

Supreme M 191

Chapter 191 Pride Goeth Before a Fall

In his decades long career, Khavos Rudd had been forced to listen to ridiculous theories, stupid questions, and excuses to justify incompetence or failure so imaginative that they would put a bard to shame.

Yet never before he had ever heard something so blatantly preposterous.

"Unfair?" He echoed placing himself between the young Lukart and the bloodthirsty girl. Clearly one of them needed protection, but he was unsure about which one.

"Cheated?" His voice rose in intensity while astonishment was replaced by rage for his wounded pride.

"Are you telling me that it's possible to cheat in the noble art of dimensional magic? During my class and in front of me? Are you calling me stupid, incompetent or both?"

Knowing how Professor Rudd loved and respected magical bloodlines, Lyam Lukart was taken aback by his vicious retort.

"No. I would never dare to say something like that." Lyam swallowed a lump of saliva. Whenever a Professor took out his communication amulet it was never a good omen.

"I really hope so. Just like I'm dying to hear why do you think lady Ernas has cheated. If I don't like your reply, prepare to say goodbye to one thousand points." Rudd replied with his thumb already placed on the administration office's rune.

Lyam started to panic. One thousand points were more than he had to spare. He was used to spending them as soon he had enough for a new magical trinket.

"Sir, she has clearly cheated. First of all, she comes from magicless family, hence it's impossible for her to outclass a pureblood like me. Not to mention she received only a B+ in dimensional magic, while I got an A+.

How can someone with such a low evaluation be this good at dimensional magic? This is all the proof that I need!" He replied puffing his chest with pride.

In recent years, the ancient noble families had seen their privileges being slowly extended also to younger and more talented magical households.

With the Court's new policies, their influence over the Kingdom was fading and their loyal servants that occupied key roles in every region were being replaced by new bureaucrats only loyal to the Crown.

Seeing someone of lesser upbringing perform better than him was more than a wound for his adolescent pride, it was like feeling everything that had been promised to him, his very birthright, slip through his fingers like a handful of sand.

"Really? A B+?" Professor Rudd became pensive, losing his edge and letting Lyam breathe a sigh of relief.

"How do you know it?" Professor Rudd's ice-cold blue eyes were suddenly just a few centimetres from Lyam's, burning with anger and mana.

"H-how do I know what?" Lyam stuttered at each word

"Her grades. They are secret, my secret to be precise. You two are not friend, hence I doubt she told you." Friya shook her head to confirm his suspicions.

"I'll ask you only once. How do you know?"

"A friend told me."

"Then give me the name of this friend." Rudd's tone was becoming more menacing by the second.

"I don't want to get him in trouble. He simply shared with me something that everyone knows. It's not his fault."

"Really? Everyone knows?" With a wave of Rudd's hand, the training hall's door closed shut.

"Then we have much to talk about, my students."

Those present looked at Lyam with hatred and scorn, he had managed to get all of them involved in barely one sentence.

"Young man, you are in a lot of troubles. If you don't give me the name of your friend, forget the points. I'll get you expelled for breaching the academy's network. After that, I'll make sure no matter the academy, you'll find only closed doors in front of you."

Lyam knew that he had no way out of that situation. His father was a rich and powerful man, but Rudd had outlived countless Headmasters and even the Queen's attempt to have him retire.

Khavos Rudd was an archmage with such knowledge, power, and connections that Lyam was certain that his words were far from being an empty threat. After Lyam gave Rudd his friend's name it took barely a few minutes for the Professor to work up the pyramid discovering who was involved and how.

"Very well, you bunch of idiots, we'll discuss your punishment later in the Headmaster's office.

"As for you, young Lukart, let me give you a lesson of humility. You may not like a person, you may despise their family, but you always respect the talent once it's slapped right in your face."

Professor Rudd dragged Lyam in the middle of the training hall, in front of the cold gaze of his friends that couldn't wait to watch him fail and share their misery.

"I may be old, but my memory works just fine. I remember clearly how you and mister Lith here were the first ones to get ahead with the loop spell. Let's do something simple."

Judging from his wolfish smile, what he was going to propose was anything but simple.

"Mister Lith, do you mind opening a Loop (*) for me? Do it very slowly, step by step please."

Lith did as instructed, discovering how hard was to humor Rudd's request. What once came natural to him during his previous failures, now required his utmost focus. His mind and body were so used letting the various elements flow that the task was akin to drive a car with the handbrake on.

Yet Lith managed to succeed. First appeared a single shining sphere, that Rudd made him keep for ten seconds, then he could finally split it into two black dots for another ten seconds and only the Rudd allowed him to complete the spell and open the small Gates.

Lith was sweating a bit and had a splitting headache. Dimensional magic was dynamic by nature, keeping it static was a mammoth task.

- "If this is what he considers 'easy', I must thank Linjos for removing written and practical test, otherwise I would never pass dimensional magic if Rudd demanded 'hard' tasks." Lith thought. –

"Now it's your turn, Lord Lukart." Rudd's voice was oozing sarcasm.

Lyam chanted the spell, opening the two Gates at once.

"I said slowly. Are you deaf, dumb or both? Again!"

Lyam tried over and over again, only managing to keep the single parts of the spell active for a second or two before it exploded in his face. Only the training hall's security measures prevented him from being disfigured or worse.

"Do you know what's the difference between the two of you?"

Lyam was going to say: "He is a commoner while I am an heir from a noble magical family.", but Rudd anticipated his answer and didn't give him the time to reply.

"It's that despite his poor talent in dimensional magic, he has practiced hard. He has failed countless times before succeeding until every single step of the spell has been engraved in both his mind and body.

"You, instead, have been probably instructed by your father or one of his assistants, feeding you the answers you needed without even caring about understanding the importance of the underlying questions.

Let me show you how easy is distinguishing talent from hard work in my field. Lady Quylla Ernas, do you mind giving a demonstration to the class?"

Quylla performed as Lith, but without breaking a sweat.

"Outstanding talent." Rudd said, managing for the first time to not make it sound like an insult.

"If it wasn't for the incompetence of Professor Nalear in teaching multi casting, I'm sure she would be already able to switch. Only the talented ones understand the flow of mana and can move it according to their will.

Lady Friya, now it's your turn."

Friya succeeded too.

"Talent and hard work. A very rare combination." Rudd bowed to her in a sign of respect.

"As for you, Lord Lukart, it's time to learn that foolish actions and words have consequences." He activated his communication amulet.

"Here is Professor Rudd. Subtract two thousand points from Lyam Lukart for insubordination, slander of a schoolmate and for divulging academy's secrets. Also, change his dimensional magic evaluation to B- and raise Friya Ernas' one to A+."

At those words, Lyam turned pale as a ghost at first, then green and finally red due to a fit of rage. He rushed toward Friya, punching her in the face.

Rudd was about to intervene, but he noticed that her hands and lips were moving at great speed. He placed an invisible barrier around her and pretended to do nothing, studying her skill.

Her dimensional spell was still active, all Friya had to do was to complete the spell, placing the first gate in front of her and the other near Lyam's nether region.

The result was the young Lukart giving himself a powerful straight in the nuts.

Rudd erupted into laughter, seeing Lyam sorry figure curled up on the ground. Soon more than half the class joined the Professor in his hilarity. The fall of a high and mighty noble was a rare sight, the commoners among those present savored every moment of it.

Tears streaked Lyam's cheeks non stop. Even worse than the physical pain was the taste of failure in his mouth, being a laughingstock for the first time in his life.

"Very well executed and perfectly timed, Lady Ernas." Rudd activated his communication amulet once again.

"Points assignation to the student Friya Ernas for displaying superb mastery of dimensional magic and completing the course three months early. Five hundred points."

This time no one interrupted the group's cheers and congratulations. Friya was so happy that she stopped frowning for the first time since the end of the second exam.

Seeing the group of youths so close despite being so different in social status, age, and magical legacy made Professor Rudd sighed of resignation.

- "I hate to admit it, but if Lyam Lukart is the best the old magical families have to offer, then it's much better to wipe them out once and for all. I hate commoners, but I love magic too much to let a bunch of ungrateful spoiled brats disrespect it.

"Those who spare no effort in pursuit of magical knowledge are a hundred times better than someone that takes shortcuts, incapable to understand that magic is a competition with oneself, not with others." -

"Lady Ernas, you are free to not attend dimensional magic classes anymore. I hope you will decide otherwise, though. It would be a pleasure and an honour for me to help you mastering Switch too and witness the birth of a true dimensional magician."

The whole group was astonished. There was no trace of sarcasm in his voice. Rudd even gave her a deep bow. Where years of arguing and debates in the Mage Association had failed, Lyam Lukart had succeeded.

The harsh comparison between his blind arrogance and Friya silent efforts had managed to convince Khavos Rudd once and for all that he had been wrong his whole life.

Being a good magician wasn't a matter of talent or bloodline, hard work and passion for magic were the only things to treasure and nurture.

"It would be my pleasure to be taught by the greatest dimensional magician of our times." She replied with an even deeper bow.

Despite her resentment for Rudd's previous conduct, Friya wasn't so stupid to put grudge before education.

Rudd nodded, pleased by both her answer and her flattery.

"The class is dismissed early today. Lyam Lukart, get up and follow me to the Headmaster's office. Let's see if I can get you expelled. Your sight sickens me."

Chapter 192 Unexpected Surprise

After the end of the lesson, the group went to the canteen to eat something and recover from the shock. For months they had been watching their backs for Lukart and his goons, and now Professor Rudd was getting rid of him.

That and Friya joining them as a full fledged A ranked student was too good to be true. Friya was literally walking on air from excitement. She was so happy that her magic had gone out of control making her float a few centimetres over the ground.

"Keep a seat for me, I'll join you in a while. I can't wait to give the good news to Orion, he's going to be so proud of me!"

"Quylla already calls him 'father' and Friya's first thought after going out of the classroom was to share his joy with him. Your dad must be a great man, Phloria." The group sat down at their usual table. It was too early for lunch, so they ordered snacks and beverages.

Lith would have loved to have a cold beer after how much sweating Rudd had put him through, but he knew that his body was still too young. No matter how many times he asked for it, the kitchen staff would always refuse to serve him alcohol.

"He's more than that, he's a great dad. Unlike my mother, he has never let me down nor has ever tried to force his will on me. Too bad that he is often away from home for weeks and that makes my mother the ruler of the land."

Just the thought of her mother was enough to make even her fruit juice taste sour.

"To be honest, I am really surprised Friya managed to Blink before you, Quylla." Yurial expressed what everyone had in mind, while Friya was still away to not hurt her feelings.

"I'm not." Quylla lowered her gaze in embarrassment.

"Despite I mastered tetra casting before her, fire magic is still my weak point. Do you remember I told you I started practicing magic after my village's healer death?"

Everyone nodded.

"What I omitted to say is that the bandits set fire to the village and I almost died back then. Since that moment, I have been scared of fire magic. Fire is different from the other elements, even without mana it doesn't disappear, it keeps growing and burning like it's alive.

Because of that I never practiced it much, but now things have changed. I'm not that scared little girl anymore, I'll catch up with you in no time!"

When Friya returned everyone was already eating and drinking. Lith decided to exploit that moment when everyone had their guard lowered to ask his question as casually as he could.

"I'm glad to see you are all in a good mood. That leaves me with a question, though. Why none of you ever called me? You had me thinking you wanted to cut ties with me." Despite all his efforts, Lith ended up fiddling with his glass while he was talking.

"I'm really sorry for that." Friya lowered her eyes, her smile disappeared already.

"It's just that after hearing your story, I was embarrassed for having treated you so coldly. After realizing that your burden is much heavier than mine, I felt like a tantrumming child demanding attention. I didn't know what to say without making even more of a fool out of myself."

"It wasn't a suffering measuring contest!" Lith sounded stressed, but was actually relieved by her answer. Since Phloria seemed pensive, he looked at Quylla.

She opened and closed her mouth a couple of times, like she was about to say something but changed her mind at the last moment.

- "Gods, why I'm such a coward? I just have to tell him the truth. Of how after he left, I needed to sort out my feelings, to understand what was real and what was just make believe.

Tell him how much you missed him, but you were too afraid of being rejected again. It's not that hard, I'm sure Phloria would say it in one breath."—

"Well, I needed some time to sort out my feelings." Phloria said with a straight face, making Quylla spit her beverage back in the glass while Lith tilted his head in confusion.

"What feelings? Those for your mother? Your new sisters? Or about the realization that sooner or later you'll have to kill someone?" He asked.

"None of the above." She waved her hand like putting away all those topics.

"You see, when she is not trying to boss me around and telling me how to live my life, my mother is a great listener. She knows human nature very well and people are just open books for her. As much as it pains me to admit it, I'm no exception."

"After you left my home, I was left with an odd feeling. When I spoke about it with my mother, she offered me her insight and suggestions, instead of trying to manipulate me, which was a refreshing event.

"She pointed out that I'm already fifteen and I'm not going to get younger. The next year I will turn sixteen, becoming an adult. Either I decide to marry or not, I still have no experience at all with boys and once I join my father's corps things will get real.

"It will be kill or be killed, with no middle ground nor compromise. So I've decided to enjoy my last year as a kid to its fullest and come out of my shell. Lith, would you like to go out with me?"

Lith's face froze with a creepy smile while Quylla was choking on her drink.

"Gee, don't jump me like that. Wait at least the fifth date or something." She sneered after Lith remained stuck in the same pose for several seconds.

"I'm sorry, but saying that this is unexpected is an understatement. Also, I'm flattered by your attentions, but I never thought about you that way."

"It's okay. I don't like-like you, for that matters." Phloria replied still in high spirits.

"Okay, now you have lost me. If you don't feel anything for me, why asking me out?"

"It's not that I don't have feelings for you, more like I don't understand them, yet. So far all the boys my age are either immature daydreamers that still believe to be destined one day to slay monsters and marry a princess, or horny teens that only want to get in a girl's pants, like Yurial."

"Hey, I resent that!" Yurial became beet red up to his ears.

"Dude, I was there when you flirted with your girls of the day. I could have even asked you out if I wasn't sure that the first thing you would do is to put your hand up my a*s."

Yurial lowered his eyes, incapable of denying the truth of her words. He was quite fickle with girls, to be polite.

"Lith, you are the most level headed and mature boy I know. Be it about politics, literature, or mystical arts I can always have a nice conversation with you. I would like for us to start as friends and see how things develop."

- "I must admit her offer is interesting. I never had a high school sweetheart. They were all a bunch of immature kids while I had my hands full by keeping my scholarship and part time works.

This could be the opportunity to experience what I thought I had missed forever. The problem is that I don't like her that way, she is still a child in my eyes. At that age, things can escalate fast and I don't want to ruin our friendship before it even begins.

What do you think about it, Solus?"

"Why do you ask me?" She was honestly surprised.

"As I said, I don't like her. Most importantly, I don't want to hurt your feelings. Our relationship may be complicated at times, but I wouldn't ruin it for the world."

Those words made Solus cry from happiness, but she hid all her emotions in a corner of her mind where Lith couldn't find them unless he explicitly searched her memories.

"Thanks, but you don't need to worry about me. Don't you remember how I pushed you toward all the girls we met? I always believed you needed someone to rely on outside of your family, someone that's more than just a voice in your head."

"You are much more than a voice in my head!" Lith was outraged by Solus' self-deprecation.

"You are my partner in battle, my confidant. You are the only reason I haven't already turned in the monster I'm afraid to become if I lose my last shred of humanity."

"Yet I'm just a voice in your head. It took eight years for me to obtain my wisp form. Maybe in another eight I'll get some kind of ethereal body, that will take eight more to materialize.

Do you really think you can avoid human contact for sixteen years, to never hold hands, kiss or sleep with a woman? When you met Nalear and Nindra, you would have asked them out if not for the age gap. This is all I have to say, the life is yours and so is the choice."—

In their mind space, time flowed much faster than in the outside world. Their conversation lasted barely a second.

- "Well, I can get a sweetheart and maybe this will help Quylla get over me. It's not like I'm going to marry Phloria, things will probably not work out. I'd say the pros outweigh the cons."

"Only one thing." Solus added. "Whatever you do, this is not one of your business deals. She is a real person with real feelings, don't treat her like a calculated risk, looking for a gain. Otherwise I will be really disappointed in you."—

"I would love to go out with you." Lith replied with his best smile while Solus's words were still echoing in his head.

"The only problem is when and where. The academy takes out almost all our free time and there's nothing to see around here."

"Not a problem." Phloria was radiant, way more than Lith would have expected.

"During the weekend we can go anywhere thanks to the academy's Gate. Do you mind if we take a walk? I've so many things I want to discuss with you right now."

Lith stood up and waved goodbye to his still frozen stiff friends.

"I never saw that coming." Yurial was the first to recover.

"Of all the girls of the academy, Phloria is the last one I would have expected to make a move on Lith. The real shocker is that he didn't turn her down like all the other girls. Maybe he is not made of stone like I always thought."

A faint hiccup stopped him in his tracks. Quylla was on the verge of tears, while Friya was holding her tight, trying to console her.

"It's all right, it's not the end of the world." She said.

"It's all my fault." Quylla sobbed.

"I had countless occasions with him but I wasted them all, always waiting for the right moment instead of creating one as Phloria did. I feel so stupid. I deluded myself into believing I had changed, but I'm still a coward."

Yurial and Friya helped her to get up and brought Quylla to her room, before all the canteen noticed her distress.

Meanwhile, Lith and Phloria were walking along the corridors with Phloria doing most of the talking and listing all the places she wanted to visit in the Griffon Kingdom.

Suddenly Lith noticed they were in front of Phloria's room.

"Come in. There's something I want to tell you, but I don't want anyone else to hear it."

Lith was hesitant.

- "Her room already? This isn't escalating fast, it's skipping all the bases!"-

When she noticed it, Phloria giggled.

"Come on, I will not eat you. Yet."

Phloria closed the door behind them. Then, without saying a word she hugged him tight.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you." She sniffed, being on the verge of tears.

"The truth is that after the second exam, I am always scared. Down in that dungeon, I realized that death is closer than I thought. I trained my sword and my magic, believing I would become invincible, but now I know it was just an illusion."

When that ogre almost killed me, all I could think about was that I would have never seen my family again, that I had yet to experience love or a boy's touch. There are still so many things I want to do and places I want to see.

I don't want to die with so many regrets."

Lith hugged her back, caressing her head while trying to understand what all of that had to do with him. He was certain that Phloria had never demonstrated romantic feelings for him and Solus had always confirmed his impression.

That turn of events was still incomprehensible to him, but he remained silent. His logic could only trample her feelings.

"The real reason I asked you out is that despite you are shorter than me, stingy, cold, and the gods know how much you remember me of my mother, whenever I'm with you I'm not afraid anymore."

Chapter 193 A Different Perspective

At those words, Lith finally understood Phloria's change of heart. If on one hand he found reassuring that he wouldn't have to stand an insipid puppy love, on the other one he felt offended.

"You sure know how to catch a man's heart." His voice oozed sarcasm.

"I didn't get so many insults at once since that time I tripled the healing fare to a merchant for being a rude prick."

His words made Phloria chuckle, but she didn't let him go, nor he tried to push her away.

"I didn't insult you. I just stated the truth. I dare you to deny any of the above."

"Well, yeah. All the more reason why you shouldn't consider me boyfriend material. Especially after hearing my story. Despite being only twelve, I'm already a broken mess. If you want to have fun, you can have much better."

"That's not true!" She held him even tighter, like she was trying to console him

"First, you are not my boyfriend. We have a lot of time to know each other better, let's use it wisely. Second, you are my best friend in the academy for more than one reason. Under that cynical shell, you are kind and caring.

No matter how many times we stumbled and fell, you were always there, extending your hand to help us get back up. You even did it during the mock exam, after we treated you like cr*p and almost dragged you down with us.

You made a great impression on me back then. That's why I joined your group later."

Aside from Solus and his family, no one had ever said such kind words to Lith.

- "I would be moved if she wasn't entirely wrong." He thought.

"I helped them only because I understood the exam's true goal and had to deceive them since I knew we were being observed. She's just like Quylla, seeing someone that's not me."

"No, she is not." Solus objected

"Phloria has spent a lot of time with you, actually talking to you, instead of staring from a distance. She has also noticed your efforts to take care of the people around you as well as your flaws."—

"Also..." Phloria added.

"Don't think that I'm not grateful to you for still being holding me despite all the things that I said and not pointing out in retort that I'm as flat as a board."

Lith feared she was actually fishing for compliments, but Phloria started laughing at her own joke and he merrily joined her.

- "Yeah, it's sad that with her physique a B cup is barely noticeable. With her age and height, I doubt she can improve much in that department."—

"Thank you for pretending to not have seen anything back then..."

"I don't know what you are talking about." Lith lied through his teeth, but Phloria ignored him.

"...yet swearing on your brothers' heads was really shameless. Did you really think I wouldn't notice?"

"A man can try." He shrugged.

"Gods, you really are like my mother." Phloria pushed him away, pretending to be angry.

"Well, 'mommy', I hope we'll get along. Don't get all clingy on me, I still consider you just a friend. Try to pull a Yurial on me and I'll kick your ass."

When Phloria calmed down, she and Lith returned to the compulsory courses' class for the last lesson of the day. After getting everything off her chest, Phloria felt light as a feather.

On the contrary, Lith was gloomy and disappointed, but nothing of it showed on his face while they kept making small talk. Solus laughing her a*s off at his expenses surely didn't help.

- "And here I thought that my mature charm made an impression on her. Phloria is not looking for a boyfriend, more like a father figure while she is inside the academy."

"More like a mother figure, my dear wannabe Casanova." Solus couldn't stop laughing.

"Her words, not mine. Isn't it better this way, though? It's like you gained a new sister that will keep away all those gold diggers that pestered you until now. Aren't you a little too disappointed for someone who doesn't like Phloria as a girl?"

"It's a matter of pride. Even if I end up rejecting a girl, being courted it's always flattering. I much prefer being liked as a boy than coveted as a mother hen."—

When they sat down at their desks, Yurial gave him a wink and a thumbs up. In his mind, his two friends had now a new and intimate knowledge of each other. Quylla didn't know how to face Phloria, who didn't seem to notice her distress, greeting her with a radiant smile like she always did.

- "I'm sorry little one," Phloria thought. "but you are still twelve. You have four years before having to decide what to do with your life and you'll probably end up working in a safe environment, like the academy or a great hospital."

I have a little more than a year for crossing off as many things as I can from my bucket list. I hope that you'll learn from this experience. As our mother always says: when you see a good man, make your move or someone else will."—

Phloria was well aware of her adopted sister's feelings, but she considered them nothing more than a childish crush. In all the time they had known each other, Quylla had always been passive, managing to speak to Lith only about homework and magic.

Phloria, instead, despite not knowing why his presence made her feel safe, was determined to understand her own feelings and let the answer, whatever it was, lead her way.

When the second gong resounded, a plump woman walked into the classroom. The students' chattering stopped immediately. Their attention drawn to the newcomer.

She wasn't a beauty nor intimidating, quite the contrary. She was in her late forties, about 1.54 metres (5'1") high with long blonde hair with shades of black that reached her hips.

Her smile was contagious and had a round, jovial face that that one would find much more fitting to a baker selling sweets rather than a powerful mage. Unlike all the other Professors, her clothes and robe weren't pristine white but pitch black.

"Good evening, dear students. My name is Calyn Zeneff and for this trimester I'll be your guest lecturer for the necromancy course. As you have probably noticed from my outfit, I normally teach at the Black Griffon academy.

Our institutions have agreed to an exchange programme for the Professors, so that we can learn from each other and improve the relationship between our schools."

She paced slowly through the classroom, studying the student's reactions.

"Before starting our lesson, it's better if I answer to all the questions that usually pop in the head of those who hear the word 'necromancy' for the first time. No, it's not a forbidden discipline, nor necromancers skulk during the night to kidnap infants and virgins.

"Necromancy is just a magical discipline like any other. We necromancers got our bad reputation thanks to ignorance, superstition, and some bad apples.

Remember, no matter if you are a Forgemaster or a War Mage, the only spells that are considered forbidden in the three great countries are the ones that use living humans as materials or require trading lives for power.

What I am going to teach you are the basics of necromancy, its laws and practical uses on the combat field. Because of the nature of my subject, my colleagues here at the White Griffon have nicknamed me 'the anti-Rudd'.

Just as for dimensional magic, passing this course will influence your overall grades but will not affect in any way your chances to graduate. Also, while Rudd's subject is long and complicated, mine will be relatively short and easy.

Let's start with a brief introduction. Because of the moral and legal implications of using corpses as tools, necromancy can be considered a really special branch of magic. Tier one to three spell are considered basic necromancy, and that's what I'm going to teach you.

Tier four and five consists of either advanced necromancy, that requires joining the royal army or the Queen's corps to be taught, and forbidden magic, the practice of which is a capital offense in all the three great countries.

Basic necromancy is about temporarily turning a corpse into an undead to serve you as a guard, manpower, or a scout. It's very useful for rangers and mages who like to fly solo.

Advanced necromancy allows to permanently create undead slaves that will serve you until they are destroyed or run out of magic. This discipline is not taught at academies nor by the Mage Association.

Only the Crown is allowed to have an army, be it living people or not doesn't matter.

Turning yourselves or others into vampires or liches, instead, that's forbidden magic and as such is a capital offense. I'm also going to explain why necromancy is so strictly regulated, what are its risks and how to defend against it.

Let's start with a little demonstration."

With a snap of her fingers, Professor Zeneff took out the skeleton of a rat from her dimensional ring.

"Normally your subjects will not be this clean. I purposely removed all the unnecessary parts to avoid most of you puking. I'm telling you this because necromancy is useless if the carcass is older than five days.

Past that time frame, the chances of success decline fast. Only fresh bodies can be turned into undead. Things like necromancers raising whole cemeteries are just folklore and fairy tales."

Lith knitted his brows, becoming more pensive the more discrepancies he found with what Kalla had taught him

- "Five days? The corpses Kalla stores in the forest are at least months old. Even those I rose back in the quarantine zone were dead from weeks." Lith thought.

"The good news is that I can already ace this class, the bad news is that it seems to be a colossal waste of time."

Professor Zeneff cast her spell, allowing Lith to spot the first differences between true and fake necromancy. When Lith created an undead, he would send a single tendril of darkness magic in the corpse creating a blood core.

By adding a spark of light magic during the process, he would imprint the creature with his lifeforce and bind it to his will.

The Professor, instead, had created a dense fog of dark energy that was going in and out the rat's skeleton, like it was looking for something. In a few seconds, the fog was completely absorbed by the bones and a red light shone from the empty eye sockets.

Before the process was completed, Zeneff executed a second spell that left a glowing mark on the creature's head. The class gasped while the undead stretched its limbs producing an oddly amusing rattling sound.

"This is what is considered a success." The Professor sent the rat doing a round of the class with a simple wave of her hand.

"As you can see, the creature is perfectly functional and obeys to my every command. Unlike all the other disciplines you have studied before, necromancy isn't as simple as point and shoot. It involves willpower and the use of multiple elements even at its first tier."

A second snap of her fingers produced a metal cage containing a second rat skeleton. She repeated the darkness spell but this time she didn't perform the light one. The new undead went into a frenzy, clashing against the bars with all its strength, trying to reach Zeneff.

"This, instead, is an aberration. It happens when due to the magician incompetence or lack of willpower the creature is allowed to go on a rampage. Usually its first victim is the necromancer itself."

While she spoke, the undead kept emitting a shrill sound that resembled the cry of a child. It charged against the bars over and over, until bone bits started to fall on the teacher's desk.

"Creating and controlling an undead require focus. The stronger your creation, the harder it will be to control. Bit more than you can chew either by sheer power or numbers and that's what happens." She pointed at the cage.

"Back in my day, when necromancy was taught during the first year, a lot of students died by the paws of these little monsters that they kept as pets."

A familiar looking girl raised her hand.

"What's on your mind, miss...?"

"Lady Mirna Kratic." She gave the Professor a deep bow.

"Why someone should want such a thing?" Mirna couldn't stop turning her head to keep watch on both the undead rats.

"Excellent question, Lady Kratic. The answer is: for power and control. It was a way to show off one's talent and have loyal bodyguards 24/7. Bullying makes the undead much more appealing than the living." Zeneff sighed.

The Professor closed her eyes, taking deep breaths. Suddenly, the first undead ran towards Mirna. It jumped on her desk and said:

"Also, mostly because of this."

Chapter 194 A Different Perspective 2

Lith didn't know if to be more surprised by the discovery of how ignorant he was about necromancy's true potential or by seeing a rat's skeleton standing on its hind legs, talking with Professor Zekell's voice.

Despite the distance, he was able to notice that the light in the eyes of the creature had turned from deep red to bright blue.

"As you have seen when I reanimated this carcass, I left an imprint on it by using my life force to bind our essences." The Zekell-rat tapped its head with a paw, making the mark visible again.

"The bond allows necromancers to temporarily transfer their consciousness inside their creations. Students used this skill mostly to cheat during written exams. By using a small undead mouse, they could communicate between them or simply copy the answers of the most brilliant students.

Undead were also a very popular tool for pulling cruel practical jokes and peeping through windows. There is a reason that all academies have removed windows from their dorms. Even magic can't beat the enthusiasm of a bunch of horny teenagers.

No matter the protection, they would always find a loophole." The rat laughed.

"Keep in mind that the transfer is not without risks. The mage's body is left completely helpless for the entire duration. Someone could simmer you and you wouldn't even notice.

"Also, in this form I don't have the perceptions of a rat or of an undead. I can see and hear as if I'm on your desk, but all my other senses are lost. I can't use magic and if something happens to this body before I return to my own, the resulting shock could incapacitate me for hours."

The creature's eyes turned red again and Professor Zeneff snapped her fingers a third time, taking out a third rat's skeleton from her dimensional amulet. When she cast the necromantic spell, the black fog engulfed the carcass for a while before disappearing.

"This is what happens when attempting to reanimate a long-dead corpse: a failure. To date, the phenomenon is still unclear. What we do know is that if a corpse it's not reanimated at least once every five days it becomes useless."

- "I wish I could use Life Vision to collect data. Solus, what did you see with your mana sense?" Lith thought.

"Her spell seems to fly blind. Fake necromancy has no concept of mana core, so the darkness energies scanned the whole body before forming the blood core. My guess is that when a living being dies, its mana core leaves behind some kind of echo that disappears after about five days.

Fake necromancy seems to be heavily reliant on those lingering energies. Without them, the spell loses focus and becomes ineffective."

"Kalla isn't an Awakened one, yet she knew on instinct what to do." Lith pondered. "Magical beasts' natural affinity with the elements is simply terrifying. No wonder there is still no dominant species on this planet."—

"During the following lessons, I'll teach you how to safely create all the lesser undead, how to transfer your consciousness and how to recognize when you are pushing your limits.

Necromancy is all about control and self awareness. Unlike all other kinds of magic, it can backfire. It will help you build your character, make you realize that your decisions, your spells have consequences on yourselves and others.

We have still a few minutes before the gong. Any questions?"

Lith raised his hand and Professor Zekell nodded to him.

"How long does an undead last?"

"Depends on the tier of the spell and the strength of the creature." She was happy to hear a relevant question instead of one about ghosts and curses.

"Let's say that after this course you will be able to keep a simple skeleton for up to fifteen hours or a skeletal knight for one."

- "I take back everything I thought. The only kind of necromancy I know needs me to constantly infuse mana into my undead servants, while hers can provide them an energy reserve.

Not to mention that my knowledge about the undead is limited to Dungeons & Looting and George Romero's movies. There's a lot I can learn from her. I tend to forget that unlike magical beasts, humans have legacies.

I can merge their hundreds of years of experience with what Kalla taught me to create my version of necromancy, something stronger than the sum of its parts."—

"Another question: you mentioned small rodents. Why not insects? They are smaller and are more likely to go unnoticed."

"Excellent question!" Professor Zekell didn't like playing favourites, but seeing genuine curiosity in her field was as rare as flattering.

"For two reasons. The first is that if the body is too small, instead of getting infused by darkness magic it gets destroyed by it. The fine tuning it would require makes such a spell too expensive and leads to reason number two.

Even if one manages to succeed, the stored energy would last only for a very short time, making the creature useless."

Lith still had more questions, but the gong resounded forcing him to stop.

"That's all for today. Dismissed."

Since they had yet to receive the books for the third trimester, Lith's group split once outside the classroom. Everyone went back to their rooms waiting for the delivery.

"Mind if I accompany you for a bit?" Yurial asked.

"I want to talk to you about Phloria."

"Don't tell me that you liked her in secret all this time!" Lith joked about it, hoping to avoid getting schooled about relationships by a single-minded hormonal teenager.

"Gods protect me, no." He laughed.

"She is too tall and definitely too strong-willed for me. I prefer petite, well endowed girls that don't threaten to turn me inside out like a sock. It's just that since I never saw you with a girl, I wanted to give you an unsolicited piece of advice."

Lith inwardly cringed, while keeping his poker face and nodding.

"If I were you, I'd return the Ballot to Linjos and let her have it."

Lith was left in a daze. This wasn't what he had expected from Yurial.

"After the second exam, Phloria is second guessing her life a lot. I know it because I lived under her roof until the academy started again. I don't know if Rudd will manage to get Lukart expelled, his father is a powerful and well connected man.

Even if he does, it's only a matter of time before people start talking about you two, and that would put a second target on her back. Everyone knows you have a Ballot, so you can always bluff your way out of trouble. Not to mention that you are incredibly strong." Yurial winked, referring to Lith's shared secret.

"She is strong too, but right now Phloria is in a rough patch. She doesn't need more traumas. If you really care about her, you should put her safety first. A year is a long time, many things can happen."

"Who are you and what did you do to Yurial?" Lith replied raising his eyebrow in disbelief, making his friend laugh.

"It's just that her future is not set in stone. She can change her path anytime and I believe Phloria needs peace and quiet to not rush her decision. I really envy her for that."

Yurial sighed. Since he seemed to need to take something off his chest, Lith didn't interrupt him.

"You know, the reason why I may appear so shallow at times it's because I'm just like Phloria, trying to enjoy the little time I have left to its fullest. Don't get me wrong, unlike her I will not put my life on the line every day, yet I will be chained.

By my responsibilities towards my father, my subjects, my wife and children."

"Your what?" Lith was flabbergasted.

"Man, even before I started the academy, I was already betrothed. I know who and when I'll marry since I was ten years old."

"Do I know her?"

"No, she's not a mage. It's a political marriage to join my magically talented household to an ancient noble family. Everybody wins. After we graduate, I'll become my father's second in command for a couple of years.

Then marriage and I'm expected to have at least a couple of heirs by the age of twenty. As I said, Phloria's future is not set in stone, but mine is. I understand better than anyone else how it feels being trapped."

- "You and me both." Lith inwardly sighed. –

"Maybe it will not work between you two, but you can still learn something from each other. Promise me you will think about it."

"I will."

In a remote corner of the Blood Desert, the three Guardians had met in person for the first time in hundreds of years. Even though they had turned into their human forms and were suppressing their auras as much as they could, it wasn't enough.

The earth below trembled slightly while the skies thundered. The world seemed to be scared by their assembly and was trying to break them apart once again.

"I hate to admit it, but you were right." Salaark said.

She had taken the appearance of a young-looking woman, with silky black long hair, emerald eyes and a bronze tinge of skin so clear it seemed to shine under the morning sun.

She wore the same white clothes her tribal leaders, the Feathers, did but with no turban, allowing her hair to graze the ground.

"Some b*stard has invaded my turf and is spreading Abominations like they are presents. I underestimated our opponent, leaving everything in the hands of my Awakened ones. The result is that five of my Feathers died in less than a month.

They were all good men and women. Someone has to pay for their deaths."

Her eyes ignited with a purple flame while the sand below her feet turned into glass because of the heat she emitted. The trembling and thundering intensified, but none of those present cared.

"It's not all. The sudden death of so many Awakened crippled my military force, my borders are under attack from all directions!"

"I'm not responsible, the truce with the Griffon Kingdom still holds." Tyris said.

"Me neither. I control nothing in the Empire, but my apprentice would have told me before making such a move. She knows how much is at stake." Leegaain shrugged in annoyance.

"I'm not blaming you idiots, but myself!" Salaark roared.

"Clearly the culprit has made sure that all my enemies knew about my weakness, otherwise the neighbouring countries could never set up a coordinated attack like this. They are ruining years of hard work!"

Her delicate feet stomped multiple times, shattering the glass, the land, and causing a minor tremor, around 3.0 on the Richter scale.

"Then why did you summon us if you knew we are innocent?" Tyris already had a headache from having to stand Salaark's temper without the possibility of bashing her head.

"Because I know who did it and where they are right now. If this was just about killing, I would have done it myself, but I want to take them alive and make them talk. I need you to prevent them from escaping."

"I'm fine with it. I had nothing to do this evening anyway." Leegaain yawned, giving her a thumbs up.

With a snap of her fingers, Salaark Warped them hundreds of kilometres away, in the proximity of a small mountain range. Like most of her kingdom, the landscape was barren. Too barren even for a desert.

"The b*stard must have taken its sweet time here. Even the mountains are crumbling due to the void of world energy." Salaark snorted.

"Seal the space around here, I'm going in."

Tyris and Leegaain operated their magic their own way. A Guardian was attuned to the planet, to the point that even their simplest act was magic. Tyris started to walk, countless runes of power spread in the air and the ground with each step she took.

Leegaain was feeling nostalgic, seeing both his friends moved his old heart. The dragon started to sing with a tenor voice. Wherever the song reached, the matter would be bound to the dragon's will.

"Show off." Tyris smiled, singing along in a counter melody. Their voices filled the air with mana, making flowers bloom from long dried up seeds and water gush out of the ground. The Guardians were only sealing up the space, life was just a by-product of their joy from being together.

"Well, at least there will be a lot of rain this year." Salaark grumbled while entering the underground maze.

Chapter 195 Trapped

Salaark moved like the wind, following the stench of chaos plaguing the air. Several Abominations, both Empowered and Puppeteers tried to stop her, but as soon as Salaark noticed that they were mindless drones, she would incinerate them with a purple blast of fire.

She soon reached the center of the maze, an artificial cave filled with state-of-the-art equipment. It was the most incredible magical lab Salaark had ever seen.

"I thought only Leegaain could do something like this. I can't even fathom what purpose most of this stuff has." She thought out loud.

Transparent water tanks filled with a glowing yellow liquid were lined up against the walls.

Each contained an unconscious magical beast or a human, but all of them were slowly being turned into Abominations. Salaark was close enough to see the process in the making. Somehow, the tanks were forcefully refining their cores, while at the same time the yellow liquid kept the bodies stable.

"Interesting. Their bodies are filled with cracks, but shouldn't collapse until they reach at least the cyan level, if not even the blue. Note to self, have Leegaain study the procedure and dumb it down for me.

This way I will be able to replace my Feathers with ease. I'll take it as partial compensation." A wave of her hand sealed the tanks' space, making it incredibly hard to damage them.. Salaark had no rush, escape was impossible.

She walked around the room, finding more and more marvels as well as horrors.

Countless dried up corpses were piled up into small hills, making her wonder if they were failed experiments or simply the staple food to fully develop so many Abominations.

"You are too late." An amused voice bellowed.

"The Master escaped hours ago." A sinister figure stepped forward. Its body was covered in bright red scales, a black liquid oozed in between. It had long curved horns where the eyes were supposed to be, big upside-down membranous wings on its back.

"Since when do Eldritchs have a master?" Salaark sneered.

"Your power made you conceited, Guardian. Your pride blinds you." It pointed at her with a talon ending finger.

"We have learned from you how to increase our numbers. We are no longer scattered. We fight as one..."

"I'm not interested in your rants." Salaark cut him short.

"Tell me who is your master and where to find it. Be a good boy and I'll not make you suffer. Much." Her wolfish smile only caused the Eldritch to burst into laughter.

"Pride goes before a fall." A snap of its scaly fingers and the whole cave became covered by symbols of power. Every inch of space was covered by countless runes and arrays, each one imbued with a magical power that didn't belong to any of the six elements.

Salaark felt her strength being sapped, but still showed no sign of worry.

"Interesting. After you dried up all the world energy of this place, you have also used forbidden magic to cut off my natural connection with mana. How many Abominations did you sacrifice to achieve such a result?"

"Not enough since you still have the strength to brag!" The Eldritch roared extending its arms forward. Each of its fingers stretched out and multiplied, filling the air with razor sharp whip like tendrils that struck all around Salaark.

The Eldritch was outraged, even without using her magic, The Guardian had managed to dodge every strike with movements so small to be almost unnoticeable.

Almost.

"I would say you have picked the wrong Guardian, but there isn't a right one. Tyris would simply ignore this sh*t and try to reason with you before killing you. Leegaain would probably destroy your formations with a sneeze. As for me? I'm a fighter!"

Salaark dashed forward, punching the air in front of her. The Eldritch felt all its senses being distorted by the strength behind the simple attack. It easily dodged the strike, but it still hit the walls behind the Eldritch, creating a cave several meters deep and disrupting many arrays.

"I hate you Guardians!" The Eldritch couldn't hold its fury any longer.

"Why are you so strong? Why do you keep looking down on us? I'm Pazuel, and I'll show you the results of our efforts!" Pazuel met Salaark head on, its claws easily cut through her flesh and bones, forcing her to retreat for the first time in many centuries.

- "Seems I have underestimated the b*astard a little too much. No Eldritch has ever managed to even scratch this form. To make things worse, I can't revert to my real body."—

The arrays surrounding them were powered with a perverted and twisted kind of magic that only Abominations possessed. It derived from darkness magic, but had its natural connection with light magic forcefully severed.

It powered their unique individual skills and had been named chaos magic. Over a hundred Abominations had been sacrificed to empower the arrays, making any kind of magic besides chaos magic impossible.

The black liquid oozing from Pazuel was an embodiment of such energies, poisoning Salaark's body and preventing her from regenerating her wounds.

Despite all that, she managed to fight the Eldritch on equal footing, her millennia of experience made every one of its attacks seem telegraphed and predictable. Blinded by rage, Pazuel let her come too close.

Her fist struck its left shoulder, the impact turned the left arm and part of the chest into dust, making the creature's body spin like a top, sending it crashing against a wall.

"Why? Why are you still this strong?" It cried.

"Because I have embraced everything you ever discarded." She panted.

"Because I'm still fighting an endless battle for my people and this planet, while you do nothing but eat, sh*t and whine."

Salaark had hoped to stall longer with her rant, but as soon as the arm was regrown, Pazuel charged at her again. Its body started to melt, expanding at the same time. It became a mass of claws, talons, and fangs with only a black core as their center.

"How dare you say I do nothing? We sacrificed so much to get this far, but now me and my brothers are one!" Each limb and snout shot a different spell, leaving Salaark nowhere to run.

She still managed to dodge most of the attacks, taking only those that wouldn't hit her vitals. When the barrage was over, only part of her torso and head remained, yet she was still alive.

"If that's the best you can do, now it's my turn." Her voice was calm, purple flames covered all the injured parts of her body, making her whole anew.

"What? How?" Pazuel was running on fumes and was forced to revert back to its original form.

"I accumulated thousands of years of experience while you were content with preying on the weak. Look at your precious array."

Only then Pazuel noticed how every one of her missed strikes had actually hit its intended target. The focus points of the array were all badly damaged, even the spot where she had sent the Eldritch to crash earlier was intentional.

"You did the rest of the job for me with your sloppy attacks." She explained while the purple flames turned white along with her whole body.

"You miscalculated. This place is no longer devoid of world energy. How long could it possibly last against two Guardians breathing new life all around us as we speak, while a third one breaks it from inside?"

"You think I'm afraid of death? I'm already part of something bigger. Glory to the dawn of a new world!"

Salaark could see the Eldritch overload its black core, triggering a powerful explosion strong enough to destroy the cave and deal a significant amount of damage to her.

Her answer was to bite her scarlet lips, spitting a drop of her blood on the exploding Eldritch. Time seemed to rewind, every single piece of flesh going back forming the body once again, sealing the explosion before the shock wave could displace even a single speck of dust.

The Eldritch found itself alive and well, its core intact. It started to sweat in fear, a long-forgotten feeling while the phoenix's hand turned into a claw, locking it in place. The Eldritch discovered that its muscles had become limp, its magic refused to obey.

"It seems there is a misunderstanding here." Salaark's form turned into a hybrid between human and phoenix.

"I'm not the keeper of anything, I'm nobody's muse. I'm the conqueror of life and death." Her free hand ignited with a white flame, scorching the creature's very soul.

"You are not going anywhere, so you better start talking."

Lith spent the rest of the day practicing dimensional magic and Accumulation while waiting for the school books to be delivered and working on the sealed boxes during the night.

The time spent with Solus in the tower practicing Forgemastering, together with Nalear's lesson about the importance of magic crystals gave him a new approach to the problem.

Lith had discovered that the reason for his previous failures was that by damaging the boxes' mana pathways, the energy contained in the pseudo core diminished, while the one contained in the mana crystal would not.

This upset the balance and caused the explosion. Previously he had tried to keep the crystal isolated, thinking it was some kind of detonator that somehow was triggered by his attempts to pick the lock.

What he had to do, instead, was attacking them at the same time. Thanks to this discovery, Lith was now able to almost depower the lock.

Alas, almost wasn't enough. He was now able to open the boxes, but the resulting explosion still destroyed most of their content, not leaving enough for him to understand their purpose.

"It's still a huge success. I just need a few more lessons about how mana crystals and Forgemastering interact and I will be able to open them. I have only a few left, it's better to save them for later."

When the next day came, he was still pondering about Yurial's words, torn between egotism and his wish to change, to actually care about his so called friends instead of just pretending to.

His morning routine didn't change. Lith went to pick up Phloria early for their walk and then they went to meet with the others for breakfast.

- "It really doesn't feel like a high-school sweetheart at all. She didn't invite me to her room, we didn't talk about anything in particular. Phloria seemed to be more cheerful than usual, though. She smiled often when talking with me and made sure to sit in front of me."

"It means that she enjoys your company and likes to watch you." Solus pointed out.

"Still feels more like bromance than romance." Lith shrugged.

"You watched too many teen dramas. Based on your past experiences, relationships take time and effort to develop. Do you remember why unlike your brother you never managed to fall in love?"

"According to my therapist, I was too self-centered. I would only care about myself and protecting my own feeling, so I never opened up to any of the women I dated."

"It's exactly what you are doing even now. You are only thinking about what you want, not what it's best for her. The Ballot is useless for you. The Queen is openly backing you up, the Professors hold you in high esteem.

Not to mention how strong and fast you are. It's not like when you arrived. Your family is safe, you can defend yourself with ease and your word is not that of a country boy anymore. If anything happens, the academy will watch your back."

"The same could be said of Phloria." Lith still wasn't convinced.

"By my maker, if I had a body, I would slap you right here and now! Her family is not as powerful as the Queen. Also, is there anything that a student, if not even a Professor can do to you if you go all out?"

"No."

"There you have it! She is young and still traumatized, while you wouldn't flinch even if you ripped someone's heart out right before lunch. She needs it much more than you do."—

Knowing to be on the losing side of the argument, Lith dropped the conversation and walked past the doors of the academy's hospital waiting with his colleagues for the Healer lesson to start.

Much to everyone's surprise, not only Manohar had returned, but also was in charge of the class. Between his rare appearances, notable only for his whining ramblings, and the constant disappearing without notice, most students had almost forgotten about his existence.

"Good morning my dear students. Welcome back to class. You sure took a long break from the academy." His tone was clearly annoyed.

"It's not them that went missing for almost three months, but you!" Headmaster Linjos suddenly Warped in the middle of the class, his face beet red from anger.

Chapter 196 Seething Rage

"Fine. Good morning my dear students. Professor Manohar is really happy to see you again." Manohar accordingly modified his greeting.

"Don't talk in third person like a madman and show some respect toward the academy and your students!"

Linjos had hoped that by forcing the unruly Professor to take an active role in the Healer class, it would teach him a lesson about responsibility. His plan, however, had backfired right from the start.

"Why are you so angry? I had just got my hands on nagas' claws, you know how hard they are to come by. Also, yes, I may have lost track of time, but I did find a cure for Prixyne. Doesn't it amount to something?" Manohar rebuked with an indignant tone.

The class gasped in amazement. Prixyne was a congenital degenerative disease, even worse than the one Tista had suffered from during her youth. It would affect the nervous system, making it collapse over time.

It required constant treatments just to slow down the illness's progression and relieve the symptoms. For decades it had been considered a death sentence and now it had a permanent cure.

"Of course it does. It's the only reason why you are here instead of being chained to your desk!"

"Let's cut to the chase." Manohar ignored him, resuming his speech.

"You already have learned most of what you need to graduate as full-fledged fourth year healers. What you still lack is experience on the field. During the third trimester, there will be no more lessons.

The academy will send you wherever there is a dire need for a competent healer, and despite you don't even closely qualify, you'll have to do."

"Manohar!" Linjos roared.

"I mean, you will be split into groups and sent to different locations, like true professionals. You will contribute to the welfare of the Kingdom on the academy's behalf.

Your grades will be influenced by your performance. It will also affect the prestige and the name of the academy. Your success will be my success, your failure will be Linjos' failure. Everyone knows I never fail."

Linjos facepalmed, his killing intent became more palpable by the second.

"Since for some reason that I'm unable to understand our Headmaster is angry at me..."

"Because you went missing for almost three months!"

"...I'm forced to babysit the most incompetent group."

"Last warning!" Linjos' hands were dangerously close to Manohar's throat.

"I mean, I will supervise the work of those whose skills are still a diamond in the rough. All the other groups will not have a supervisor. Keep in mind that this opportunity is a great honour for all of you.

You have the chance to let your name be renowned even before graduation, to meet important figures of the Kingdom and help those in need.

At the same time, you'll probably kill someone due to your incompetence, giving my dear friend Marth an excellent excuse to kick you out of the academy and reduce my insane amount of paperwork."

"I'd never do such a thing!" Marth Warped in the class too.

"Also, it's completely different from the speech I wrote you. You had to encourage them to soldier up in the face of failure, telling them it's normal for a healer to lose a patient or make a wrong diagnosis!"

Before he could start an argument, Professor Marth took the lead.

"Remember, never listen to anything he says outside of the medical field. From today onwards, even if just for a few hours each day, you'll have the same role and responsibilities of an academy sanctioned healer.

"The reason you'll be split into groups is to be each other's lifeline. Never be afraid to ask for help or to admit your mistakes. If you manage to graduate this year and the next one, countless lives will be in your hands.

"It's a heavy responsibility that not everyone is capable to shoulder. A strong spirit, wits, and talent are the minimum requirements to become a good healer.

Go and make us proud."

Marth's assistants handed to each group the list of patients they had to attend to before the end of the lesson. Each name was associated with a hospital, along with the instructions of how to reach it from the city's closest branch of the Mage Association.

Lith's group belonged to the top percentile, so their list contained only sensitive names. Most patients weren't hospitalized, but required home visits. Professor Marth personally went to speak with them.

"I recommend you to always move together. I have the utmost trust in each one of you, but these people are powerful." He tapped on the list.

"It's better to not disappoint or offend them. Quylla, you are still too meek when dealing with patients, so I'll appoint you as team leader." Quylla turned pale, instinctively hiding behind Friya.

"You will take care of dealing with the families and make sure your colleagues receive the respect they deserve. Without a confident attitude, people will always walk all over you.

"Lith, your bedside manners are terrible. Your duty will be to take care of the patients' psychological welfare, explaining to them what's the cause of their affliction and reassuring them when necessary.

Friya will be the main healer and Yurial the diagnostician. You two have no weak point, aside from the lack of experience. If anything happens, contact the academy immediately and we will do the rest."

He patted them on the back before going to speak to another group. Yurial took a quick glance at the list, frowning with a worried expression.

"This is much worse than I thought. Most of these people are as stuck up as annoying. They consider my household unfit of its title because we contribute to the Kingdom from 'only' three generations.

I'm sorry Quylla, but either you put out your best Lith's impression or they'll use us like doormats. Let's get moving, we have a lot to do and so little time."

Lukart Household, Archmage Lukart's private quarters.

"What do you want this time, Lukart?"

"I need your help. This time you'd better pay attention. Velan Deirus is this close to finding proof of my connections with Hatorne and the Kandria's incident."

"Why should I care?" The voice on the other side of the communication amulet was annoyed, like a teacher dealing with a spoiled child.

"Because if I go down, I'll drag you with me. After the plague's outbreak, all my plans are ruined. I have no reason to proceed against the White Griffon anymore, aside from your constant blackmailing me.

Your plans have no chance of success without my help, and if they catch me red handed I'll make sure we'll share the same cell."

"Don't you dare to threaten me, Lukart. I just need one word to get you killed."

"Do it and you'll suffer the same fate. I'm not stupid. I already made sure that if anything happens to me, recordings of all our conversations will be delivered to at least fifty royal constables. Not even you can stop all of them."

From the other side came a crushing sound, like something big and heavy being destroyed.

"What do you want?"

"The same thing I asked you the last time. Kill Deirus's son, I don't care how."

"How do I know I can trust your word?" The voice oozed disgust.

"You can't, but know this. I'm preparing to leave the Kingdom since the outbreak, my only problem is that with Deirus breathing down my neck it's taking too much time. I can't move too many assets or funds at once, or he will notice.

If you do this last favour for me, I'll get out of your hair forever and leave you everything you need to reach your goal."

"You are a lucky man, Lukart." The voice seemed to calm down.

"Yurial Deirus has just left the academy. I know where he will be for the next hours."

"If he is outside the academy, I can take care of him myself. Just give me his coordinates."

"Your gift for failure has long stopped amusing me, Lukart. You can't be trusted with picking your own nose. I'll send my own men. You focus on packing your stuff. You are likely to screw that up too, but at least there shouldn't be casualties."

The group's home visits went smoothly. They were still students after all, Marth would never burden them with a task above their skills. The challenge wasn't curing diseases, rather to learn how to find the way in an unknown environment and to deal with the patients.

Their first destination was Vinea, a beautiful city built around a small lagoon. The uptown district was crescent shaped, so that every mansion would be overlooking the sea.

Water separated the city blocks, forming canals that could be crossed either by boat or using one of the many stone bridges. The group had almost reached the address, yet Quylla was walking behind the others, fiddling with her hair and rehearsing all the introduction lines she could think of over and over.

- "If she doesn't snap out of it, we'll never finish our round in time. Sorry, little sis, but it's for your own good."— Friya hated herself for what she was about to do, but she couldn't stand her best friend always being so passive.

"You know Lith, this city is quite a sight to behold." She waved her hand, encompassing the clear blue sky and the lagoon's crystal clear water.

"Only if you like humidity and scavenging birds raining death from above." He grumpily replied while dodging the bird po*p that paved most of the way.

- "If it wasn't for the lack of gondolas, this city would remind me of Venice." Lith thought. "Not to mention that on Earth pigeon's droppings aren't as big as an omelet."—

The birds plaguing the lagoon closely resembled seagulls, but their size was akin to a pelican.

"It's a pity that Phloria can't enjoy this view." Friya ignored his remark, keeping her eyes on Quylla's reaction.

"Even for me, it's the first time seeing the sea. I find Vinea truly romantic. Why don't you take her here during the weekend? I'm sure she would love it."

"I'll think about it." He said.

- "Maybe too romantic. Not to mention that I don't have time for this cr*p." He actually thought. "If I manage to learn Blink before the weekend, to keep my training schedule and if I don't make any more breakthroughs with the boxes, then I'll consider the possibility."

"You are impossible!" Solus was outraged. "Just this morning you were whining about the lack of romance between you two and now you already consider her a second, no a fourth best option?"

You are supposed to make time for her, not to just use her to fill the blank spaces!"—

After hearing them talk, Quylla's eyes steeled with rage. She marched double time, taking the list from Yurial's hand to check the address before banging the knocker with enough strength to make the door tremble.

A butler in a black and white livery, that reminded Lith of a smoking, abruptly opened the door with an annoyed expression.

"Yes?" He didn't even care to hide his disgust at the sight of the group, dilating his nostrils and curling his upper lip like someone had delivered garbage.

"Good morning, good sir." Quylla's voice sounded sweet like an unripe lemon.

"We are the White Griffon's healers. Lead us to our patient, please."

"The front door is only for the guests. Go around back to the service entrance." The butler attempted to close the door, but Quylla stopped him

"Your name." She hissed.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I want your name, so that when I report to Headmaster Linjos why we couldn't treat your master, he can explain why and who deserves credit for house Korya losing its privileges with the academy. I'm sure your master will reward you well."

Her eyes were reduced to slits brimming with mana. The butler turned pale as a ghost. Angering a mage was already bad enough, but if his actions damaged the household, he would consider himself lucky by being just skinned alive.

"I'm very sorry, Lady Mage." He stuttered. "Please, have mercy of this old fool. You and your mighty colleagues are the most welcome." He opened the door, half kneeling in front of her as soon as she entered.

"Lead the way." Quylla snarled.

That day, more than one butler who dared to disrespect them, become unable to even meet her gaze or speak to Quylla without bowing first.

Chapter 197 Helpless

In the end, Lith was the one who got the short end of the stick. The new Quylla was a pocket sized bulldozer, while Friya and Yurial could always ask the other two for a second opinion whenever they had a doubt.

Lith, instead, had to smile more than he had ever done his whole life while listening to idiotic questions and worries. He was forced to reply without sarcasm or spicing his answers up with insults like he was used to back in Lutia.

He still managed to do it, thanks to Solus' help, his companions' constantly worried looks and the occasional friendly nudge in the ribs.

The rest of the morning was uneventful. They checked off over half the list and had time to spare. Their next destination was House Seket, in the uptown district of the city of Lorion.

"I was thinking that if we manage to finish our rounds early, we could actually come back and have lunch here. I heard that Lorion's salmon mousse is to die for. My treat." Yurial said.

"Great idea! Let's get Phloria too, though. It would be sad for her to have to eat alone at the academy." Friya agreed, purposely adding fuel to the fire.

"It would be too sad." Quylla echoed, while she kept getting knots in her stomach.

"Not a big fan of fish. Do they have some good meat?" Lith's mouth and brain seemed to be disconnected. Even before finishing his sentence, he was already cursing at himself, waiting for Solus to scold him again.

Then, a Warden array appeared out of nowhere under their feet, Warping them away.

"What the heck just happened?" The Queen's corps unit that was assigned to the group as a detail was shocked. Half of them were undercover, following them closely, while the other half would scout the group's more likely routes to check for dangers.

Every student of the academy was considered an invaluable asset and the future backbone of the Kingdom. Knowing there was at least one traitor in the academy, Linjos had assigned a detail to every group without notifying anyone but the Queen.

Yet his precautions proved to not be enough. The squad was composed only of veterans, so they immediately contacted their commanding officer and requested back up, searching for their targets at the same time.

"Where are they?" The captain asked the unit's Warden. Linjos' paranoia was finally paying off. In case something like this happened, he had the uniforms imbued with a powerful tracking spell that could be remotely activated.

"The good news is that I have their position. The enemies have taken them quite far, but Linjos has spared no effort in those trackers. Four of them together produce a signal so strong that we could pinpoint them even at half a county of distance."

"He's not here, stop blowing smoke up Linjos' a*s and give me the bad news." The captain roared.

"They are a few kilometres away. Unless one of us is familiar with the outskirts of the city, it will take a while to get there even at full speed. Our enemies spared no effort too." The Warden sighed.

"Damn! Let's hope they can hold on long enough. Otherwise the Queen will have our heads."

The moment the Warping array activated, Lith and Solus prepared for battle. The rest of the group was panicking, trying to make heads or tails out of their situation.

"Ambush! Get ready to run!" Lith yelled, fearing he had just walked into a trap similar to the one used to kill Captain Velagros (*) and his unit. He immediately conjured several spells at once, activating both Life Vision and mana sense.

He wouldn't let any array or enemy take him by surprise again.

His companions were scared, but Lith's warning made them regain their cool and become wary of their new surroundings. They had been transported to the slums of the city, in the middle of a back alley.

The stench coming from the open sewers was enough to make them puke, but fear kept them focused.

- "No arrays?"- Lith was pleasantly surprised, failing to remember that the previous ambush had been tailored for an elite military unit, not for a bunch of teenagers. Yet he couldn't relax, there were too many life forces nearby and he had no idea who was a real hobo and who was just pretending.

Suddenly, a shadow jumped from behind a heap of garbage into the middle of the group. His dirty, raggedy clothes and some makeup made the man look like a beggar, but his curved blade aiming at Yurial's throat told a different story.

"Yurial!" Friya screamed, making her hands fumble the signs necessary to save him from death with a timely Blink.

The green radiance of enchanted steel, a splash of blood.

It was all that it took for the cleanly cut head to hit the ground with a thud, rolling in the middle of the group with an expression still filled with fear stamped on its face.

"I never understood why you guys never cauterized the enemies' wounds during the exam. There's never a reason to make a bloody mess."

Lith had appeared out of nowhere right in front of Yurial. His left hand was clenching the corpse's crushed right wrist while the right one was open and covered by a layer of ice that made it razor sharp.

The battle experience of the group of assassins was first class, but they were no Talons. No one had told them about the Queen's corps involvement, so when they noticed the detail protecting the kids, they had been forced to improvise.

The Warp array was a last minute trick, to bring the target to a secluded place they were familiar with. It implied they had no opportunity to prepare the field in advance, since their Warden had to stay behind to cast the Warp array at the right moment.

A man placing magical stones in the middle of the road of one of the most exclusive districts of Lorion was beyond suspicious. The residents would have called the guards faster than if they had painted with blood the word "Murder" on a wall.

They had no idea their opponent was the Queen's corps, otherwise they would have long fled. With so many unforeseen problems the mission was already a disaster, yet it managed to get even worse.

As soon as they moved toward the target, some of Lith's rings glowed, releasing several fireballs aimed at them. They exploded beside or above the assassins' hiding spots, engulfing them in flames that would have been lethal if not for their enchanted protections.

"How the heck does he know where we are?" The leader screamed in his communication earpiece, having become temporarily deaf due to the explosion.

"It's almost like he can see us!"

- "I actually do." Lith thought with a wolfish smile on his face. "Let's see if they like this."—

Lith shot another round of fireballs, this time high in the sky.

"Oh gods, why?" The assassins' leader was on the verge of tears. The key to a job well done was to be quick and go unnoticed. With so many fireballs flying around it was just a matter of time before the city guards and the Mage Association swarmed the place.

"I could use a little help, here." Lith said while shooting down whoever ran towards them instead of away from them.

Yurial stopped staring at the head laying at his feet, remembering who he was and who he was meant to become.

"Friya, protect me! I'm clearly the target of the attempt. Quylla, keep the flames under control! This may be a sh*thole, but there are people living here and they need our protection. Lith..." His brain froze for a split second.

What kind of advice could he possibly give to someone that moved faster than his eyes could see and capable of attacking fiercely like a divine punishment?

- "I literally meant to help me, not to do damage control." Lith thought, surprised by Yurial's care for the residents. "Whatever. The more spell they cast, the less people will be able to understand who did what." -

"You just focus on those b*stards, I'll cover your back!" If there was something that Yurial had learned from Lith's negative attitude, fueled by his unbridled paranoia, was to always expect the worst.

Hence Yurial started to conjure the faster arrays of his repertoire in case something went wrong.

Less than ten seconds had passed since the activation of the Warp array, and most of the assassins were already dead or gravely injured.

- "F*ck! If I leave even one of my men behind, my identity will be exposed. A royal constable's tortures can even make you remember how much milk you drank as a newborn. I can only kill my way out of here."— The leader thought.

"Code black! Repeat code black! We sink or swim here, boys!" He yelled in his earpiece. The remaining assassins quickly gulped down all the enhancing potions they had, even those with dangerous side effects.

While their leader bravely charged forward, they ran away as one, scattering in all directions. Their only wish was to see another day as free men. No amount of money was worth their lives.

The leader was now empowered by top tier Hatorne (*) potions, that turned him into a one man army.

He easily dodged the barrage of incoming spells. To his eyes the world was now moving in slow motion. He had never felt so powerful in his whole life. The first target was the rugrat that had ruined their ambush.

Years of experience in the field had honed his instinct. The other three were like mages riding on the back of a dragon, his sword had no chance to reach them without slaying the beast first.

Seeing his mana was going to waste, Lith interrupted his casting, projecting instead a shroud of spirit magic that engulfed the assassin and squeezed him like a wet rug.

The leader noticed something was attempting to restrain him, but he shrugged off the feeling with sheer force.

- "F*ck!" Lith thought. "Whatever this guy is high on, has effects so similar to fusion magic that the mana flowing in his body counters my spirit magic. Time for plan B."—

Lith infused himself with all the elements at once with fusion magic. The assassin executed several feints, using footwork to make his real target unpredictable.

Between the high speed movements and the abysmal gap in technique, Lith was left in a daze. He was still physically superior, but thanks to the potions the assassin was able to use the advantage coming from his combat skills to put Lith on the defensive.

The sword struck Lith several times, piercing both the uniform and his magically hardened skin. Lith had managed to avoid or block all the slashes aimed to his vitals, but it came at a price.

His arms and legs were full of cuts, some even deep enough to bleed profusely.

"Do you see it, men? If he bleeds, we can kill it!"

From their short exchange the leader had partially regained his confidence. The rugrat was a monster, but still an untrained civilian.

Now that he had managed to stop the little monster from raining death from above by putting his life on the line, his teammates could safely join the battle. It was only a matter of seconds before they surrounded the rugrat and killed him with their teamwork.

- "Any moment now."— The leader stopped his attacks to catch his breath, taking a quick look over his shoulder to check the situation. Only then he realized no one was coming to his help.

Lith exploited that pause to use Invigoration, making his wounds close with a speed visible to the naked eye and sending the assassin further into panic. He immediately resumed his attack, discovering that little by little the monster was getting used to his pattern.

"I still need help, here!" Lith yelled after noticing his opponent's distress. Yurial racked his brain to find a way to help him, but they were moving too fast. If they attacked without a plan, the enemy could exploit their spells turning Lith into a human shield.

Their opponent was the one with a clear line of sight, while their friend was unaware of their actions. The only silver lining was that he had already finished placing the first array, so he was able to talk again.

"Quylla, attack on Lith's right side. Friya, same on the left. Lith, push forward." Yurial yelled.

"F*ck, no!" The assassin moaned.

Chapter 198 Helpless 2

The earth all around the assassin turned into mud while spears of ice as big as a man randomly fell from above. Without space to move around, his footwork was nothing but a silly dance. Strength had become the deciding factor.

- "At least he has already used up all his rings. If he attempts to cast, I can kill him in a split second. As long we are lined up, his friends cannot aim at me properly."—

The assassin was right, except for one detail. Lith had only used one ring in the opening act, the other spells were silent cast with true magic. True magic was silent, but still required time for casting, so he saved the rings for later, just in case.

All he had to do was to spread his fingers, releasing the remaining nine at once. Cursing at his bad luck for meeting such a monster disguised as a rugrat, the assassin crushed the medallion he wore at his neck, activating his last stand item.

Multiple barriers enveloped him, negating most of the damage. The sheer force of the impacts, though, was another matter entirely. The assassin was knocked back right to the point where the battle had started.

Yurial activated his Earth Vines array, entangling the assassin's body with tendrils conjured from the hardest minerals in the soil, devised to be powerful enough to keep even magical beasts in check.

Four bolts of darkness magic hit him from the front, above, and the sides. The moment the array was activated, Lith had crouched down, clearing his teammates' line of fire.

Seeing how sturdy and resourceful their opponent was, they knew that restricting him wasn't enough, but it created an opening. They all decided to use darkness magic because, despite being slow and mana expensive, it was the most difficult element to defend against.

It directly attacked the enemy's life force, so a hardened skin or a magically enhanced chain mail didn't offer much protection from it. The dark energy sapped the assassin's strength and vitality, turning the scratches he had suffered during his clashes with Lith into open wounds and the bruises into internal bleedings.

"You suck!" The assassin cursed at Lith, spitting a mouthful of blood from the many broken ribs that were now piercing his lungs due to the darkness ravaging his body.

"You are barely an amateur. Technique, experience, footwork, you are below me in every aspect. Why am I the one that ended up losing? This is not fair!"

Another four bolts of darkness struck the assassin, putting him out of his misery.

"Yeah, and if my grandpa had three balls instead of two, he could have been a pinball." Lith replied only after confirming that the assassin's life force was fading away.

- "What pisses me off the most is that he is right. I really need to join the army and receive some proper training. Most of my knowledge about martial arts is only about unarmed combat. Aside from our sparring, Solus, I have no real practice.

"I'd need a master to polish my skills, since neither of us has the talent necessary to derive new notions from what I already know. Not to mention how I keep suffering from not having a decent weapon nor training in the way of the sword.

"The practice I had with Phloria during the first trimester barely taught me to hold a real weapon. After that, between the exams, the plague, and dimensional magic I hardly touched a sword.

"Awakened ones and Monsters can use true magic just like me. When magical skills are on the same level, combat technique and equipment make the difference between life and death." Lith thought.

"Once we learn more about Forgemastering, we will be able to make our own equipment." Solus mind-nodded.

"For the training, though, there is not much we can do for the time being. The academy takes too much time. Even if it didn't, mastering magic and combat skills at the same time is unheard of in all the books we read. Progress, not perfection. Remember?"—

"Lith, are you all right?" His companions asked in unison.

"Yeah, only flesh wounds." He extended his arms, revealing that aside from small cuts in the uniform, only shallow injuries remained. Lith studied their reactions carefully.

He had shared with them part of his secret, but only now could they realize the scope of his revelation. They were still shaken up by the ambush, so Lith could see right through them.

- "Surprise aside, Yurial seems to be really impressed. Friya is conflicted between fear and admiration instead. She probably longs for this kind of power, but at the same time she is afraid I could turn it against her. Quylla is beyond me though."

Lith could see something resembling pain in her expression, but she wasn't hurt. Her eyes were a little watery, but there was no trace of fear, making her a mystery.

"What you see is compassion." Solus answered the riddle for him. —

"How did you do that? I mean moving so fast and taking so little damage?" Yurial asked.

"I told you I'm faster and stronger than a normal person. Also while you were spacing out I consumed enhancing potions." He lied.

"As for the damage, I must thank the Forgemasters that enchanted the uniform and Professor Trasque's lessons about using first magic in combat. I used a lot of earth magic to deflect most of the sword strikes."

"Did it hurt?" Quylla asked while tending to Lith's wounds.

"Of course it did." Lith gave his first honest answer.

"I might be a little different from you guys, but I feel pain like anyone else."

"I'm so sorry you suffered so many injuries just to protect us. I wish there was more I can do." Quylla gently wiped off the blood from his skin before stepping away.

Yurial grabbed Lith by the shoulders, his breath was still ragged because of the physical and mental exertion, but his voice was calm.

"Thank you for saving my life." He then looked at Friya and Quylla too.

"Thanks to you all for sticking with me, instead of running away like the associates of this poor b*stard." Yurial kicked the corpse with more anger than pity. It seemed no one was going to be traumatized this time.

"In my darkest hour you remained by my side, you are the best friends a man could wish for. I..."

"Queen's corps, nobody moves!" A voice suddenly roared.

The five members of the unit landed in the middle of the alley, finding it difficult to hide their surprise. The place looked like a warzone. There were several burn marks on the house walls, spears of ice scattered everywhere and a small crater where the spells contained in Lith's rings had crashed into the barrier.

Five dead bodies lay on the ground, yet the students were without a scratch.

"What the f*ck?" A member of the unit blurted out, drawing on himself reproving looks from his colleagues. Normally the Captain would have scolded him for his lack of professionalism, but he couldn't do it in front of the students.

Not to mention he had expressed the feelings of the whole unit, so the Captain decided to let it slide.

"Have the soldiers secure the perimeter, then search for survivors. Maybe one of them is still alive for interrogation." The Captain opened a Warp Steps leading back to the Mage Association right in front of the group.

"Get in, kids. First, I need to get you to safety. Then you have to tell me exactly what happened here."

"There is not much to explain, sir. It's all thanks to teamwork." Yurial replied.

White Griffon academy, Headmaster Linjos' office

As soon as Linjos was informed about the assassination attempt, he didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"It's worse than I thought." He explained to the Queen.

"Either I have traitors in every department, or it's someone really deep in my inner circle. The leaked information is too precise to be the work of a single clerk or of a Professor of the old guard.

Even though it's hard to say how far the reach of people like Vastor or Rudd goes. Even if I keep them in the dark, nothing I do ever seems to surprise them."

Linjos pensively scratched his goatee.

"I doubt the traitor is one of them." Queen Sylpha shook her head.

"Vastor has no faction outside his own. If the Kingdom plunges into chaos, he would lose at least half of his connections. He'd rather die than put to waste so many years of efforts.

As for Rudd, deep under that obnoxious 'old goat' attitude of his, there is a true loyal servant of the kingdom. Beware though. If you go even deeper, you'll find another old goat."

"What really puzzles me is how someone that has managed to infiltrate the academy to such a level can be dumb enough to send amateurs to kill fourth year students. Even if young, a dragon is still a dragon."

"Maybe he is not dumb. Or do you know something that I don't?" The Queen appeared to be quite amused.

"No, the investigation is still ongoing, but how hard can killing four students possibly be? Especially considering that two out of four remained scarred after killing a single person?"

White Griffon academy, somewhere else

"How hard can killing four f*cking students possibly be?" The traitor yelled while trashing their own apartment.

"Especially considering that I gave those idiots a complete background check on every single one of them?" A punch hit a luxurious desk, causing it to crack almost in half.

"The battle experience of three of them amounts to fighting acne! The last one is a deranged psychopath that only preys on the weak and magical beasts to make a quick buck." A bookshelf was ripped from the wall and crushed to bits, while the precious books were stomped mercilessly.

"Who would have thought that the reputation of the Ravagers was just a blatant lie?" They panted.

"They were supposed to hit and run, leaving no traces behind. This is a disaster! If I were superstitious, I'd think that Lukart's incompetence jinxed me. Luckily, it doesn't matter." It took a few deep breaths to calm down

"Worst case scenario, I can give Lukart part of my funds to keep him quiet. I just need a bit more time to put the last pieces in place, before I'm able to destroy this place to its very foundations."

Back at the academy, Yurial managed to doctor the story, explaining how they survived the ambush with little damage. To achieve his goal, he had to significantly reduce Lith's contribution to the battle, making a hero out of Friya instead.

Having a Mage Knight capable of Blinking proficiently before the end of the fourth year was something so rare, it even impressed the members of the Queen's corps. Many of them had undergone special training in the military to achieve the same result.

Less than half the students from even the six great academies were able to learn dimensional magic and even less would usually master the Blink spell. It perfectly explained why the initial assault had failed and how the Ravagers died where they stood.

In Yurial's version of the story, the three of them had provided cover fire while Friya Blinked through the battlefield using her rings to mow down the enemies.

"Your nerve and combat awareness are worthy of the Ernas' name." The Captain of their detail shook Friya's hand with eyes full of respect and admiration.

"If you ever decide to serve the Crown, I'll make sure there will be a spot reserved for you in the Queen's corps."

"Your words are too kind, it wasn't much." Friya was red from embarrassment, not because of the lie, but because she was actually able to do everything Yurial had said, if only she didn't panic.

- "This is the most humiliating moment of my life." She thought. "Being treated as a hero while all I could do was listen to Yurial's orders like a puppet and cover behind Lith's back. After what I went through, I'm still all bark and no bite.

I must master dimensional magic at all costs, until I'm able to turn this shameful lie into reality. I don't want to feel so helpless ever again!"—

"I'm deeply sorry for what happened." Once the corps' men left the office, Linjos gave his students a small bow.

"From now on, Professor Trasque will accompany you during your rounds. Along with the detail, of course. He is the best Battle Mage of the White Griffon. With the corps watching you from a distance and him at your side, it would take a natural disaster to harm you.

Chapter 199 Frost Dew

"Lord Deirus, do you suspect anyone of being behind this attack?" Linjos asked.

"Suspects, no. More like certainty. Lukart." Yurial's tone was filled with spite.

"This is a very serious accusation. Also, I don't think Archmage Lukart would kill you just because I have expelled his son. Anyway, do you have any proof backing your theory?"

"You expelled Lyam?" Yurial was so surprised to not notice Lith mourning the fate of their schoolmate with high fives and down lows with the rest of the team members.

"Too slow." Lith dodged Friya's hand, giving her a feeble slap on the nape.

"Yes, I did." A cold shiver ran down Linjos' spine. He could almost see Manohar's shadow behind Lith's complete lack of respect towards a fellow student. No matter how toxic Lukart had been, in Linjos' mind his expulsion was a loss for all the magical community. It wasn't something to celebrate.

"I have a file as long as my arm about him and his gang, but I lacked solid evidence. A class full of witnesses and an angry Professor were simply overkill. I'll ask you again, do you have proof?"

"Yes and no." Looking at the confused expressions of those present, Yurial explained.

"This has nothing to do with Lyam's expulsion, nor with the rivalry between our families. The problem is that I can't talk about this matter without my father's approval. So yes, I do have proof, but no I can't show it to you."

"Should I speak with Archmage Deirus, then?" Linjos drummed his fingers on the armrest of his chair with a pensive look on his face. He had heard many dark whispers about Lukart recently, but he had always refused to believe them.

After all, only those who greatly contributed to the Kingdom would be bestowed the title of Archmage.

"Yes. I can't betray my father's trust."

"If there's nothing you have to add, then you are free to go. I would love to give you the rest of the day off, but alas the academy must go on. You'll complete today's round tomorrow, first thing in the morning.

Professor Trasque will bring you to your destination."

"Actually, there is one more thing." Lith raised his hand.

"Speak freely." Linjos sighed. He couldn't wait to get rid of them to talk with Deirus first and the Queen later. She had to know he had found another candidate for the special list. First Lith, then Phloria and now Friya.

For someone with anti social behavior, Lith seemed to be a magnet for talented individuals.

- "Maybe it's because of the age, but I'm starting to sound more like Vastor every day."—

"Two of us are still without a Ballot. When can we expect the new ones to arrive?"

"Never." The question hit a sore spot, making the Headmaster's long face even longer.

"After the accident in the dimensional magic training hall, I started to suspect there was a traitor among our ranks. After the events occurred during the past months, I'm sure of it. No one outside the healing department could know your destination.

"I can't let anyone I don't trust blindly near the academy's power core, especially Forgemasters. It would be too dangerous. A slight alteration of the power core and the whole castle would become a deadly puppet in the traitor's hand."

Linjos hid his face behind his hands in shame. He knew that despite the best efforts of the academy's staff, many students were going through a rough spot. After the forced break during the plague outbreak, several of them had seen their grades drop.

The second exam had only made things worse. Despite the number of students promoted from the second to the third trimester was at an all time high, the grades' average was at an all time low.

Linjos had listened to their stories and they were all dreadful. Some had failed on purpose, to go unnoticed and have at least a semblance of a peaceful life. Others were being harassed just enough to make their life miserable and were on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Linjos had been forced to choose between their peace of mind and their physical safety, prioritizing the latter. He knew he had failed them, but there was nothing he could do.

Hearing those words, Lith could do nothing but sigh. His last excuse had just crumbled.

Lith regretted having lost his first occasion to eat in a restaurant without having to worry about the bill. During lunch Yurial told to Phloria the official version of their adventure, before whispering to her the truth.

"Thank the gods you are all right. I wish I was there to help you. Did it hurt much?" Phloria touched Lith's arm, noticing the small cuts the uniform was still repairing.

Lith nodded in reply.

- "It's so odd that both Quylla and Phloria almost used the same words." Lith thought. "Guess it means they both care for me. I remember that when I was her age and I still lived with my parents, I often suffered from unrequited love. I wish there was something I could do to help her move on."—

Phloria caressed his hand, giving him a warm and fuzzy feeling that Lith hadn't experienced since he was still a newborn in Elina's embrace. It was soothing and pleasant, almost making him lower his guard.

Lith hated that moment of vulnerability, so he took back his hand after pretending to have dropped his napkin.

During the afternoon, Lith went to the first Forgemastering lesson of the third trimester. He had long waited for that moment to come. Lith had several things he wanted to ask Professor Wanemyre.

"Good evening, dear students. It's good to see so many of you back after the second trimester. Usually this time of the year is a bit lonely for me." She gave them a radiant smile that gave Lith the chills.

- "What the heck? First Nalear and now Wanemyre too? She also seems prettier than before. This makes no sense. Also, I have never seen her smile so much. Not even when someone performed a perfect enchanted item.

I'm telling you Solus, something is off."

"Maybe she too found someone special, but unlike someone I know she is letting herself go instead of playing impossible to get." Her voice was filled with sarcasm.

"What makes you think that?"

"The makeup, the jewelry, the smiles." Solus scoffed while pointing out the various details he had missed.

"She clearly wants to impress someone that makes her feel special."

Lith took notice of all the changes, only growing more and more suspicious.

"Say what you want. I can't believe a person of that age can change so much in a bit more than ten days. She wasn't like that before the end of the trimester."—

"In the last six months, you have practiced how to create the most common magical tools, like dimensional items, reinforced clothes, and magic storing rings. All these objects have one thing in common: despite you needing to cast several spells of all the elements to obtain them, the final sum is zero.

None of them has any elemental property, hence they are called neutral items. From today onwards, I'll explain to you how to infuse an object with a single element. Infusing multiple elements has the same requirements of performing multiple enchantments, and will be a subject of the fifth year."

She looked sternly at Lith. Clearly, she and Nalear had talked.

"Contrary to what you have learned so far, giving an object elemental properties cannot be done without ingredients. If any of you has some notions of Alchemy, you'll notice that this is one of those cases where the two disciplines overlap.

But unlike Alchemy, where ingredients are necessary to absorb the element and store it for future uses, Forgemastering does the opposite. This happens because alchemical items exploit their own instability to bring out the stronger effect possible.

A Forgemaster only aims to create something that can be used endlessly instead. Infusing an object with an element means that the Forgemaster has to purposely alter the balance of their own spell in favour of the chosen element.

That would cause the final product to be slowly eroded by the very energies that empower it, until either it crumbles or explodes. To prevent that, an ingredient is needed.

For example, if we want to infuse the fire element we don't need a fire based magical treasure, but a water one. It acts as a counterweight during the forgemastering process and restores the balance.

The stronger the intended effect, the more powerful and rarer the ingredient usually is. I waited for the third trimester to introduce this technique because even simple enchantments require very expensive natural treasures.

There is only so much that you can learn by reading a book, Forgemastering requires a lot of practice to be mastered. That's why the last trimester will be about putting into practice what you have studied so far until it becomes second nature to you."

Wanemyre clapped her hands, making appear on the desk of every student a bowl full of water, a silk cloth, and a crystal looking flower.

It was very similar to an Earth chrysanthemum, but instead of petals it was composed of delicate ice shards exuding a faint blue glow, constantly condensing the humidity in the class into dew.

"The ingredient you'll learn to handle today is called the Frost Dew flower. It grows in the forest surrounding the academy, making it uncommon for the White Griffon residents. For the rest of the world it's quite rare, though.

As you can see, I provided you the full plant. When picking up a natural treasure no part of it has to be removed, otherwise it will lose some if not all of its potency as an ingredient."

Lith noticed that even the roots were intact. Whoever picked it up, had executed the task with meticulous attention.

"The first thing to do is to remove all the impurities from the stem, roots, and leaves. The flower requires a separate treatment that I'll explain later. Use the water bowl to wash away dirt, earth and insects' eggs.

"Clean it one leaf at a time and try to only use your fingertips. The stem is more resilient, you only need to be careful not to break it. As for the roots, avoid touching them at all. Just dip them in the water until the earth turns into mud and detaches itself.

"Always keep the water clean. You'll understand you are doing it right if the Frost Dew's glow increases.

"The treatment requires a gentle touch like you are cleaning a wound. Manhandle the ingredient and it will become useless. You can also use first magic if you are confident enough in your skills. If you have any questions, feel free to ask. Otherwise, begin."

Removing impurities was second nature to Lith, so he directly used water magic to take control of the water in the bowl and make it gently flow over every centimeter of the plant.

As soon as he identified clots of dirt, he would use earth magic to remove them and then added fresh water. Out of curiosity he used Invigoration too, discovering that the flower still had a vigorous mana flow.

- "This reminds me that I have yet to properly examine the magical plants the dryad gave me as a reward for sparing her sister's life. Sigh, I can't wait for the winter break. I have so many things that need my attention and so little time."—

The Marchioness had warned him to not show them around and he had no use for them. With everything he had on his plate, after checking their type, rarity, and market value, Lith had completely forgotten about their existence.

Lith could also perceive how the contact with water temporarily revitalized the flower, while the cleaning process was strengthening its mana flow to the point Lith could see his breath steam.

He had initially considered the task a chore, but soon Lith noticed that the ever growing mana flow was starting to resemble a pseudo core.

- "Is it possible that if properly nurtured even a plant can evolve? Maybe that's how dryads are born. Invigoration allows me to see and remove internal impurities, I wonder what would happen if I completely purified it before performing the Forgemastering process."

"It's more than that. Maybe we can use Invigoration to artificially grow magical treasures, if not even give birth to plant creatures." Solus pointed out. —

Lith's scientific curiosity was excited on a new level. He became more and more engrossed in his work, forgetting about everything but achieving perfection.

Solus took a mental note of his wish, already picturing Lith's despair when he would realize that every discovery he made would take away more of his free time to be studied. Their list of "to do" things was already so long Solus doubted he could even afford to sleep once a month.

Lith used the silk cloth to dab the water before calling the Professor.

"Good gods, ten minutes have yet to pass and you finished already? I can even see hoarfrost on the petals. Someone seems to be a natural. Fifty points for achieving so much at the first try. I think this might be a new record for the academy."

Lith swallowed a lump of saliva, a stinging sensation at the base of the neck made him raise his head. Every single student was staring at him with eyes brimming with burning hate. Their collective gaze exuded a faint killing intent.

Chapter 200 Frost Dew 2

Wanemyre didn't miss the envious glares, reverting immediately to her old self. She slammed her hand on a desk, producing a deafening sound and drawing the students' attention on her.

"Instead of wasting your time staring at him, mind your own task. You, up there." She pointed to a red haired girl, sitting a couple of desks behind Lith.

"I said to be delicate with the leaves. Keep up like that and they will crumple." To her defence, she was just clenching her hands in frustration. The problem was she had completely forgotten what she was doing.

"As for you." Wanemyre pointed to a slim boy sitting right in front of her.

"You don't change your water often enough. That way you are not cleaning the Frost Dew, just moving the dirt from one spot to another."

The two students rushed to correct the situation according to the Professor's instructions.

"I'd like to tell you to keep your cool, that this isn't a competition, but it damn is. Once you graduate, or even better if you graduate, who do you think will buy the creations of a nameless Forgemaster? No one but friends, relatives, and the Mage Association.

The Association will not purchase from you just to provide you some pocket money, but to evaluate the quality of your work and establish its market value. So if you start losing your head while you are still in the academy, you'd better change your specialization."

Wanemyre gave them a few seconds to ponder on her words.

"Since you have decided on your own to take a break, I'll explain now how to treat the flower. Be sure to pay attention, because I will not repeat myself." Under her fierce gaze, the students gently placed their flowers on the silk cloth, like it was a priceless gem.

"Smart move. The flower needs even more care. You can't touch it at all or drench it in the water. You need to drip lukewarm water on each petal, stopping as soon as the external frost layer does not form anymore.

Use too much water and you'll melt the petal, too little and the impurities will not be removed." She used Lith's flower to show them the method.

"Start from the innermost petals and then move towards the outer ones, otherwise the dirt dripping from the center will easily ruin your work."

After three water droplets, Wanemyre stopped dripping the petal, letting it dry. Just a few seconds later, the class could see that one of the petals seemed to have grown longer, emitting a stronger glow.

Wanemyre gave the flower back to Lith.

"Keep up the good work, but don't get conceited. I accepted this job because I want to nurture my future competitors. Without a proper challenge, being a Forgemaster is too boring for me. Don't let me down." She patted his head like he was a dog.

- "Charming as usual." Lith thought. "I doubt even a gold digger could stand her for long. She makes Phloria appear like a delicate flower. If she really is in love, then I'll bark like a dog."

"I'll take that bet." Solus replied before he could change his mind. –

Lith did as instructed, cleaning the petals from the inside out. Once cleansed they became crystal clear, absorbing the humidity from the air and adding it to their mass before their temperature dropped again.

- "Interesting. This flower is actually made of water frozen by the mana stored into the stem, leaves, and roots. It must be incredibly delicate if even common impurities affect its growth to this extent."

"Yeah, but don't you think it's kind of cruel?" Solus shivered a bit.

"I mean, it's actually growing under your care. The pseudo core keeps becoming bigger and more complex. I don't know how to feel about sacrificing it for our gain."

"Well, it's not really alive. It has a mana flow but almost no life force. Even if it was alive, my family raises animals just to turn them into money and food. I hunt and kill for a living. It's no big deal as long as you don't hurt others for no reason."—

This time Lith was careful not to be too fast. Not because he was afraid to show his skills but rather to take his time and carefully study the procedure to better be able to repeat it in the future.

Once again Wanemyre was an enthusiast of his results.

"Marvelous! You managed to develop the rest of the petals at the same rate as the one I cleansed."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?" Lith blurted out.

"Of course it is. You remind me of my days as a student."

- "Yeah, too bad you were really twelve at the time and only used your talent, while I have many years of experience in cleansing impurities much smaller than these ones."

"Quit whining and take the compliment." Solus scolded him.

"She acknowledged the results of your hard work. Being hardworking is a talent too!"

"Now you are talking like a shounen manga."—

They would have kept bickering, but Wanemyre had drawn on a stone table a magic circle like Lith had never seen before. It consisted of two concentric circles, with runes in-between, and a six pointed star resembling Silverwing's Hexagram enclosed in the smaller circle.

"Since everyone is about to finish the second step, let's all take a break so I can give you a demonstration of today's spell." Wanemyre took Lith's Frost Dew, placing it in the middle of the magic circle alongside a longsword of excellent quality.

Wanemyre ordered Lith and the red haired girl to charge the magic circle, so they took place on the opposite sides of the desk and chanted the Forgemaster spell in unison.

To fill the space within the circle with pure non elemental mana they had to repeat it several times. Wanemyre allowed them to stop only when the runes turned from blue to white hot, marking the circle reaching its maximum capacity.

The energy inside clashed with the magical boundaries, triggering several sparks that grew in intensity until they resembled lightning bolts.

Only then Wanemyre stepped forward, casting in succession the several Forgemaster spells the procedure required. Despite her being just a fake mage, Lith would always be awed by her ability to weave so many enchantments together.

Whenever he saw Wanemyre at work, bending mana and matter at her will, he could not help but wonder if that was how a goddess would appear while creating new worlds.

One by one, the runes between the circles rose in the air, revolving at increasing speed while the sword and the Frost Dew floated in the middle of the circle. The runes absorbed the surrounding mana, forming a flaming energy sphere.

The blazing mana scorched the flower, that left behind a bright blue sphere. Like twin suns, the two energy masses started revolving one around the other, with the sword as their fulcrum.

Wanemyre kept chanting, bringing them closer and closer, until with a final spell she made them become one and fused them with the sword. The blade fell on the table, hot enough to cut through the stone like it was butter.

A second later a blue glow radiated around the sword, allowing Wanemyre to pick it up without risks.

"That wasn't supposed to happen." She sighed while pointing at the destroyed table.

"The silver lining is that it means that Lith's flower's purity was outstanding. This sword will fetch me enough to cover for the table and this lesson's Frost Dew flowers."

"Can I touch it?" Lith was eager to check how the pseudo core of such item looked like.

"Sure, but do not imprint it. Otherwise you'll have to pay."

Lith used Invigoration, looking at the pseudo core with eyes filled with marvel. While the mana pathways weren't much different from the ones he was able to create, the pseudo core was a revelation.

There were actually two of them, overlapping each other almost perfectly.

- "They got it all wrong!" Lith was flabbergasted.

"The ingredients don't restore the balance by simply countering the elemental energies during the enchanting process, they actually pass their pseudo cores. This means that multiple enchantments require multiple pseudo cores coexisting in the same item."—

Lith was still studying the phenomenon, pondering if a living body could hold multiple cores too, when Invigoration suddenly stopped working. Wanemyre had taken the sword back.

"You must really love swords to get so lost in thought by simply holding one."

"You are right, sorry." Lith realized he had spaced out for over a minute.

"Go back to your seat and rest. You'll need all your strength before attempting the spell on your own." She ruffled his hair, making him feel like a dog again.

"You used my Frost Dew." Lith was confused.

"How am I supposed to perform the spell without one?"

"Don't worry, I got it covered." She handed him a Frost Dew emitting such a faint glow to seem just a cheap knock off of the one Wanemyre had consumed.

"Why do you give me that funny look?" She scolded Lith.

"It would have been a crime against magic to let such a perfectly purified natural treasure go to waste during a test run. No one will miss this one, instead."

Lith had many things to say, but was smart enough to keep them for himself. Wanemyre was an excellent Professor and their relationship was good. There was no reason to ruin everything over a single ingredient.

After a few minutes, the students completed the second step and were ready to try out the new magic circle. Wanemyre took away properly cleansed Frost Dews from a few other students too, assigning them points accordingly to the purity level reached, before replacing them with mediocre counterparts.

The ones that did a poor job could keep their flowers, making them grit their teeth with frustration.

Wanemyre handed out to each student an unremarkable iron dagger that couldn't be worth more than a silver coin. Clearly, she wasn't expecting them to succeed.

For a good reason, though.

"Don't worry if you fail. In my experience, infusing elemental properties is much harder than Forgemastering a neutral item. It takes a few tries to handle so many spells and two kinds of energies at once. Only special talents, like me, succeed at the first try."

She puffed her chest with pride, making her ample bosom stand out even more.

- "Thank heavens with her personality she has zero charm, otherwise I would have a new crush already."— Lith thought.

One after the other, his classmates tried and failed. Most botched the procedure during the last steps, making the dagger shatter like glass. Only a few managed to screw up during the initial steps, losing their chanting rhythm and receiving extra homework as punishment.

Having helped the Professor earlier, Lith and the red headed girl were last, to give them time to rest.

Remembering so many magic words and hand signs was hard. Even if he had them stored in Soluspedia, his hands couldn't afford to stumble, his tongue to stutter or miss even a single accent.

That was why every time a student performed their experiment, Lith would chant alongside them, using that time to practice rather than to relax. When Lith's turn came, he was ready. He had even used Invigoration to be at peak condition.

The words rolled off Lith's tongue, his hands moved non stop forming signs and magic seals. Controlling the energy flows was definitely the easiest part for him. With true magic he was used to weaving even six elements at a time, manipulating just two of them was child play, allowing him to focus on the rest of the incantation.

During the last spell, the red and blue sphere clashed violently compared to Wanemyre's execution, emitting a blinding light when they attempted to fuse with the dagger.

"Another failure." Wanemyre sighed. "Too bad, that was really close. Twenty points for an excellent first attempt."

Then the dagger fell on the table, piercing through it until only the hilt was visible.

"Good gods, I was wrong. It's a success!" Wanemyre hugged Lith too close for his comfort, kissing his forehead with excitement.

"Finally a promising rival!"

"I did it." Was all that Lith managed to say. He was so used to failure that success was the most shocking thing that could happen to him.

- "I told you so! You do have talent."— Solus rejoiced.

Wanemyre took the dagger out of the stone table, holding it like it was a treasure.

"Who cares about the sword, this is much more important." Wanemyre took out from her dimensional amulet a golden liquid, inscribing on the surface of the blade Lith's name, the date, and her name before handing it to him.

"Raise that twenty points to fifty. It's no attempt, it's a success." She screamed almost deafening the clerk on the other side of the communication amulet.