out of the door without turning back, until he felt a small body hugging him from behind.

"I'm so sorry for saying all those things back then, about you hunting and killing people being cool." Quylla was bawling her eyes out.

"I never stopped to think how hard such a life had to be on you. Despite having gone through so many hardships myself, I could only picture you like one of those heroes from my books, capable of shrugging everything off with a smile.

I just stood there, watching you from a distance only thinking about myself and never caring for your feeling. If there's something, anything I can do for you, even if you only want to talk, just say the word."

Lith turned around without escaping from her embrace, but not returning it either.

"Thanks for your words, but I think you are letting this thing go to your head." He patted her head kindly, running his hand through her hair.

"You have nothing to apologize for. I didn't tell you guys all those things because I wanted your pity or compassion, but only because I believe you needed to hear them before deciding what you want to do with your lives.

Now that you know who I am, I need you to calm down and reflect about all that has happened during this year. You should never make important decisions when you are emotional, or you'll do and say things you'll end up regretting in the future.

When we meet again at the academy, if you still think the things you just said, repeat your offer once more. Who knows? Maybe this time we'll become friends for real."

Quylla let him go, realizing she has just gone from one extreme to another, from never speaking to him to almost confessing her feelings for him.

- "Gods, I'm so stupid. I never fell in love with Lith, only with the distorted image I had of him. Thank heavens he stopped me before I could make a fool of myself. I can't blame him for seeing me only as a potential friend and not a love interest.

We are still too young and know nothing about each other. Let's start as friends."—

Only when Lith reached the Ernas' private Gate he realized he couldn't operate it without Orion's royal pass.

- "Great job, smarta*s. Now I have to go back and search for help. I'll be lucky if the staff doesn't kick me out. No one here knows me or why I am here."—

Then, he heard the door behind him opening up. It was Phloria, with a still tear-stained face from the little make up she wore. She was wringing her hands, trying to muster the courage to tell him how sorry she was.

Phloria was the one that had spent more time with Lith, taking a walk together before breakfast every morning. She wasn't shy as Quylla and didn't keep her distance from him like Friya to not hurt Quylla's feelings, yet she had never bothered asking him about his burden.

The problem was that her speech and Quylla's were awfully similar. Phloria had eavesdropped his reply already and it fitted her too quite well. Only after listening to his story, she had realized how silly was her constant whining about her mother and the duties her family required from her.

Phloria had never understood how lucky she was, being born with a silver spoon, until that evening. It made her feel like a shallow and spoiled girl.

"Just the girl I was about to look for." Lith smiled at her, leaving Phloria amazed at how fast he had gone back to his usual self.

"Can you please open it for me? I want to go home."

Phloria took her pass out of her dimensional necklace, setting the Gate's coordinates without saying a word.

When Lith was about to walk through the Warp, Phloria grabbed his arm.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay? The dinner will be delicious and we have plenty of rooms for our guests." It was a stupid line and she knew it, but Phloria didn't want to let him go like that, dismissed like a servant after performing his duty.

"Thanks for your offer, but there's nothing for me here. In five minutes you all will regain your cool and then it would be all forced apologies and awkward silences. You need time to think about what to do next, and so do I."

The Gate closed as soon as Lith passed through it, making Phloria feel cold and alone despite being in the comfort of her own house.

House Ernas was an ancient noble house, full of hidden passages and secret doors. There was a reason that Velan Deirus had taken the apartment right next to his son.

By simply removing a metal grid in the chimney, it was possible to hear everything that was happening in the adjacent room without the need of using spells that could alert a paranoid magician.

Velan, Jirni and Orion had listened from start to finish, not even missing Quylla's speech.

Orion had fiercely opposed to the intrusion on the kid's privacy, but Velan had been adamant about it.

"I can't put my son's future in the hands of a stranger I don't know and who has so many bad rumours going on about him. Leaving Yurial alone in his time of need would mean failing him once again and I'm done doing it."

Jirni seized the opportunity to better understand the nature of her newest opponent and his relationship with her daughters, while Orion could only sigh and accept his fate.

"A very interesting fellow." Velan said while fiddling with his goatee.

"People like that are damaged goods, but they can be incredible assets. I must tell my son to keep him close, if he doesn't break down along the way, this Lith may have a brilliant future ahead of him. He reminds me of my grandmother in many ways."

At the words "damaged goods" Jirni felt personally offended, giving to Velan a soft smile that sent shivers down Orion's spine. It was the same one she wore while taking care of her torturing devices in front of her prisoners.

Orion knew that if glares could maim, Velan's remains would easily fit into Jirni's purse. Yet she didn't rebuke their guest. Dinner time was nearing and they still needed to prepare themselves.

Orion and Jirni took their leave and went to their private quarters before continuing the discussion.

"What an ignorant idiot." She sneered. "If he just spent a little more time out of his lab and in the Court, he would know that half of them are 'damaged goods'. What do you think of the young Lith, dear?"

Orion would never cease to be amazed by how no matter how violent her emotions could be, his wife would never let them get the better of her, remaining cold and collected under all circumstances.

"He is still young. I really hope he can recover from his past traumas. It takes willpower and courage to not let such burden crush you and be able to share it with others. He can become a great friend to our girls and an asset for the Crown."

"That's not what I was talking about." Jirni started to pick up a suit for him, since Orion was still deciding on the tie.

"Quylla is not very attractive yet, but she has a lot of talent and seems to really care for the boy. Friya acts tough, but she wouldn't be so mad at him if she considered him just a stranger.

"As for our little Flower, any boy that can make her blush is better than all those we have introduced to her so far. Not to mention how she ran after him after a bit of hesitation.

When we bring him into the family, we must be certain about who to match him with. A happy marriage is all about compatibility, like it happened for us."

"What do you mean with 'When'?"

After arriving back to Lutia, Lith didn't go home going straight for the Trawn woods. The recent events had taken a toll on him and he felt the need to remain alone.

- "Mom thinks I'm away, so she will not worry. Besides, if anything happens, she always has the communication amulet."—

Solus and Lith went down to the Forgemastering lab to experiment on the second method. Lith was still tired, but Invigoration could make up for it and with his mind in turmoil he felt the need to bury himself in his work.

According to Gantzwel's theory, the best way to overcome Forgemastering's limits was to use a second magic circle. The normal enchanting processes required only one magic circle, to store the runes and collect the mana necessary.

It was the Forgemaster's duty to provide the energy necessary to force both runes and mana into the item, by exerting a magical force superior to the one the magic circle stored.

If the condition wasn't met, the enchantment would fail, that was the reason why a Forgemaster's creations could never exceed his own mana capacity. Gantzwel hypothesised that by using a second circle instead of their own mana, Forgemasters could team up and produce superior items.

His work had raised great expectations, since using more than a single circle was already a standard procedure, although it served to better contain the magical energies rather than to make them clash.

In the end, Gantzwel theory had been discarded because it never bore any fruit. Filling two overlapping magical circles with mana would make them unstable, the conflicting energies would damage the circles and dissipate too fast for any enchantment to succeed.

After a few attempts, Lith and Solus discovered that neither Solus's tower using Invigoration to keep the circles powered up nor Lith using true magic to speed up the process was enough to succeed.

"The night is still young." Solus sighed. "Do you want to get some sleep or do you prefer to pick a third method?"

"Neither. I think I have a solution."

Chapter 187 Silver Lining

"The reason we are struggling so much with things like Alchemy and Forgemastering is because we got it all wrong. Since we have stepped into the academy, we have been looking at the problem from the wrong angle.

"Fake magic and all its branches are strict, full of rules and boundaries that the mage can never overcome. Fake mages can't change the shape, size or even the temperature of a fireball, unless they rewrite the spell from scratch.

"True magic instead, is a free flow. There is no set number of steps or limits to what you can do, as long as you have the willpower and imagination to make it happen. Our problem since the beginning is that we are trying to beat a game at its own rules instead of making our own.

"Most of the things I have learned at the academy about tier four spells are redundant.

I could have managed to perform everything they explained so far at the Healer, Combat Magic and Advanced magic classes on my own. I simply lacked the ingenuity to connect the dots between what I already knew about tier three and below.

That's why as soon as I learned the trick behind regrowing a limb or share life energy, I was already able to do it better with true magic. Forgemastering though, is something I am deeply ignorant about, hence my mistake.

Instead of focusing on runes and circles, I should have tried to understand the logic behind the mana pathways' number and positioning. I should have studied what kind of form and properties a pseudo core needs to grant the enchanted item its effects.

Once I have achieved that, I will not need any rune or chant. I will just have to carve the pathways and then create the proper pseudo core."

"I think you are right." Solus' wisp said.

"I should have thought of it when I managed to create my own magic circles without using Professor Wanemyre's special ink. If we don't need the ink for the circles, there's no reason why it should be any different for the runes too. By my maker, I could I be so slow on the uptake?"

"Don't be so harsh on yourself, Solus. You are indeed the smarter one, but it's over one year that you are suffering from depression because of your condition. Not to mention how you are always taking care of me, managing my social life and helping me with magic.

You know, I think you are one of the kindest persons I have ever met."

Solus' wisp spun around out of joy. Being referred to as a person instead of a thing was what made her happy the most. Lith sensed it, and found himself thinking out loud.

"Do you know a funny thing we have in common? We have yet to find out what exactly we are. You are not an artifact, because you have a mind of your own, nor a cursed item. While I seem to have the body of a man, the morals of a beast and the soul of an Abomination."

Solus liked the idea of their bond being beyond their symbiotic relationship, much less the gloomy turn Lith's thoughts were taking, so she hurried changing the topic.

"What where you saying about Forgemastering? That we can skip Gantzwell's theory and work directly on pseudo cores?"

"I wish." Lith sighed.

"It would require a massive amount of knowledge and experience that we are sorely lacking at the moment. Until I manage to put my hands on a variety of magical items and study their properties, we are stuck using fake Forgemastering.

Now that we know the rules of the game, though, there are some that we have to obey, some we can bend and other that we can ignore by cheating. Let me show you."

Lith placed on the Forgemastering table one of the cheap rings he enchanted into dimensional items, while Solus used Invigoration to draw in the world energy and used it to fill with mana the ring's surrounding space.

Then, Lith took out from the pocket dimension one of the many small hammers he had Zekell prepare for him. It had a metal head and a wooden handle, the kind one would use to knock a nail in a wall.

"I had actually planned to enchant them into weapons for my family, but they should work just fine for my experiment too. Solus, is your control over the mana inside of the tower restricted to circles?"

"No, it's just the way I'm more used to project it, since we always followed Forgemastering's canons."

"Okay. I need you to imbue the hammer I'm holding with a little bit more mana than the one stored in the circle."

Solus had no idea what Lith was planning, but did as instructed. Such amount of mana was well below her capabilities. The hammer pulsed with a blue glow, emitting a low buzzing sound.

Lith focused on the mystical energies, making them submit to his will and take the form of the first rune before making them clash with those contained within the magic circle.

Sparks flew all over the lab while the conflicting energies generated a cyan burst of light that almost blinded Lith. Each strike produced a new burst of light, carving another rune inside the ring that created mana pathways wider and stronger than Lith ever had.

The brief contact allowed the mystical energies to remain stable, but took a huge toll on the tool and its wielder.

At the third rune the hammer crumbled. The cheap materials were already under a lot of stress due to the highly compressed mana forced in their frame. Each clash was like slamming the hammer against an incoming train.

Lith took out another, this time with a steel head and handle, that Solus once again filled to the brim without letting Lith lose his rhythm. Steel proved to be a better mana conductor, allowing him to shape the runes with less effort and lasting five hits.

- "Damn! Eight done, seven to go. Next one!"— Lith couldn't waste his time talking, thinking was much faster. The third one was a small decorative silver plated hammer that Lith had bought as end of term present for Professor Wanemyre.

- "F*ck me sideways! Random hates me, of all the junk I bought I had to pick the only expensive one. Just my luck."— The hammer wasn't that expensive, it was just Lith being that stingy.

Yet he was in a rush, the cheap ring couldn't hold much longer, not giving him the time to switch hammer before resuming the process. Much to his surprise, not only silver was an even better mana conductor, but also somehow dispersed the excess energies reducing the bursts' blowback.

Lith completed the ring without the need to change hammer again. When he examined the final product via Invigoration, he discovered the experiment had been a partial success.

Despite using the enchantment requirements for middle class quality dimensional items, capable of storing about ten square meters (108 square feet) worth of space, the one they obtained with the hybrid technique using both fake and true magic was a high quality one, with an internal space of almost thirty square meters (323 square feet).

The problem lied in the uneven mana pathways coursing around the pseudo core.

"Dammit. Despite you used the same amount of mana for each hammer, different materials have yielded different results. The pseudo core was infused while using the silver hammer, so it's too strong for the pathways I carved with first two hammers.

Either they will be unable to hold its energies and make it progressively lose its magical properties or the core will become unstable over time and explode. With my luck, my money is on the boom."

"It's still a success." Solus said.

"The silver plated hammer lasted seven hits before shattering. Maybe a silver hammer could last enough for all thirteen runes, if not for more than one item."

"Maybe and maybe not." Lith sighed.

"Silver is a ductile and malleable metal. It could get deformed after a single rune, becoming useless. It's worth the try, but it will cost a pretty penny."

"Well, the good thing is that if we collect all the pieces you can have them melted into a new hammer."

Over the next few days, before the academy's break was over, Lith performed countless experiments on several subjects. Following Solus' advice he bought a silver hammer, while following Earth's RPG customs he also bought a gold plated hammer.

Only the materials costed him three gold coins, but in all the video games he had played gold items performed better than silver. Much to his disappointment, gold turned out to be a terrible mana conductor, not lasting even a single hit before getting pulverized.

After cursing the creators of Dungeons & Looting for a while, he tried out the silver hammer. It allowed him to produce the first high quality dimensional ring of his Forgemaster career.

The impacts were more magical than physical in nature, so the hammer would get dented but not destroyed. Lith could use it several times before having it reforged.

"We either need a sturdier silver alloy or to enchant the hammer to make it more durable. Sooner or later Zekell will ask you what are you doing to reduce it in such a poor state and you don't have a plausible excuse." Solus said.

The more they learned about Forgemastering, the closer Lith got to open the boxes. He never received a vision to show him that the future had changed, so had never forgot about them.

Lith and Solus tried to replicate the synchronization effect they had experienced against the Scoricore, when she had assumed her glow form the first time, but to no avail.

The stone glove simply acted as a stone glove, their bodies were linked but their mana cores seemed to be miles apart and happy that way.

He never received a visit or a call from his friends and that left him quite dejected.

—"As Yurial said, too little and too late. That ship must be sailed already." Lith thought.

"Or maybe they need some time to sort out their feelings." Solus pointed out.

"Yurial and Friya have some serious thinking to do, while the poor Quylla is probably still recovering from being friend-zoned like that. Phloria is the only one that has no excuses at all. I thought she was better than this."—

After saying goodbye to his friends and family, Lith went back to the White Griffon academy for the last trimester.

Chapter 188 Once More, with Feeling

Going back to the academy felt a bit odd to Lith.

He didn't like being there, always forced to hide his true abilities while keeping the Ballot at hand.

After discovering that Warden's arrays could seal off dimensional items, he didn't feel safe storing it in the pocket dimension, so he took it out whenever he was going out of his room or of a classroom.

Lith had decided to enrol into the academy because he hoped to hoard knowledge and connections with powerful people, but so far only the former was proceeding smoothly.

Between the Specialization courses and the library, from which he never stopped borrowing and copying material, his magical knowledge was ever expanding.

As for the connections though, he was still at square one. Climbing the social ladder had proved to be impossible. The only choices were to either submit to a young lord/miss and become their gofer or get a Ballot and be isolated.

- "It was already bad before, but now I have lost even what little company I had. I knew that getting all emotional with a bunch of kids was a bad move. It's just you and me, Solus. What's worse is that without Quylla's help, mastering dimensional magic will be much more difficult."—

It was one of those rare times when Solus didn't know what to say. On one hand, she wanted to scold Lith for considering his companions like tools instead of people, but on the other one she was glad to see him back to his uncaring self.

It had been her pushing Lith to open up and share his burden. Now that it had backfired, Solus couldn't help feeling partially responsible for the break up. At least with his cold attitude Lith would avoid further suffering.

That was one of the many reasons why she was really surprised when someone knocked on the door of Lith's room, and even more when they discovered it wasn't a clerk sent to deliver the new books.

It was Yurial.

"Hi Lith, can I come in?"

Lith opened the door letting him inside, while noticing that Yurial didn't seem to be in good shape. He looked emaciated, paler than the last time Lith had seen him and had lost a few kilograms.

"I don't know what the girls have in mind, but I prefer this talk to be private. I'm afraid I am not as good as you at public speaking." Yurial sighed, looking around the room like he was searching for something other than the courage he needed to say what had to be said.

"I thought a lot about what you told me. I'm not talking only about the part concerning how to face my current hurdle, but about everything we rubbed in each other's face.

"You were right, I didn't approach you looking for a friend, but I was really happy when I thought I had found one. You were also right about my apology. The only time I did it I wasn't sincere. I was just trying to rope you into my group to make my life easier at your expense."

Yurial spoke while looking Lith in the eyes, his hands tightly clenched.

"I have changed, though. Everything we went through together turned me into a different person. Someone that maybe is a little too reliant on tranquiliser potions, but still someone I believe is a better person than who I was before."

Yurial extended his right hand towards Lith.

"Hi, I'm Yurial Deirus and I'm a murderer. I'm really sorry for what I did to you guys on the first day of academy. I treated you as a second rate person and Quylla as a pet. I am sorry for having always taken you guys for granted until it was too late.

I may be a little stuck up, but I'd really like to be your friend."

Lith smiled, shaking hands.

"Apologies accepted. We can't change the past, but we can learn from it and not repeat our previous mistakes. Since we got ourselves a second chance, we should do our best to not waste it."

- "Are you serious?" Solus was flabbergasted by the turn of events.

"Yes. I too tried to manipulate them all for my own gain, so I can't blame him for playing the same game. Since I'm trying to change too, maybe we can help each other.

"I consider him on probation though. Talking is always cheap, Yurial has to prove with his actions to have really matured, otherwise it would be like trusting a new year's resolution at face value."—

Yurial was so happy that his face regained colour, turning the handshake into a hug.

"Thanks, man. I was really worried that you would just kick me out of your room. I've really been a sh*tty friend so far."

Lith patted Yurial's back, waiting a couple of seconds before escaping the embrace.

"You and me both Yurial. I should have called you earlier."

The sound of the first gong forced them to hurry towards the compulsory courses' class, they had only fifteen minutes before the start of the lessons. Using Warp Steps inside the academy was impossible, so they had to fly.

At their arrival, the girls had already taken their seats, keeping a couple of empty ones for their missing companions. Lith was happy to see all of them smile at him, yet it left him wondering why they had never contacted him in the previous days.

When the second gong resounded, Professor Nalear entered the classroom. Lith couldn't help but think that she had gotten even more beautiful, but his heart was at peace now.

- "If only I was ten years older."– He sighed, relinquishing once and for all his romantic dreams about her.

"Welcome back, boys and girls. I'm glad to see that so many of you managed to pass the second trimester. This year's promotion rate is way higher compared to previous years and that's good.

"Yet many of you have seen their grades drop compared to the first trimester, and that's bad. So I expect for you to work extra hard to make up for the lost time. Remember, perseverance and hard work are what real talent is made of."

The class gave her a short round of applause for her kind words, to which she responded with a small bow.

"Let's get started. Today I'm not here to teach you Principles of Advanced Magic. We are done with that subject, at least for the fourth year. What I am going to introduce to you, is something that every mage must know, since it's part of our everyday life.

"I'm talking about mana crystals. You have already seen them plenty of times, but probably you never stopped asking yourselves what they are. At the academy there are mana crystals embedded in the tables of the canteen, at the prize hall, basically everywhere.

"Mana crystals light every room, provide fresh air where there aren't windows and running water in your showers and toilets. Everything in the academy relies on mana crystals to work.

"During this class, I'll teach you what mana crystals are, how to find them and most importantly how to use them. In their raw form they are just pretty, shiny stones. It takes a mage to refine them and harness their power, turning them into all purpose tools.

"No specialization is needed to become a Crystalsmith. Any one of you can become one as long as you have patience, precision and steady hands. I'd add it's a well paid job, but I never heard of an alumnus struggling with money issues. All mages' jobs are good jobs."

The eyes of the students that had no specialization or that had flunked them already lit up with greed.

"First of all, what are they? Mana crystals are naturally formed minerals which hold an amazing quantity of magical power. How they form is still a mystery, we only know that usually they can be found in precise spots where wildlife thrives the most."

- "They really have no idea the world is filled with magic power." Lith thought. "Probably those spots she is talking about are like the mana geyser we use for your tower form, Solus. If I'm right, the world energy crystalizes over time into mana crystals.

This means that with your mana sense we can find them easily and get filthy rich."

"Sorry to burst your bubble..." Solus said.

"... but both the mana geysers we know of have been squeezed dry by Abominations. I doubt they left anything behind."—

Lith's dreams of wealth shattered, right when Nalear gave him another piece of bad news.

"Only the poor quality ones can be found in forests, woods or oases. To get to the motherlode, one needs to go digging quite a bit. We don't know if magical beasts, plants or monsters use the crystals too, leaving behind only scraps.

"What we do know, is that mana crystal veins can be found underground and that usually the deeper you go, the better the quality."

- "It makes sense." Lith thought. "Probably plants and beasts consume them to enhance their cores, or maybe they naturally absorb the world energy for triggering their evolution and that prevents high quality crystals from forming.

"Below the ground though, the world energy not only should be more abundant but also unused, so it can accumulate over time forming the veins. It's like a bank for unspent energy."—

"A mana crystal's purity can be easily assessed by its colour."

From her dimensional amulet, Nalear took out eight crystals perfectly cut like a precious gem. Each one was the size of her first.

"As you can see, worst to best are red, orange, yellow, green, cyan, blue, violet and white."

Lith almost couldn't believe his eyes. Mana crystals quality grade was identical to the one for mana cores, but with one exception.

- "A white one? Does this mean that white mana cores actually exist?"

Chapter 189 Once More, with Feeling 2

Completely unaware of Lith's inner turmoil, Professor Nalear continued her explanation.

"Red, orange and yellow are classified as low grade crystals. These crystals are the most cheap and common. They hold the smallest amount of mana and once it's consumed, they crumble to dust.

They only have a limited number of uses as mediums for Wardens' and Alchemists' most simple creations, while they are useless to Forgemasters."

- "Cheap?" Lith was stunned by Nalear calling something worth dozens of gold coins cheap.

"My staff runs on a red crystal, and so did Yurial's array during the second exam. Even he was reluctant consuming one. I'd better ask him for explanations later."—

"For example, red ones can be used to prolong the duration of an array or to grant its control to someone different from the caster. In the former case, the Warden places the crystal inside the formation, giving it an extra mana reserve.

"In the latter one, the Warden sets his imprint on the crystal while conjuring the arrays. This allows whoever holds the crystal to turn them on and off. Red crystals are considered to be 'dumb', since despite being imprinted, anyone can use them, even against the Warden's will.

"Orange and yellow crystals work the same way, but contain much more mana and are a little 'smarter'. They can be imprinted multiple times, but only with the consent of the original caster. This makes them thief-proof, but using them for a one time array is like using a fireball to kill a fly."

The red, orange and yellow stones disappeared in her dimensional amulet.

"This leaves us with the good stuff. Green and cyan crystals are classified as middle grade. They are used by Alchemists only for their most powerful creations, while they are much more important for Wardens and Forgemasters.

Middle grade crystals not only contain a much bigger amount of mana, but they are also able to self recharge over time. As long as they hold even a tiny speck of energy, they do not crumble.

The recharging process can take hours, days, or weeks depending on the size of the crystal and its purity. A deep cyan stone recharges slower than a bright one, the more vibrant the colour, the purer the gemstone is."

The number of analogies between mana cores and crystals was making Lith's head spin.

"Thanks to this property, Wardens can use them to make their formations semi permanent. Fueled by a sufficient number of crystals, a defensive array can remain active always, since its mana expenditure is covered by the crystals that recharge themselves non-stop.

"Of course, the more damage the barrier sustains, the more mana is consumed, until the array is deactivated either by the magician himself or because all the crystals have been consumed

"Forgemasters can instead embed them into their creations. Thanks to the magical gemstones, items not only become able to receive multiple powerful enchantments, but also gain a mana capacity of their own, allowing their wielder to use spells that he doesn't know or that he wouldn't be able to cast at all."

Nalear took out what seemed to be a miniature sword, little enough to fit the palm of her hand. One second later, it grew to the size of a long sword, with two shining cyan gemstones on its hilt.

"This is Professor Wanemyre's most recent creation. For those who don't know her, she is our best resident Forgemaster. This sword has been enchanted with multiple spells that allow it to shrink, to be sharper and sturdier than normal.

"It also allows its wielder to summon a protective barrier and cast tier three lightnings, even if he/she isn't a mage at all. It's all made possible only thanks to the mana crystals. Aside from special materials, most inorganic matter crumbles if imbued with too much magical energies.

Only mana crystals can harness such power, even managing to use the conflicting energies deriving from the multiple spells to recharge themselves faster."

Thinking about all the precious materials and resources he had wasted until the previous day, just to discover the same things he had learned in the last half an hour, Lith didn't know whether to rage or cry.

- "Random really hates me! Why couldn't this lesson have happened a month ago? I hate Professor Wanemyre so much right now. If I still had her gift, the silver plated hammer, I would bash it on her head!"—

Lith raised his hand to ask a question. Nalear noticed it and gave him permission to speak.

"I'm specializing in Forgemastering, why I have never heard about this before?" The pain resounded from his wallet up to his voice.

"Because embedding magic crystals and infusing multiple enchantments is something you'll learn on the fifth year, after you have passed this subject and learned how to refine and handle the crystals." She replied with a warm smile.

"We have already studied how to apply more than one spell though. The Professor had us trying and failing again and again. With all due respect, but it's unfair to us students." Many colleagues from Forgemastering nodded.

They also had spent a lot of time, effort and money in a fool's errand, just like Lith.

"It's unfair to the students, but fair to the academy's budget. This way Wanemyre knows who have worked their hands to the bone gaining solid foundations, and who instead have relied on tips from their families in violation of the academy's rules."

Looking at those who had remained indifferent to Lith's lamentations, her smile turned into a grin.

"High quality magic crystals are really expensive. We can't afford you students wasting them while taking your baby steps as Forgemasters. It was her way to separate the wheat from the chaff and save a lot of her budget.

Two birds without even a magical stone." She winked at Lith, who contrary to her expectations instead of turning red became pensive.

- "Solus, is it me or Professor Nalear is a bit strange?"

"Yeah, flirting with a student is really going overboard. All those smiles and winking..." She replied with more than a tinge of jealousy in her voice.

"Not that. Look at the sword, she's holding it with one hand."

"It doesn't mean much. Maybe it's just enchanted to be light too."

"Then explain how does she know about the conflicting energies of multiple spells? She isn't a Forgemaster and even if she was, they know nothing about pseudo cores. We learned about them only because of Invigoration."

"By my maker! Are you implying she is an Awakened one?" Solus was shocked.

"It would explain her trick on the first day that seemed so similar to spirit magic, her strength and knowledge. What does your mana sense perceive?"

Solus focused all her attention on Nalear's mana core, ignoring her long legs, the full lips and the wavy hair that pissed her off beyond reason.

"Her mana is still, just like that of a fake mage. Now that I think about it, though, the Marchioness had a magical item shielding her core from detection. Maybe Nalear has a similar device."

"Or maybe she has learned how to control her mana flow. I can't ask Nalear if the sword also has a weight reducing spell, it could tip her off. I'll ask Professor Wanemyre as soon as I see her."—

After the enraged chattering of the students died out, Nalear made the green and cyan gem disappear before resuming her explanation.

"Blue and violet are high grade crystals. Only the best and richest Wardens and Forgemasters can afford them. The white ones are a tier of their own, you'll never see them outside of the royal palace or powerful artifacts.

What sets high grade crystals worlds apart from their lesser cousins, is that beside the ability to recharge at great speed over time, they can also be manually recharged. Take the academy, for example." She waved at the wall, pavement and ceiling.

"The reason why even the canteen can use Warp Steps to deliver you your meals is the same that makes this castle an impregnable fortress. Not only it has been built with countless crystals that empower all of its spells and arrays.

It is also able to feed on the mana of its residents in case it needs some extra juice. Every time we practice magic, make a call with a communication amulet or activate a dimensional item, the academy takes its toll in the form of a minuscule fraction of the magic employed."

The students gasped, looking at their hands like expecting to find fleas under their clothes.

"It's at the same time a sword and a shield. A shield because it protects us all from internal and external threats. A sword because whoever doesn't wear a uniform can have their mana sucked dry in an instant.

Whatever spell an intruder could use, the castle would throw it back at him tenfold.

Oh, right. Only gemstones from blue and above are capable of sustaining complex functions, like projecting holograms, copying documents and such. That's why all your communication amulets have a blue gemstone embedded and are so expensive."

At the thought that Wanemyre had showed him the blueprint for the amulet without explaining anything to him, Lith felt the desire to make the Professor and her present have a violent encounter grow even stronger.

"In the following lessons I'll teach you how to cut a mana crystal according to its intended function. How to check its quality, how to identify its consumption rate and if it has it, the recharge rate.

The last part of our lessons will be about how to manually recharge high quality crystals, with a trip to the mines in the forest to show you how to find, dig and extract raw crystals without having them explode in your face. Dismissed."

As soon as Nalear had finished speaking, the gong signalling the end of the lesson resounded and she left the class.

"This lesson made me feel dirty poor." Lith sighed.

"I know, with my weekly allowance I can barely afford a few red mana crystals. That's why I don't use them unless it's absolutely necessary." Yurial sighed along, showing Lith a small bag containing enough red gemstones to fuel Lith's staff for more than a year.

Suddenly Lith felt the urge to gift him with a hammer too.

Chapter 190 Dimensional Business

Between classes there was a ten minutes break that students could use to relax, exchange notes or simply stretch their legs a bit. Lith was eager to understand if one or more of the girls was still angry or wanted to keep a distance from him.

The problem was introducing the topic without making himself sound worried or even worse, desperate. From his previous life, he had learned that girls could smell desperation from a mile away and they were usually good at exploiting it.

Before he could find a proper way to clear their relationship, Quylla spoke up.

"Did you really practice Forgemastering on your own?"

"Of course, I did." Lith felt slightly offended by the implication.

"But aside from small stuff I didn't manage to create much. On the contrary, I wasted quite a few materials, since Wanemyre left me stumbling in the dark." He snorted.

"Really?" She was genuinely surprised.

"How can your family afford a magic lab? It's not something you see often near a farm."

Lith realized too late his slip up. He couldn't tell them about Solus and her custom-made labs, so he had to improvise.

"They can't. I practice in a small clearing in the woods near my house. It's not much, but at least it's quiet and isolated."

"Then you can't really blame the Professor for your failures. Father always says that without a properly insulated magic lab, enchanting items is more a form of gambling rather than magic."

"Are you taking Forgemastering lessons from Orion?"

Quylla nodded.

"More like he explains to me the basics while he works. Father says that I could use a second specialization and that Forgemastering helps build the character."

- "It seems to be true, since she managed to look me in the eyes the whole time without blushing. Orion must have been spending quite some time with them to make Quylla call him father already."—

"By the way, how was your report card?" Quylla had become much more talkative and straightforward compared to the past.

"Pretty good. With only one sour note."

"Let me guess." Friya scoffed. "Dimensional magic?"

"Got it in one." Lith smiled.

"Did Rudd give you an A- too?"

"The f*cker did much worse!" Friya slammed her fist on the desk, drawing the attention of most of the class.

"Hush! Last time I hadn't the opportunity to tell you, but somehow the report cards of those who passed the second test leaked to the public." Lith whispered.

"Most of our classmates are already envious of our success, don't give them the opportunity to report you to Rudd and give him an excuse to lower your grades even further."

The piece of news took them all by surprise. Friya looked at their classmates with anger and only after taking a few deep breaths, she managed to calm down.

"Yurial and Phloria got an A+, Quylla got an A- like you and I only an B+." Her voice was quiet, but her hands snapped a quill in half over and over, until the biggest piece was the size of a bean.

"It's beyond unfair." Phloria chimed in.

"We are more or less at the same level, but only thanks to Quylla giving us real lessons about dimensional magic and thanks to you teaching us how to multi cast properly.

"It should be you two having a better grade instead of us. I bet Rudd looked at our family's status first and at our performances later. Friya's grade makes no sense unless..."

"Unless he is punishing me for what my mother did, implying that since I belong to a family of traitors I must have cheated somehow." Friya completed the phrase for her, rage and sadness resounded in her voice.

"I think I would have popped a vein if it wasn't for you, Lith. Thank you very much." Friya suddenly hugged him, causing the onlookers to start gossiping about it.

"What did I do exactly?" Lith had been caught by surprise and was unable to make heads or tails of her words.

"You were our supervisor during the second exam, dummy. You must have embellished our performances quite a bit, otherwise I doubt my report card would be this good." She handed him a piece of paper, on which was written:

"Friya Ernas:

Principles of Advanced Magic: A-; Mage Knight: A-; Healing: A; Dimensional Magic B+. School points gained from daily evaluation: 3,362. School points gained from the second exam: 1000/1000 Headmaster Linjos."

The candidate demonstrated to be cool headed even under stressful situations, capable of excellent teamwork and brave enough to put her own safety at risk to ensure the success of her team's mission."

One after the other, his companions gave Lith a copy of their report card. They had all scored full points during the second exam, while their grades went from a minimum of A- to a maximum of A+.

The only exception was Quylla, who had received an S- as a healer.

"We received our report cards just a few days ago. I would have never expected to be considered a Rank A magician." Quylla was brimming with joy.

"I honestly doubt we would have got full marks if you told Linjos how we puked our guts out after facing the first group of goblins. Did you paint us out like fearless adventurers? And if you did, how did you manage to sell it to Linjos?"

All eyes were fixated on Lith, eager for an answer.

"Sorry to burst your bubble guys, but you are overestimating my acting skills and underestimating Linjos. He would never believe such tale, I had to tell him the truth. Especially after what he did to you during the last test.

I wanted him to understand how hard the whole exam had been on you and how despite that you had managed to overcome every hurdle without my help." He winked.

"I simply forgot to tell him about the time you panicked, losing control of the lighting spell, and about the night when you all fell asleep leaving me to stand guard alone. And even if I did tell him, I'm sure you would have got full marks. You owe me nothing."

As soon as he finished his speech, Lith fell victim to a group hug.

"Thank you so much." Phloria said. "When my parents heard the Headmaster praising my talent as a leader, my mother was moved to tears and didn't nag me until I left home."

Considering that the report cards had arrived after Lith's visit, he was left pondering how terrifying Jirni Ernas had to be to make a couple of days nag-free so precious.

"Yeah, man." Yurial added. "Reading over and over my report card, especially the part where Linjos highlighted my strategic skills against the ogres gave me the strength to get up from my bed and return to the academy.

"Rest assured that when Linjos will summon us in his office to evaluate your performance, we'll return your favour in full."

Being careful about who he touched and where, while trapped in the mass of clinging bodies, Lith managed to free his arms and return the embrace.

"Thanks guys, but there is no need to. Just tell the truth and everything will be fine. Of course, if you could share my selective memory loss it would be peachy."

Professor Khavos Rudd walked in just in time to hear their laughter.

His left upper lip curled up in an expression of unbridled disgust.

- "Damn Linjos. Seeing the heirs of proud magical families mingle with dirty commoners and a traitorous b*tch makes me sick. In the old days, I would teach them a lesson or two about respecting the hierarchy and keeping the mana-line pure.

To add insult to the injury, not only are those five among this year's top percentile, but also that Lith is one of the Queen's favourites, like Linjos wasn't enough already. I didn't survive this long by antagonizing powerful people for petty reasons, but the gods know how tempted I am to do it just this once."—

"Sit down. School's in session." Rudd's stern voice put a stop to the chattering, forcing the students to return to their seats.

"My dear students, I would like to say that I'm happy to see you still so numerous, but the truth is that I'm not." His tone was so full of bile that it could melt steel.

"In my long career I had many classes, but this is by far the most disappointing. The only reason so many of you are still here, is because despite my subject being compulsory, my evaluation is irrelevant towards your promotion."

Some students lowered their heads out of shame. The others stood tall, either because their grades were good or simply because they didn't care. Professor Rudd had long lost the respect and admiration of many of them.

The nobles saw him as someone unable to stand his ground against Linjos, the others as a relic of the past. As an annoying, pompous old coot.

"Whoever already succeeded casting Warp Steps raise his hand, please." A little less than half the class answered the call.

"Those of you that still haven't mastered the spell and fail at it sometimes lower their hands, please." Barely twenty raised hands remained.

"Three months of patience and effort brought us to such a pathetic result. Since some of you worked hard while the rest of the class twiddled their thumbs, I'm not going to waste my precious time anymore.

"I'll explain to you how to turn a Warp Steps into a Blink or a Switch and then we will all go to the practice hall. You'd better take notes, because I'm not going to repeat myself."

Rudd waited only a few seconds before resuming his lesson, many students had yet to take out their books and inkwells.

"Those of you that have actually read my book, should have already noticed that the two spells that will get you out of my face once and for all are only mentioned but never described.

"That's because they aren't new spells, they are simply variations in the execution of Warp Steps that require a lot of talent and skill in the art of dimensional magic. You already know the magic words and hand signs. You just need to take one last step.

"To turn a Warp Steps into a Blink, all you need to do is to make the entrance Gate move towards you and close it as soon as you have crossed it. Switch is the same thing, but requires generating two sets of gates moving at the same speed and leading almost to the same coordinates.

"Very few can do it, that's why learning Switch is purely optional while Blink it's not. To make a Gate move, you need to use the other one as an anchor and stretch the dimensional corridor without making it collapse.

"This requires boosting the energy flow by adding fire magic at the very last moment, and a further injection of air, earth and water magic so that the balance remains unchanged.

Between the further mana consumption and the speed required to make it work, Blink has a range of thirty meters (33yards) tops, despite consuming the same amount of energy it would take to Warp a kilometre (0.6 miles) away.

Switch is similar to a Blink done twice but with a single spell.

By adding light and darkness magic in equal parts during the first steps of the spell, it's possible to induce a resonance that doubles the number of energy cores, creating two entry and two exit points.

Using six elements in such short time not only is a rare feat, but also requires a lot of focus. Hence why its range is further limited to 10 metres (11yards) and needs a clear line of sight between the caster and the target."

After finishing his explanation, Professor Rudd Warped them to the training hall, splitting the students in groups according to their skill level.

Over an hour passed, many Gates were opened, but none managed to Blink.

Half an hour later, much to everyone's surprise, Friya disappeared from her spot reappearing a few meters away. In a matter of minutes, she managed to Blink several times in a row.

Professor Rudd was seething with anger, but managed to hide his feeling and even congratulated her, encouraging the class to follow Friya's lead.

Before Lith was forced into another group hug, a furious bellow resounded.

"It's not fair, she cheated!" Lyam Lukart walked toward Friya like he wanted to beat her, but despite being fifteen centimetres (6 inches) shorter than him she stood firm, her hand resting on the hilt of her sword.

"She cheated and I can prove it!"