

## Supreme M 201

### Chapter 201 Good News, Bad News

After Lith's performance, the red haired girl did the best she could, going above and beyond in her efforts, but failed nonetheless. Lith stayed behind, while the others marched out of the classroom in silence.

From their gloomy expressions, one could have thought they were going to a memorial service.

After Professor Wanemyre instructed the academy's clerks to clean the Forgemastering lab and repair the broken equipment, she finally noticed his presence.

"What can I do for you?" She was back to being all smiles and niceties. Lith didn't know if it was because the class was over or because she was still overjoyed from his success.

Whatever the reason, he found her creepy.

"I have a few questions for you."

"Shoot."

"Today Professor Nalear showed us your latest creation. I was wondering how many enchantments it possesses and what is its market value." Lith was actually only interested in checking if it had a weight reducing spell, but he couldn't ask it directly.

If Nalear was an Awakened one, by exposing her he was likely to expose himself too.

"You really are the greedy type." Wanemyre clicked her tongue in disapproval.

"What we do is a perfect mix of art and magical science. It's not about how much you earn, it's the journey that matters. Money is just a pleasant side effect of our line of work."

- "How can she say that with a straight face after keeping the Frost Dews for herself? She's shameless." Lith thought.

"The pot calling the kettle black?" Solus sneered. –

"As for your questions, here. You can keep it." She gave him a small booklet, containing drawings and descriptions of all the magical items Wanemyre had for sale. The pricing of most of them was enough to make him weep blood.

- "I wish I had it earlier. Maybe I can still ask the Crown to give me a few of these things. The reward I asked for would barely cover for the cheapest items."–

When he found the sword's description, the weight reducing spell was listed among many others. Lith felt like a burden had been lifted from his chest, yet another was added when he checked out the price.

- "Maybe if I reveal to the Crown how much I contributed to finding a cure for the plague, they will gift me half a sword. I need at least another two plagues to be able to afford this thing." -

"Another thing, how does the dagger work? You never explained that part."

Wanemyre slapped her own forehead with her palm, realizing her mistake.

"Sorry, I never thought someone would succeed. I didn't want to get your hopes up just to be disappointed as it happened to your classmates. It's actually very simple. Once you imprint it, activating the enchantment will make the blade turn hot enough to melt stone.

It can easily cut through most conventional protections and weapons. It doesn't cause bleeding, but makes the wound unbearably painful and harder to heal. The effect lasts a couple of minutes per activation. With the Frost Dew I gave you, I doubt it can be activated more than thrice per day. Sorry."

Her apologies sounded fake like a three dollar bill, but Lith had to let it slide.

"The last question is a personal one, so I apologize in advance for being nosy. I couldn't help but notice that you changed quite a bit from the last trimester."

"Changed how?" She tilted her head, seeming more flattered than annoyed by his curiosity.

"You look even prettier than before, you now wear makeup and jewels." Lith pointed at the gold necklace with several embedded gemstones she wore around her neck and the small silver bracelet around her wrist. "You also smile a lot more."

"Well, thank you for noticing it." She giggled like a little girl.

"I admit I was a bit too stern before, but you know, love changes everything. I am betrothed now."

"Betrothed?" Lith was dazed.

"Yes, I know it may seem rushed to a twelve year old with his whole life ahead of him, but for a woman of my age there is no time to lose. We want to have children, so we'll get married after the end of the trimester."

- "Told you so. Again!" Solus laughed her heart out, mocking his paranoia.

"Don't think I have forgotten about our bet."—

Lith ignored her remark, noticing instead the contrast between the two accessories.

"It's a wonderful betrothal gift." He said pointing at the necklace. In the new world there was no such thing as engagement rings. The one proposing could provide any kind of jewelry or commodity as a sign of good faith.

"That's my protective necklace, page twenty-three of the catalog." Wanemyre snorted, quite offended by his remark.

"I wear it only because of Linjos' paranoia. He wants us to be ready in case another sabotage happens. It's too flashy for my taste, but it was the most useful if something went wrong during today's lesson. This is his betrothal gift."

She extended her slim wrist, showing him the silver bracelet.

- "And you say I'm the stingy one, Solus. On Earth this trinket is barely better than those you would find in an Easter egg. Judging from the numerous runes and magic crystals, it should at least be powerfully enchanted.

"Even I would have bought something better." -

Solus was tempted to say "It's the thought that counts", but she was too afraid Lith would use it against her the next time he had to buy presents.

"It's simply lovely." Lith lied through his teeth.

"Sorry for my rudeness before. It's just that your masterpiece drew all my attention." He added flattery to make sure she wouldn't resent him for his blunder.

"I forgive you. Now go to your room and prepare for tomorrow's lessons."

Lith didn't make her say it twice, he had already wasted too much time indulging his paranoia, now he had to rush.

If only he had spent a few more minutes with the Professor, he would have seen that despite her smiling and the joy on her face, her right eye twitched uncontrollably, shedding a single tear before returning to normal.

\*\*\*

Blood Desert, the day before.

While waiting for Salaark's return, Leegaain and Tyris kept singing, rejuvenating the heaven and earth from the damages that the prolonged experiments performed by the Abominations had caused.

The barren land had turned into a flourishing oasis. The two Guardians could already perceive many animals migrating toward the newborn haven guided by their innate mana sense.

Salaark came out of the caverns with her talon-ending hands covered by bits and chunks of a black matter that were quickly turning into smoke.

"How did it go?" Tyris asked, worried by the phoenix's frown. She wasn't the kind to mull over a victory, more likely to banter about it and demand a celebratory feast.

"While you lovebirds were singing about peace and love, I risked my feathers. This b\*stard..." She took out Pazul's head, handing it to Leegaain before it could disappear.

"...was very well prepared for our arrival. If it wasn't for the fact that I never underestimate any opponent and brought you along as a contingency plan, the Garlen continent would now have only two Guardians."

"If this is a joke, it's not funny Salaark. We have killed Eldritchs for millennia and each of them had less power than a single one of your feathers." Tyris scoffed at the idea of a Guardian dying at the hands of an overgrown tick.

"A single Eldritch is indeed irrelevant," Leegaain said after having stabilized Pazul's remains and studied them for a bit.

"...but this thing is so much more. The other artificial Abominations we encountered earlier were harmless despite their humongous power because they were utterly insane. So many minds could not coexist, so the whole was less than the sum of its parts.

"This time they used an Eldritch as a base, fusing it with countless artificial Abominations. An Eldritch has enough power and experience to beat the other minds into submission.

That's why it was able to retain its personality and harness all their powers at once."

"How bad is it?" Salaark had just finished cleaning herself.

"Quite bad, if you ask me. It's still a rough product. It had to spend most of its energies just to keep all the other minds in check, but it's a huge step forward. They have already solved the madness issue.

"Even as it is, if they put up a squad of these things, even a Guardian may not be enough. What did it say to you before dying?"

"Not much." Salaark shrugged.

"I had no idea his mind was so fragile. I was quite pissed off, so things turned ugly fast. Torturing its soul made his mind collapse and melt in the psychic maelstrom. There is a full lab down there, and it's still in almost mint condition though."

"Make way, please." Leegaain asked with a stern expression, making Tyris grow even more worried.

In all the time they had spent together, she had never seen the dragon completing so many sentences without cracking even one joke.

\*\*\*

It took Leegaain a few hours to check and catalog everything. When he finished, the dragon was pleased with his results.

"Excellent work in preserving the lab Salaark. Now we know everything but the identity of our enemies."

"We do?" Tyris and Salaark asked in unison. Since they couldn't make heads or tails of the equipment, they had spent their time playing Lith's game. Chess had become renowned as the "Queen of the games" and "the game of the Queens".

"Yes. Do you want the good news or the bad news?"

"Whatever. I'm sure that no matter what I pick, you'll tell us both anyway." Salaark snorted in exasperation.

"You are right my fair lady, but this time I will do it because it's vital for you to understand how serious our crisis is, rather than for the simple pleasure of annoying you." His mocking tone told a different story, though.

"The first thing I ascertained by examining the lab, is that whoever is behind this, they are not Awakened ones. Their method to mass produce Abominations is brilliant but too crude.

An Awakened one wouldn't need all this equipment nor to sacrifice so many lives for so little result." Leegaain pointed at the mountains of corpses.

"They would just use Invigoration to call upon the world energy and forcefully feed it to their test subjects. Our culprit is sapping the life force of countless living beings to produce a single Abomination, instead.

Clearly they have no idea of what a mana core is or how to sense the world energy."

"How can you be so sure?" Tyris asked. "Most Abominations were once Awakened ones, can't they have taught to others the secret behind the awakening?"

Leegaain sneered in response.

"Even if they wanted to, they can't. Abominations lose all their connections with the world energy after the transformation. Would you be able to Awaken someone by using mere words? The answer is no." He didn't give them the time to reply.

"Sure, Abominations can explain what a mana core is or how the world energy affects magic, but knowing and doing are two different things. Also, I'm certain of my assumptions because I'm very familiar with the blueprints of those tanks..."

"Since you made them yourself?" Salaark interrupted him, shocked by her intuition.

"Why would I do that? Just like you, I can create artificial Awakened as well as true ones. I'm the father of all dragons, if I wanted to take over the world, I would just need to call all of my offspring and take down a Guardian at a time.

No, I know them because they belong to the Griffon Kingdom. They are the upgraded version of Arthan Griffon's immortality project."

Tyris had done her best to forget that name. King Arthan Griffon, the Kinslayer. The Soul Eater. The biggest mistake she had ever made.

Unlike natural Awakened ones, those Salaark and Tyris made were incapable of using techniques like Invigoration and Accumulation, their sensitivity toward the world energy was purposely sealed during the process.

Having a stronger mana core than the one they were born with, made them age more slowly, but they aged nonetheless. Arthan had been a genius mage, that during his final years had focused on studying the limitations of the gift he had received and how to overcome them.

His experiments had sacrificed countless lives and almost led to the Griffon Kingdom's destruction.

## Chapter 202 A Shadow in a World of Lights

During his youth, after Tyris had chosen him as the next King and gifted him true magic, Arthan Griffon would often laugh at how hard and convoluted fake magic was. Without the countless legacies left behind by Awakened ones, most magical advancements would have been impossible.

What made fake magic invaluable, was that anyone with a strong enough mana core could practice it. As for most things, there was strength in numbers. By standing on the shoulders of the Awakened ones, fake mages had improved the lives of all those who lived in the Galen continent and beyond.

Thanks to Lochra Silverwing and many others, magical research was possible for fake mages too. Some of them had made discoveries so great to put to shame even Awakened ones.

Arthan Griffon understood why the Awakened were so jealous of their secret. It wasn't just a matter of power, but also of longevity. A dog could live up to twelve years, a Ry up to forty, a Monster for hundreds of years, while Guardians were seemingly immortal.

If all mankind turned into Awakened ones, having children would eventually become a crime, forcing the various Royal families to cull their own population from time to time.

As Arthan grew old, he also grew envious of Tyris' eternal youth. He was unwilling to let his genius perish by the hand of something trivial as old age. At that time, she interfered even less in the Kingdom's matters, letting humans take care of themselves.

After wasting years searching for an Awakened, Arthan had used most of the Crown's and Mage Association's resources to buy his way into immortality. Failure after failure, his project became more ruthless and desperate, using the lives of his subjects to prolong his own.

Despite his secrecy, Tyris soon discovered Arthan's crimes, executing him on the spot and setting the canons that defined forbidden magic. Arthan Griffon's name became a synonym of madness, a bogeyman used to scare the children and make them behave.

"It's impossible!" Tyris was flabbergasted.

"I made sure to destroy all the blueprints and specifications of that evil contraption. I left behind only the parts that could be used for medical research and even the few fragments left are heavily guarded."

"Are you saying this is all her fault?" Salaark pretended to be outraged, pointing her finger at Tyris while her other hand switched the position of a few pieces on the chessboard. There was no such word as "defeat" in her vocabulary.

"No, I'm not. That's cheating, by the way." Leegaain put everything back into place with a wave of his hand.

"What one man can invent another can discover. Especially if he has access to the remaining pieces and has enough talent to reverse engineer the machine. Judging from the result, our culprit is either a rare genius or someone that spent years improving Arthan's madness.

We are lucky to have found this place when we did. Losing their latest specimen and all this equipment will set them back for years, especially now that we are keeping our eyes open for anomalies."

"Okay, enough with the bad news. Give us the good news too." Tyris gave Salaark a reproving look while making her next move.

"That was the good news." Leegaain replied shocking them both.

"Weren't you listening? The setback, the ignorance about world energy and cores, the fact that they can at best create Abominations instead of Awakened, those are all good news.

"The bad news is that when the new lab will be up and running, they only have to fix the humongous energy consumption problem and find a way to suppress the psychic maelstrom to be capable of turning whoever they want into the Abomination knock-off version of a Guardian."

\*\*\*

After the end of the lessons, Lith's group resumed studying dimensional magic in Yurial's room. It was the only subject they could prepare for in advance since they had no idea what they would do for Necromancy or Magic Crystals.

As for their specializations' classes, the Professors were throwing the books away in favor of a more practical approach. Friya and Phloria were worn out both physically and mentally.

"Professor Thorman is a monster." Friya was still panting, incapable of catching her breath.

"Three minutes of sparring, one minute of rest, three minutes of casting. Rinse and repeat for two whole hours! If one fainted, he would just have a healer give them some life force and a sweet drink before starting again."

"I don't remember ever wanting to take a shower so badly." Phloria added.

"We can postpone our meeting. Clean yourself, get some rest and get back here." Yurial's proposal was also for his own benefit. He had spent his lesson learning how to handle the arrays' activation order to alter their effects.

The problem was that the slightest mistake caused the arrays to cancel each other, forcing him to start over from scratch. Each array was demanding on his focus and mana since Professor Juong had one of his assistants time the casting speed of each student.

Yurial had a splitting headache caused by the lack of mana, but was too prideful to call quits first.

- "Please say yes. Daddy needs some sleep."— He thought.

"Thanks, but no thanks." Friya replied. "I am certain that the moment I touch my bed or hot water I'll fall asleep until tomorrow morning."

Quylla and Lith were the only ones in peak condition. Quylla because she had no specialization aside healing, Lith because of Invigoration.

Despite their fatigue, the training went smoothly. Friya turned out to be a natural at dimensional magic, managing to master Blink before dinner time. Once she was able to cast it successfully ten times out of ten, she stopped practicing to rest and give tips to the others.

The canteen had never been so quiet during dinner. Everyone was either too tired or depressed to speak, even Lith's group. The clattering of the silverware was the only audible sound.

"Sorry guys, I'm too exhausted to do anything but sleep. I'd call it a day if it's okay with you." Yurial's proposal was unanimously approved.

"Friya, Quylla please escort me to my room. I'm still without a Ballot and had enough of ambushes for today." Yurial faked a yawn, winking at Lith while Phloria wasn't looking.

- "How nice of Yurial being your wingman." Solus thought. —

Lith didn't reply, sighing in resignation instead. Part of him found all that situation insane. Despite his body was one of a twelve year old, his true age was around forty. The more he thought about it, the more the idea of having a high school sweetheart sounded dumb.

Another part of him was tired of being alone, a shadow in a world of lights. That part of him was aware that the age gap would never disappear and that the longer he waited, the more excuses Lith would make up to keep isolating himself from the rest of the world.

After speaking with Yurial, he had realized how lonely it was to live trapped in a life of duty. No one could force Lith to marry, but he already knew that after the academy he would be forced to train until he became sixteen, accumulating wealth for his future travels.

Then, he would join the army, starting his quest to find a body for Solus and a solution for his twice lifelong problem. Lith didn't want to start over again, to find a new family, and most of all, to lose Solus.

He had already decided that if he couldn't find a way to prevent his next reincarnation, then he would settle for a way to achieve a permanent death. He and Yurial weren't so different, after all. Both wiser than their age and living on tracks they couldn't escape from.

"Thanks for walking me to my door despite your horrible day." Phloria suddenly said, waking Lith from his stupor. They were already in front of her room.

"I don't know how you guys managed to attend your lessons after almost losing your lives this morning. Especially you, Lith from Lutia." She smiled warmly at him, making his dark and light side clash against each other with growing intensity.

"I wish to one day be as strong as you and be capable to protect all those I hold dear."

She unlocked her door and was about to disappear inside when Lith stopped her.

"About that, there's something I need to give you." Phloria turned around, seeing he was handing her a Guilty Ballot.

"I had Linjos remove my imprint, so now it's yours."

"I can't accept it! What if something happens to you?" She pushed it away with both hands.

"To me?" Lith chuckled. "I faced magical beasts, monsters, and assassins. Yet I'm still here. Nothing in this academy, be it physical or emotional can touch me, but you are different." He placed the Ballot in her fingers, appreciating their warmth.

"You still have feelings that can be hurt, a mind that can get scarred. It's too late for me, I'm beyond salvation. Take it and promise me you'll have a happy life."

Both Phloria and Solus were on the verge of tears. The former could only feel the pain behind those words, while the latter was seeing all of Lith's lives flashing in front of her eyes.

Phloria imprinted the Ballot before putting it away in her dimensional amulet.

"I promise." She said closing the door behind her, incapable to face him any longer.

- "Was it that hard?" Solus asked.

"Actually, it was." Lith replied.

"Good! Nothing that's worth having comes easy, remember? Your words, not mine."—

Their bickering was interrupted when the door reopened and Phloria embraced Lith, giving him a quick, soft kiss. Barely a peck.

"Also I promise I will try to share that happiness with you. No matter how thick skinned you have become, you are still alive. Please, don't talk ever again as you are going to die at any moment."

She held him tight for a long second, giving his body and mind the time to react to the sudden turn of events. Once again, a warm feeling spread through his being, like when he was in Elina's embrace as an infant.

With that also came the hunger. The violent desire to fill the bottomless void that plagued his existence ever since he could remember. His inner conflict resumed, part of him just wanted to



drown in that warmth, while the other wanted to kill Phloria for being a liability, a weakness that could only lead to more suffering.

"Was my first kiss that good or that bad for leaving you in a daze for so long?" She asked blushing in an adorable manner.

"Woof." Lith's brain short circuited because of the conflicting emotions, suddenly remembering his lost bet with Solus.

Phloria chuckled at his nonsensical answer, giving him a second peck before disappearing behind her door.

- "Was it that bad?" Solus gloated.

"Woof! Woof!" Lith replied. –

As most of the happy times of his lives, it wasn't bound to last.

An almost inaudible sound drew his attention, making Lith activate Life Vision, spotting three figures hidden behind pillars and corners.

"Well, well, well. The academy is so clean, yet the roaches are so big. Three of them at that." He said out loud, making them come out in the open. Without the advantage of surprise, hiding was just useless.

"It's not the first time you follow us. Why you don't run away as usual? Isn't that what cockroaches do when you shed light on them?" Lith said with an amused voice.

The three students were all taller than Phloria, the shorter one was 1.82 meters (6') high. Yet they were all on edge. Their goal had been the girl all along, none of them wanted to face Lith unless he was tied up and drugged.

His background check was intimidating on its own and the fact that he had just survived the attack of professional assassins was public knowledge. They were three against one, all taller and heavier than him though.

He was also finally without a Ballot, so they only needed him to cast a spell in self defence to have him expelled.

At least in theory.

"I can't believe you gave your Ballot to that wh\*re even knowing we were here."

The leader swallowed a lump of saliva, looking at his companions to gain some confidence. He didn't want to be there, but he couldn't disobey his mother.

Lith laughed maniacally.

"What use do I have for a Ballot? The rooms are all soundproof, why ruin our meeting with a recording device?" Lith's pupil dilated to the point of covering most of the iris, making his brown eyes seem to have turned black.

The corridors were lit by magic stones, fueled by the castle's power core. In all the academy's history, they had never malfunctioned.

Yet when Lith moved forward, the lights flickered at his passage.

## Chapter 203 The Watcher

"Stay back! We have a Ballot!" The leader screamed with a high pitched voice that was hard to believe it could come out of someone that big. They never intended to pick on Lith, no matter what their orders were, it was just too dangerous.

After being discovered, they had no choice left though. Lith wouldn't believe a word they said. It was better taking a punch in the face than a knife in the back. They were three against one and well prepared for the encounter.

They could only hope to scare him away.

- "Do they?"

"So far it's a bluff. They only have some magic rings and alchemic tools. No Ballot." Solus replied.

—

They had studied it for months. She could recognize a Ballot's pseudo core from a mile away.

"Really?" Lith sneered. "Did you incriminate yourselves by recording since you started following us? Or are you going to activate it now?" Lith's voice was stone cold, a huge smile had appeared on his face, yet it contained no joy.

It was the smile of a predator closing in on a cornered prey.

A twitch in the left arm alarmed Solus.

- "I stand corrected. The one in the middle now holds a Ballot in the left hand."—

Thanks to her timely warning, Lith extended his right arm ripping the Ballot off his enemy's fingers with spirit magic before he could even activate it.

"I said no recording devices!" Lith engulfed the Ballot in a shroud of darkness, actually sending it in his pocket dimension. He had no idea what kind of safety measures it could have and wasn't willing to take unnecessary risks.

Lith let the shroud disappear, revealing his now empty hand.

"You have just destroyed an academy's property. You are insane!" Not only had they just lost their only ace in the hole, but seeing an artifact crumble like that brought the three to the verge of panic.

The leader of the group was Raynart Poltus. His mother Duchess Poltus, a leading figure in the old noble faction and had a bone to pick with Jirni Ernas, Phloria's mother.

Ever since the end of the plague, the Poltus family was under the scrutiny of the Crown because of their deep ties with Coirn Hatorne, the fugitive alchemist believed to be responsible for creating the parasites and known for being a middleman for the major black market dealers.

During her inquiries, Lady Ernas had discovered that the Duchess' brother was part of a slave trade. Even if most of his victims were dead or missing, he had been found in possession of a new kind of slave collars that could be disguised as a necklace, a ring, or a bracelet.

It was by itself a capital crime, so no matter how powerful and influent the Poltus family was, he had been tortured until he had revealed all the names of his accomplices and then executed.

The event had been a disaster for the family. Its members were now looked down on even by commoners and cut out from all the major social events. The identity of the royal constable in charge of investigations was supposed to be a secret, but Duchess Poltus still had many informant and friends.

She wanted to give Lady Ernas a taste of her own medicine. Her only daughter r\*ped and branded as a sl\*t was punishment enough in the Duchess' eyes. Without a Ballot, her son could have always claimed it was consensual s\*x.

It would also help the noble faction's cause, forcing Linjos to take a side between the two families and putting himself in a lose-lose situation. Siding with the Poltus meant making an enemy of the Crown, while siding with the Ernas was like admitting his own incompetence, adding the scandal to his long list of faults as Headmaster.

The lights' flickering intensified, while a black fog seeped out of the shadows making the scene looked more and more like a nightmare by the second. Raynart and his cousins wanted to run away, but for some reason their feet refused to move.

The previous warmth Lith had demonstrated earlier had disappeared, only the hunger remained. The abyss inside him kept pouring out its hate, infecting the outer world. Lith's killing intent reached a new peak, forcing the three on their knees with just a gentle push from spirit magic.

"Kneel!"

Albeit brief, the touch from those invisible hands made the three squeal in terror.

That was the side of Lith Solus was more scared of. No matter how much love and affection he received, turning back into the same man that had abducted and tortured a young boy was as easy as flipping a switch for him.

What made things worse was that the more people he cared for, the more ruthless he would become. Each light that entered his life would only make the darkness inside of him deeper.

"Usually I don't give speeches, but for you I'll make an exception. I need to send a message and you'll be the one delivering it."

Lith's hand squeezed Raynart's throat so hard that for a moment he thought his eyes were going to pop out of his skull. Then the pressure lessened enough to let him breathe, but not enough to make it easy.

At the same time, spirit magic and wind magic pinned the other two on the ground, making them incapable of breathing as well.

The scene in front of Raynart's eyes almost made him faint. Through their contact, he could see something that even Lith and Solus were unaware of. A legion of hands made of shadows was gushing out of Lith's body.

Only a few were suppressing the three students, countless others stood still like snakes, ready to strike at any moment. Spirit magic was invisible, yet for some reason Raynart was able to see its true form.

Countless eyes of all sizes and colors had materialized wherever light was absent, staring full of curiosity at the unfolding events. The world was watching over its new toy, lured by the unbridled hate that had been offered to it.

"It's already the second time today that someone tries to take away what's mine. You can't imagine how angry I am right now." Lith used darkness magic to appear more terrifying and water magic to freeze the surrounding environment to scare them out of their wits.

He smirked noticing that the other two had already lost control of their bladders, drenching themselves in their own p\*ss.

- "These nobles, how can someone be so cowardly?"— Lith thought.

Only Raynart knew the truth. Fueled by the world's will, the tendrils of darkness seeped into his cousins' bodies from the nostrils, eyes, ears, and mouths, robbing them of their vitality. The feeling they were experiencing was akin to being buried alive.

Lith lifted Raynart from the neck until their eyes were at the same height, sending him into panic. Half of Lith's face was now covered by Raynart's shadow, assuming ghastly features.

Lith's eclipsed eye had become bright yellow with a vertical pupil, the mouth was lipless and full of fangs highlighted by an inner fire that seemed to be burning in his throat.

"I don't care who sent you. Tell Lukart or whoever it is behind this attack that these kids are mine and mine alone!"

Lith sent a new wave of spirit magic on the two that were lying on the ground, bringing them closer. He also clenched the hand around Raynart's throat making him incapable of breathing anymore.

Raynart could hear his voice and feel the lack of oxygen, but he couldn't avert his gaze from the darkness running under his cousins' skin, whose eyes rolled backward while foaming at the mouth.

"The next time I see one of you around them, even if I just smell you, I'll make your worst nightmare seem like a wet dream after what I'll do to you."

The other two had already fainted, so Lith could focus only on Raynart, alternating waves of darkness and light magic. His skin would crumble, his life vessels collapse, just to be restored less than a second later.

On the outside, it was like nothing was happening, but Raynart felt pain like never before. His whole body was constantly being destroyed and regenerated in a never ending cycle, yet it left no mark on him.

His mind and body collapsed in just a few seconds, unable to bear anymore that torture.

Lith left him alongside the other two, putting the Ballot in Raynart's hands before going to his room for a good night sleep.

\*\*\*

The next morning, the canteen was lively again. Everyone was discussing how three students had been found unconscious and hospitalized. For some unknown reason, it was impossible to wake them up.

Normally no one would have cared, things like that happened all the time. The reason a common event had piqued so much curiosity was that they weren't injured at all. They even had a Ballot, but according to the Professors it had never been used.

"I can't believe it happened just a few meters from my room and I didn't notice anything. Maybe I could have helped them." Phloria was shocked by the news.

Yurial scoffed, telling to the rest of the group why no one cared about the fate of the Poltus family.

"Either it was the consequence of an internal strife, to get rid of the rotten apples before the whole household collapse, or it was an act of vengeance from the relatives of their victims. Those guys deserve no pity Phloria."

Lith couldn't care less about their background. Even if they came from a family of saints, he would have done the same thing.

- "No one touches my things, no matter the reason." He thought.

Solus sighed, wishing he stopped referring to them as objects instead of people.

"I wonder why the two you didn't roughen up are still unconscious. It has never happened before." It was the only part of the rumor that didn't make sense to her.

"I don't know and honestly, I don't care. Three guys following a single girl at night, knowing she has no Ballot. It doesn't take a genius to put two and two together."—

Lith regretted deeply not having the opportunity to kill them for good, but he knew about the academy's security system that prevented deadly injuries.

It was the reason why he had used that torture technique. It would leave the victim exhausted and mentally scarred, but the body would remain in perfect health.

After breakfast, the group split up for the morning activities. Lith's group rounds of visits were uneventful, allowing them to make up for most of the time lost the day before.

They met back with Phloria for the first practical lesson of Magic Crystals.

After welcoming the students, Professor Nalear clapped her hands, making a crystalline mass as big as a melon appear on their desks along with what looked like a rune-inscribed wrench the size of a pen.

"Normally, when people hear the words 'underground mine' and 'extraction of minerals' they think about rough men with a pickaxe, but for magic crystals it's the worst image possible.

"Normal tools have no effect on mana crystals, no matter how strong you are or how hard is the metal. Best case scenario, you can crack one and hope that the resulting explosion will not trigger a chain reaction making the whole mine collapse.

There is a reason why only a mage can become a Crystalsmith."

Nalear picked up the wrench-like tool from her own desk. The students saw the runes lighting up one after the other until a small energy blade formed in the U shaped extremity.

Lith involuntarily quivered. The phenomenon reminded him of the blade that had killed him during his second life. He had never forgotten the pain of dying drowned in his own blood, gasping for air like a washed up fish.

- "There's nothing to be scared of. That thing is just the magical equivalent of a box cutter." Lith said to himself. –

"Extracting mana crystals doesn't require brute force, but finesse and technique. First, all of you must learn how to power up a mana blade. Pick up your own and hold it in the way that's more comfortable for you.

"Some hold it like a carving knife, others like a scalpel. Too many like it's a spoon. That's the only wrong way to do it."

The class laughed, following Nalear's instructions.

"It's very simple to use. Inject it with your mana, like if you were trying to imprint it."

Many blades appeared, but none remained for more than a split second.

"For those that didn't make it, just put some more effort. Those who made it, keep it coming. Mana blades can't be imprinted and need a constant flow of mana to function properly."

Lith noticed that he was the only one in the group with the mana blade turned off, so he corrected the situation. By using Invigoration, he noticed there was no pseudo core, just mana pathways that redirected the mana into a physical form.

"Well done everyone! Now put it down. Our lesson has just begun, don't waste your energies. You will need them in a while."

Lith powered on and off the blade a few times, appreciating the buzzing sound it produced while being activated or swung around.

- "I wish I could say 'Yurial, I am your father', but the reference would be lost in translation."– Lith sighed.

## Chapter 204 Unexpected Guest

"Before starting our lesson, I'll ask you a question. Please be honest about it, it will save us a lot of time. How many of you were too tired to practice the spell on page 22 that I assigned two days ago?"

Nalear's inquiry was followed by prolonged silence.

"There's nothing to be ashamed of, it happens every year. The first day is all about theory, so students get confident. The second day is all about practice and drains their energies. Take five minutes to study it, despite it being a tier four spell is very simple."

Aside from Lith, Quylla and a few others, most of the students took out their books and read like madmen.

Lith used that time to practice it on the crystal mass. The spell was called Scope and turned out to be extremely similar to a diagnostic spell, but instead of showing the status of a patient, it allowed one to distinguish the single crystals that composed the mass.

Just like a mana blade, it hadn't a set duration. Once cast, Scope would last as long as the mage kept spending mana, requiring the constant use of earth and light magic.

- "Invigoration doesn't work on inanimate matter, yet it does on magic items and artifacts. I wonder how I should classify mana crystals." - Lith thought while activating Invigoration.

His breathing technique revealed not only the crystals' outline, but also allowed him to see on their surface a series of lines and cracks, of which Lith was unable to understand the significance.

"All you have to do for today is to separate the cluster that I provided you into single mana crystals and then cut them into a usable form. Do not underestimate your task. Using the mana blade and Scope at the same time takes a lot of energy, while adjusting the blade's density according to the situation requires focus."

Nalear closed in to the first row of desks.

"Use too little mana and you'll get sparks but no cuts. Too much and..." Her blade cut straight into a crystal, that emitted a bright light before crumbling.

"If this was a real mana crystal, instead of scraps of the lowest tier minerals, it would have caused the whole cluster to explode. The force of the resulting detonation would be proportional to the amount of mana stored.

"That's why Crystalsmiths require huge fees. The more powerful the crystal, the higher the risks. Since they are risking their lives on your behalf, don't be stingy with them. Never believe to those that offer their services for a reasonable sum.

They are either trying to rob you of your crystals or are so incompetent that they will lose more than half during the refining process. If you pay peanuts, you get monkeys."

The first part of the exercise was easy. The crystals composing the cluster were big and didn't overlap much. Thanks to Scope the students could discern where a crystal ended and the other began.

The mana blade was capable of separating the conjoined sides without destabilizing the structure. Everyone managed to finish their task quickly.

"Excellent. Now comes the hard part, cutting a crystal into a usable form. In their natural state, most mana crystals are bigger than my fist. If you remember my first lesson, all those I showed you were the size of a walnut.

That's because bigger crystals not only are more brittle, but also the mana they contain is scattered along its whole structure. The cutting process allows compressing the mana crystal, making its power focused and more easily accessible to a good craftsman. Let me give you a demonstration."

Nalear used Scope on a single gemstone and then activated her mana blade again. Her mana was ethereal, passing through the surface of the crystal without leaving a scratch. Yet each time the blade touched the gemstone, it would shrink more and more.

The final product, despite she had worked on scraps, was a bright red gem the size of a pearl.

"Don't get fooled by appearances. A mana crystal it's not a rock imbued with mana, it's pure mana that somehow took physical form. Removing even a small chip means making it weaker. The cutting process requires to use the mana blade to stimulate its structure, making it slowly collapse on itself.

To do it, you need to use Scope to see the keystone points and to make the mana composing the blade as thin as possible."

Lith did as instructed, discovering that the spell showed the same lines highlighted by Invigoration, but they were fainter and there was no trace of the cracks. The hardest part of the exercise was to keep the mana flow as weak as possible.

Aside from healers, fake mages weren't used to such fine control, so many students ended up breaking one crystal or more. Lith's work was progressing smoothly, like for the rest of his group, so he exploited a moment when Nalear was helping a boy on the other side of the class to make an experiment.

He used Invigoration on the crystal and instead of applying the blade on the lines, he struck with it one of the cracks. The crystal didn't change its size, but he could sense his mana getting slowly sapped, being absorbed by the gemstone.

- "I can charge these things!" He thought. "I can turn scraps into perfectly fine crystals. Solus, we have struck a gold mine!"

"Yeah, right. Not to burst your bubble, but even scraps are rare. We never found one before. Not to mention that we would need a plausible excuse for the crystal's origin, otherwise it would blow your cover. This isn't a gold mine, more a way to spare some bucks on your staff."—

Solus's cold pragmatism made Lith mind whimper.

The lesson ended in complete success. All the student had managed to cut at least three crystals, even though many of them had required several breaks to catch their breath.

- "This is odd." Lith thought. "Despite their cores aren't at the level of Yurial's and the rest of the group, how can they be so exhausted for something like this?"—

He looked around, noticing that most of his colleagues from the Healer's specialization had no such problem.

- "Maybe it's just that their control is really poor." Solus replied. "I don't know if you have noticed, but those who destroyed a few crystals are also the same that have yet to succeed to open a Warp Gate. They must have very low mana sensitivity."—

There was only so much that even logic could do against Lith's paranoia, but in the end he didn't care for them. His priority was eating lunch and getting ready for the first practical Necromancy lesson.

\*\*\*

White Griffon, Headmaster's office

Linjos had just received the latest Crown's proclamation reserved for their inner circle, remaining shocked by what he had just read. Linjos used his communication amulet to contact the Queen, expecting a long queue, but she replied immediately.

"Let me guess, you too are calling about the new slave collars, right?" Queen Sylpha had the annoyed tone of someone who already had that conversation countless times.

"Yes, Your Majesty. You know there is at least a mole in my academy, if not more. Those cursed devices allow the traitors to turn anyone into unwilling allies. My situation has just gone from dire to desperate!"

"Your situation?" The Queen frowned, barely keeping her anger in check.



"The civil war has been almost foiled, but almost isn't enough. I and the King don't know who to trust anymore. We have to perform daily controls on everyone that approaches us, our children, or has access to sensitive information.

It's not just 'your situation', it's everyone's. I had to inform all my loyal subjects, even knowing that the news would spread panic and distrust. I prefer paranoid officials to dead ones.

A slave collar can make a mother kill her newborn child, turn your loving husband into a violent beast with a single word. I need you all to be on your toes, but most of all, to read the damn proclamation until the end.

It's clearly written that the slave items found in Lord Poltus' possession were just three and custom made. To his knowledge, there is no mass production, but the fact that someone has the means to create them is a threat that can't be underestimated. Did you execute a security sweep recently?"

Linjos nodded.

"Yes. One right after the sabotage of the training hall and another right before the start of the trimester. I checked students, Professors, clerks, everyone. I had Trasque check myself, just to be safe. Someone could always turn me into a sleeper agent."

Sylpha seemed happy by that news, but after a second her eyes became cold.

"What about the students?"

"I'm really sorry, your Majesty. I've let you down again."

"What are you talking about?" Sylpha was genuinely surprised by his answer.

"I know that the students' grades are at an all time low, but the promotion rate..."

"I wasn't talking about that." She cut him short. "It's the same in all the academies."

"What?" Linjos jumped out of his chair, he couldn't believe his ears.

"What did you expect? That the other Headmasters would flaunt their problems? Off the record, since the threat of the civil war started, the students spend more time fighting among themselves or following their parents' agenda rather than studying.

The Black Griffon never expelled so many students in a single year, while at the Crystal Griffon academy they have so many injured that they had to hire new medical staff. Your White Griffon is the crown jewel of the academies at the moment."

Sylpha's smile perfectly hid her amusement at Linjos' shocked expression.

"I was talking about the Poltus boys. Three of them, at night near the girls' dorm. It creeps me out just saying it out loud. What were they doing there? Why have they yet to wake up?"

- "Oh, that!"— Linjos thought, inwardly sighing of relief.

"Up to no good, that's the only thing that I'm sure of. They had a Ballot, but they didn't activate it. It means that either they knew their aggressor or that they couldn't afford to record their meeting.

I had them searched. No slave items, but they had several alchemic products on them. Most of them where to... incapacitate the victim."

"Meaning?" Sylpha didn't like the pause at all.

"I can't be sure until the alchemic lab confirms it, but judging from the smell I'd say they were sedatives or roofies. I'm going to interrogate them as soon as they wake up. Depending on their answers and the lab results, I'll decide what to do. Off the record, they are as good as expelled, already.

After breaking their dimensional amulets, we found so many drugs they could open a pharmacy."

"Oh dear." Sylpha silently prayed for Linjos.

The Headmaster was about to ask the Queen why she cared so much for the Poltus family, when the gemstone on his desk blinked red. His personal assistant had something very urgent to tell him.

"This better be important, Balfas." Linjos answered with an annoyed tone, bowing to the Queen as an apology for the interruption.

"Royal constable Jirni Ernas requests your presence, Headmaster." Balfas was a retired veteran, not even dragons soaring the skies could upset him. Yet he was squeaking like a mouse.

"Tell her I'm innocent! I mean busy!" As a royal constable, Lady Ernas had an authority second only to the Royal Court. She was that good at her job that no one, either innocent or guilty, wanted her poking at their personal life.

"She says it's for official business." Balfas' voice rose of another octave.

"What official business could she possibly..." Linjos' eyes suddenly noticed the name of a particular student that lived near the site of the accident.

"Gods, no! I mean, tell her I'll be there immediately."

"Be careful about what you do and say, Linjos." Sylpha said after he closed the communication with his assistant.

"She knows about the Poltus boys, the roofies, everything. I know what you are thinking, it's a minor offense, but don't fool yourself. Do you know what's a royal pardon?"

"Of course I do!" Linjos felt offended by the question. A royal pardon was a get out of jail free card for any crime non punishable by the death penalty. The Crown granted a few of them every year to their most loyal servants for their outstanding results.

All the noble families had one or more black sheep that needed protection from the law. Most of them would do anything to obtain one to not get their name tarnished. The royal pardon was a leash that kept them loyal and efficient.

"Well, she has collected five so far, but never needed one. Yet."

"Does that mean..."

"That she could maim half your staff and as long she kills no one, she will go home in time for dinner."

## Chapter 205 Unexpected Guest 2

There was a reason why Balfas was so nervous during his conversation with the Headmaster. Lady Jirni Ernas had a peculiar hobby that made her a really unpleasant guest.

Whenever she was left waiting, she would run a thorough check on the nearest person to her. In this case, Balfas. He could see her scrolling through his military files, payrolls, and daily expenses. Sometimes she would click her tongue, more often she would look at Balfas briefly, giving him a wolfish smile.

When Linjos finally arrived, Lady Ernas was already questioning Balfas about his new house in Derios. In particular about how he could afford it and pay up all due taxes.

"Lady Ernas, it's a pleasure to meet you again." Linjos lied through his teeth.

She was wearing a dark blue military uniform with boots at her feet, black leather gloves on her hands, and her hair held up in a ponytail. Lady Ernas was one hood away from resembling an executioner.

"Look me in the eyes and tell me that my daughter is all right." Her reply was a breach of almost every etiquette's rule at once, but Linjos was a practical man. He could see from her eyes that despite her role, she was just a worried mother.

That and the faint impression of seeing in them a grave with his name written on it, prompted him to give her a quick answer.

"I swear that nothing happened to her."

Lady Ernas sighed in relief. This time Linjos had told her the truth.

"Sorry for my earlier rudeness, Headmaster Linjos." She gave him a small bow.

"Now I need to talk with the prisoners."

"Prisoners? Don't you mean the students?" Linjos didn't like that turn of events.

"I like calling things with their names, Headmaster." Her voice oozed sarcasm.

"According to the lab results, they were in possession of recreational drugs, but the real mother lode is five different kinds of sleep inducing, memory erasing drugs. It's enough to arrest them."

She showed him the report on her magical silver tablet. It was similar to a communication amulet, but bigger and linked to all the Griffon Kingdom's archives.

"How did you get them before me? The master Alchemists of the White Griffon told me they needed days to analyze everything."

"In my line of work, I don't have the luxury of time, Headmaster. On the other hand, I have a lot of friends or people that want to be my friends, willing to pull an all nighter for me. Bottom line, the Pontus boys are mine now."

Linhos found the idea that even inside his academy there were people willing to go over his head to please Lady Ernas quite disturbing. Yet he wasn't eager to repeat the experience he had had with Lord Ernas, so he Warped with her to the hospital.

- "I wish I could leave it to Manohar to deal with her, but I learned from experience that whenever he is involved, I'm the one that ends up paying the price for his madness."— Linjos thought.

As soon as they arrived, Jirni stared at the three youths laying in the beds with hatred, pulling out the medical files at their bedside to understand what was going on.

"Are you also a Healer?"

"Gods, no. I can only use chore magic, but I know a thing or two about the human body." The tone she used sent a shiver down Linjos's spine.

"Who dares to approach my specimens?" An indignant, petulant voice chimed in.

"Manohar!" Linjos roared. "How can you call two human beings, students at that, specimens? Don't you have any decency?"

"You are right, Linjos. Back off from my specimens who also happen to be students, midget. I'll not go easy on you just because you are an old lady." Manohar promptly corrected himself.

"Manohar, the unruly man-child." Jirni chuckled, releasing enough killing intent to make every single patient of the hospital wing search for a bedpan.

"Let me tell you a couple of things, child. First, your disappearing so often every time there is an ongoing crisis has made the Crown very unhappy. Enough that no one would care if I decided to rough you up, as long as I leave your precious mouth and hands intact.

It's all you need to cast spells after all. The rest of your body is redundant."

Manohar found himself shivering. Jirni's tone reminded him of the times when he was still a child and his mother scolded him for experimenting with his new spells on the neighbours' sons.

"Second, whoever puts themselves between me and my enemies becomes my enemy as well. Do you want me to treat you as an enemy?"

Manohar had learned from experience that he was about to cross over from "you are grounded until you are old enough for the academy" to "do it again and I'll spank your a\*s so hard that even my grandchildren will bear the mark of my hand".

He was the archmage known as the god of healing, the one and only Royal Healer, as well as a genius like the ones that appeared only once in a thousand years. He had a reputation to uphold, so he did what had to be done.

He promptly hid behind Linjos after a hasty retreat.

"No mom. I mean Ma'am. Please, make yourself at home. If you really feel the need to, please take it up with Linjos. I recommend hitting him in the stomach. It's much softer than the head because he never exercises."

- "Note to self, learn how to emit killing intent for taming idiotic healers."— Linjos thought.

"What's their problem? Why don't they wake up?" Jirni asked ignoring his whimpering.

"That's a really interesting question, mom... Ma'am. Their bodies are fine. There is no sign of internal or external trauma, no drugs or toxins. It's the first time since..."

"I won't ask again! What's the problem?" Jirni snarled.

"Emotional trauma. I think their minds are shutting in because of emotional trauma." Manohar replied from Linjos's back.

- "This is amazing!" Linjos was barely holding back tears. "Not only he actually obeys her, but she also manages to obtain quick, not convoluted answers. Also, it's the first time in months that we are both in the same room and I don't look like a fool."—

"What's your treatment?"

"They need time and rest. It shouldn't take more than a week for them to wake up."

"A week?" Jirni sniggered. "No, they are going to wake up now. You see, there is another way to bring them back."

"Really?" Manohar's scientific curiosity was piqued, so he came out of his hiding place.

"Yes. Do you know what's here?" She pointed out the zones near the hips and the shoulders.

"Of course, the thickest bundle of nerves that... (\*)" Manohar was incapable of completing the sentence, mulling over the sudden revelation.

"Exactly! All the most sensitive receptors, coming to and fro the fingers, erogenous zones, genitals. I only need to inflict on them more pain than the one that caused the trauma."

Jirni smiled softly while several needles that looked like knitting tools appeared in her hands.

"If I were you, I would create a silence zone." Linjos went pale too, rushing for the spell while Manohar secured a front row seat to better watch Jirni in action.

"That Lith from whatsitsname is right! Anatomy is awesome! We should add it to the subjects of the fourth year Healer class." Manohar said with a childish smile on his face.

"What a guy! He deserves a lot of points. If it wasn't for his lack of personality, I'd say he reminds me of myself when I was his age. A true innovator."

Linjos had many things to say, none nice, but chanting the spell kept his mouth busy.

- "What you call lack of personality is just human decency. Or at least a pretense of it. If I had two Manohars, I'd run away from the Kingdom as fast as I can." He thought —

The spell was completed just in time. One of Raynart's cousins woke up letting out an inhuman scream right after the fourth needle had pierced his skin. Jirni quickly and painlessly removed them all at once.

The temporary relief from pain would only make what was about to come more terrifying.

"What? Where am I?" The boy asked.

"Jirni Ernas, royal constable of his Majesty service." She handed him her badge and royal ID, speaking with a machine like demeanor.

"I'm also the mother of the girl you attempted to r\*pe." As soon as the boy understood his situation, rage twisted her visage in a cruel mask, making him wet himself.

"With your uncle's criminal record and what they have found on you, it's in my rights to interrogate you how I best see fit." She took out of her dimensional amulet a leather roll, that contained a lot of sharp tool of curious shape and forms.

"So, we can do this the easy way, or the painful way. As a constable, I hope you'll pick the former. As a mother, I hope you pick the latter."

Gorgus Pontus's fight or flight instinct kicked in and immediately tried to escape, only to discover he was chained hands and feet to the bed. He then tried to chant a tier three lightning, but a fist as small as powerful struck his jaw dislocating it.

"Thank you so much!" Jirni chirped happily.

"I actually lied before. I can't use these tools on a kid just for drug possession. Or better, I couldn't. Assaulting a royal constable is a capital crime instead. Why do you think I left your chains so loose?" She giggled, making Manohar hide again while Linjos felt the urge to puke.

"Let's play!"

\*\*\*

None remained to spectate the questioning, but Jirni recorded everything and used a silencing device to prevent even a single whisper from escaping her control. She had never needed Linjos's help, Jirni had simply exploited the situation to put both the Headmaster and the healing god to test.

Manohar crept her out. In a way, he was like Jirni, but lacked any form of common sense and most importantly, he had no constraints.

- "I have to get him married. His fear of motherly figures could be our only hope to controlling him. I already pity that poor girl though."—

After being 'persuaded' a little, Gorgus told her everything. Starting from the five Ws about that night accident to all the dirt he knew about his family and all of his parents' plans.

His brother, Sothes, did the same. The problems arose when she tried to wake up Raynart. Even after six needles, he was still unconscious. Jirni checked his pulse and heartbeat before stopping the procedure.

- "He does feel pain, simply it's not enough. Damn, to push things further I need a healer. Otherwise he may die of shock. I won't let him take the easy way out!"—

When Raynart finally recovered, Jirni needed to sedate him to avoid Raynart hurting himself. As soon as he recovered his senses, he went into a seizure like she had never seen before.

Much to Jirni's dismay, he answered all her questions while under the effects of the narcotic. His story was similar to that of the other two boys, but filled with unbelievable details like shadows coming to life or mystical eyes piercing his very soul.

Normally she wouldn't believe a word, blaming his delirium on the shock that had sent him into a coma. Too many things didn't add up though.

- "The insane amount of knowledge, him surviving an attack that killed an elite squad of the Queen's corps, his contribution to the plague, surviving a group of assassins, and now this? If this was about anyone else, I would shrug off Raynart's words like a bad dream.

I got the feeling that both the background check on Lith and the Queen haven't told me everything. I hate being kept in the dark. Looks like Lith and I need to have a little chat."—

Before walking out of the hospital, Jirni removed all the pain medications from the three boys' system, leaving behind a disposable silencing device so that no one would notice their screams.

Chapter 206 Questioning

Lith's group was happily enjoying their meal, exchanging suggestions about how to better treat magic crystals during the next lesson when Jirni Ernas almost burst open the door marching inside.

All the conversations suddenly stopped. All eyes were drawn to the badge shining on her chest. Aside from a few students choking on their food, the clicking of Jirni's boots on the stone floor was the only audible sound.

Lady Ernas exuded enough killing intent to take away the appetite of those she passed along. While most of his schoolmates avoided her gaze, Lith couldn't stop hearing in his head the Imperius March along with a rhythmic heavy breathing.

Lady Ernas didn't bother caring for the reactions of the ants surrounding her. She was still high strung because she couldn't kill the three little b\*stards. She wasn't a fan of due process, judges, and all those technicalities.

In her opinion, once she was done with her job, she should have been allowed to take out the trash. Yet she had the utmost respect for the law. Jirni had tailored her work life around a deep respect for rules and regulations.

There was only one thing that she could do to avoid murdering someone on her way home.

"Mom? What are you doing here?" Phloria looked at her with a puzzled look. Jirni had rarely allowed her daughter to see her in her uniform. She liked to keep her personal life separated from the professional one.

"Oh, my baby! Thank the gods you are all right." She hugged Phloria, squeezing her against her chest while caressing and kissing her daughter's head.

The killing intent popped like a bubble, replaced by a scene quite embarrassing for a teenage girl. Phloria became beet red, trying to shake off her mother's embrace, but to no avail. She could hear many people sniggering at her.

Only once Jirni was certain that nothing had happened to her daughter, she let her go. What followed was even more embarrassing.

Jirni went in front of each one of the most vocal to have found the previous scene hilarious and after scanning their features with her silver tablet, she listed all the past misdeeds that their families had tried so hard to cover up.

R\*pe, tax embezzlement, slavers, traitors. Sometimes the list was long, but she took her sweet time, starting with the most recent crimes and promising them she would take care of all those cases personally.

Some ran away in tears, others hid their faces in shame, a few attacked her. The result was always the same, broken bones and new criminal charges for assaulting an officer in the line of duty.

When she had finished, no one was laughing anymore. Jirni Ernas was a short woman, 1.52 (5') high, but in their eyes she had turned into a terrifying giant that no one dared to offend.

"Lith, do you have a few minutes to spare?" She asked with a gentle smile after returning to his table.

"I have some questions for you and my little Flower. It's better if we discuss this privately."

Phloria blushed violently, while Friya and Yurial had to hold back their chuckles. Their reactions made no sense to Jirni, but being teenagers, there were few things about them she understood, so she paid them no heed.

- "How the heck did she found out so fast?" Phloria's mind was a train wreck. "I didn't even tell dad that Lith and I are dating. Sort of. We have yet to have a proper date. Is it possible she has someone spying on me in here?"—

They went to Lith's room and when Jirni insisted on talking to them separately, Phloria almost went into a panic.

"What do I do? She'll scare him away! I'll never have a boyfriend. Why does she have to meddle in everything I do?"

"It's not a big deal, sister." Friya chuckled. "There are plenty of other fish in the sea."

"Yeah and every one of them will get scared when having a meeting with a shark! I want to see if you'll keep laughing when it happens to you." Phloria's retort snuffed out her hilarity.

Friya had yet to see Lady Ernas treat her adoptive daughters any different from her own blood.

While the three girls were panicking, each fueling the others' paranoia, Jirni and Lith were having another kind of talk.

"Do you know why I am here?" Her tone was firm, but gentle. Jirni preferred a soft approach in questioning a possible ally. She had already contacted the King on her way to the canteen and he had shared with her the Crown's agenda.

They knew Lith was an anomaly, like Manohar or Hatorne, but they hoped to turn him into an asset and prevent him from being snatched by other countries.

King Meron didn't explicitly order her to leave him alone, it was implied in his wording. Jirni was a loyal servant of the Crown, but above everything else she was a mother and a man hunter.

She had understood at first glance that Lith was like her, a ruthless killer with no compassion or care for human life. According to his background check, he cared for his family. It was a good start, but not enough.

It could have been all an act. She had to make sure that just like her, he was actually capable of caring. Otherwise letting him so close to her daughters was too dangerous. Not to mention that once Lith graduated from the academy, she had no doubt he would succeed, he would become a time bomb.

She knew that such a menace had to be snuffed out as soon as possible, before it became unstoppable as it had already happened with Hatorne or the god of death.

"Is this an official visit?" Lith asked.

- "If this was about me and Phloria dating, she wouldn't wear a uniform. She wouldn't question me, but fawn me instead. Lady Ernas wanted us to date since the second semester. Phloria never told me her mother is a royal constable, dammit.

I would have planned things more carefully."—

Jirni nodded.



"Then it's about yesterday's accident."

"Nailed in one. Now, since you seem a smart boy to me, I suggest telling me the truth. We are cut from the same cloth. You can't fool me like you do with the others."

Lith sighed. There wasn't much he could do about his situation.

- "Phloria's mom is too calm. She probably already knows the answers to her questions, she must have interrogated those three. There is no other possible explanation. Lying to her can only put me in trouble. In this dance, she leads while I can only follow."—

Before he could answer, Jirni took out a device the size of a USB pen drive with a small blue gemstone embedded on it. After she pressed the stone, it emitted a low buzzing sound.

"It prevents anyone from listening to our conversation, either by conventional or magical means. There is a traitor in the academy, I wouldn't be surprised if one or more of the rooms are bugged." Jirni explained.

Knowing how hard it was to deceive someone like him, Lith only told her the truth, simply omitting the parts about the use of spirit magic.

Jirni was pleased by his behavior. His story matched what she already knew and she couldn't detect any hint of deception in his words or body language. However it wasn't enough.

"What did you do to send them into a coma?"

"Torture." The shortest, most concise and satisfying answer in her vocabulary, but she remained expressionless.

"How?"

"Two of them with killing intent and air magic. Against the leader I used something more sophisticated."

"Constable Ernas log. What follows happens due to my explicit request, it's not an act of aggression. Repeat, not an aggression from the suspect." After Jirni spoke those words in her magic tablet, she closed in to Lith.

"Show me." She asked him. "It's hard to believe that a twelve year old single-handedly suppressed three men taller and heavier than him. Do to me the same thing you did to the two Poltus boys, but stop when I ask you to."

"I don't think I can." Lith replied. "The only time I can emit killing intent is when I'm threatened or when I feel a deep hatred. Otherwise it's painful, like making scars become open wounds again."

The answer was a pleasant surprise. Jirni had experienced the same thing when she was about his age, learning how to control her emotions at will. For a moment, she thought about pretending to threaten his family, but quickly dismissed the idea.

She wanted a confrontation, not a fight to the death. If Lith was even one bit similar to her, only one of them would come out alive before she could explain her reasons. Even then, the Crown would probably execute the survivor for treason, it would be a lose-lose situation.

"Please, try it anyway." She asked.

Lith forced himself to think about his father back on Earth, to Carl's death, to all those people that plagued his existence so far. Jirni could feel the killing intent rise bit by bit, but it was nothing much. Then she found it difficult to breathe.

An air spell was surrounding her head, sucking the air out.

"Nice trick. I can see those two almost die of fright. Now stop."

Lith obeyed, still blinded by the emotional pain.

"Now show me what you did to the last one." She offered him her hand.

"Do it only once."

Lith pretended to chant and as soon he touched Jirni's skin she felt a burning pain ravaging her flesh with an intensity she had rarely experienced. Yet she endured it without batting an eye, leaving Lith deeply impressed.

"Do you recall anything about black hands and mystical eyes popping out from the shadows?" Her question left Lith flabbergasted.

"What? No."

She stared in his eyes, finding only genuine surprise.

- "Seems that Raynart was really delirious after all. That or one of them is lying without knowing it." She thought. –

"Did you tell Phloria about that night?"

"No." He shrugged. "There's no point in making her worry about what could have happened. She has my Ballot now, so she's safe."

As a man hunter and a constable, that was the answer she had been looking for. Lith was able to care, otherwise he wouldn't have sacrificed his safety for someone else's sake.

If he really gave Phloria his Ballot before the assault, then it couldn't be part of a ruse, since the Poltus boys had followed them after meeting them by chance. She could easily check the timing, Linjos was the only one that could reset a Ballot.

As a mother in search of a husband for her daughter, that piece of news made Jirni's heart flutter. She decided not to push him. They were still young, but that was a good sign.

"Thank you for protecting my family." Jirni said offering him her hand, which he promptly shook.

"One day I hope to be able to return the favor. Could you please tell my little Flower to come in?"

Phloria barged in a second later, slamming the door behind her.

"Mom, this is too much, even for you. Stay out of my love life!" Jirni had no idea what she was talking about, but she had learned that suspects with a guilty conscience would often talk too much, so she remained silent.

"How could you put me under surveillance? I asked him out two days ago and you already come here in high uniform to interrogate us? We did nothing wrong!"

"You didn't?" Jirni kept her face expressionless.

"We just kissed. Once! I have the right to date who I want. I will not allow you to control my life." Phloria's face was red due to rage and embarrassment. She was really happy that the dorms were soundproof, she had yelled quite a bit.

"Oh sweetie, that's marvelous! I'm so happy for you." Jirni hugged her tight, finally letting her joy out.

"I was starting to fear you'd die single. You listened to my advice and courted Lith instead. He even gave you his Ballot, now everything makes sense. Good girl, mom is proud of you."

Phloria froze, panic quickly replacing her outrage.

"Didn't you know it already?" She squeaked.

"No, I just wanted to see you. I'm here on official business for yesterday's accident. I'm glad you choose to share the good news with me."

Phloria thought she was going to die out of embarrassment, but her heart stood still and the earth refused to open up and swallow her.

## Chapter 207 Gods and Men

The forest surrounding the Lightning Griffon academy, the night before.

Since Linjos didn't need its help for the second exam, Scarlett the Scorpicores, Lord of the forest surrounding the White Griffon academy, had spent the last months performing its annual round of the Distar Marquisate.

The Scorpicores would look for magical beasts old and wise enough to be potential candidates for becoming Awakened ones, hence turning them into Monsters. Scarlett had no obligation to do such thing, it simply felt it was the right thing to do to keep the balance.

Magical beasts had a mortality rate incomparable with humans. Dying of old age for them was more a myth than a possibility. Humans kept growing in numbers and power instead.

Without new Monsters to keep their greed and selfishness in check, there was no telling how bad things could become. Meeting Protector while performing a background check on the mysterious human-Abomination hybrid cub had been the icing on the cake.

Not only was Lith trustworthy according to the many magical beasts he had interacted with, but Scarlett had also managed to help Protector to evolve, securing the County of Lustria for at least a few centuries.

- "If only the rest of my traveling went that good." Scarlett inwardly sighed.

"This year has started badly and if it keeps going like this, my fur will turn grey from the constant worrying."—

During its round, it had met countless magical beasts and most of them were harbingers of bad news. Or better yet, the same piece of bad news repeated over and over. After consulting with Tarbas the Naga, Lord of the forest surrounding the Lightning Griffon academy, they had resolved to summon the Council.

The Lords took out a communication device from their respective dimensional amulets.

Unlike those Lith and the rest of mankind used in their daily activities, those communication amulets were made out of Davross (\*) instead of silver, while the magical gemstone embedded on it shone of pure white light instead of the common blue.

"This is a waste of time." Tarbas said. The Naga was a monster with the lower part of her body resembling a huge snake's tail, while the upper part could have been mistaken for a human woman if it wasn't for her sky-blue skin and six arms instead of two.

She wore an enchanted breastplate covering her torso and six different enchanted weapons were ready at hand, two on its back, four where the hips were supposed to be.

"Those old farts will never listen to us." Tarbas shook her head in resignation, letting her long, silky black hair dance under the moonlight.

"If I wanted to hear your whining, I would have just called." Scarlett snorted.

"The only reason I'm here is that without two communicators it's impossible to summon the Council. Now shut up and let me do the talking. If we have any chance of persuading those blockheads, we need to be calm and confident.

So keep your mood swings in check."

Tarbas clicked her tongue, but she couldn't raise any objection. Being a cold-hot blooded hybrid, she was indeed moody.

There wasn't any magic formula or circle involved, as soon as the two mystical amulets touched, five figures materialized mid air.

Each of them was the spokesperson of their own kind of Awakened ones. Humans, magical beasts, undead, plants, and Guardians. The assembly didn't have an official name, each race would refer to it differently.

Humans called it "The Guiding Hand", the undead "The Darkwatch", the plants "The Root", the beasts "The Council" and the Guardians "Another Damn Chore."

None of the five seemed happy to be forced to answer the call, except for Leegaain.

"Looking good, Scar. You are that close to promoting your core to the violet level. Have you considered the idea of becoming a Guardian? Sure, you'd have to relinquish your turf forever, but the job comes with many perks."

Scarlett took a deep breath to calm its anger. It hated the nickname. Both its skin and fur were flawless. Also it hadn't missed how the Guardian's untimely remark had made the eyes of the other members of the Council burn with envy.

The other races couldn't forgive magical beasts for being the only ones capable of becoming a Guardian.

- "Thanks for making my job harder, you scaly idiot!" It angrily thought.

"You're welcome." Leegaain cheerfully replied, almost making the Scorpicores gasp in surprise.

"You are always such an optimist. It's not like you have any chance to start with."—

Scarlett cut off the mind link before giving her speech.

"Fellow Awakened, I call upon you in this time of crisis to ask for your help. Someone is ravaging the lands, consuming huge amounts of world energy and kidnapping countless creatures on the verge of Awakening.

Humans, plants, beasts, undead. Whoever it is, they do not discriminate. We are all a target. We must find the root of the problem and weed it out."

"Why should we care?" Inxialot, the king of the liches, snorted through the exposed nasal septum of his skull. He wasn't actually a king, it was a title that had been imposed on him after getting the short end of the stick during the last raffle.

It would last for three centuries, forcing him to attend those boring meetings and neglect his precious research, while the others were free to mind their own business.

"We have meddled countless times in the past, nothing ever changes. Kill a tyrant, another takes their place. Give them food, they stop working. Force them to obey the law, they revolt calling you a tyrant.

"As long as living beings have dreams and ambitions, this world will suck. Yet it's because of those things that the world thrives. Leegaain has already informed us of this Demon Lord, Abomination King, Master of Disaster or whatever childish title they will self-appoint to themselves.

"Bottom line, we don't care. Been there, done that. They will throw their tantrum, make an enemy of the world, and then they will fail. No one, no matter how powerful, not even us, can go against a whole world full of billions of individuals.

The moment they cause too much damage, all the races will join forces and wipe them away." All the members of the Council nodded at his words.

"I know that." Scarlett struggled to keep its cool in front of so much blind indifference.

"Countless lives will be lost before that happens though. Hundreds already have. Does none of you care for their descendants?"

"Humans only care about themselves. Protecting them is pointless. Many will die, but more will be born replacing them, maybe even learning from their ancestors' mistakes." Raagu, the human representative shook her head.

"Death isn't a bad thing. They will return to the Great Mother and feed the next generations." Lotho the Treant crossed his arms nodding to Raagu.

"I think..." Leegaain said.

"The session is over. The motion is unanimously approved." Feela, the beasts' representative, cut him short. With a clap of her hands, four out of five figures Warped Away.

"Told you so." Leegaain patted Scarlett's head.

"If you need help, give me a call. I'll send Tyris, since I can't operate in the Griffon Kingdom. Ta-ta!" He said before disappearing.

Scarlett lowered its head, accepting the failure.

Tarbas placed one of her hands on the Scorpicores' shoulder to console it.

"It's not your fault. We all grow more detached and insensible over time. Non Awakened have such a short lifespan that getting attached to them only brings us pain. It's no coincidence that all the races have the same saying: 'the gods have abandoned us'."

Scarlett knew the truth behind those five words. Before the advent of fake magic, Awakened ones appeared like gods to their own kin. Over time they would either start to believe they were real gods and needed to be put down, or would experience so much pain, betrayal, and isolation to seclude themselves from the rest of the world.

"Who needs gods that sit on their hands doing nothing?" Scarlett roared, its eyes burning with fury.

"I don't need a bunch of indifferent gods, I need allies. Luckily, I know where to look for them."

\*\*\*

Later, during the Necromancy class, Lith knew that something was wrong. Phloria had suddenly become incapable of looking him in the eyes without turning beet red, even choosing to sit as far away as possible from him.

- "I really hope that mom was joking when she talked about having dad preparing a betrothal gift for Lith. It would be the second most embarrassing moment of my life. Today would still get the first place."— Phloria thought.

After Professor Zeneff entered the classroom, she clapped her hand, Warping several rows of rat skeletons along the walls.

"As I told you last time, during our lessons I'll teach you how to animate lesser undead. By definition, lesser undead are all those reanimated creatures that do not have a mind of their own.

"Creating greater undead is either a crime, since it involves sacrificing someone's life, or ethically controversial. It's the closest thing to slavery, because the undead will have feelings and thoughts of its own but will be completely at the necromancer's mercy.

"That's why advanced Necromancy is a well kept secret. In case some of you gets too curious, be aware that researching advanced Necromancy or creating what basically are sentient slaves without the Crown's approval is a major crime.

"Now let's get back to our lesson. Among the lesser undead there are skeletons, zombies, crypt crawlers, and many others. Skeletons are the weakest and easiest to reanimate, yet we will start with something small. Each of you has to pick at least one rat skeleton.

"You'll soon discover that this exercise has two major hurdles. The first is to mark your creature before it becomes fully formed, otherwise it will eat your face. The second and most difficult one is controlling it with your will.

"Hopefully, by the end of the day ,you'll be able to make them move in the direction of your choice."

Another clap of her hands and a hardcover book with only two pages materialized on the students' desks. One was the Reanimating Skeletons spell, while the other was the Life Mark spell.

"Unlike other courses, I can't allow you to practice without supervision, it's too risky. Luckily my subject is simple, so our lessons should be plenty enough. I'll provide you new pages during the following lessons, they will self attach until the book will be complete.

Practice Life Mark first. Failing to animate the dead is not a big deal, giving undeath to a raving mad one is though."

While all his class looked at the skeleton with disgust, Lith read the spells a few times until he was sure of having memorized them.

- "She is right, these spells really are simple compared to the others I studied so far. Probably because fake Necromancy is the closest thing I ever encountered to its true magic counterpart. It requires will and imagination."—

Lith reanimated the rat on the first attempt, the problem was that the creature just stared dumbly at him. Lith furrowed his brow, squinting his eyes while concentrating until they were almost closed, but nothing happened.

"Excellent job! Ten points for mister Lith." Zeneff said.

"You are doing it wrong though. You can't control an undead with your mind, because it does not have one of its own. You must feel the mana residing in the carcass and manipulate it."

Cursing at his own stupidity, Lith did as instructed. Thanks to months of healing and dimensional magic, his mana sensibility had improved by leaps and bounds, but he was still lagging behind the others.

They had needed a few attempts to succeed, but now their rats moved without limping or staggering, unlike his own.

- "I still suck at mana sensitivity, but my mana control is in a league of its own. Let me try a new trick."—

Lith emitted an almost invisible tendril of darkness, directly connecting him and the skeleton. He wasn't using true magic. It could be barely classified as a trick using first magic. The moment the trick and the spell interacted, something unexpected happened.

Lith was now able to control the undead at will. The connection allowed him to bypass the sensitivity issue, like plugging a controller in a console without needing the batteries anymore.

"Fetch!" Lith ordered the rat that brought back a second skeleton that was promptly reanimated. Zeneff was surprised by the speed of Lith's progress. According to his file, his real talent lied in his open mind as a Healer and his rich battle experience.

None of them were supposed to help him in learning Necromancy. While most of the students were still trying to make their rat move, Lith was now controlling two undead at once, making them stand on their hind legs and performing the new world's equivalent of the minuet.

- "There is no reason to hold back anymore." Lith thought. "Either because of Phloria's mom's report or because those three b\*astards will spill the beans on me during their trial, I'm going to have more enemies than ever.

Also, this is but a simple trick, there is no risk in sharing it with the academy. I need dozens of thousands points to afford some decent equipment."—

Along with many envious gazes, Lith received a few admiring ones. Professor Zeneff's was among those.

Chapter 208 Storm Fron

"Mister Lith, would you mind coming over here please?" Professor Zeneff had him walk to her desk.

- "If this guy is a Necromancy genius, I must report it immediately to the Crown." – She thought. Each Professor had to keep their evaluation to themselves, notifying only the Headmaster or Crown of a promising talent.

It was a safety measure to avoid talented students from becoming targets of the hostility from noble families or of the interest of foreign countries. Being a Necromancy lecturer, Zeneff would report her observations only to the Crown.

It was too sensitive a topic for clerks to handle, all academies were known for having more leaks than a sieve.

"Can you please explain to me how you accomplished that?" She pointed to the still dancing rats.

Lith told her making Professor Zeneff burst into a chuckle.

"Really well played, but for today's lesson purpose it's like cheating. I wasn't going to teach you that trick until all of you managed to gain a decent degree of control over your undead. Still, it's very impressive for a student to discover it on his own. Twenty more points for you."

While Lith was disappointed learning he had just reinvented the wheel, Professor Zeneff was relieved instead.

- "I knew it was too good to be true. I can kiss my points goodbye." He thought. –

- "Thank the gods he is just very brilliant. I don't think the Kingdom can afford a second god of death." Zeneff thought. –

"Go back to your place and do the exercise properly." Professor Zeneff instructed Lith.

"Do not explain the trick to anyone, it would ruin my lesson. I'm sorry to send you back to square one, but I'm sure you will thank me later."

She smiled gently, knowing how hard it was for someone so young going from believing to be a genius to discovering it had only been a fluke.

Lith went back to his seat with a dejected expression. Soon envy turned into snickers and pointed fingers, when the other students noticed that he was back to controlling a single rat, apparently suffering from brain damage.

Lith was already able to move his rat in the direction he wanted, but every two or three steps, it would writhe like it had a seizure, prompting the ridicule from his peers. Even Quylla would chuckle from time to time.

"Sorry..." She said looking in his direction. "but it's too funny. Why don't you try shutting down the other one? It didn't act like that before. During the previous lesson, Professor Zeneff told us that every undead requires focus from the mage.

Maybe that's why you find it so hard to control it now."

"Quylla, you are a damn genius." He gave her a thumbs up while placing his left hand on the second undead and draining the darkness magic that possessed its body. Lith's words made Quylla smile for



the first time since Phloria had asked him out, while his actions made Professor Zeneff swallow a lump of saliva.

- "Once it's a fluke, but twice? Is it possible for him to have the mana control to be able to take back his own spell?"— Her face was jovial as usual, but her eyes returned often to his desk.

As Quylla predicted, once the second rat was out of the picture, Lith was able to move the remaining undead with more ease. The rat was promoted from brain damaged to crippled.

The lesson continued and Lith kept falling behind. He felt like the others were running while he was forced to walk.

- "Damn, I must find a way around my limits. This time I can't pull all nighters to catch up with them. Think Lith, think. Normally, when I use Necromancy, I always keep my undead under control with tendrils of mana.

"It serves the purpose of constantly feeding them and makes their reaction time much faster, since I can control them with but a thought. Now I have to control a lump of mana after giving it a body instead.

"On paper, it should be easy for me. After I cast any spell with true magic, I can always alter its course or form, as long as I can see it. Why should this be any different?"—

Lith drained and injected darkness magic into the carcass multiple times, turning it into an undead and back while trying to remember the feeling he experienced when the mana passed from him to the skeleton.

- "This is not dimensional magic where I have to constantly manipulate and adapt different mana flows. Unlike a Warp Step, the undead is stable. I need to feel it just once!"—

Lith kept his eyes closed, repeating the spell over and over, until he was able to feel every drop of mana that came out of his core, manipulating it like it was a new arm.

To make things easier, Lith coordinated the rat skeleton's movements with his right hand's fingers. There were no tendrils attached, but thanks to the workaround he was soon able to move the creature at will.

After he got used to the feeling, he reanimated the second rat again, using one hand for each and moving them in unison.

By the end of the lesson, while most students had succeeded in correctly controlling a single undead and Quylla was close to perfecting the movements of the second one, Lith had expanded the number of his puppets, needing only a finger for each one of them.

Professor Zeneff had never been so excited and afraid at the same time in her whole career, fearing to have triggered the advent of the new god of death.

\*\*\*

Time passed and soon the days turned into a month. Friya needed but a week to master the Switch spell, completing the dimensional magic course and receiving a griffon shaped honour badge from Linjos and Rudd to celebrate the new inter-academy record.

Aside from Quylla, the rest of the group had mastered Blink, but they had yet to succeed in the Switch spell. Quylla and Friya used that extra free time to cram healing magic together, becoming the rising stars of the Light Magic Department.

Lith kept Forgemastering successfully one elemental weapon after the other, making Professor Wanemyre so happy that at one point she offered to adopt him. It was a flattering proposal, but he gently refused it.

Necromancy helped Lith overcome his mana sensitivity gap, leaving Professor Zeneff in awe. He would finish the assignments so fast that she promoted him to her assistant during the lessons, giving tips and suggestions to the other students.

Receiving so much good news every day made Lady Ernas feel like she was walking on air.

"I hope you will now admit I'm always right." She chuckled reading the latest congratulatory report from the White Griffon academy.

"A dimensional magic prodigy, two geniuses at healing, and our little Flower has finally blossomed as a woman. The future of house Ernas is as good as set in stone."

At those words, Orion Ernas spit out his tea in the butler's face, spilling the rest on his own nether regions. The pain coming from the hot tea was nothing compared to the one he felt in his heart so he ignored it, treating the small burns with healing magic.

"Do you mean she... they... you know what I mean!" Orion was beet red from pain and anger.

"No, I don't." She giggled, sending the butler away.

"It's never a good thing for a parent to meddle during the initial phases of a relationship. Lith seems quite the gentleman, I'm sure he'll make her first time pleasurable."

Orion once again cursed Lith's name and the day he brought the little runt into his house.

"She is too young for that! How can you say such things and remain so calm?"

Jirni put down the report, looking Orion straight in the eyes.

"Didn't we start knowing each other intimately when I was fifteen?" She asked with a soft smile.

"Those were different times! Ages ago." Orion replied, noticing the trap when it was already too late.

"Are you calling me an old hag?" She stood up, scolding him with an indignant tone.

"No, gods no!" Orion hastily retreated. Admitting defeat was his only option at that point, or he would share the doghouse with Lucky for the days to come.

"You are right, fifteen is the perfect age to start dating."

"According to our little Flower, Lith is a very promising Healer, Forgemaster and maybe even Necromancer." Jirni was back to being all smiles.

"You could bring him to your forge sometime, for some male bonding time. I was thinking we should meet his parents one of these days. Nothing formal, just to say hi and introduce ourselves."

Orion Ernas was inwardly weeping blood at the thought of losing his little Flower to a brute whose only perk was being so similar to his beloved wife, but he could only nod with a smile plastered on his face.

\*\*\*

Sitting alone in his office, Linjos couldn't help but have an eerie feeling that something terrible was about to happen. Things were going smoothly, there had been no more accidents and he received only good news.

It was all too good to be true. Linjos was the White Griffon Headmaster for three years now, he knew the rules of the game all too well. He had spent the first two years learning the ropes before finally implementing the changes he had always dreamt about to the academy system.

Despite being the trial year, his academy had already achieved the highest number of promoted students per trimester and the lowest numbers of expelled or injured students per month.

The healthy environment had allowed many students that had appeared unremarkable at their arrival at the academy to develop their talents. They were popping out like mushrooms in all departments.

The random checks for slave items had been fruitless. Members of the Queen's corps would search and interrogate the staff, but thank the gods every time they would come up with nothing.

Yet Linjos couldn't help but worry. According to the reports he received from the Professors and the Queen, despite the internal strife having been quelled, all academies were still experiencing an all time low of the students' grades.

Linhos knew that sooner or later, the other Headmasters would try to sabotage his academy. With such poor results, they would be forced to implement Linjos's system, losing a lot of face and looking incompetent in the eyes of the magical community.

No matter what the Queen ordered, he was certain that they would put their prestige above everything. Many of them were too old to accept the changes and would never accept retirement.

To make things even worse, it was almost that time of the year again. Thinking about how much work he had to do with so little time at his disposal, Linjos sighed multiple times before summoning Nalear to his office.

\*\*\*

The Magic Crystal lessons were the most appreciated among the compulsory courses of the third trimester. There were no winners or losers, all the students had become capable of cutting and refining low grade gemstones.

It had no homework, since handling mana blades and crystals was too dangerous without supervision, nor was there a rush to complete the task. The most important thing was the quality of the final product, so students would take their time, facing each crystal like a challenge to oneself rather than to the rest of the class.

At the end of the lesson, after checking the results of the students' work, Professor Nalear had an announcement to make.

"Excellent work everyone. Now I have good news and bad news. The good news is that since the whole class is making progress at such an outstanding rate, our trip to the forest's crystal mines has been brought forward.

"We'll depart tomorrow first thing in the morning, bring along anything you think you might need in the next few days." The trip was supposed to last only one morning, the sudden change of plans made the class burst with chattering.

Nalear raised her hand, silencing them with a quick spell.

"This leads to the bad news. For security reasons, students and Professors alike will move out of the academy until the eighteenth day of this month. Temporary lodgings have already been prepared.

You'll be split based on your household rather than on your gender or academy year. Beware of your seniors and be nice to your juniors. No misconduct will be tolerated, we will keep everyone under constant supervision."

Despite her smile, Lith could see it was all a façade. A deep rage was smoldering behind her soothing manners. Something terrible had probably happened to her during her student days.

"I am not at liberty to give you any explanation. Just know that this is for your own safety. Dismissed." Nalear abruptly left, clenching her hands so hard she was bleeding a little.

Lith was so focused on all those small details that he missed the several glances Phloria threw at him, sighing every time she did it. They had much to discuss.

## Chapter 209 Storm Front 2

Phloria Ernas wasn't having the time of her life. Her adoptive sisters were running circles around her in the academy, her mother called too often with stars shining in her eyes, waiting for some big announcement. Every time she heard from her father, Orion seemed to be on the verge of tears instead.

Also, her relationship with Lith hadn't progressed much during the last month, giving her the impression there was something wrong.

They were already at their sixth date and Lith had always behaved like a perfect gentleman, having a deep knowledge of the places they visited together even if he had never been there before.

Phloria didn't know about Soluspedia, so the idea of him investing so much time and effort for her sake was truly flattering. They would always have brilliant conversations and while his jokes were a bit odd, Lith managed to be funny or mature according to the situation.

The problem was everything else.

- "He is way too mature, but that's actually nice." She would often think. "The more I know him, the more it seems I'm dating my parents though. He is a paranoid control freak like mom, but without being bossy or nosy.

"He is also caring and protective like dad, without being clingy or possessive. I like his virtues and flaws, but while, at the start, it was nice of him to leave me my personal space and not try to touch me inappropriately, now I'm starting to worry about it.

"Holding my hand from time to time is the boldest move he ever did. Be it kissing or hugging, he never takes the initiative, it's always up to me. Did he agree to go out with me out of pity? Or was it to get rid of Quylla?"—

Mulling those questions over and over, Phloria was getting more insecure by the day.

She couldn't imagine that Lith was actually a forty year old in the body of an almost thirteen year boy. He was conflicted between his psychological and physical age. Lith was incapable of approaching her without the fear of being guilty of forcing himself on someone naïve and inexperienced.

Phloria was too embarrassed to seek advice from her parents and asking her older brothers was useless. Gunyin, her eldest brother, had followed their mother's wishes, marrying a girl when he was barely sixteen. He had never dated someone outside of his own wife.

Tulion, her second brother, had almost been kicked out of the household because of his many affairs with maidens from other noble families.

- "I can already hear Gunyin say: "Ask mom, she knows better." Or Tulion: "Push him down on the bed. It would work with me.""—

Being cornered, Phloria had sought Friya's advice the day before. Phloria knew that she was still rooting for Quylla, but she had no one to turn to.

"I never dated anyone, so I really don't know what to say." Friya was really embarrassed to reveal that while she very much liked talking about boys, she knew almost nothing about them.

"If I were in your shoes, I would just ask him. If he doesn't like you, then he doesn't deserve you, sis." Phloria was moved by her words. She had always thought that, between the almost forced adoption and Quylla, they would only be sisters on paper.

Her advice made a lot of sense, so she was waiting for the end of the lessons to confront Lith. Magic Crystals was the last course of the day and since they would spend the next three days working in the mines, they had the rest of the afternoon free.

Phloria was so nervous, looking for the right moment to talk to him, that she almost flinched when Lith tapped on her shoulder while they were coming out of the classroom.

"Since we have nothing to do until tomorrow morning, do you mind coming to my room for a few minutes? We need to talk." Lith said taking the words right out of her mind, making her swallow a lump of saliva.

Saying those four words was hard, but hearing them was even worse. According to her brother Tulion, it was the best line before dumping someone and he was an authority in the field.

- "I have no idea what the security reasons Professor Nalear spoke about are, but it's likely that Phloria's mother does. I don't have Lady Ernas's contact rune, but I'm sure that she wouldn't mind helping me. The last time we met, we parted on good terms."—

Lith's intentions were completely unrelated to his relationship with Phloria, but she had no way to know that. She lived every step towards Lith's room like a death row inmate would while approaching the chopping block.

After they walked through the door, Phloria clenched her hands covered in sweat, finding the courage to speak her mind.

"Actually, I have something to say that can't wait anymore."

Noticing the urgency in her voice, Lith nodded, offering her the only chair in the room while he sat on the bed instead.

"That's exactly what I want to talk about!" She stood up, pointing a finger at him.

"Meaning?" Lith tilted his head in confusion.

"Why do you always keep your distance from me? No matter where we are, you never sit beside me, let alone try to kiss or touch me. Am I that ugly to you? Are you pity dating me?"

Her voice was full of rage, yet Lith could clearly see the insecure teenage girl hiding behind the mask. The new world closely resembled the middle ages in his mind.

Since they were so different in age and social status, he had thought that Phloria was content with what they had, never suspecting she wanted something more, like a modern Earth girl.

The only answer he could offer her wasn't the truth, but the next best thing.

"Absolutely not!" He stood up too, his tone was firm as a rock in denying her allegation.

"It's just that I've never dated someone your age, so I don't know what to do." Lith scratched his head in embarrassment. He was a late bloomer, never dating anyone before his last year of high school.

"Also, being as strong as I am, I'm afraid to hurt you. Last, but not least, our height gap doesn't help." He stood in front of her, using his hand to emphasize it.

Lith was now 1.65 meters (5'5") high, but Phloria was still taller than him with her 1.77 meters (5'10").

"Do you want me to bring around a soapbox during our dates? Because I feel so dumb having to use a spell or ask you to bend down." Phloria felt so relieved by his answers that it was like someone had just lifted a mountain from her shoulder and another from her stomach.

Realizing he was not only younger, but also as inexperienced as her, made her heart flutter. Phloria gave him a long, deep kiss while her hands caressed his hair and wide shoulders.

Lith was surprised by how good a kisser she had become, needing his sheer willpower to keep his hands on her back instead of going for second base. He had no idea if he would be able to stop there.

"What do you want to talk about?" She whispered in his hear, refusing to let him go and making it really hard for him to focus.

"This field trip sounds fishy." He replied with a hoarse voice.

"I was thinking we may ask your parents for information. It never hurts being prepared for the worst."

"It can wait." She shrugged emitting an adorable giggle. "All work and no play makes Lith a dull boy." She had just kissed him again when someone knocked on the door.

"Lith? Little Flower? Are you in there? Please open up."

"Dad?" Phloria blurted out from surprise.

"I told you it could wait, dammit. Give them some space."

"Mom?" Phloria panicked, pushing Lith away and sending him butt first to the floor.

"Yes dear." Jirni's voice replied from the other side of the door.

"Take your time, there is no rush." In Phloria's mind those words sounded like:

"Put your clothes on carefully. Think about your father."

If her parents' sudden appearance was like a sudden cold shower for her, Lith needed a magical one, cooling down his face, hands, and other obvious places to make himself decent.

As soon as he opened the door, Orion barged in, sighing in relief seeing that the bed was still made and all the buttons on the two youths' uniforms were in proper order.

"Why didn't you answer your communication amulet? I've been calling you for hours!" Orion yelled.

"I was busy!" Phloria angrily rebuked.

"Please forgive us, Lith." Lady Ernas said. "I couldn't stop his rampage after he heard the news. The moment Phloria missed his tenth call, we were already on our way here. I suppose you know that something is going on."

Lith nodded.

"Yes, Lady Ernas. We were just about to call you." He reported to them Professor Nalear's announcement and his doubts about it.

"Excellent thinking. Emotions are important, but in time of crisis, keeping a cool head is of the utmost importance." Jirni clicked her tongue, making both father and daughter blush in embarrassment.

"Also, it's the exact reason why we are here. By now, most of the students should have been contacted by their parents and informed about the current predicament."

"Which is?" Lith asked.

"Have you ever heard about the god of death?" Phloria and Lith shook their heads.

"Ilyum Balkor, better known as the god of death, is one of the blackest pages in the Griffon Kingdom's modern history. Twenty years ago, before either of you were born, he was a commoner of humble origins that had entered the Black Griffon academy, soon revealing to possess an outstanding talent for magic.

"It quickly turned out to be more a curse rather than a blessing. According to the academy's old standards, might makes right, so he and his family were constantly victims of harassment from the noble families.

"The previous Queen ignored all the reports because she considered such behavior useful to her agenda. In her mind, they would push Balkor to seek the Crown's support, making him more malleable to her requests in order to satisfy his thirst for revenge and protection.

"Her 'brilliant' plan fell apart when a few months before his graduation, Balkor's village was set ablaze and his family killed by unknown bandits. It's still unclear if it was just an unlucky incident or something staged by one of the old noble families.

"What matters is that Balkor didn't care for the Crown's promises of finding the culprits, nor for all the flatteries coming from the academies and noble families alike, aiming to recruit him. They tried to exploit his pain of losing his family by replacing it with a new one.

"After graduating, he disappeared for a few months before returning at the lead of an army of greater undead, exterminating in one night all the noble families in his birthplace.

"Then he escaped to the Blood Desert while the army and the Mage Association were still busy dealing with his thralls.

"That night, Ilyum Balkor gained the title of god of death and the old Queen abdicated in Sylpha's favor. The following year, the Crown received a single word from him: 'Past'.

"During the night of the anniversary of Balkor's family's death, a whole old noble household disappeared. Not even children or elderly were spared, the only thing left behind was a single word, painted with blood over every single wall, ceiling, or floor: "Soon."

"Every year, for the following four years, the Crown received the same note and another ancient household would disappear during the night of the anniversary. Then, for the next five years, the note contained a different word: 'Present'.

"During the anniversary, the new target became the Crown and the Mage Association. Their most notable members would be attacked by legions of never seen before undead.

"We know this because most of the intended victims managed to survive, thanks to the heavy security. The King and the Queen survived all five attempts, allowing the Association to collect a lot of samples and devise new weapons against the new race of undead.

Sadly, this is the eleventh year and the note changed once again. Now it says: 'Future'."

"So they think he will now target the academies? It makes sense since the students represent the future of the Kingdom. What makes them think he will target the White Griffon?" Lith asked.

Lady Ernas shook her head sighing.

"No one thinks the god of death will target the White Griffon. We think he will target all the academies. The first five years were just the appetizer. He used them to perfect his creations while putting to test the magical defenses of the most powerful families, succeeding most of the times.

Then, he targeted both the Crown and the Mage Association, attacking all of their most notable members. He is the reason that lead the Griffon Kingdom to hasten the reform of the nobility and academy system, leading to the current crisis.

The existence of the god of death is a secret to the public, but every major power of the country knows about him, and lives in fear of his return."

## Chapter 210 Tactical Retrea

Lith pondered for a while over Lady Ernas's words, trying to understand the reason behind Linjos's decision.



"Then what's the point of having the students move out of the academy? Isn't the castle one of the safest places in the Kingdom?" He asked.

"It is, but not against the god of death." Lady Ernas explained.

"All the ancient noble families, just like house Ernas, have several arrays defending them. We have contributed to building and nurturing the Kingdom, so you can think of our houses as smaller versions of the academies.

"The defense mechanisms are similar, but weaker. Balkor didn't just hunt us, he used every single attack to collect data and improve his thralls. Every year, they became stronger and more resilient, able even to bypass the basic arrays like they don't even exist.

"For your information, both the Royal Palace and the Mage Association headquarters have defenses on par with the academies, some say they are even better. Yet Balkor's creatures managed to break in every single year.

"We knew they were coming, we were prepared, and armed to the teeth. None of that mattered. The number of casualties only increased over time. Probably Linjos is thinking of relying on the protection of the Lord of the forest.

"Monsters like a Scorpicores only grow stronger with the passing of time. Thank the gods those beasts' talent for magic is second only to their indifference toward the outside world. As long as you don't mess with their turf, they don't mess with you."

"What's a Scorpicores?" Phloria asked.

"A genius magical beast that further evolved." Orion explained.

"They are invaluable allies and merciless enemies. Be careful of never antagonize one unless it's strictly necessary. While they are still beasts, they are much more intelligent than normal animals."

Lith was amazed by the time and effort magical beasts had spent to keep humans underestimating them. Even before his evolution, Lith would have never considered Ryman stupid.

"Also, the god of death is not the only one that has learned from the past attacks."

Jirni continued.

"Once the pattern was clear, the old noble families would scatter their members and go into hiding during the anniversary. It was a cowardly but effective move, many of them managed to survive the onslaught.

"Linjos's plan is very smart. First, he is changing the battlefield, making Balkor's preparations useless. Magical beasts' arrays work differently from ours, so the creatures should get affected by them.

"Second, by moving the students to the forest, finding them will be much harder, exploiting the undead's greatest weak point.

"To give them so much power, skill, and magic, Balkor had to sacrifice their lifespan. They never last much longer after sunrise, so by turning an assassination attempt into a hide and seek game, Linjos has already gained an advantage.

I only wish the other Headmasters did the same thing. Some of those old coots want to make a stand against Balkor and Linjos." Jirni sighed.

"Call the other kids here, I'll teach you whatever I can." Orion said

When Friya, Quylla, and Yurial arrived, they were still shaken up by the news received from their respective parents.

"First thing, do not fight them unless you are cornered. Those monsters are incredibly fast and strong, even the Mage Knight spell Full Guard barely allows a veteran to fight them on equal footing. You are no veterans, just kids.

"Running away should always be your priority. Never underestimate greater undead. They have a high degree of intelligence, can plan ahead and coordinate their attacks. They never get tired, do not feel pain, and every hit sucks away a bit of your life force, using it to heal their wounds.

If you are forced to engage the enemy, Mage Knights should resort to guerrilla warfare, combining Blink and Full Guard." Orion said looking at the two girls.

"As for you guys, you are only useful as long range attackers and life force batteries. Wardens are useless. Their spells are too slow and even if they manage to cast one, Balkor's creations can shrug off most of their effects. That's why I brought these."

Orion waved his hand, and five weapons came out of his dimensional ring.

An estoc, a rapier, a short sword, and two curved blades resembling shotels. Each one had two magic gemstones embedded in the hilt.

"I prepared them based on the knowledge we have accumulated so far. They are specifically designed to deal greatly increased damage to undead. I'm only loaning them to you." He looked straight at Lith and Yurial.

"These are not weapons for kids, I expect you to return them once the crisis is over."

Lith gratefully took his shotel, deeply bowing to Orion.

- "I'll make use of this time to thoroughly study this weapon and take note of every detail in my notebooks. It's like already having a Forgemastering fifth year book at hand!" He inwardly smiled.

—

"One more thing." This time it was Lith talking.

"If an undead ever comes close to you, only use darkness magic. It's their bane. They are not afraid of cuts, burns, or cold. The other elements can damage their bodies, but unless it's enough to cripple them, they will barely notice it.

Never use light magic instead. It would only give them more power."

"How do you know it?" Orion was flabbergasted. Necromancy being one of the rarest mystical arts, only those who served the Crown, the Mage Association, and veterans in fighting undead knew such things.

He was about to teach them about the elements, but Lith took the words out of his mouth.

"I have a lot of free time during the Necromancy classes. I do not spend it by idly waiting for the lesson to end, I raise undead and experiment on them instead. To truly master any discipline, I need

to understand its flaws and limitations, becoming capable of exploiting them when it will be used against me."

Lith's reply made Phloria's and Jirni's heart flutter. To the former, he sounded like a cool hero always one step ahead of his enemies, to the latter he sounded like the perfect son in law and an excellent royal constable candidate.

Jirni and Orion stayed for dinner and with them a lot of other parents. The canteen had never been so full and noisy before. The hall was split into two sides. One with the noble families warning their heirs, giving them advice and equipment.

The other where commoners were grouped up, still unaware of the imminent threat.

Lith was sitting at the Ernas's table while Yurial was at the table next to them with his parents and fiancé. She was as cute as a button blond girl, around fifteen years old, and definitely overdressed. She seemed to be attending a gala rather than an academy.

That and the scornful glances she threw at the other side of the canteen made her obnoxious at first sight to Lith.

The following day, the morning gong resounded early and after a quick breakfast, all the students were assembled in front of the academy's gates. Dozens of Warp Steps were open, allowing the staff to go back to their homes.

Linjos's plan included leaving the academy empty and locked from the inside so that even if Balkor's undead managed to break in, the number of casualties would be zero.

Not having anyone to interrogate, finding their new location would hopefully require more time than the creatures' lifespan allowed, so the White Griffon would win the battle without even moving a finger.

When only the students and Professors remained, Linjos closed the Warp Steps, opening new ones leading to their refuge. It looked like a medium sized mining town, composed by a hundred of small houses entirely made out of wood.

Doubting that Linjos would make such a blunder, underestimating Balkor's fury to that extent, Lith activated Life Vision while Solus used her mana sense to scan their surroundings.

The whole area had a mana flow vigorous enough to put to shame even the academy's one. The houses, the ground, even the flowers glowed like a Christmas tree. Aside from the shabby look, it seemed Linjos had spared no efforts in his creation.

Lith noticed that the youngest students were terrified by the presence of their seniors, staying as far as possible from them. Magical beasts could be seen everywhere in the town, some perched on the nearby trees, others leisurely walking along the streets.

Lith was searching for a Professor, to know which was his accommodation, when a strong hand grabbed his shoulder.

"Hey, you are Lith from Lutia, right?"

Lith pushed the hand away like it was an annoying fly before answering.

"Depends. Who's asking?" He found himself staring at a sixteen year old boy, probably a fifth year student. He was very tall, around 1.85 meters (6'1") high, with chestnut hair and eyes that gave him an oddly familiar look.

"You are that commoner sh\*t that had my brother and cousins expelled! All because you and the f\*cking stick up your a\*s can't take a practical joke." Vinor Pontus was seething with anger.

His family was already on the verge of disaster, the expulsion and arrest of three of their most promising talents had been the final straw that broke the camel's back.

Their reputation was ruined. It would take them decades to recover from all the recent blows and rebuild their good name from scratch. Lith looked around for a Professor, finding only M'Rook the Ry, that was staring at the scene with interest, wagging its tail in anticipation.

"Three men ambushing a girl at night can hardly be called a practical joke, unless one is a pervert and a degenerate. You Pontus guys seem to perfectly fit the bill. It's no surprise that Balkor wants you morons dead. Idiots with more power than brain are the perfect recipe for disaster."

Just Balkor's name was enough to make most of those present shudder, but not Vinor Pontus. He had been looking for a pretext to attack Lith. Insulting him and his whole family in front of so many witnesses was more than enough.

Vinor raised his arms, pretending to be just shrugging before throwing a straight at Lith with all the strength he was capable of. Lith reacted accordingly, raising a single finger and stopping the punch a dozen centimeters from his face.

He had used first magic to generate an air cushion, giving Vinor the impression of hitting an invisible pillow. Before he could pull back the punch, the air cushion exploded.

It released many air blades, strong enough to pierce the uniform's protection. They scratched his face, giving him the look of someone that had fought and lost against a stray cat. Lith snapped his fingers, conjuring an air wave that sent Vinor tumbling on the ground.

The students watching the scene burst into laughter, making Vinor's blood boil. He got back on his feet with one fluid movement, releasing a spell from one of his rings. It conjured an icicle as long and thick as an arm, aimed at Lith's heart.

Before Lith could react, the icicle turned to dust, while a strong grip was squeezing Vinor's hand, to the point of almost breaking his fingers.

"What the heck do you think you are doing?" Professor Wil Ironhelm was in charge of the Battle Magic class and the Forgemaster specialization for the fifth year. He was muscular as a bull and almost as patient.

"He started it, Professor! He attacked me with magic for no reason." Vinor whined while twisting and lowering his body, trying to relieve the pressure on his fingers.

"Is it true?" He asked staring at Lith with his ice blue eyes.

"No. I'm Lith from Lutia and he is a member of the Pontus family." Lith replied like it explained everything.

"That Lith from Lutia?" Ironhelm threw Vinor back on the ground with a flick of the wrist, while rushing towards Lith with his extended hand.

"It's an honor to meet you. I have heard a lot about you from Lyca Wanemyre. The gods know why she got the talent, the looks, and a promising student while all I got is this shirt and a bunch of morons!" He cursed shaking his fist against the heavens.

"Minus one hundred points for assaulting a junior and minus another hundred for getting your a\*s kicked despite attacking first."

"How can you believe him instead of me? This isn't fair!" Vinor whined, two of his still charged rings had permanently shut down because of the points deficit.

"You need proof. Everyone here is my witness!" The younger students stepped away, while the others started to turn around and leave.

"Proof, uh? Well, let's do this your way. Is he speaking the truth?" Ironhelm asked to M'Rook, who promptly shook its head.

"No. The dumb oaf attacked the young wolf for no reason. After his defeat, the oaf attacked with magic. You know the rest."

"It speaks?" The whole crowd of students went into an uproar.