

Chapter 401 - Contingencies

Cassian tapped the soul-bound scryer. Moonlight spilled over the documents fanned out on his desk. Linking to the nexus arrays through his access ring, the crystal cube glimmered with threads of shifting mana, cold to the touch.

The *nerve* of these amateur saboteurs.

The air thickened with his irritation as he surveyed the myriad lines of data and diagnostics of Raelion's core arrays. Jaw clenched, he separated his mood from his aura.

Sloppiness wasn't something he abided in himself or others.

It was the only way. Losses are inevitable.

It'd be easier to stomach if his efforts had been more successful. After the Mid-Term Trials, this was the second accident involving malfunctioning arrays, not counting the stack of minor unverified mishaps. It made him reconsider several events that had been dismissed. There was never decisive proof, and always plausible explanations.

Returning his focus to the scryer, he plunged into the enchanted lattice of the academy. From darkness came blinding light. Thousands, *millions* of interconnected runes flared to life, enough to melt the brain of a weaker mage. Even he couldn't take in too much at once. How many hours had he spent studying this sight since gaining access? Only the Dean, the Warden, and the High Archivist possessed master keys for the core scripts, and both the latter two weren't currently on the academy grounds.

When people praised Raelion's marvels, everyone thought of the soaring towers, or the arcane artifacts and oddities in the deepest vaults. The day he rose to dean, Cassian knew the runic nexus overshadowed them all: it was the lifeblood and heart of the academy itself.

That very same breathtaking complexity made the irregularities near-impossible to spot once they evaded the alerts. Which had *never* happened before this last student cycle.

Tracing the leylines, Cassian analyzed the scripts of the Arboris Tower. Unlike what Runesmiths claimed, there were no unbreakable arrays, only those that had yet to be breached. The tower's wards had been fully restored five minutes and twenty-three seconds after the first irregularity. It all looked pristine, each sign of tampering an innocuous variation on its own. Yet altogether...

They bypassed the seven main barriers and fifteen ancillary failsafes without triggering the alerts...

Cassian couldn't help but respect brilliant and meticulous work. It must have taken months to exact those tweaks. In contrast, the execution at the party had been sloppy. That left him puzzled.

They could've caused much more damage with these preparations. So, likely multiple actors... possibly students. Or a very committed attempt at misdirection.

Did they think he would miss their tempering?

Cassian sneered at the scryer. Competence often bred arrogance.

Unknown factors could crack even the most ingenious scheme. No one knew about his grasp of complex runic matrices. Simply put, his knowledge of enchanting had been barebones before becoming dean. And he never told or showed anyone his progress since.

Unfortunately, that still didn't provide him with many new leads.

Patience.

His fingers traced the cube's sharp edges. Rash action would only ruin his plans. Win the battle, or win the war. Even as one of the strongest mages in the Republic, he couldn't have everything. Each time, he thought another grade would free him from constraint and politics. How naive. It was never enough. Perhaps Indigo? As he climbed higher, the nature of his shackles changed, but their weight remained equally frustrating.

A meek knock pulled him from his thoughts.

"Come in."

The handle of his office door turned. A young clerk poked his head inside, wide-eyed upon seeing him, as if he could have expected anyone else in his office.

"Pardon the intrusion, Dean Astares." The man recovered quickly and lifted a rigid paper folder. "I was told to bring the initial findings—"

"Spare the formalities." Cassian stifled the annoyance with a tired exhale. He hated always repeating himself. "What is the final count?"

"Ehm, sir." The clerk hurried to set down the report, only the irregular thumps of his heart betrayed his nervousness. He clasped his hands behind him and swallowed. His voice came out stiffly professional.

"There were two confirmed casualties. Elisma Verecielo and Myralla Farsight. Both first-year students. Died from lethal burns and a broken neck, respectively. Miss Verecielo was found lifeless outside the affected halls. All attempts at resuscitation proved futile. The cause of death appears unclear, but findings suggest her heart stopped from mana backlash, aggravated through minor burns and intoxication.

"Miss Farsight appears to have slipped down a ramp of stairs, fleeing alone from the chaos. Her location was very unfortunate. Just outside the wards. The medical team also reached her too late to attempt resuscitation. Aside from that, seven students suffered crippling injuries. Six related to internal mana, and one physical. We've stabilized them. The healers

are hopeful they could make full or semi-full recoveries, contingent on an extensive treatment plan and investment of resources.”

“The academy will cover the costs,” Cassian said. “How long will their treatment take?”

“For the physical patient, at least a month for the reconstructive healing and rehabilitation.” The clerk gulped, shuffling uncomfortably. “For those with wounded mana channels... months to years, sir. *If* they recover full functionality.”

“I see.” Cassian held back his simmering aura.

At Green, a presence was a versatile tool, favored by anyone who taught hundreds of teens; at Blue though, it underwent a qualitative change. Auras could become weapons and, with proper application, affect reality. The effects only heightened around lower grades.

“Anything else?”

“Yes, yes, sir. The rest of the injured are comparatively minor. Even the worst cases should be fully healed within days. A week at the latest...” The young clerk continued his report in no clear order.

Two dead and seven crippled. Even if these last recovered, they’d likely have to drop out of the academy. All nine students had ranked among the elites he’d personally marked this year. Another near-impossible coincidence. He had looked forward to watching them bloom. All that potential wasted.

His expression stayed impassive as his mind split between the clerk’s talking, the scryer, and mulling potential moves. Dying Students accompanied Raelion since its founding, though the numbers had sharply decreased after the last restructuring. Outside of Trials and assignments, they’d recorded almost no deaths on campus before this year.

Stick to the facts.

A pity the concrete clues were scarce. To tamper with the academy’s wards, they must have a traitor on the inside, likely more than one. Skills, knowledge, opportunity and resources. Even more worrying was how accurately they seemed to select their targets, always behind a veil of plausible accidents.

Almost always.

He turned the last page of the report: testimonies of shrouded assassins.

“We’re still working on verifying those claims.” The clerk followed his gaze. “Unfortunately, we weren’t able to find any known descriptions or identifiers.”

Cassian nodded with perfunctory interest. It was a futile effort. The assassins would reveal no identifiers. He knew since he’d caught her. In the moments he locked on and displaced the attacker from the party, the woman drank a lethal dose of bloodworm essence. He’d

gotten three gurgling breaths before the connection to her spirits was severed and her brain turned to mush.

Lucky for her.

There was no forgiveness for those who threatened his students.

He would have been more inclined to admire her decisiveness if he weren't so short on leads. He doubted her gear or the autopsy would reveal more. Well, she did leave *one* clue. Many assassins carried deadly poison, but few could take their lives without hesitation. That somewhat narrowed the circle.

Unless her zeal was a personal quality and not the norm for her organization...

Who hired her? How had she infiltrated the academy undetected?

If not for his mercurial contingencies, they might now be short a Blackwood heir. And if the rumors about the matriarch were true, they had narrowly avoided disaster. Raelion strove to keep out political assassinations, and usually succeeded—at least for those that could be proven. But when the Houses stirred, their games abided no borders or restraint.

A cleverly painted picture to explain the accident, vague enough to make anyone who pieced it together feel clever rather than suspicious. Even Cassian had to consider if it was truly all a plot of the Houses. It'd be stranger if no family had their hands in it.

But who and how many?

"That's everything we currently know." The clerk stood back, hesitating. "Dean Astares... I was told to ask if there are changes to our directives. We could investigate more extensively if we informed the Houses of the potential threat."

Cassian raised an eyebrow in mild surprise. Usually, the academy begged him to do the opposite. He made a note to look into which investigator had grown a spine. Pity he had to give a curt shake.

"At this juncture, that's likely to cause more chaos than good." Not to mention muddy the waters and send his targets scuttling back to their dark burrows. Fishing took patience.

The young man quickly straightened his slump. "I understand, Dean—sir. Does that apply to internal searches as well? We believe some students gave incomplete testimonies. We might discover more if we dug deeper. There were several commoners involved that could be interrogated without blowback."

From how the clerk smoothly produced a list, Cassian began to suspect this conversation had been planned. Denying a larger request could easily make the next one seem more reasonable.

I should really find out who took this investigation.

With a faint smile, Cassian glanced at the list. Atop the column of commoners, a familiar name stood underlined for highly unusual behavior.

Of course...

"Do not engage with them."

"Of course—" The clerk blinked, doing a double-take. "None of them? But we have reasonable suspicions— *sir*, they might be involved in the accident. Or, be hiding crucial information."

"Possible, but unlikely," Cassian said. "To stand out that much... He would make the most singular spy I've ever encountered. Now, if that's everything. Keep me updated."

"Yes, sir." With a stiff bow, the clerk marched out.

Patience and persistence.

Cassian delved back into the array scripts. Tracking a mote in a manastorm seemed easy by comparison. But applying unreasonable effort was often the best way to surprise those who skulked in the dark.

Theories were merged, pieced, and discarded for useful parts until a most subtle spatial ripple gave him pause.

"Mew."

A flash of silver sauntered onto his desk.

With a stifled sigh, Cassian reached into his drawer to retrieve the treats.

Contingencies had to be fed.