

Supreme M 261

Chapter 261 Crossroads Part 2

Ernas Household. After the closing of the academy.

Phloria Ernas was having the time of her life. Her ranking was high enough to earn her father's admiration and to prevent her mother from nagging at her. She could spend her days as she pleased, riding, hunting, practicing her sword or magic.

The only sour note was that she wasn't allowed to leave the estate. Winter was the time of the year when the Ernas, her father's household, and the Myrok, her mother's, would meet to spend some quality time and reinforce their bond.

Since she attended the academy, it was her only opportunity to see her cousins and grandparents. There was no bad blood between the families and although Phloria found her mother's bloodline to be quite creepy, she loved them nonetheless.

She was aware that while the Ernas embodied the shield protecting the royal family in broad daylight, the Myrok were the poisoned blade that was tasked of taking care of the enemies of the Kingdom from the shadows, under the façade of being harmless second rate nobles.

Jirni's side of the family was very interested in Friya and Quylla. Since the girls had no blood relationship with the Ernas, the Myrok hoped to have them marry into their household to add their magical talent to their assets and hopefully to their bloodline too.

Between her relatives and the parties she was forced to attend to, she never had the time to visit Lith, only hearing from him with the amulet.

"Whoever said 'away from the eyes, away from the heart' was a jacka*s, right Lucky?" Phloria said throwing a chicken leg to the big mastiff, that barked enthusiastically.

As long as she fed him roasted chicken, Lucky agreed with everything she said.

"I miss so much our walks, our talks, the cuddling and everything else. I can't invite him here, or my grandparents would eat him alive, nor can I go to Lutia.

They have no Warp Steps and I have never been there. Going back and forth would take too much time, dammit." A chicken wing earned her another woof of compassion.

Quylla and Friya were faring much worse than their adoptive sister. During the last two months, Quylla had been unable to practice magic even once. Jirni gave Quylla her undivided attention, trying to cram in a single winter the education the other girls had received since birth.

Quylla had to learn the proper etiquette during conversation and the meals. How to ride a horse, play at least one instrument, and learn everything about the Kingdom's history and current political affairs.

Her talent for magic couldn't help her in any of the above, while her shy character made everything more difficult. Day after day, Quylla was forced to talk with people she didn't know and do things she didn't care about.

Friya had a lot of free time, instead. She used it to learn about her new family, spending more time with Orion and Jirni. Compared to her biological mother, Jirni was a much better kind of monster, giving her ample freedom about how to manage her life.

Orion was the father she had always wished for, so she soon came to realize that being adopted by the Ernas couple was the best thing that had ever happened to her. Friya spent her days helping Quylla revise the various subjects daily assigned to her and training together with Phloria.

Outside the academy, the two had still a shallow relationship, but it was slowly improving. Friya had long feared for Phloria to push her around abusing her status of the true daughter, yet the only thing she ever did was nag her about how bossy Jirni was and how fat Lucky was getting.

There were only two downsides to her current situation. The first, just like for Yurial, was being paraded as the second best student of the White Griffon at every occasion. The second one was closely related to the first: the bad rumors that came with her achievement.

Being a former member of the Solivar family was a stigma she was unable to wash away. Both the old and new magical bloodlines resented Friya, spreading the vilest accusations about her.

During each party, as soon as Friya turned her back, she could hear whispers about her sleeping with the Professors, blackmailing them, or cheating her way to success. There was nothing she could do about those rumors.

The thought that despite her presence was hurting the Ernas' reputation, her new parents treated her as one of her own, only made her wish that she could cut away those filthy tongues and shove them up their asses.

Distar Household. Two weeks after the call.

That evening, one of the most important events of the season was taking place in the Marchioness' house. Her Marquisate was flourishing quickly, since it now ruled over the region hosting two of the only four remaining great academies.

The Earth and Crystal Griffon academies were closed. No one knew when or if they would ever reopen. Archmage Deirus had been awarded for his services with the lands hosting the Black Griffon, giving him control over the remaining two.

They now shared an enormous power above all the other noble households. Some said too much power.

All the four remaining academies depended on the two households for funding and supplies, giving them a voice in the matter of who to admit or about the changes in the academies' system.

The Crown had received countless petitions about taking at least one academy away from each of them, yet none had received a response. Officially, the Crown was still considering both sides' claims. Off the record, they had already dismissed them all.

The Crown had no interest to strip two of its most loyal subjects of a prize they had worked hard to achieve just to indulge households with a shady past and an even more shady present. The names at the bottoms of most petitions were the same on the Marchioness' list.

It wasn't enough to accuse them of treason but more than enough to not listen to a word they said.

That night Marchioness Distar had gathered the most influential people of the region to celebrate the rankers in the top twenty of the White and Lightning Griffon academies, allowing to students and their parents to mingle together.

Yurial and his fiancée, Libea, were having another 'happy' evening together.

"You know, when our parents arranged our marriage, I couldn't help but see you Deirus like tricksters hungry for the Fintyr household wealth. I would have never expected for a commoner's bloodline to become so successful. I admit I was wrong about you."

Libea said as soon they got rid of Duke Cailon.

"I was wrong about you too." Yurial replied with the same plastered smile like hers.

"I always saw you Fintyr as thirsty beggars in desperate need to get a bit of magic in their bloodline. I knew all along that your family has given birth to more dragons than mages in the past." He added viciously.

"I hoped we could at least keep things civil between us, but as I said, I was wrong."

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"Quite an attitude for someone that almost got outshined by a filthy traitor and a dirty poor commoner." Libea clicked her tongue in disgust.

"The traitor and the commoner, as you call them, are a thousand times better than you. I wish my friend Lith was here. He is great at dealing with monsters, something I am still lacking at."

Libea was about to reply in kind when suddenly the whole room turned dark and empty. She turned around just in time to see a shadowy figure with eyes blazing with blue mana closing in to her.

"My dear Yurial, I always told you to go big whenever you make a wish. Otherwise if one of them comes true it's more a pity than a relieve."

"He's right behind you, of course." Yurial said with a smirk.

"You have quite an attitude for someone that ranked... My bad, I forgot you have no rank. It's just that my mind refuses the idea that someone without an iota of magical power could be so arrogant."

Normally, Lith would have ignored Libea's slander. Back at the academy, he heard much crueler words on a daily basis, yet he paid them no heed. Lith just had three months of peace and his renewed bond with Solus made him calmer than ever.

The reason behind his unnatural behavior was the precise instructions Marchioness Distar had given him.

'It's been a while since I taught a lesson to an arrogant prick. This is going to be fun!' He thought.

"It's better for you to watch your tongue, young miss. One day, even a dirty poor commoner could reach a status higher than yours. Without your noble title, you are nothing more than a spoiled parlor dog.

"You should be aware that dumb creatures that keep barking at the wrong tree are... accident prone."

Lith kept his distance, pointing his finger at her while he talked. It was an act incredibly rude towards someone of a higher social class. In any other circumstance, Libea would have lashed out at Lith for his unacceptable behavior.

She wanted to, but was unable to speak. Something prevented her from even moving her eyes away from Lith's index finger. To her it was like a sword pointed at her throat, exuding a chilling aura that was prickling at her skin like countless needles of ice.

With every step that Lith took forward, Libea's stomach twisted into one knot after the other. Suddenly she just wanted to hide behind Yurial, but he was nowhere to be seen. The whole world had disappeared, leaving her alone with a crazed beast.

Contrary to Libea's perception, Yurial was right beside her, the room was perfectly lighted, and Mogar kept spinning on its axis uncaring like always.

'I don't know why Lith is acting so touchy and honestly, I don't care.' Yurial thought. 'Her being forced to shut up for once it's liberating.'

Being used to Lith's aura and having an innate powerful mana flow, Yurial was unable to perceive the pressure Lith was exerting, so he was further surprised by Libea's meek attitude.

At least until he realized she wasn't meek at all. His fiancée was simply unable to breathe.

Yurial recognized the all too familiar symptoms of mind aggression from a magical aura. Libea's forehead was beady with sweat, her face was turning from pale white to cyanotic blue from the lack of oxygen.

"Okay, that's enough." Yurial grabbed Lith's hand, interposing himself between the two to break the eye contact. Libea was now able to breathe again. She found herself back in the Marchioness's dining hall, the people around them were watching at the scene with an amused expression.

Realizing what had happened, she felt humiliated like it had never happened her whole life. The Fintyr family had never given birth to a single mage, but they were one of the most ancient noble households of the Griffon Kingdom.

Even Archmages treated them with respect, as long as the Fintyr did the same, of course. Libea wanted to yell and call for her personal guards, to teach the country bumpkin a lesson.

What she did was going to the closest bathroom, moving forward with furious but short strides, instead. The sudden scare had almost made Libea lose control of her bowels, she had only so much time before shaming herself for life.

Also, making a scene in front of so many guests would only make her look like a fool. The only thing she could accuse Lith of was being rude. He had not cast a single spell nor left a single scratch on her.

As soon as she left, Lith returned Yurial's grab, making it a handshake.

"If that's the woman you are going to spend the life with, there's no amount of alcohol that will make her presence bearable. You need to set boundaries, or she'll drive you insane. That or you can kill her."

Lith's wolfish smile made Yurial understand he wasn't joking at all.

"I wish things were that simple." Yurial sighed.

"Killing Libea would only force me to marry one of her sisters and undergo a thorough investigation. Believe it or not, she's the less annoying of the bunch. Since you already know Lady Ernas, you can imagine what does it mean having a royal constable on your tail.

"No, I only have three roads ahead of me. Accepting my fate, emancipating myself from the Deirus household after the fifth year, or convince my father to cancel the wedding. Emancipation would mean squandering everything I have done so far and probably dooming the Deirus household.

"Without an heir, if something happens to my father, our bloodline is over. Yet, cancelling the wedding is even more unlikely. It would mean making us lose a lot of face, our prestige would be destroyed.

"Between that and antagonizing the Fintyr, it would put an end to all our plans for improvement for at least ten years. As you can see, I'm basically doomed."

A long, awkward moment of silence followed before Yurial decided to move on a less depressing subject.

"The dinner jacket looks good on you." Unlike Yurial, Lith wasn't wearing his uniform but the new world equivalent of a black tuxedo. The white shirt was apparently made of silk, while the pants and jacket were made of a wool similar to Earth's vicuna.

What Lith was actually wearing was his Skinwalker armor. He had stored the real suit in the blue gemstone embedded at the base of the neck, allowing the enchanted item to mimic it to perfection. The white griffon pin was shining on the pocket above his heart.

"Aren't you sick of that uniform at this point? Also, you seem to have lost weight since the last time we met."

"Yes to both. But what can I do about it?" Yurial shrugged.

"Since the rankings came out, my family was awarded with the lands that host the Black Griffon academy. It means a lot more authority and prestige, but also a lot more responsibilities.

"Because of that, my father is forced to spend most his days granting audiences to our new retainers, to sort out those to keep from those to replace. I'm helping him, of course. Being the heir, he is showing me the ropes while at the same time introducing me to my future subjects."

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"Why are you so stressed, then? Isn't this your life long dream? Libea excluded, obviously." Lith could understand her being a pain in the a*s but not like that. Yurial seemed to be well fed and rested, yet had lost at least five kilos.

"Because besides being paraded like an exotic animal 24/7 to affirm our new status in front of the Crown and our neighbors, which is already quite stressing, there have been five attempts on my life, already. Do you see that woman?"

Yurial tilted his head towards a gorgeous redhead. She was wearing an emerald dress that emphasized her fair white skin and green eyes. The red scarf on her neck matched her hair, partially covering her shoulders and arms that the dress left exposed.

"Do you mean that Battle Mage?" Lith replied while his eyes indulged on her neckline a second longer than it was polite.

"Yeah. She is my new personal assistant/mistress/bodyguard. I can't go anywhere without her following me around."

"Lucky bastard." Lith's voice had a tinge of envy.

"Wow, that's new from you." Yurial was surprised. He had always considered Lith made of stone, or at least the next best thing.

"By the way, how do you know she is a Battle Mage?"

"Ever since my earlier little stunt, she hasn't taken her eyes off me. Hence, she knows what happened, but it's not afraid of me, just wary. That makes her a mage. She bears no sword, has too many muscles to be a civilian but too little to be just a hired muscle. If she was a Mage Knight, she would stick closer to you.

The only explanation left is for her being a Battle Mage." Lith explained his Holmes-like reasoning with a smug expression.

'You really are shameless.' Solus made a mental retching sound.

'You didn't notice anything outside her three sizes, while I understood she is a mage from her bright blue mana core and her specialization from the enchanted items she wears. They come straight out of Wanemyre's catalogue. Yurial's dad spares no expenses.'

'Well, you know how they say. Hindsight is correct 100% of the times. Also, it's not like I can tell him about your existence. Since I need a cover story, I can as well use it to appear as a keen observer.'

"Brilliant deduction." Yurial nodded in approval.

"You are lucky none of the girls was here. Otherwise Phloria would never let you hear the end of it, if she learns about your previous remark."

"The Ernas are here too? I heard they didn't have the time to attend."

"They are fashionably late, as usual." Yurial shrugged.

"From what my father said to me, the Marchioness insisted for their presence. Just like she did for yours, I guess. I didn't expect to see you at all. You know, being the party full of stuck up nobles while your parents are..."

Yurial didn't complete the sentence, but there was no need to.

"Indeed she did. I came here with Count Lark as my chaperon." Lith pointed at the jovial noble talking with other mages, losing his monocle from time to time due to the excitement. Lark didn't care about hanging with influential nobles as much as sharing his passion about magic.

"Speak of the phoenix and there is the smoke. Friya, nice to see you." Friya gave them a small curtsy to which they replied with a bow. She was wearing a gold embroidered cream colored evening dress that covered her up to the shoulder.

Her hair was arranged into an elaborate updo, with several tresses knot together that left her neck exposed, emphasizing the leaves shaped parure composed of golden necklace and earrings with black diamonds that complimented her dark eyes and hair.

She also wore evening gloves, giving her outfit a maiden look, being the one that left the most to imagination compared to the other noble dames.

"Nice to see you guys too. Thank the gods you didn't get any taller." She said with a smug expression while looking Lith in the eyes thanks to the high heels.

"I am still taller than you and I've got plenty of time to grow." He shrugged. "Nice dress. It looks lovely on you."

"Thanks, but I actually don't like it." She snorted. "I was just tired of men complimenting at my breasts for their rank at the academy while other girls called me a sl*t behind my back. At first, I tried to ignore them, but after a while they really got under my skin."

"Seriously? Again with those rumors?" Lith raised an eyebrow in disbelief.

"Yeah. Beware that you got it even worse than me. Some say that you slept with both the male and female Professors, others that you are the Marchioness' boy toy. Some even that you are the forbidden love child between her and Linjos."

Lith laughed heartily at the thought.

"Let them talk, I don't care. Where are the others?"

"Do you mean Phloria?" She winked at him. "Don't worry, she is eager to see you too. We just split up to search for you guys more quickly."

Their chatter was interrupted when they saw Marchioness Distar coming towards them, followed by three youths. The four ladies all wore magnificent evening dresses, embroidered with small gemstones complimenting either their eyes, hair, or skin.

"Ladies, allow me to introduce to you our guests of honour from the White Griffon academy. They are Yurial Deirus, Friya Ernas, and Lith of Lutia." Each one of them politely greeted the newcomers as soon the Marchioness called their name.

"These three girls are the top rankers from the Lightning Griffon. Lusa Erjar, Kyla Dornar, and Vala Rothar." The girls gave them a small curtsy, having a hard time hiding their surprise.

Usually, the first ranker was also the one awarded with the academy's crown jewel, the colored griffon pin. Lusa Erjar wore them both side by side, the golden griffon and the topaz griffon pins.

That was also the reason why Yurial was the only one forced to wear his uniform, otherwise he would be forced to specify countless times which academy he was from.

The second anomaly was the trio composition. On Mogar women were naturally more talented for magic, to the point that even inside the academies the males/females ratio was four to six.

For both the pin awarded rankers to be men was something rarer than finding a unicorn on the doorstep. The three girls from the Lightning Griffon had prepared some nasty remarks for their opponents, but suddenly they were at a loss for words.

The Marchioness didn't seem intentioned to leave the six of them. To make things worse, Yurial was way more handsome than they had pictured him, making hard for them being mean to him. Lith was a good head taller than the Lightning Griffon's golden trio and was looking at them with the same cold gaze an undertaker would use while preparing the boxes for his latest clients.

Friya would have been the easiest mark, if not for the considerable amount of killing intent she was emitting. The muscles on her arms had been finely chiseled by daily training, while her soft smile was warning them that Friya had no problem breaking a jaw or two by "accident".

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"You are the rising stars of your respective academies and the reason why I organized this gala. Your achievements bring great prestige to the Distar marquisate, so I'm going to personally introduce you to my guests. You should use this opportunity to distinguish yourself and show your value to the Kingdom."

The Marchioness took a few steps back, throwing a short but meaningful look at Lith. She turned around, rubbing her throat and activating a first magic air spell.

"May I have your attention, please?" Her magically enhanced voice resounded through the ball room, making all the heads turn and conversations stop.

"Tonight, we have assembled to celebrate the new year. To remember all the hardships we have endured. Two academies are temporarily lost. Balkor has once again put the Griffon Kingdom on its knees. Yet we survived. Our future may seem grim, but our present is worthy of celebration.

"I'll introduce to you, one by one, the brightest minds of this generation. I'd like to ask them to show us a little bit of their talent, so that they can demonstrate the progress they have made during the past year and make this evening more enjoyable.

"There are a lot of rumors about the rankings being unfair." Marchioness Distar looked at all the six youths, but indulged on Friya for a second longer than the others.

"Magic, however, doesn't allow one to bluff. Either you can do something, or you can't. There is no faking talent. What is required from you is to perform at your best by using only first magic.

For security reasons, tier one magic and above are sealed by the mansion's protective arrays and so are all the magical items that are not defensive in nature."

Lith was surprised by the announcement. He hadn't encountered such a powerful formation since during the plague, when he was under the effects of the Small World artifact.

Solus activated her mana sense, scouting their surroundings.

'There are a lot of arrays around us, but no Small World.' She thought.

'This is not something I would have expected from a medium importance noble like the Marchioness. I thought only the royals had access to magical formations this strong. Let's see how they fare against true magic.'

Lith silently waved a tier one spell in his mind, connecting his mana with the world energy surrounding him. The idea was to perform something simple and unnoticeable, raising the temperature of the room by a few degrees.

Everything went fine until he mixed the mana with the fire element. As soon as the energy started to build, the arrays around him activated. They weren't actually capable of preventing him from casting a spell, only to disrupt the execution by causing fluctuations in the mana in the room.

'That's why the security is so lax. Intruders and guests are both stripped of all their powers.

'The arrays can definitely stop a fake mage, but not a true one. I could continue if I wanted. I only need to adapt my flow according to the fluctuations, something that a fake mage's fixed pattern is incapable of doing. What about our dimensional pocket?'

Lith was reassured by his findings. He had walked into the arrays without even noticing them. He had gravely underestimated a noble household's resources.

'I think we can open it but it's going to take some time and effort. In our case, rather than block our magic, these arrays make casting any spell much harder and mana expensive.' Solus replied.

Lith mind nodded to her words, checking if both spirit magic and fusion magic still worked. Everything went without a hitch. No matter how much energy he conjured, the arrays remained inactive.

"Let's start from the first rankers." The Marchioness continued.

"Yurial Deirus, the white hand, from the White Griffon academy."

"Yurial the what now?" Lith whispered in Friya's ear.

"It's his custom title. High rankers often receive one or more nicknames from their Professors in the fields they are more talented in." She explained.

"I never heard anyone calling him like that, though."

"And probably you never will. He probably wouldn't have one if not for Linjos's you know what." Her voice was barely audible, even with his heightened senses.

Lith was able to notice Yurial being embarrassed by the pompous title and the deafening applause that followed.

'Poor Yurial.' Solus's voice was full of compassion. 'Not only he gets constantly reminded of his fake achievement, but he also got the short end of the stick by going first. Hope he doesn't get stage fright.'

'Right now he has only two choices. Either to keep drowning himself in self-pity or do his best to turn the lie into truth. I hope he'll choose the second one.' Lith replied.

Before their telepathic talk could finish, Yurial was already moving.

Stage fright was something he had overcome years ago. As the heir of the Deirus' household, Yurial had followed his father to all the most important social events ever since he was little, often opening his speeches in the role of valet.

After being paraded around the whole Kingdom for the last two months, bragging was second nature to him. Yurial slowly spun around, waving his hands in the air while collecting small wisps of fire from every candle that met his eyes.

The ballroom was mostly lighted with magical crystals, but there would always be other sources of light at a banquet, to give the room warmth. No matter how brilliant it was, magic generated light had something cold about it, especially to non mages.

The wisps danced around Yurial forming an ethereal river, until he widened his arms making them spread around. The wisps rose a few meters above the guests' heads, taking advantage of the high ceiling.

Then, each wisp grew to the size of a football, assuming the shape of a griffon that shrieked its challenge to its fiery companions. Each wisp-griffon was of a different color, ranging from red to green.

Handling so many griffons with only first magic put a cap on the temperatures the conjured flames could reach. The whole room gasped in amazement while the pseudo creatures charged at each other like they were fighting to the death.

Then, Yurial made them fly out from an open window, sending them as high as he could before he lost control. When it happened, they exploded forming multi-colored fireworks. His performance caused a spontaneous applause that continued until the Marchioness announced the next student.

"Lusa Erjar, the Mistress of the Storm." The Lightning Griffon first ranker was in quite a pinch. She had not prepared anything, the show wasn't planned. Lusa didn't want to be outshined, but fire was the flashiest element and it had already been used.

So, she resorted to water magic, collecting a few drops from the drinks of those presents to form a multi colored sphere of liquid that created multiple rainbows across the room before turning it into an ice dragon that flew out of the window before exploding into a huge rainbow.

The crowd applauded, but after Yurial's performance Lusa's was lackluster.

"Friya Ernas, the master of space."

When her name was called, Friya went to the center stage. She used light and darkness magic to recreate the celestial sphere, giving to those present the illusion the ceiling had disappeared.

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Whole constellations moved at unison like each second was an hour, until a fake sun appeared on the horizon making the right return in the room.

The spectators congratulated her with a thunderous applause.

"Kyla Dornar, the battle goddess."

Lith was already bored when he felt someone tugging at his arm. He turned around to discover it was Phloria. He was about to whisper a greeting, but she was faster.

"Kiss me like you miss me." Aside from Friya that was standing right next to them, everyone was so caught in the performance that no one noticed the deep, passionate kiss she gave him.

Lith had the impression she had just sucked the air out of his lungs and maybe even tasted his tonsil.

Phloria only let him go when the applause marking the end of the performance resounded. Lith could finally take a proper look at her. She wore a silk-satin red evening dress and white evening gloves, emphasizing her olive colored skin due to the prolonged exposure to the sun.

It was skin tight, with a neckline that somehow exerted a push-up effect. Her hair had grown even longer, allowing Phloria to braid them into tresses that were knotted, twisted, and tied back in an intricate headpiece, complete with pearls and fabrics.

'Walking like a man, hitting like a hammer.' Lith couldn't avoid remembering an old Earth's song.

'Well, she definitely got the look.' Solus giggled.

Before they could exchange a single word, Lith got called to the center stage.

"Lith of Lutia, the eye of god and maker of wonders." The whole room gasped in surprise, Lith included. No one else had received two titles and him being the third ranker made it even more amazing.

Not even most second rankers would receive a title.

'It seems that Vastor wasn't kidding when he said that the light and forgemastering department were quite pissed off at Linjos for the rankings. Usually I wouldn't like so much attention, but tonight it's different.' He thought with a smirk.

"Thanks for your kind introduction, dear Marchioness. I hope you all realize that at this point, there isn't much I can do without boring you with a rerun of what my peers already did. So, to spice things up I'm going to try something different, but I need an assistant."

He turned around the room pretending to be searching for the right person.

"You." He pointed his finger at Phloria.

"Would you do me the honor of accompanying me in this feat?" Lith extended his hand to her. Phloria was dazed for a second, embarrassed by all the eyes on her, before stepping forward to take Lith's hand.

"Thanks. Now just follow my lead." Lith walked toward the nearest wall, leaving some of the guests confused and most of them disappointed.

Once they arrived in front of the wall, Lith didn't stop walking, stepping on it. Phloria didn't understand what was happening and neither did most of the guests. The others were either chocking on their drinks or inwardly cursing at him.

'Son of a...' The Marchioness was among the latter.

'I asked him for a distraction and some ruckus. This is going to turn into a riot if I don't handle it properly.'

"Do you trust me?" Lith said with a smile, seeing that Phloria was hesitant. In response to the question, she immediately stepped forward discovering that her foot was now effortlessly stuck to the wall.

Lith then resumed walking, accompanied by her until they were standing upside down on the ceiling.

As it was apparent ever since their first vertical step, it wasn't a flight or float spell. Otherwise the coats of Lith's suit and Phloria's gown would be falling toward the ground, making the situation quite embarrassing, especially for Phloria.

Her hair, dress, and jewels were perfectly normal, like she was just walking on the floor.

"May we have some music?" At Lith's request, the Marchioness signaled the orchestra that started playing a minuet.

The couple danced the whole song while avoiding the numerous crystal chandeliers, returning back in front of the Marchioness when the music ended. Phloria was red from the excitement, but the room gave them a cold reception.

No one applauded, they were just looking at them like they were monsters, even Jirni and Orion.

"I'm sorry you didn't like it, but I did." Lith shrugged. Their approval meant nothing to him.

"For your information, that's something I like to call..."

"Gravity magic." Archmage Deirus blurted out, cutting him short.

"Nailed in one." Lith was surprised by how fast Yurial's dad had understood what had happened. After all, Gravity magic was Lith's original creation.

Or so he thought.

"That's impossible!" One after the other, the mages present expressed their disbelief while the nobles would ask them for an explanation.

"What's Gravity magic, dad?" Yurial was among them.

"The seventh kind of magic. Something that's considered an exclusive of the ancient noble households."

"I never heard anything about it. Not from you nor while being at the academy. Is it some kind of secret art?" Yurial's curiosity was piqued, he never heard about a seventh natural element.

"It's not a secret, otherwise I wouldn't know about it." Velan Deirus shook his head.

"I never spoke about it because I don't practice it. You can find books about it in the academies' libraries, but no one will ever teach it to you. It's...complicated."

As soon as the details about Gravity magic were being disclosed, the murmurs rose in intensity and volume, turning into chatting first and yells later.

"Complicated how?" Yurial asked while Lith and Phloria joined him. They were as confused as he was.

"Gravity magic requires to be able to cast six spells at once and wave them together. It also requires a great mastery of the mana control and of the principles behind the natural phenomenons.

"What you saw your friend using is the equivalent of first magic, yet it's already beyond the reach of most. Gravity magic is considered to be a legacy of the most ancient noble households because they are the only ones that possess the knowledge and the magical legacy to teach it."

"Why did you never learn it? Aren't you an Archmage?" Lith nodded, agreeing with Yurial question. He was quite disappointed in learning he had just reinvented the wheel. Again.

Yet this time it seemed to be quite a fancy wheel.

"Because it's useless. Even tier one gravity spells are too complex. They require such fine control over the mana and the hand signs that their difficulty goes beyond that of tier five spells. The results do not justify the effort."

Lith understood Velan's point, but it wasn't an issue for him. Lith never had to struggle with magic words or signs, true magic was all a matter of manipulating the mana flow according to one's will.

Gravity magic was indeed difficult, he was just scratching the top of the barrel and it required Lith's full focus just to reverse the gravity on two people. Yet moving to higher levels of Gravity magic was far from impossible for him.

"It's not just a matter of effort, it's a matter of pride!" Archmage Ejar, Lusa's mother roared.

"Gravity magic it's the living proof of all true magical bloodlines!" She looked Velar in the eyes, clicking her tongue in disgust.

Chapter 266 Second Meeting Part 1

"That's why I practice it and I'm teaching it to my daughter." Archmage Ejar echoed through the ballroom.

"Because we, the Ejar are true mages, not two bit pretenders like you. Grassroots mages shouldn't even be in the same room as us!"

A lot of indignant voices cursed at her. Archmage Deirus's eyes shone with a menacing emerald light.

"I dare you to say that again!" Velan snarled, his face only a few centimeters away from his peer's.

'I did my part, that's for sure.' Lith thought with a grin on his face.

'The Marchioness asked me for some ruckus. I'd say dinner is served, even though only Isaac Newton knows why.'

"What in the gods' name are you grinning for, kid?" Archmage Ejar ignored Velan's threat, pointing her finger against the uncaring youth.

"How did you do it? Who taught you about Gravity magic? Pray that I like your answers, otherwise..."

"Otherwise what?" Lith slapped away the hand in front of his face, making the Archmage's eyes almost pop out of their sockets in anger.

"I'm a student at the White Griffon. First in the light department and an asset to the Kingdom. I'm Marchioness Distar's honored guest, attending this gala on request of the Crown. What authority do you represent, exactly? Outside your own foolishness, of course!"

"Indeed." Archmage Ejar's face was still in the process of losing its color, realizing the amazing number of blunders in a row she had just made when the Marchioness's voice resounded next to her ear.

"You are in my house, while I represent the Crown and you dare to offend your peers and threaten my guests?"

"No, I..." Ejar stuttered, but luckily for her, Marchioness Distar's question was merely rhetorical.

"Her rudeness is unforgivable, but she made a good point. Where did you learn such magic, Lith?" The Marchioness wanted answers too, but she asked them rather than making demands. Her tone gentle and polite.

"I learned it as a self-taught." He replied with a shrug, making new and ancient households gasp in surprise.

"It's not that hard." Lith couldn't understand the reason behind their disbelief.

"I learned how to create pocket dimensions at the Forgemastering lessons and how to bend space with dimensional magic. They are just two extreme applications of gravity. I only had to combine what I learned from both subjects and then use it to manipulate gravity around objects rather than on the space itself."

As the Marchioness had predicted earlier, Lith's actions triggered a hornet's nest. New households were using him together with Archmage Ejar lack of manners as proof that magic was fair, while the ancient households were not.

All mages deserved respect according to their talent and disposition, not based on the family they were born in.

The ancient households claimed it was a scam, blaming the Marchioness for having shared their secrets with a commoner mongrel. Lith decided it was time to get to safety. Nobles' quarrels didn't interest him, he only did what he had been paid for.

"Where do you think you are going?" Lith felt his center of gravity shift, suddenly he was on the verge of falling horizontally. Archmage Ejar was using gravity magic to pull him back in the middle of the conflict.

First, he had to crouch, gripping at the floor with one hand to prevent the fall. Then, Lith used his own gravity magic to cancel the pull. The opponent had a stronger core, but for her first magic was just a hobby, for Lith it was a life's work.

"Kneel!" He sent a powerful wave crashing on Ejar's body which tripled her weight in a split second. He even added a sprinkle of spirit magic, just to be safe.

Archmage Ejar fell on her knees. She was forced to use her hands to avoid her forehead crashing against the ground.

"I warned you! No one disrespects me or my guests in my house!" The Marchioness clapped her hands, unleashing the full power of the arrays against the unruly noble. Archmage Ejar's body writhed for a second before falling limp on the ground.

Once focused on a target, the arrays were capable of disrupting even first magic. They could also paralyze any threat, living or undead, by binding every fiber of their target.

The brief magical battle made the room turn silent, but only for a second.

One side of the room called Ejar a hero, the other one a traitor. The quarrel resumed without the use of magic, but louder than before.

Phloria and Yurial helped Lith to stand up, bringing him to safety.

"That went well." He said with a sarcastic expression.

"You sure know how to liven up a party." Phloria clicked her tongue at the raging crowd behind them. Dancing on the ceiling with Lith, surrounded by the lights like they were alone in the world had been truly romantic.

What followed, not so much.

"Raising your hand against an Archmage, are you insane?" Yurial was still as pale as a ghost.

"What was I supposed to do? Let her beat me up and beg for mercy? She was out of her mind. I prefer to apologize later rather than be so polite to let someone kill me for sport." Lith scoffed at his companion.

With a short sprint, they reached the safest spot in the room: the one where the Ernas and other nobles were spectating at the unfolding events from a safe distance. Despite being members of ancient noble households, those gathered there had no place in the conflict.

They supported the young magical bloodlines' claim for fairness. They chose to stand on the fence because in the heat of the moment their allies would lash at them mistaking them for the enemy, while their noble peers would brand them as traitors.

Their intervention would only end up making the two factions gang up on them, so they decided to wait for the lord of the house to put an end to that mess.

"Why is it taking her so long?" While her peers were still discussing Lith's performance or Ejar's unspeakable act of aggression towards an honored guest of the Crown, Jirni's mind was spinning at top gear.

"Now that you mention it, it's indeed odd." Orion whispered back.

"Between the arrays and her personal guards, this mess shouldn't have even started. Maybe she doesn't want to raise her hand against other nobles. Violence could escalate things politically."

"Maybe, but she doesn't strike me as a calm guiding hand. Distar had no qualms subduing Ejar. What's worse than attacking a noble that's also an Archmage?" Their private conversation was interrupted when they saw the youths approaching.

Mostly because a young woman stepped right in front of them, welcoming the White Griffon students with a flawless curtsy.

"Yours was a striking performance, Mage Lith." She didn't manage to say it with a straight face. She giggled cheerfully while hiding her mouth with a hand.

"You managed to turn a hundreds years old tradition into a tavern fight in less than ten minutes. That's completely unprecedented and truly worthy of my savior."

She was about seventeen years old, with silky blonde hair down looking like a golden waterfall that almost reached the floor.

Chapter 267 Second Meeting Part 2

The young woman wore a white evening dress that left her shoulders and arms exposed. It was embroidered with sapphires that emphasized her sky blue eyes.

She had a lively face and a bright smile. Her demeanor left Lith quite puzzled.

"I'm sorry, do I know you?" The young woman looked somehow familiar, but no matter how much he focused, Lith couldn't recognize her. The only thing he knew was that she was quite well endowed, her beauty was easily on Friya's level.

"Did you really forget about me?" She said with a playful gaze.

"Even though you are the only man that ever saw me naked?" She whispered while blushing on cue, hiding her face with a fan made of what looked like golden peacock's feathers.

'She's the Marchioness' daughter. Don't you see the resemblance?' Solus pointed out. 'Besides, it's true that so far most of the girls on Mogar are on the thin side, but for example Tista is much more...'

'First, gross. Second, Tista isn't a girl, she is my sister. Don't use her as a standard, thanks.' Lith cut her short.

His companions were all taken aback by the girl's last remark.

'And he had the gall to call me a lucky b*stard!' Yurial inwardly cursed and congratulated at his friend at the same time.

"I'm sorry, Milady. I can't remember all of my patients, no matter how pleasing to the eye they are. I had too many." Lith gave her a small bow, pretending to not know who she was.

Phloria felt reassured by the 'patient' part and threatened by everything else. Lith wasn't the kind of man to make false compliments.

"How do you know I was your patient then?" She closed her fan, her expression inquisitive in a way that Jirni didn't like at all.

"You called me your savior. I'm no warrior, just a healer." While Lith played Sherlock Holmes again, his companions had a hard time repressing a burst of laughter at the blatant lie.

"That and the other part..." He whispered. "made everything clear."

"Brilliant." She clapped her hands while smiling non stop.

"A strong character, a bright mind, and an eye that doesn't stop just at a pretty dress. These are all traits that I appreciate in a man. Also, you are right, we were never properly introduced.

"I'm Brinja Distar, first daughter of Marchioness Mirim Distar and heir to my household." Her choice of words was formal, Brinja even accompanied her self-introduction with a second curtsy, much deeper than the first.

It was quite uncommon for the host to show so much respect to a guest met for the first time. That and her previous words worried Lith as much as they did Phoria and Jirni. Being wooed by the daughter of his patron sounded like a massive pain in the a*s.

'Seems my big sister has a rival now.' Friya inwardly smiled. That evening was getting more interesting by the second.

"I'm Lith of Lutia. If next year I graduate I will still be just a mage." He gave her a deep bow while using modest words to belittle himself.

"Well, for being 'just' a mage you proved to be resourceful and brave. You even stood your ground against a self-entitled Archmage. Or was it just recklessness?" She replied without backing down from her position.

"No, it wasn't." Lith shook his head.

"I may be someone of humble origins, but I didn't spend my time hiding in a cave studying magic or fighting non stop like a bloodthirsty beast. I learned society's rules, got admitted to one of the six great academies, made friends..." He pointed at his companions.

"and allies." Lith nodded toward the Marchioness. "I just showed everyone what I accomplished after a single year of proper education. Now it's up to them to choose if they want to stand against me or support me. Either way, I'm not easily bullied because I made myself really hard to replace.

"No matter how big their ego is or how small minded they are, I believe that in times of crisis most of them would feel reassured rather than threatened by my presence."

"See? That's what I meant, 'just a mage' Lith." Brinja said with a radiant smile while taking his arm between hers, gently pressing it against her breast.

Lith was flattered, but unfazed by her behavior.

"Thanks, your Ladyship, but I think you missed the part about me being just thirteen years old and without any background." Lith tried to step away, he could feel several eyes piercing his back.

"How is that a problem?" She giggled, holding his arm even tighter.

"In a few years, the age gap will become irrelevant. Whoever I'm going to marry, he will join my family and I'm rich enough for three people. I may have no magical power of my own, but the Distar bloodline gave birth to several powerful mages.

"I can't stand those shallow nobles that only care for my wealth nor the arrogant mages that see every non magic user as an object. I'm tired of being considered an arm candy with annuities from those who aim for my family title.

"Based on what I heard about you and on what you did tonight you are like a breath of fresh air. I just want to get to know you better."

Her points were all valid, but Lith had no interest in any kind of relationship.

'What the heck, first Phloria and now Brinja? Women in the new world are quite assertive.' Lith thought.

'Maybe it's because here magic gives them an edge.' Solus suggested. 'Or maybe it's just a cultural thing they have. Unlike Earth's middle ages on Mogar women have the same opportunities as men. They can pass their last name and inherit their families' fortunes.'

Solus had a hard time not mentioning that she also would be assertive, if only she had the means to. Despite being brief, her experience with a body, first Lith's and then hers, had filled her with hope and confidence.

At the same time, Solus had become quite impatient.

'I wonder how many years will it take for me to get even that body made of light.' She inwardly sighed in a corner of her mind, glad to have her privacy.

'Until then, I can only cheer for Lith from the sidelines.'

Distar Household, later that evening.

After all of her guests had safely departed to their homes via the Marchioness' private Warp Gate, she could finally sit down in the armchair in her office and relax. After the bumpy start, everything had gone as planned.

She took out a communication amulet, placing it in the middle of her desk. Four blue magic crystals appeared from the corners of the solid white oak table, opening a secure channel with Queen Sylpha.

"I hope you bring me good news, Mirim." The Queen's stern face greeted her with a nod.

"Excellent news, your Majesty." The Marchioness gave her a small bow.

Chapter 268 New Accomodation Part 1

"Please, enough with honorifics and pleasantries. It's already late and it's just the two of us, dear friend."

"As you wish, Sylpha." The two knew each other since their time at the White Griffon academy. It was a well kept secret, since Mirim had attended the courses under a fake name. She wanted to avoid receiving a special treatment as the daughter of the ruler of the land.

The two of them had both inherited their respective bloodlines' talent for magic and that, together with the long years of friendship, had created a bond between them almost stronger than blood.

After achieving the role of Lord Commander of the Queen's corps, Mirim Distar had chosen to keep the pretense of being magicless to make her enemies underestimate her, making it hard to believe she was more than just a medium importance noble.

Her only regret was that life seemed to have an odd sense of humor. Her daughter was the only member of the family born without any talent for magic. It was something that had not happened for generations.

'It's almost like Brinja is being punished for my deception.' She would think from time to time, before shrugging off all that superstitious horsesh*t. Inheriting magic was a matter of blood and luck.

Having mages in the family made it easier for descendants to be more attuned with the world energy, but it wasn't an ironclad rule. That was the reason why despite having many heirs, sometimes the ancient noble households bore no mages, even for decades.

"So, how was your evening?" Sylpha asked.

Marchioness Distar told her everything, putting emphasis on Lith revealing the ability to use Gravity magic and the discord that followed.

"Amazing. That young man has a talent for angering people. The most fearsome aspect of his character is that Lith is aware of who and when to provoke. He causes almost more troubles than he solves."

Sylpha laughed when Mirim told her about Lith forcing Archmage Ejar to kneel in public.

"It sure humbled her without causing any physical harm." Mirim nodded.

"I managed to turn the following quarrel into a debate, forcing the two parties to find common ground. I can assure you that most of the guests left on better terms than when they arrived."

"That's the advantage of knowing when and where conflict is about to happen." Sylpha grinned.

"The more hot-headed people get, the easier is to manipulate their reasoning. I'm not concerned by such small stuff, though."

"Tell me about your plan."

"As you know, I made sure that all those who knew about Linjos's anti Balkor protocol learned about the existence of the list and that I am about to decipher it. I assumed that whoever is the traitor, would try to learn about it as well.

So, I orchestrated the gala to give them an opportunity to enter my house. The celebration of the top rankers was the perfect excuse to request for an invitation. As I expected, many of our enemies took part in the banquet.

Even with so many people, they couldn't roam free, so I asked Mage Lith to cause a ruckus. He is notoriously unaligned, no one outside the three of us knows of my special relationship with him. No one suspects everything was staged."

"Good! Does he know about the plan?" Sylpha asked.

"No. He didn't even ask for an explanation. Only to strengthen the defense of his family, more money, and materials for his research. He said, and I quote: 'We already have a target on our backs, making it bigger changes nothing. As long as you pay me, I'll get the job done.'"

"Cynic and expensive for someone so young." Sylpha raised an eyebrow in disbelief.

"If he was some idealist fool, I wouldn't have trusted him. As for the price, if you pay peanuts you get monkeys. I consider it an investment. If he sees us as the last line of defense in front of his family, he'll never turn into another Balkor."

"What about the list?" Sylpha was getting impatient.

"My safe was successfully opened and the list copied." Mirim said with a wide smile.

"Great! What was written into it?"

"It wasn't the real list. It was a doctored copy written in the same code, containing only the names of our prime suspects. This way, it will appear like one of their accomplices has sold them or at least is planning to cut a deal with us.

Now we only need to wait and see who reacts."

"Who leaked the information about the list?" Sylpha could almost taste their blood.

"Balfas. He is Linjos's personal assistant. He was the one that had access to the information about the safe." The reports Mirim had provided for the suspects to read were all identical except for one detail. The location of the list.

The spy had revealed their source simply by looking in a specific place rather than another.

"May the gods burn him! I was the one that assigned him to Linjos. How in the Great Mother's name did he pass all the background checks until now? Someone in my inner circle is involved or, even worse, is an idiot. Either way, some heads are going to roll for this."

The Queen could almost feel the earth crumble beneath her feet. She had hoped the culprit was someone from the ancient noble households, to gain leverage against them in the recent power struggle. Having been chosen by the Court, Balfas was a political knife pointed at her throat instead.

"That also explains how they achieved capillary control of the kitchen staff, poisoning students and Professors exactly at the right moment."

"Indeed." Mirim touched the blue gemstone on the communication amulet, sharing the latest reports with the Queen.

"I had constable Ernas checking his finances. Thanks to her cooperating with Velar Deirus, we discovered Balfas has been receiving money from a shell company that can be linked to the runaway Archmage Lukart."

"How long it's been going on?" Just hearing Lukart's name gave Sylpha heartburn.

"Before the academic year even started. The odd thing is that even after Lukart's disappearance, the payments haven't stopped."

"So, the players have changed, but is the game still the same?" The Queen pondered out loud.

"Guess we'll find out soon. I'm not going to have him arrested getting a small fish can only get us so far. We'll use him to get to the top of the command chain."

The rest of the winter passed quietly. After the gala at the Marchioness' manor, Jirni allowed Phloria to go to Lith's house, allowing them to spend his birthday together. Orion kept his word, gifting Lith the Gatekeeper sword.

Lith was really happy about it, but there was not enough time left to perform any more experiments. He could only keep studying the interactions between the mana crystals and the pseudo cores.

The armor and the weapon had different effects, allowing him to further his understanding about how to shape a pseudo core with true magic to give it specific properties. Lith and Solus could almost see a pattern, but they needed more data.

In the blink of an eye, it was already time to go back to the academy for the last year.

Chapter 269 New Accommodations Part 2

Lith spent the last days preparing Tista's homework during his absence and studying once again Lochra Silverwing's book "The basics of magic".

Archmage Deirus's words had inspired him, making Lith suspect that maybe there was something he had overlooked for all those years. If Solus was right about Lochra being an Awakened Magus of the past, then her book could contain part of her legacy or at least point him to its location.

'After all, everything she explains about first magic in her book can also be applied to true magic. I learned every word of the book, but I think I failed to comprehend its full purpose until now.

'As Yurial's dad said, Gravity magic is an obscure subject because of its difficulty, but the same can be said about Silverwing's Hexagram. What if they are both legacies left from past Magi about true magic?

'Back when I first learned how to perform the Hexagram, I had no idea arrays existed. Now, the more I look at it, the more I'm certain it's not just a parlor trick to impress the academy's old fogeys.

'If I'm right, it's not only the first true magic array I learned, but it's also part of the legacy of one of the most powerful mages in the history of the Griffon Kingdom.'

Lith's experiments lead him to discover that he could enlarge and empower the Hexagram at will. There were two major difficulties in the process, though.

The first was that the bigger the array grew, the harder it was to keep all the six elements in perfect balance. To achieve stability the spell required for each element to receive exactly the same amount of mana and for them to have their energies flow as one.

The second was that he had no idea what it was supposed to do. Being a pessimist by nature, Lith suspected it could also just be an elaborate prank from a long dead magician. If Lochra was really dead, of course.

'According to Kalla's words, she may still be alive. So either I find her and ask Lochra an explanation or I need to bang my head until I crack open this mystery.'

At his arrival at the academy, Lith was in for a surprise. The fifth floor of the White Griffon academy was almost identical to the fourth one. The only major changes were that his new room was in a different position and it was much bigger than the previous one.

It was also equipped with a forgemastering laboratory and a healer's office. Fifth years students were fewer in numbers compared to their juniors. In a good year, they would be around one hundred and fifty.

Because of the recent events, between those who died during the attack and the ones that had failed due to the anti mana toxin, there were less than one hundred students attending the fifth year.

It left a lot of free space, granting those who had made it much more liberties.

Each room was customized for their needs so that a Healer could receive patients from outside the academy or a Mage Knight practice their swordsmanship.

Having only one specialization, Phloria's apartment was entirely dedicated to sword practice. It had a soundproof room complete with golems as training dummies. Thanks to their magical nature, they were made of materials which density was identical to the human body.

They could also be programmed to assume different shapes and sizes, mimicking all the creatures that her Mage Knight course would cover.

The golems were also equipped with a sort of Artificial Intelligence. It allowed them to retaliate to the student's attacks by following the most common combat patterns of the various creatures the golem replicated.

The students were allowed to personalize their training dummies' AI to further increase the difficulty level. The first thing Phloria did was to input her own style to practice against herself and find the flaws in her execution.

"It's the first time I'm actually happy to have only one specialization." Phloria said while showing Lith her personal training facility.

"How so?" He noticed that the living space hadn't improved much. Once again, the habitations were poorly furnished, there was just enough to live and practice properly. Everything else was on the student.

Aside from the forgemastering lab and the medical practice, Lith's room had only a bed, a wardrobe, a work desk, and a few bookshelves as furniture. He would never waste money to embellish a place he used only to sleep.

Especially since he would live there only for a year.

Phloria, on the other hand, was more carefree. Her room had already a second wardrobe full of clothes. Soft carpets covered the whole floor allowing her to walk barefoot even during the cold winter mornings.

It was the only commodity Lith almost envied.

Almost.

The Skinwalker armor was capable to reproduce not only clothes, but also shoes. He only had to will for it and the armor would reshape itself from the pajamas form to the uniform, covering his feet.

The transition would only last for a split second. The enchanted clothes turned into a semi liquid state, running over Lith's body while changing its color and composition on a molecular level.

'It's worth every single point I spent on it.' Lith thought every time he used the armor's properties.

Unlike Lith's desk, which was always empty unless he was studying a particularly difficult subject, Phloria's was decorated with egg-shaped nacre ornaments on small pedestals. They were arranged in a semi circular form.

She had even a couple on her nightstand. She had never allowed him inside her own bedroom, except when the group gathered to study together. Even then, he had never seen them before. Clearly, she hid them before their arrival.

"Because unlike Friya's, my training room allows me to spar with multiple golems at the same time. It's also big enough to accommodate two people. It means Friya and I can work out together, or I can simply train you a bit with the sword." She replied.

"Good idea. The only problem is if we'll have enough time for that." He sighed.

"Well, last year was different. Now if we finish late, you can always sleep here." Phloria swept her hair, blushing a little.

"What are these things?" Lith changed the topic. It wasn't like Phloria to make such an odd and rushed offer. After he had almost died, their relationship had slowed down quite a bit. Too many things had happened too fast. His constant mood swings had contributed to making things worse.

"Do you really have never seen a..." Phloria almost choked on the rest of the phrase. The most shocking thing about visiting Lith's house had been noticing how his room was as big as one of her closets.

He was always so aloof to luxury that she often forgot about his humble origins.

"A what?"

Phloria touched the closest egg. The upper part of the magical item opened, projecting a hologram the size of a photograph. It was completed with sounds and colors, depicting a younger Orion while he was reading a story to Phloria when she was a little girl.

It was a short clip played in a loop.

Chapter 270 New Start Part 1

"A Rememberer." Another touch from Phloria made the egg close and the hologram disappear. Then, Lith watched one showing Phloria playing with Lucky when the mastiff was still a puppy, both covered in mud from head to toes.

Another was about Jirni teaching her the basics of self defense.

"It's how mages store their precious moments."

"Why did you never show them to me before?" Lith's doubts were turning into a suspicion.

"Because those are my private moments." Phloria fiddled with her hair while she was staring at the ground incapable of looking him in the eye out of embarrassment.

"I didn't share them even with my sisters."

"Okay, let's cut to the chase." Lith closed the Rememberer, resisting the temptation to pry further in her life.

"Are you jealous?"

"What? Why do you say that?" Phloria's flinching like that was a big tell.

"Well, whenever you called me after the gala, you seemed nervous. You have always liked to keep some boundaries. To go slow and steady. Yet now you are offering me to sleep here and sharing all this stuff. Sounds..."

"Desperate?" She completed the phrase for him.

"No. I was going to say: 'out of character'."

"Oh." Phloria blushed up to her ears. She wished for the ground to swallow her whole, but the carpet remained still.

She walked to her bed, sitting on it before answering with a sad voice.

"Yes, I'm jealous. I don't think I can compete with the Marchioness' daughter." Phloria's fears had gone through the roof when Jirni had pressed her to visit him during the last days of winter, instead of nagging her about her studies as usual.

"She's better than me under every aspect. She's very beautiful, moves and speaks like a lady. I'm just a clumsy giantess compared to her." Her eyes fell on her chest area, closing the speech with an unspoken comparison.

"Since when it's a challenge?" Lith scoffed.

"Do you think I have a little book where I assign all the girls I know points or something? That I score them according to some standards? How shallow do you think I am?"

"Wait, did you say all the girls? As in there's more?" Phloria was dumbfounded.

"Of course, there are. Ever since the rankings came out, all the girls of marrying age of my village have been parading in front of me every time I left my house. I keep getting invitations from small and medium importance nobles of the Lustria county.

"Most of them I didn't even know they existed. To be honest, I expect to receive the same attention from our female schoolmates Yurial did last year, if not even worse. Because now he is publicly engaged, while I am just 'an ignorant fool'.

"I expect them to think of me as a limitless letter of credit. I'm not stupid or arrogant enough to believe I've suddenly turned into a beautiful swan. They are all just gold diggers."

Lith sat on the bed beside her.

"Brinja is not different from them. Even after I saved her life, she never considered me nothing more than a brat with a glare. Otherwise, she wouldn't have waited for so long before making a move.

"She probably heard about me from her mother and got curious. You are the only person I met since I joined the academy that looked at me as a person, instead of an asset. Even before we started dating, you sought my company and advice.

"You have shared with me your everyday problems, the quarrels with your mother, and even your dreams for the future." Lith swept the hair that was covering Phloria's face before starting to caress her cheek.

"I wouldn't have ever accepted to go out with you otherwise. Not even if you were the most beautiful girl in the world."

"Are you saying I am not?" Phloria had suddenly found her spunk back, hitting him with a cushion.

"Your words, not mine, remember?"

The mood while they walked toward the fifth year Lecture Hall was completely different from before. Phloria hummed the whole time, without forcing herself to be clingy or flirty.

Not even when several girls looked at him like they saw Lith for the first time, giggling and trying to strike up a conversation with him managed to ruin her high spirits.

Especially because he dismissed them every time with a growl. Lith had no time to waste in pleasantries and hated leeches ever since his time on Earth. He still vividly remembered all those that thought him being parentless was "cool", who had attempted to make him waste his hard earned money for their own gain.

The Lecture Hall was identical to the fourth year one, but even with all the students attending the first compulsory lesson more than half the seats were empty.

When the second gong rang, Headmaster Linjos entered the room, closely followed by Professor Farg.

"Welcome back, my dear students." Linjos's face was still long and unattractive, but he seemed to have turned into a different man. His gaze was hard as steel, any trace of his previous optimistic disposition was gone.

Despite the Headmaster was just in his late twenties, his chestnut hair had partly turned white, complimenting the shades of silver he was gifted with and giving him an even colder look.

There was no joy in his voice as he spoke, only determination mixed with something that Lith recognized as slithering rage. Linjos's expression could only be described as feral. Usually the

Headmaster's sharp features and aquiline nose contrasted with his kind nature, while now they gave him a ferocious appearance.

"Since lesson time has already started, I'll go straight to the point. The past year has been a nightmare, partly because bad things happen and partly because of some of the students and their parents."

A few youths stood up in outrage, but before they could even open their mouth they were forced back to sit with a thud, unable to say a word. Linjos had used no spell or array.

He only needed to let out part of his magical aura to overwhelm with his killing intent all those who had attempted to interrupt him. The power released by the Headmaster was so strong that everyone present who didn't attend a combat specialization or wasn't part of Lith's group found themselves shivering in fear.

"So many troubles could have been avoided if some of you had the decency to leave politics outside the castle walls. So many would be still alive if not for blind pride and stupid prejudice tainting young minds like poison.

"Most of the perpetrators have been arrested at this point, others I have just expelled. This is my academy, after all, I don't need to justify myself to you or anyone else for that matter. Since I believe we still have some snakes in the grass, this message is for them.

The party is over." With a snap of his finger, Linjos made a Guilty Ballot appear in front of every student.

"To use it or not is up to you, but I strongly believe it's better to have it and not need it rather than to not have it and need it. Now imprint it with your mana."

A few students stood up again. This time Linjos did nothing to stop them.