

The Unlikely Romance

Act 1: Not-so-humble beginnings

A son is born to Louisoix and Ysabelle during 1537 6AE, whom they name Fourchenault.

Fourchenault would grow to be a stern, stubborn, quiet child — polite, respectful, and well-behaved... but also reserved, withdrawn, and intensely-focused on his studies and interests — showing resistance and irritation to being exposed to anything that he was not naturally inclined to like, whether it be food, activity, or academic subject.

And so, whilst Louisoix had at first been eagerly looking forward to sharing his interests and scholarship with the son that he was so proud of, Louisoix would soon be dismayed to find that — with each passing year — his son would grow more and more resistant to almost every topic that Louisoix was passionate about.

Indeed, rather than being fascinated by those tales of prophecy and sacrifice which Louisoix attempted to share with his son, the young Fourchenault instead found them alternately frightening, depressing, upsetting, or distasteful.

Instead, the child Fourchenault became drawn instead toward stories of survival, practicality, and unequivocal triumph over obstacles and disasters. For bedtime stories, he preferred only those with happy endings.

When Louisoix attempted to share his love of ancient myths and legends, Fourchenault again showed resistance — thinking them boring and irrelevant to actual life.

Instead, the young Fourchenault preferred empirical tales of the here-and-now: news from gazettes, or firm and documented histories of political events and wars, with concrete lists of meticulous and verifiable sources.

When Louisoix attempted to share his research into exotic arts, occult relics, and methods of divination, Fourchenault once again showed disinterest — finding it all to be a waste of time, compared to arts and skills that were pragmatic and worldly, and directly benefited the everyday lives of Mankind.

Especially, Fourchenault developed — from earliest childhood — a deep fascination with the work of the Sage Doctors of Sharlayan, which to his eyes, plainly produced empirical and respectable results, and bettered the lives of everyone it touched in concrete ways... something young Fourchenault found both pleasing and comforting.

Exasperated, Louisoix found himself struggling to connect to his son in any way.

And when Ysabelle tried to suggest that Louisoix instead take up Fourchenault's interests, Louisoix would react with frustration... stating that he had no time in his schedule to suddenly learn entirely-different fields and topics than his life's specialties!

Thus, as Fourchenault grew, he and his father would always have an uncomfortable distance between them — and it would seemingly grow wider and wider with each passing year.

Louisoix would continually struggle to find time for — or, bluntly, interest in — the mundane, grounded matters that seemed to be the only topics which young Fourchenault cared for... and Louisoix would also grow ever-more-hurt by his perception that his young son would not even try to appreciate the deep and profound topics and philosophies that Louisoix felt so passionate about.

Young Fourchenault, conversely, would grow to utterly-resent the lofty, esoteric, far-away interests of his father as being pointless, unimportant, and — most of all — hurtfully divergent from Fourchenault's own interests... feeling as if his father cared not for anything that Fourchenault did, and seemed unwilling to even try.

Nonetheless, Fourchenault would be absolutely loved, and raised very well, and — of course, being a Leveilleur — would want for little and less in life.

Fourchenault's education would be immaculate, consistent, and ever-present, and his parents would see that the boy was always supplied with bountiful amounts of learning and knowledge — including whatever tomes or treatises he desired.

So Fourchenault's room would steadily fill with all manner of direct and practical topics, such as concrete world histories, treatises on political process and formal lawmaking, or countless tomes of medicinal theory.

And as Fourchenault would grow into later childhood, and develop a more distinct and independent personality, he and his father would begin to quarrel more and more frequently and openly.

Louisoix and Fourchenault would, by no means, hate each other, or anything near... Yet, father and son simply would not, and seemingly could not, ever seem to comprehend each other's sensibilities or preferences in nearly any matter, or upon any topic.

And wife and mother Ysabelle — caught in the middle, and loving them both equally — would end up simply doing her best to care for them both as best she could... and to recuse herself as diplomatically as possible from their increasingly-frequent arguments.

Act 2: Opposites attract

In 1551 6AE Fourchenault Leveilleur entered the Studium, at the age of 14 years.

To the surprise of most of his fellow bachelor students — who knew far more about his father, Professor Louisoix Leveilleur — Fourchenault displayed a conservative, reserved, and often-sour attitude about very nearly everything... especially from the perspective of his young colleagues, who generally held optimistic, liberalistic attitudes about almost every topic.

Indeed, Fourchenault's resistance to most of the liberal-minded causes that were popular amongst the young student body — and, in fact, his often-scathing criticism of such ideals — quickly earned him the intense dislike of most of his classmates.

His quick-to-flare temper only exacerbated the problem further.

Yet none of that social disapproval seemed to concern Fourchenault even slightly.

Years of growing up — and arguing constantly — with his father Louisoix had already hardened the boy beyond measure to having his ideals tested and disagreed with... and so Fourchenault either shrugged-off, or skillfully-riposted, nearly every attempt to challenge his attitudes that was brought by his bewildered and frustrated classmates.

Indeed, by that age, Fourchenault had come to view Sharlayan's founding Archon Nyunkrepf Nyunkrepfsyn as an ideal man: someone who had put practicality and purpose above hollow ideals and empty talk, and had used his vast knowledge only to protect and guide others, rather than as a weapon.

In fact, this fascination had initially developed in Fourchenault's childhood as a method by which to desperately counter Louisoix's persistent attempts to refute Fourchenault's conservative attitudes: Fourchenault had for some years taken to quoting one of Nyunkrepf's most famous statements almost like a mantra:

"Renounce all that which brings strife, and instead seek to advance mankind only through knowledge and reason."

Now, Nyunkrepf had originally spoken those words as part of a much longer speech to the founding peoples of Sharlayan, after their vessel had first arrived on the untamed shores of the Sharlayan Isles — a speech in which Nyunkrepf laid out his heartfelt vision for what sort of society that he hoped to see his new people's settlement grow to become.

Yet, the striking and quotable statement had been isolated and taken out of context by Sharlayans almost since Nyunkrepf first spoke it — forming the core creed of the Sharlayan nation, even despite the fact that its full context was far richer and more nuanced.

Indeed, even in the modern day, the exact intent of those words is still fiercely-debated in Sharlayan courses on philosophy, ethics, rhetoric, and so forth.

To the young Fourchenault, however, Nyunkrepf's supposed credo became a burning encapsulation of Fourchenault's entire purpose and beliefs almost as soon as he first found the words within a biography of Nyunkrepf targeted toward young readers.

From that, Fourchenault had suddenly felt like he had finally found a tangible explanation for his long-standing, instinctual dislike of nearly everything that his father said: to Fourchenault, Louisoix's ideals suddenly seemed to be a direct violation of the very core of what it meant to be "Sharlayan"... which was an identity that Fourchenault was increasingly becoming far more proud of than his father's name.

Indeed, from Fourchenault's young perspective, his father — ever-pursuing esoteric mythology, abstract theories, lost arts, and ancient prophecies — did not act with 'reason', nor seek true 'knowledge'.

And Louisoix's intense advocacy for Sharlayan involvement to provide aid in foreign conflicts was a direct violation of Nyunkrepf's request to 'renounce all that which brings strife'.

As such, Fourchenault came to see Louisoix as distinctly-opposed to the very founding beliefs and ideals of Sharlayan, and thus, as a disgrace to the legacy that great Nyunkrepf had entrusted all Sharlayans to carry forward.

Thus, despite Fourchenault having taken a passionate adherence to what was actually a narrow and stubborn interpretation of a single sentence of Nyunkrepf — a sentence whose exact meaning not even every academic could agree upon — Fourchenault still came to see his position as righteous — having at last found, within the very words of Sharlayan's founding father, that which young Fourchenault believed to be justification for his oft-controversial viewpoints... and especially, for his unyielding disagreement with nearly everything Louisoix said.

And so Fourchenault likewise used those same words as an equally-effective shield against his fellow students after he entered the Studium — countering nearly any idealistic, progressive, or liberalistic cause or viewpoint presented to him with a stern reprimand such as:

"I remind you all of Archon Nyunkrepf's solemn request to our ancestors: 'Renounce all that which brings strife, and instead seek to advance mankind only through knowledge and reason'!"

And anyone who attempted to debate Fourchenault about the exact meaning of Nyunkrepf's words — or the wider context that Nyunkrepf had originally spoken in — was swiftly shut down by Fourchenault with a haughty sigh or a dismissive huff...

...and then met with Fourchenault's turned back, as he strode away — apparently uninterested in what he viewed as "a sure-to-be tedious and amateurish discussion, based in false premises and an ignorant lack of education about our founding principles and the great man who laid them out".

In 1538 6AE, an Elezen girl named Ameliance had been born into an upper-middle-class Sharlayan family of well-respected legal advocates.

As such, it had widely been assumed by all within her family that Ameliance would — as was a tradition going back countless generations of her bloodline — train as an advocate, just like her parents.

...Unfortunately, Ameliance's inherently-impish nature became combined with her chronic childhood exposure to legal practices and logics, granting her a circuitously-keen wit — which the young girl early-on began using to outreason her exasperated parents at nearly every turn... on nearly every topic.

This led the young Ameliance to quickly develop a mischievously-rebellious streak — and not even because she felt particularly bothered by anything that she was rebelling against... but simply because she found rebellion fun.

Indeed, the young Ameliance's *espiègle* mind just enjoyed the 'game' of challenging, navigating, and tip-toeing around nearly every form of authority that she encountered... leading her parents to no end of premature gray hairs (which was especially impressive when considering that the Hommedeloi bloodline already had naturally-silver hair as a dominant trait).

Yet Ameliance's mischievous nature should not be misinterpreted as stupidity nor miscreance: the girl was, in fact, frighteningly-smart when she applied herself.

In fact, just to startle and defy her parents once again, Ameliance impulsively sat for the Studium Exams without informing her family beforehand... and scored high enough to be granted admittance, which she swiftly accepted — upending countless generations of Hommedeloi tradition in which the children of ofthe family line always attended the Solonon, a prestigious private Sharlayan law school.

Ameliance's tongue, however, grew only more clever and silvered with each passing year of her young life... and thus she successfully talked her confounded and exasperated parents in circles for long enough hours that they finally gave up in frustration and sanctioned her attendance to the Studium — prompting a curtsy, and a sweet and innocent smile of appreciation, from the triumphant Ameliance.

Fourchenault Leveilleur's unpopular behavior and disagreeable personality generally made him a social outcast during his first year in the Studium dormitories — a situation that suited Fourchenault just fine.

To be clear, this was not because Fourchenault was antisocial or enjoyed being alone. Rather, it was because Fourchenault felt so justified in his viewpoints that he perceived being alone as a far more acceptable option than being forced to compromise on his convictions.

Thus, buoyed by the heady affirmation of self-righteousness, Fourchenault felt untroubled by the ostracization — instead calmly devoting his time to focusing intently and diligently on his studies, and his persistent dream of entering the Physis Technon after graduation.

Yet Fourchenault's bizarre behavior and personality (especially from the perspective of young Studium bachelors) ended up serving a peculiar purpose during the first quarter of his second year of studies at the institution: it brought him to the attention of a young student named Ameliance Hommedeloi.

Ameliance was one year Fourchenault's junior, and by the age of 14, her nature, personality, and ideals had developed to be... er... nearly the exact, diametric, polar opposite of Fourchenault's in nearly every way.

Most of the undergraduate student body — which by and large viewed the young Fourchenault with nothing but distaste — had given up on the young man by this point, and simply begun avoiding him as much as possible.

The young Ameliance's keen-minded nature, however, swiftly recognised that — despite his obstinate and controversial opinions — Fourchenault was actually extremely intelligent... and also, clearly, incredibly lonely — despite his attempts to present an outwardly-alooof and unaffected demeanor.

Thus, despite quickly finding that she disagreed with very nearly everything that came out of Fourchenault's mouth and pen, and her constantly-struggling to even comprehend the stubborn young man's peculiar opinions, Ameliance could still see that Fourchenault genuinely believed in his ideals, even at such a young age... and so, she began to feel a certain curiosity and admiration for the perplexing conviction with which the young Fourchenault held his views.

Indeed, especially-impressive to the young Ameliance was that Fourchenault was the first person that she had ever met in her young life whom she could not out-manoeuvre in a debate or argument — her early, confident expectations of "changing his nature" with her silver tongue "had met about as much success as the First Siege of Nym".

Furthermore, Ameliance perceived that there was more to Fourchenault than his young compeers gave him credit: she could not help but admire Fourchenault's clearly-sincere desire to learn medicine in order to aid the Sharlayan people — a passion which, even at the age 15 years, she could see that he was throwing himself into with absolute dedication.

Thus, overall, rather than the typical dislike for Fourchenault held by most of his fellow students, Ameliance was overcome with curiosity for how someone could be so close to her in age, and so incredibly-smart... yet also so entirely-different from her.

So the young Ameliance Hommedeloi — for reasons that even she herself could not quite understand — began to feel compelled to devise ways and excuses to approach, spend time near, and be around the irritable and isolated Fourchenault.

At first, the aloof and haughty Fourchenault had simply ignored Ameliance's attention... and when it persisted, he began to actively avoid her — confused by "this... random girl's irritating shadowing of me".

Eventually, however, Fourchenault's luck ran out: the two were forced to work together in a laboratory exercise...

...after Ameliance had slyly and patiently waited for everyone else in the room to pair up, correctly-anticipating that Fourchenault would be the only student left without a willing partner.

Fourchenault, of course, was by now very used to these outcomes, and so by established habit, he had simply strode over to claim his favorite laboratory station, and then crossed his arms — patiently waiting for whoever would be forced to come crawling over to work with him once the room ran out of other partners.

Thus did Fourchenault's sea-blue eyes abruptly fly wide with horror when he turned around and saw that girl slowly striding up to his laboratory station, wearing a disturbingly-sweet smile on her face, and with her own umber eyes sparkling with an unsettling glint of triumph.

Thus did Ameliance finally force Fourchenault to actually make eye contact with her — and then, further, to actually speak to her... because Fourchenault's desire to achieve perfect marks outweighed his desire to avoid her, and there was no way to complete the laboratory exercise without... communicating...

...And so Ameliance found herself instantly amused by how much her mere presence seemed to fluster the otherwise-aloof young man, and seemed to break the otherwise-immovable Fourchenault down into a stammering, awkward mess who avoided eye contact as much as possible.

Indeed, she took especial pleasure in how the boy's sudden nervousness caused him to begin making constant calculation errors in the lab datasheets, which she sweetly and innocently pointed out one after the other — making him grow ever-more-flustered, in an endless snowball of consternation that took all of the effort in Ameliance's body not to constantly titter over. Somehow, Fourchenault survived that laboratory session — and, with the support of Ameliance's guiding hand, earned a perfect mark for the day.

Fourchenault then patiently cleaned and replaced the experimental tools and supplies with meticulous precision, as he always did — constantly rejecting, approximately every few

seconds, Ameliance's offers to help — and then, as soon as that self-imposed obligation was finished, Fourchenault immediately left the room — reportedly with a swiftness usually ascribed only to creatures such as draft chocobos or Othardian ninjas.

Alas, that was not to be the end of Fourchenault's trials at the Studium.

From that day forward, Ameliance decided that she had found a new favorite game in life: making the confused and, frankly, somewhat-terrified Fourchenault constantly lose both his tongue and his composure in her ever-persistent presence.

Indeed, no matter where Fourchenault attempted to hide, he would inevitably be startled by the sudden presence of Ameliance sitting down next to him — wearing her same seemingly-innocent smile of sweetness, and feigning surprise at seeing him in that location. Within a few stubborn months of such efforts on Ameliance's part, even the otherwise-immovable Fourchenault had...

...slowly and reluctantly given up on shoos her away, facing a battle that even his obstinate will could not seem to win.

And thus, despite seeming like a completely-mismatched pair in very nearly every possible sense, Ameliance's efforts successfully resulted in the two spending a great deal of time together as their years at the Studium progressed.

...although nearly no one amongst their fellow undergraduates that was observing this development could ever seem to comprehend why someone as brightly-natured, outgoing, friendly, social, humorous, liberal-minded, and likeable as Ameliance would intentionally seek to spend her time in the company of someone like... Fourchenault Leveilleur.

And, er, well... when pressed, even Ameliance herself could not really explain it: "I'm not sure," she would say, "I simply... like him..."

"But he is terrible!" exclaimed Ameliance's friend.

"Perhaps sometimes! But not in all ways... he has very good qualities as well!" insisted Ameliance.

"Ergh... if you say so, Meli..." her friend replied, thick with scepticism.

"But don't many others have such good qualities? Others who aren't so... insufferable?" asked another friend, perplexed.

"Well, yes, of course," mused Ameliance, "But no one else is quite like Fourchenault..."

"And thank the Twelve Gods for that!" chimed in a nearby eavesdropper.

In 1553 6AE, now 16 years of age and in his 3rd year at the Studium, the still-indignant Fourchenault Leveilleur came into contact with an organisation of upperclassmen — the "Bibliothec Studia" — that styled itself as "the intelligent student's alternative to the exhaustingly-foolish philosophies of the general student body".

And Fourchenault was... amazed.

As the small group gathered, he suddenly found himself surrounded by like-minded individuals of his own age... and it was an incredible and vindicating experience for him.

Thus did Fourchenault become even more convicted in his conservative ideologies.

And, being of adult age by Sharlayan law, he also gladly-accepted the offer to register himself as officially-affiliated with the Bibliothec politickal bloc — which he quickly began to feel was a perfect embodiment of his own views on nearly all matters of Sharlayan policy.

...Alas, even the tiny meeting hall of the Bibliothec Studia could not protect Fourchenault from Ameliance Hommedeloi, who somehow learned — within mere days — exactly where Fourchenault was "disappearing to" at certain times after classes during the week.

And so, to Fourchenault's shock and confusion, the extremely-liberalistic girl did not even hesitate as she approached the threshold of the Bibliothec Studia meeting hall... and thus innocently followed Fourchenault straight into every meeting of the hyperconservative student faction.

Ameliance would then sit quietly, and smile silently with unrestrained amusement, or tilt her head and furrow her brow with unhidden confusion, at almost everything that the conservative students said — yet she usually managed to suppress actually laughing.

Nonetheless, as she was not actually disruptive in any way, no one attempted to bar her entry to the meetings... not even after Fourchenault had all-but-begged them to do so.

Yet, now empowered and vindicated by the Bibliothec's codified ideals, the young Fourchenault became only more hardened and emboldened in his contrarian viewpoints.

With each passing page of history studied in his courses, and with each additional piece of news of the situation in Othard that arrived in the student gazettes, Fourchenault saw only more and more empirical support for everything that the Bibliothec argued.

Thus, as his 3rd year progressed, and he grew into early adulthood, Fourchenault became more and more convinced that the Bibliothec's philosophy was the only acceptable philosophy for Sharlayan if his nation wished to ensure both its security and its future.

Those increasingly-staunch politickal views were only hardened further once Fourchenault discovered just how much his affiliation with the Bibliothec unnerved and upset his father Louisoix.

Indeed, with every additional exasperated admonition and appeal from his liberalistic father, Fourchenault was only driven to become even more polarised in his views.

This was partially, indeed, just to spite and upset Louisoix... because Fourchenault was... er... 16 years of age.

However, it was more than that. By and large, Fourchenault's increasing polarisation was driven by the fact that he simply sincerely believed that his father was wrong about nearly everything, and in nearly every way — and that Louisoix's extroverted politickal ideas and "whimsical" beliefs would eventually be the doom of Sharlayan, and all it held dear, if the Sharlayan people continued to follow men like Louisoix.

The young Fourchenault — already believing that Nyunkrepf Nyunkrepfsyn was perhaps the greatest man in the history of the entire Star — came to see the Bibliothec philosophies and policies as being the ones which most-resembled and -respected Archon Nyunkrepf's wishes, and most-properly honored all that Nyunkrepf had sacrificed to see Sharlayan made.

As well, Fourchenault came to see the Bibliothec's positions as being the truest inheritors of the philosophies that Nyunkrepf had attempted to leave behind for the people of Sharlayan — the truest embodiment of the words that Fourchenault kept so close to his heart:

"Renounce all that which brings strife, and instead seek to advance mankind only through knowledge and reason"...

Thus, Fourchenault increasingly came to view his father's actions and philosophies as "an outright desecration of all that Nyunkrepf stood for, fought for, shed blood for, and worked to create" — and "a disrespectful embracement of all that Nyunkrepf attempted to warn us Sharlayans against ever repeating".

Through these evolving and more extreme views, the young and hot-headed Fourchenault came to sincerely view his father as "embodying the absolute antithesis of everything that it means to be Sharlayan!", and as "a defiler of Sharlayan's very foundations and heritage". Indeed, to a livid and exasperated Louisoix, the 16 years of age Fourchenault had once tersely ranted — before storming out of the Leveilleur manse —

"Spare me your tiresome ideals, father!

If you truly so dislike our great nation's fundamental principles and beliefs, why do you not simply leave it? Leave us, the Sharlayan people, to our peace?

There are countless cruel and belligerent places all across the Star that would surely and eagerly welcome such an amoral sorcerer of your capacity... so why do you not go join them? Why must you spend your life seeking to erode our foundations, our way of life, simply because it does not suit your peculiar and eccentric and maddened sensibilities?

Sharlayan is not the abnormality, father! You are!"

Louisoix was so offended by these statements that, in a rare event, he could not form coherent speech — and so the young Fourchenault continued with furious impunity:

"Yes, it seems to me that you would be far more pleased living nearly anywhere else... as evidenced by your constant visits to everywhere but your homeland... to every barbaric place around us.

Yet you do not live anywhere else. No! Instead you stubbornly remain here, that you might continue to exploit our hard-earned knowledge for your arrogant whims and ideals!

And in the process, you uncaringly and constantly risk drawing all the rest of us — unwillingly and unasked for — into your dangerous games, for your personal whims!

...Well, I am not fooled as the common man is. I can see through your foolishness, your... aura of reputation. And as I am now old enough to do so, I will see the madness of you, and others like you, stopped!"

...As usual, Fourchenault returned many hours later, after walking in large circles around Sharlayan City in a silent fit of fuming displeasure... and as usual, upon entering the Leveilleur manse, Fourchenault strode silently to his chambers... whilst Louisoix remained silently in his study, poring over a tome, not even acknowledging his son's return.

And, as usual, Ysabelle — and every servant of the House Leveilleur — tried their best to simply not get between the two ferociously-opinionated men.

Act 3: Aspirations

After procrastinating on choosing a path of study for... er... nearly her entire time at the Studium, Ameliance Hommedeloi realised that the deadline was rapidly approaching for the scheduling and submittal of the 1555 6AE school year's Bachelor Theses.

And that was... er... quite a problem, because part of Ameliance's dramatic and persuasive arguments to her parents about not attending the Solonon was a convicted and passionate insistence about her aspirations to be a great Sharlayan researcher... and her swearing that, if she was only allowed, she would achieve something great at the Studium — and in the same number of years that she would spend learning law at the Solonon!

Only, well... after she had gotten her way, and actually entered the Studium...

...she had found that high-level research and study wasn't, as, er... glorious? ...as she had been imagining in her childhood. In fact, it was often really quite stuffy and dry... or even tedious.

It wasn't a lack of intellectual capability on her part — she had excelled in the courses that she selected, and consistently gotten high marks — it was simply a lack of... er... passion about it all.

Oh, the topics themselves were wondrous!

But... er... the tedium of doing proper research, data collection, and especially... drafting the papers, was... not wondrous.

And so Ameliance had sinkingly-realised that a life as a great Sharlayan researcher was... perhaps, ah... not her aspiration, after all.

Somehow, the gossip and gazette articles had always made being a cutting-edge researcher and professor seem so much more... er... exciting? ...than it actually seemed to be...

Yet to back out would have meant admitting defeat to her parents — and no less, after the spectacle that she had put on to escape being sentenced to the Solonon! It just... simply was not an option.

...Thus had Ameliance sort of... drifted? ...about the Studium's academic channels for several years — taking a wild, disjointed potpourri of different courses, and responding in calculated, evasive, and sometimes... er, "perhaps somewhat fabricated"... ways, whenever her parents inquired about her plans... and her progress.

...To be honest, had it not been for the attendance of Fourchenault Leveilleur, she very well might have seriously considered going home, and eating a grand and humble pie before her disappointed parents.

But somehow, the strain and sinking worry seemed so much more... bearable, and far-away, with Fourchenault around!

With the daily game of confounding that strange and amusing boy with her persistent ever-presence...

Even though he seemingly paid her almost no mind or attention whatsoever, his presence was still comforting, and inspired her to carry on.

...It... really only made sense to Ameliance, as her ever-perplexed friends and peers constantly reminded her.

And as well, Ameliance truly enjoyed the Studium!

The people, the friends, the teachers, the sights, the atmosphere, the many wonderful topics, the — alright, not the food. That was ghastly.

But otherwise! She truly enjoyed it all!

And the fact that Fourchenault Leveilleur was always to be found lurking somewhere within only made it even better...

...Yet, a typical course of study at the Solonon was 4 years.

And now, here she was, in her 4th year at the Studium... and still most decidedly not the grand researcher that a 13-years-age Ameliance had promised her parents that she aspired to be.

Thus, if she did not complete her time at the Studium this year... and then had to return for a fifth year...

...Ah, well... that would likely not sit well with her parents at all, as it would be a tacit failure of the young Ameliance's blustery promises...

...And this realisation had all occurred to her rather... er, suddenly.

In her first year, it had all seemed incredibly far away, and hardly a concern!

In her second and third years, it had still somehow seemed... a lifetime away.

Even at the start of her fourth year, it had seemed... a comfortably-distant problem.

And then, one day, she awoke, and — whilst staring at the ceiling above her dormitory bunk — suddenly realised that only two quarters remained in her 4th Studium year...

...and that had finally set her into a panick.

...So Ameliance had suddenly begun anxiously seeking about for a field of study to focus herself on.

...Oh, dear. Oh, dear! What was she to do...? What did she even like doing?!

...Taking a deep breath, Ameliance thought on the matter.

Well, she knew that she liked magicks! That was one of her favorite subjects.

The casting of a spell could be done somewhat through improvisation and intuition, as long as one had a good preparatory foundation — much, in fact, like speechmaking!

And so she found that she much preferred spellcasting studies to more dry and precise, data-driven subjects...

And she liked healing magicks, especially.

She had no patience for the dry and meticulous arcanometry of Southern Seas Arcanistry and Sage Medicine, but she quite enjoyed Conjury!

Indeed, she found it quite enjoyable to direct her aether into someone else, and see them renewed and refreshed — even if most entry-level courses in the Studium enforced the usage of practice mammals, rather than living subjects.

But that, of course, had never stopped Ameliance Hommedeloi from merrily strolling around the study halls late at night, offering a little boost of aether to anyone who was flagging in their desperate attempts to pull an all-night cram session!

So... she liked magicks, especially healing magicks.

...But, er... she was unsure what to do with that observation.

Merely casting some healing magicks was hardly enough to serve as a Thesis topic on its own...

...and suddenly, Ameliance felt like she had ended up right back where she had begun.

So it was that an exasperated Ameliance somewhat-autonomously sought out Fourchenault Leveilleur wherever he was studying that day — as she did almost out of subconscious habit by that point — and sat down next to the young man... who immediately let out his characteristic, exasperated huff of impatience at her presence.

...And then Fourchenault performed a veritable double-glance:

Ameliance was, er... not smiling. And, in fact, had not even greeted him.

...Indeed, for the first time that he could even remember, the girl looked... distracted. Even troubled...

...A great wave of uncertainty came over Fourchenault, and he hesitated repeatedly — his better judgment screaming at him not to say a word.

...But then, with a momentary sigh at his own weakness, he spoke:

"You seem... uncharacteristically distant today. Is aught troubling you, Miss Hommedeloi?" Ameliance suddenly snapped to attention — embarrassed to realise just how preoccupied she must have been with her many worried thoughts.

Then she performed a veritable double-glance of her own:

Had Fourchenault Leveilleur really just spoken to her first...?

Smiling brightly, Ameliance tipped her head, and thought for a moment, then responded:

"Well, I am embarrassed to admit that I've yet to settle on my Studium Thesis topic! And... I'm suddenly feeling a bit, ah, pressured."

She paused a moment, then tilted her head a bit more, inquisitively: "Have you chosen your own Thesis subject yet, Master Fourchenault?"

Fourchenault bristled, as always, at Ameliance's excessively — and obviously-flippant — formal address of him...

...and then Fourchenault started to speak...

And then stopped.

...and then started again...

And then stopped.

...and finally narrowed his eyes, and turned his head to look askance at Ameliance.

Ah, of course, thought Ameliance, He really is so stubborn and competitive, that he is likely afraid of some other student overhearing his Thesis idea, and stealing it...

Unable to help herself, she giggled slightly at the boy's predictable nature.

"Oh, it's alright!" Ameliance added, trying to spare Fourchenault this internal suffering: "If you'd rather not speak of—"

Fourchenault sighed loudly. "No." he stated firmly, "It is fine. I am fine. It is... well. It is fine."

...then he glanced back and forth around the room repeatedly...

Ameliance sighed, in the way of someone resignedly-appreciating the predictable habits of someone that they know all-too-well, and then smiled sweetly:

"Perhaps you might be interested in discussing the topic somewhere more quiet and alone? Such as the Monopteros?"

Then, fearing that the observation about his hesitancy might offend his potent ego, Ameliance quickly added:

"Just so that you can concentrate, of course! I'm sure that it is a very detailed topic, after all, and I wouldn't want you to feel distracted!"

Fourchenault slightly narrowed his eyes, and slightly turned his head — his mind processing how to respond.

...Then, he seemed satisfied:

"Yes... yes, that might well be... well. I think that might... be well. Yes."

So the two had strolled to the open park of the Silent Monopteros, and there found a distant and lonely tree under which to sit, far from any other studying ears.

...Then, after a long and awkward silence, Ameliance smiled, and prompted:

"So then, Master Fourchenault, please do tell me about your own Thesis plans!"

Fourchenault hesitated a moment longer...

...and then suddenly his face and eyes lit up, and he began to pour out an extremely-animated and detailed explanation of the recent new research and development that had led to the creation of the devices termed "Nouliths"!

And how it was going to revolutionise the field of Sage Medicine, and his intention to conduct a thorough review of all known papers and publications on the topic released in the previous year — a collation with which Sage Studies scholars and Sage Doctors alike might be able to better-navigate the dizzying amount of disorganised research that had flooded out since the first prototype was unveiled!

And...

...Some time after the 90th consecutive minute of Fourchenault's seemingly-tireless explanations and details about Noulith functionality and applications, Ameliance's mind felt like it had begun to fuzz at the edges, and then slowly begun to dissipate right out from her skull — as the young man seemed able to talk without limit or pause on this particular topic that he felt so passionate about.

Yet, his passion was wonderful to behold!

Ameliance had never before seen Fourchenault so... animated.

His eyes sparkled with what seemed like true joy and excitement...

Amazing, she had thought to herself, I do believe all of my friends were, in fact, wrong! The Leveilleur boy does indeed have a Soul... he just rarely displays it to others.

...So Ameliance had continued to sit, and patiently listen to all that Fourchenault had to say — politely asking questions whenever she did not understand something...

...even though Fourchenault's responding explanations usually only led to... er... even more questions in Ameliance's dizzied head.

...Yet, surprisingly, unlike Fourchenault's usual self... no amount of Ameliance's questions regarding this particular subject matter seemed to actually irritate the young man.

It was as if every new opportunity to talk even more about Nouliths and Sage Medicine actually only made him more pleased...

...And so it was that, after over four unbroken hours of listening to Fourchenault speak about Sage Medicine, Ameliance realised that the boy finally seemed to be wearying a bit... and slowing down somewhat.

Gently placing a hand upon his shoulder — which Fourchenault quickly and reflexively backed away from — Ameliance smiled brightly, and suggested to Fourchenault that they might perhaps take a break...

...to which he reluctantly agreed...

...yet also seemed secretly relieved — not because he wished to stop talking, but because he was, er... physically running out of energy.

Ameliance had been, in all honesty, expecting Fourchenault to stand and flee the very moment that his turn to speak was over...

...yet, to her surprise, the stern young man had remained — sitting quietly, staring into the distance, his back stiffly resting against the tree's trunk, his arms crossed tightly over his chest, his brow furrowed.

And so a surprised Ameliance had remained, and done similar — resting her folded arms upon her bent knees, and then thoughtfully resting her cheek upon her arms.

And so they sat, for some long minutes, in a silence that felt, strangely, neither awkward nor uncomfortable.

Meanwhile, Ameliance's mind spun in circles with all of the information that Fourchenault had given her...

Then, at last, Ameliance tipped her head inquisitively, and spoke:

"You said that there's presently some promising early research about the possibility of using techniques from Southern Seas Arcanistry to enhance the effects of these Nouliths, is that right?"

"Yes!" Fourchenault said firmly, suddenly springing back to life, unable to keep the excitement from his voice: "But only when they are used in an array formation. Essentially, the preliminary idea, currently, is that the overlapping and intersecting wave-forms can function somewhat similarly to the effects of projecting magicks through the organised lattice of a reagent gemstone, and..."

...Some twenty minutes later, Fourchenault finally rested his tongue again, and Ameliance clasped her hands together, and rested her cheek against them in contemplation... quietly feeling the breeze gently tousling her silvery bangs.

Finally, she spoke again:

"And the Nymian Scholars... their Tactical Magicks and Faeries used similar principles as Southern Seas Arcanistry, didn't they?"

Fourchenault nodded enthusiastically: "Oh, yes! Quite more refined, however! So much so that it is still, to this day, difficult to reproduce Nymian arcanic constructs without a copy of the Omnilex, or a Nymian Soul Crystal... priceless relics which the Bibliotheca Historica is not wont to loan out. The written observations and records about Nymian Scholarship alone are simply not enough to reverse-engineer the phenomenally-complex calculations that underpinned their arts... although Sharlayan's great heritage does give our archives something of an advantage in this matter. However, theoretically, it should be like a far more complex version of Southern Seas Arcanistry... yes."

Ameliance tilted her head and narrowed her eyes, smiling slightly... deep in intrigued contemplation.

"Then... perhaps the Nouliths could be thought of as serving a purpose somewhat like that? If the Nouliths can weave arcanometric constructs when in an... 'array formation'...? ...could the Nouliths also weave an Arcanistic Carbuncle? Or a Nymian Faerie?"

—At this, Fourchenault's eyes went wide, and he... froze.

It was a question that... he had not encountered in the literature before.

And thus... he had no idea how to respond.

Thus, he stammered, struggling to answer: "Ah... well... hm... That is..."

"You don't know?" Ameliance laughed lightly, her eyes looking into his own, sparkling with amusement.

Fourchenault immediately frowned and furrowed his brows, looking wounded.

"But that's okay!" reassured Ameliance, putting her hand on his shoulder again — he flinched, but did not withdraw this time — "Not knowing something is at the heart of being Sharlayan, is it not?"

...At that statement, Fourchenault startled, looking... truly confused.

Ameliance explained: "Well, if we already knew everything, then we would have no reason to ask questions or conduct research, isn't that correct? But a Sharlayan without questions or research seems unlike any Sharlayan that I can imagine! So, not knowing is as much a part of being Sharlayan as knowing is, right? At least, I believe so!"

Fourchenault... hesitated, and then... smiled. Actually... smiled...?

"Ah... er... yes, I... I suppose so..." he stammered, unsure how to respond... but not seeming angry or upset.

There was another long moment of peaceful silence, as both of the young Elezen gazed out in the direction of the distant sea.

Finally, Ameliance's face fell a bit, and she spoke, more somber and less animated:

"I truly do envy you, Master Fourchenault. To have such passion and certainty of focus... I have ever loved nearly everything I study, but never have I been able to love any one thing enough to become expert about it."

Ameliance sighed, "And now I fear that I may end up leaving the Studium with naught to show for it all."

Fourchenault...

...hesitated, fighting himself internally again...

...and then pinched his nose in exasperation, and sighed heavily, every new word leaving his lips like another bullet being fired into his sense of better judgment:

"Well, I am... unsure that I can assist with such a fundamental, er... problem. But perhaps taking your mind off of it for a bit might help clear your thoughts? I find that such a thing does sometimes help me, when I am feeling particularly-consternated. For example, I might take a long walk about the entirety of the City... no Aetherytes used, of course, for I find the physical activity—"

Ameliance brightened suddenly: "Master Fourchenault, are you inviting me to take a walk with you...?"

—Fourchenault suddenly blanched, and his eyes flew wide, looking as if someone had just stuck a dagger's-blade into his abdomen: "Er!"

After a moment to collect his thoughts, he continued: "N-no, I... no. That was not... you did not allow me to finish my thought. ...I have been having some... difficulty... finishing all of the necessary research and calculations for my own Thesis, and I thought perhaps you might wish to... assist. ...Perhaps."

Seeing Ameliance's blinking, bewildered, blank stare, Fourchenault stammered and continued: "Er... that is... I merely... You had said you were struggling with your own! And so I thought... perhaps working with me on mine, might offer some insight or inspiration... That... is all."
...Then Ameliance smiled brightly.

He truly is... Fourchenault, and no one else. And for that, I do think that I...

Yet even Ameliance could not let that thought take its full course, and so instead, it simply trailed off within her mind.

And, frankly... Fourchenault's proposal was, as might be expected from the boy, remarkably-logical and sound.

So Ameliance finally nodded, eyes sparkling: "Do not worry, Master Fourchenault—"

"Please," he suddenly said, sternly and firmly: "Dispense with that mockery. I assume you mean no true ill, but I find it grating. I do not wish to have an appellation that I have not earned. My name is Fourchenault. You may use it alone. Please."
Ameliance smiled even brighter.

"...I understand! Then, do not worry, Fourchenault. I find no offense in your suggestion to help with your Thesis! In fact, I am quite flattered! It sounds like it might be just what—"

Then, Fourchenault furrowed his brows, and then held up his hand: "Er... wait. Wait! Have you ever conducted... any prior research in Sage Studies...?"

"No!" replied Ameliance brightly, laughing. "But I shan't let that stop me!"

Fourchenault pinched his nose in exasperation: "I do not think that you understand the extent of what you are proposing to burden yourself with, then..."

"Oh, that is alright," replied Ameliance merrily, "The worst thing that happens is that I utterly fail!"

Fourchenault looked... mortified, eyes wide: "You would... risk impulsively assisting with a topic far beyond your means and training...?"

Ameliance looked at him, and shrugged: "Why not? We all must try things! In fact, I'm fairly certain that Archon Nyunkrepf himself might never have dared cast that great Teleport magick, if he had been given the time to think about it too much!"

Fourchenault blinked. "I... er... well, perhaps, but..."

—Then, suddenly, Fourchenault startled, looking at the position of the Sun in the sky... and then fumbled frantically in the pockets of his Studium robes for his pocket chronometer, and gave it an urgent glance.

And then the stern young man's naturally-tanned skin abruptly went deathly-pale: "A-ah... it...! M-Miss Ameliance! M-May I see your own chronometer?!"

Tilting her head, Ameliance nodded, and gracefully-produced her own pocket chronometer from within her own robes.

...Seeing that his chronometer was not in error, Fourchenault abruptly stood, suddenly in a fluster. "I... I must go!"

And so he did, with nary another word said or glance made.

...Apparently, Fourchenault had become so caught up with speaking of his passions and interests to Ameliance that he had entirely-forgotten about a scheduled meeting with his Thesis Advisor... a distinguished professor of Sage Studies, and one who had very little free time in her scheduling.

But in that moment, Ameliance knew nothing of that detail.

And so, as she watched the strange young man hurry away into the distance as fast as his legs could take him (without breaking into an undignified sprint), she could only smile — filled with a newfound admiration and appreciation for Fourchenault Leveilleur, after witnessing the genuine passion that he felt for the topics of medicine and healing.

"Fourchenault!" she had finally called, causing the young man to stiffen, and anxiously turn his head around to look at her: "When shall I assist you with your research?"

Fourchenault hesitated a moment, and then... smiled...? grimly:

"Well. If I do not leave right this instant, the answer may well be that there is no Thesis left to assist with. But assuming that I am not dismissed from my study outright, then I shall be in the Aetherological Laboratories this eve... as I am every eve."

So Ameliance tipped her head, smiled lightly, and gently waved the boy away... who had finally given up on appearances, and broken into a full-on sprint toward the halls of the Studium, earning much tittering from onlookers at seeing the usually-stiff Fourchenault running.

...Anyhow, Fourchenault was — of course — correct, and that evening, Ameliance quickly realised that she was hopelessly over her head in attempting to do something as brazen as assist with Thesis-level Sage Studies research, after having all-but-zero contact with the field throughout her four years at the Studium.

...Yet Fourchenault seemed unbothered by her presence — even late into the night — at his designated workbench of the Aetherological Laboratories... indeed, he almost seemed even... happy.

So the two had spent hours saying naught to each other, but that which was necessary to set up instruments, or record data.

Finally, Ameliance spoke: "Fourchenault, you seem unperturbed by my presence, even though I feel that I am of little use here. I must say that surprises me, given your relatively... ah... efficient nature."

Fourchenault paused, looking surprised — having been entirely-focused upon his work. Then he tipped his head: "Oh? What makes you say that you are 'of little use'?"

The question caught Ameliance by surprise: "I... er... aren't I? I am certainly no scholar of Sage Studies! I feel as if I am merely blindly-following your instructions, again and again..."

"But see here," Fourchenault said matter-of-factly, pointing to the sprawling clutter of sheets strewn all across the laboratory table, "You are far better at calculations than I. Indeed, I understand the theory far better than you, of course, but you can finish the numerical analyses far swifter than I am able."

The boy seemed almost-embarrassed, yet he somehow was forcing himself through the sentence that had admitted this to her.

"And," he gestured to the space around them, "You seem innately-inclined toward spellcraft. I... am not. ...Ah... truth be told, your ability to wield simple, true 'magicks' so effortlessly is allowing me to fill in gaps in this documentation which I have been struggling with for... er, ah... well, admittedly, far too long."

"Because you refuse to ask others for help!" Ameliance exclaimed, bursting out laughing. To her surprise, Fourchenault did not bristle at her statement... he merely nodded slightly, looking away.

"It is..."

...He sighed.

"...Growing up with a famous and renowned man as your father, a master of countless arts... every time that I would stumble in any way, he would suddenly be there, as if from nowhere, like

a circling griffin... explaining every last detail of every last thing that I had done wrong... never allowing me to decipher a problem for myself. Eventually, I came to resent it. Deeply."

Ameliance smiled gently: "It sounds like he loved you very much, though. And he just wished to fill in for you all of the gaps that he himself had struggled with along the way..."

"But I cannot stand on my own like that!" Fourchenault suddenly snapped, although not at Ameliance, per se: "I cannot find my own strengths, my own capabilities!" He crossed his arms, then turned away: "You... cannot understand. Not without having been there. ...Still being there, every time I walk through those accursed doors..."

Ameliance nodded gently, realising how delicate the current topic was: "I think I understand. I do not mean to presume, Fourchenault."

Fourchenault shook his head. "No, it is fine. It is... well. You are... well. It is just... not a subject upon which I wish any discussion."

Ameliance nodded, respecting that, and tried to shift the topic: "So, because of those experiences, it is now difficult for you to accept the help of others..."

Fourchenault stiffened and bristled, and Ameliance realised that she was probably pushing too far... so she trailed off, rather than finishing her thought.
...Nonetheless, Fourchenault did not take the opportunity to push her away.

Instead, he simply, himself, changed the topic more firmly:

"So. Ahem. On account of your... intuitive adeptness... with calculations and spellcraft, you are actually assisting me a great deal, even if it seems that I am merely giving you orders."

He hesitated a moment. Then added: "But I... apologise, if I have perhaps been too overbearing."

Ameliance blinked... four or five times. She was, in a rare event, momentarily stunned.

Did Fourchenault Leveilleur just...??

...But then he swiftly continued: "Yet if you are... willing, your continued... cooperation, would be... appreciated."

Ameliance thought a moment, then smiled sincerely: "Oh, of course, I do not mind, Fourchenault! It's—"

Fourchenault suddenly interrupted, looking directly at her, speaking firmly: "But. You are limited on remaining time, yourself. Perhaps I am being selfish. You have not yet even conceived of your own Thesis, correct?"

"Oh, that's alright," Ameliance smiled, "I actually feel much better taking my mind off of that right now, to be quite honest."

Fourchenault hesitated... then nodded.

Ameliance then tipped her head: "But perhaps I can do more than simply serve as an assistant? What is it that troubles you so about calculations and spellcraft, Mas— ...ahem. Fourchenault?"

Fourchenault furrowed his brows: "What... do you mean? It is simply not my strength. Just as you have your own limitations."

Ameliance smiled widely: "Ah, but I wasn't born good at these things! Someone taught me. Perhaps you just haven't allowed anyone to tutor you?"

Fourchenault visibly stiffened and bristled... but he did not turn away.

"Here!" Ameliance said sincerely, "Let me show you some of the tricks that I use to calculate so quickly!"

...and, although Fourchenault was at first extremely resistant, he... reluctantly, but patiently, sat through Ameliance's instruction — deep into the night.

By the end, Fourchenault's face was... actually smiling. Constantly.

"Amazing!" he said sincerely, "You have made this... so much more sensible. I... I must thank you. These techniques will be of great expedience in my continuing work..."

Ameliance nodded, exhausted herself, but glowing with happiness: "And you are hardly so bad at spellcraft as you thought! You were merely approaching it all wrong."

"Yes," Fourchenault nodded wearily, "That seems plain. I thought to approach it like writing a paper, but as you have explained, it is far better to first hold the concept within my mind, and only then attempt to spontaneously weave the aether. In this way, spellcraft is quite unlike arcanometry... almost the opposite method, in fact."

"Mm-hmm!" Ameliance nodded, excitedly: "And perhaps that is why you struggled with it. But a simple change of perspective, or the insight of another, can make quite the difference...!"

...or so she tried to say, but no one heard her: the Laboratorium was empty save for the two of them and their echoing whispers... and now Fourchenault had passed out at his laboratory desk — having nodded-off uncontrollably whilst Ameliance was speaking.

Smiling gently, Ameliance quietly gathered up and collated all of the data and papers that the night's work had produced, then carefully put away all of the experimental instruments.

Next, she playfully tucked Fourchenault's Noulith sample into his arms — like a child's plush toy — and then, finally, draped Fourchenault's Studium coat over him like a blanket.

And then the girl quietly crept away, to let the strange and passionate young man finally get a rare moment of rest...

The next morning, Ameliance awoke with a renewed sense of calm and vigor.

Suddenly, everything seemed so much more clear to her — made so much more sense.

She was not destined to be a great researcher, nor the innovator of a field — this she now felt to be true.

But she had realised that she did have a passion: helping others.

Indeed, it seemed so plain now! She had spent so much of her free time in her years at the Studium voluntarily-tutoring friends and strangers that were struggling with some subject or other...

And due to her own eclectic academic tastes, she had almost always been able to offer some amount of help!

And so Ameliance made a bold decision: she would make her Studium Thesis about the study... of, er... studying!

...To the best of her knowledge, that wasn't really a topic that had gotten much attention in Sharlayan history.

But why not? Studying and teaching... it was an art and craft of its own, was it not? One was not simply born knowing how to learn in an organised and effective manner. It had to be taught, as well!

So obviously, there was something to study about such a concept...

Thus, Ameliance decided that her Thesis would be a survey of the challenges and methods of teaching others!

And, in particular, it would examine ways to 'break through' to recalcitrant students like Fourchenault — those who truly needed help, but were too proud or embarrassed to admit it.

Perhaps, if she could help organise some useful techniques, it might even allow future generations of struggling students to better reach their actual potential, rather than floundering in obscurity for such a silly thing as want of a little extra tutoring!

The only problem being that... er... she had now less than a quarter-and-a-half remaining in the 4th year to construct, er... her entire Thesis.

...Which, by all rights, should have been impossible.

Naturally, that realisation only made Ameliance even more stubbornly determined to do it!

...And so Ameliance's last two quarters at the Studium became a dizzying — and often-sleepless — blur, as she gritted her teeth, and furiously crammed in several years's worth of normal topic exploration and study into the precious little time that she still had remaining before her Thesis-submittal deadline — having already registered the date and time of her Thesis Defense.

"But that's alright!" she had said, "This way, I shan't be inclined to let myself get distracted! Just a bit of pressure can be healthy for getting things done, I think!"

...Er... maybe. But she began to seriously-rethink that philosophy as the last month of her deadline now loomed over her, and a sense of increasingly-existential dread began to consume her.

...Nonetheless, she would not admit defeat!

And so she pressed on... working feverishly up to the very last night of her Thesis deadline, to try to cram in endless reams of research — for the Sharlayan study of "Pedagogy" was only rarely touched upon throughout the millennia of Sharlayan academia, and usually only in the most cursory or incidental manner.

Thus, Ameliance was, in a sense, trying to pave the foundations of her own entirely-new field of study... and in the span of less than two quarters.

Then, she also had to somehow, er... slam it all together into a presentable Studium Thesis... and all before the appointed hour of reckoning ticked over.

The result of all this was a great deal of last-second, all-night trips into the depths of the Noumenon, feverishly flipping through thousands of tomes, looking for some ancient source or citation with which to support one argument of hers or another...

And somehow, during that hazy blur of restless activity, driven to keep moving by willpower alone, Ameliance had — thanks to having entered a state of sleep-deprived, propriety-discarding, near-feral boldness — also managed to all-but-force Fourchenault Leveilleur to take her out upon their first dinner date together.

However, to this day, Ameliance remains entirely-coy when asked exactly how she managed to make that happen...

...always merely smiling with a knowing sort of amusement, pressing a mischievous index finger to her lips, and winking silently.

—And then, suddenly, the day came:

A half-dead Ameliance somehow found the will to rise from her intoxicatingly-inviting bedsheets in the morning, and then somehow found the energy to wash, dress, groom, gather her papers, and then strut boldly to the front of the lecture hall where her assigned Thesis Committee was awaiting her Thesis Defense...

...and began her presentation.

"Well! Good day to you all!" she curtsied, "Let me begin by saying that I don't really like gathering data, and I'm not very good at it."

—the Committee members widened their eyes, and braced themselves—

"Nonetheless, I have done my very best to organise for you a treatise on a subject that I have realised is very dear to my own heart, and a true passion for me! And, I daresay, the proper study of which has been neglected for far too long in the annals of Sharlayan history!"

What followed was an... er... actually remarkably well-developed discussion of "Sharlayan Pedagogy", as Ameliance titled it — examining, throughout the ages of Sharlayan's existence, the ways in which Sharlayan teaching methods and approaches to learning had changed:

Beginning first with the manner in which Nyunkrepf Nyunkrepfsyn had disseminated his wisdom and teachings, and then continuing on through such figures as Lewphon, and even Archon Matoya... comparing and contrasting the strategies, and relative effectiveness, of those many different ways of approaching teaching.

Finally, Ameliance had concluded with a series of — anonymised — "case studies".

Essentially, these were elaborated anecdotes about her experiences with helping twenty different "example students" to overcome their learning difficulties with some area of study or other... and the manner in which she had had to figure out how each individual learner required their own, personalised approach, in order to open up their particular and unique mind and heart to being tutored — and thus, to be able to begin to overcome their limitations, and excel!

"And that... is my argument today! That Sharlayan Pedagogy is a valid field all its own: that the study of how to study is under-served in our often-overconfident culture. But, if applied sagely, it can have great benefits... even to those students who otherwise seem naturally-gifted!

I believe that almost everyone struggles with something... but perhaps the brightest of us are the worst at admitting it!

And with proper applications of Pedagogy, we can not only learn to recognise when such a shortcoming is occurring, but also to devise effective ways to 'treat it', so to speak!"

And... er..."

Ameliance fidgeted with her hands briefly.

"...And... I do think that is all that I intended to say today. So I thank you for patiently lending me your attention!"

She then curtsied politely, and rested her presentation.

...Ameliance then spent over an hour fielding intrigued — or sometimes, pointed and merciless — questions from the assemblage of Sharlayan scholars that were sitting as Ameliance's Thesis Committee that day...

...yet, in general, she seemed to have great command of her subject: fielding questions confidently, or sometimes comfortably-admitting when she was uncertain about a particular point — yet offering her insight into how the answer might yet be reached with further study.

At last, the Thesis Committee thanked Ameliance for her Thesis and her time, and then requested her to leave, so that they could discuss her Thesis's merits amongst themselves — which was a standard outcome for any Thesis Defense.

Behind the closed doors of that lecture hall, reactions were subsequently a bit... mixed.

It was pointedly-acknowledged that Ameliance's research and data-gathering seemed "somewhat sloppy", and showed "clear signs of being rushed", and thus, was "lacking appropriate depth and rigor".

Yet, at the same time... the young woman had boldly-explored and demonstrated an entirely-original approach to a field which had previously gone all-but-unnoticed in Sharlayan study, and with impressive facility — clearly, this Thesis was a work of true passion, not rote obligation...

And for the minds on the Thesis Committee — who sat for hundreds of such Defenses each year — such passion was a pleasing, but sadly-rare, thing to witness: as most Studium students did indeed view their Thesis with a ravenous competitiveness, and a sense of... well... rote obligation.

So the debate went back and forth amongst the Committee members for quite some time.

But ultimately, Ameliance's Thesis, *Exploring the Foundations of Sharlayan Pedagogy: A New Approach to Teaching and Tutoring Those Most in Need*, ended up winning over the Thesis Committee — whose unanimous agreement was required before any Thesis could receive approval for graduation:

"Young Mistress Ameliance Hommedeloi's sincerity, passion, and humanitarian creativity are certainly not in doubt, and the shortcomings in her data-gathering methods can be seen as merely a procedural issue.

It is true that, were this a Professorship Thesis, we would be forced to deem the roughness of the research entirely-unacceptable. But, as a Bachelor Thesis, this work shows great promise, and the flaws are all shortcomings of method alone... something which can be repaired in time, with better planning, and some proper guidance.

It is thus this Committee's determination that, at its heart, the Thesis entitled, 'Exploring the Foundations of Sharlayan Pedagogy: A New Approach to Teaching and Tutoring Those Most in Need', does indeed contribute to Sharlayan knowledge, and does legitimately meet the criteria for Studium graduation."

So a startled Ameliance, waiting anxiously with her friends on a bench in the hall outside the closed doors, was finally and suddenly informed of her successful Defense — and thus, as her friends excitedly cheered her own, Ameliance was left to realise that she had actually done it: combined with her excellent marks across her four years of general coursework, Ameliance had just earned herself graduation from the Studium — the first Hommedeloi in her known family history to do so.

Upon the subsequent formal (and automatic) publication of Ameliance's paper, tittering and speed-reading students could — almost instantly — not help but dwell on 'Case No. 20' — a stern and recalcitrant young man, of great brilliance, but who was loath to admit that he needed assistance from others in any matter, and had been secretly struggling with deficiencies in his approach to both calculation and spellcraft.

Soon, no end of teasing began being leveled at the exasperated Fourchenault Leveilleur — who, as a blazingly-fast speed-reader himself, was already in the process of pinching his nose in frustration at Ameliance's unauthorised decision to include the suspiciously-familiar Case No. 20 in her Thesis.

...Nonetheless, he was... not angry at her.

On the contrary, he felt incredibly... proud? ...that the once-flustered young woman had so adroitly found her academic footing at the very last moment...

And he also felt... pleased? ...that he had inadvertently been able to help her...

Thus, when Ameliance suddenly called out Fourchenault's name, and came rushing across the vast hall of the Phenomenon Auditorium...

...Fourchenault neither bristled, nor fled.

And when she crashed into his stiff and awkward form, and wrapped her arms tightly around him, and excitedly announced that she had passed her Thesis Defense...

...he...

...er...

...sighed, and embraced her back equally-tightly — feeling... joy? ...that Ameliance was so happy.

At this, the onlookers that usually gossiped and teased Fourchenault... remained silent, for once, and merely allowed the unexpected and surprising couple to enjoy their moment together.

...even if Fourchenault was, himself, still struggling to come to terms with having that sort of... terminology... applied to his... relationship... with another living being...

Yet, when Ameliance finally released her hug, and then stared up at Fourchenault with silent, sparkling eyes... and then suddenly, impulsively, stood on her toes, and kissed him upon his cheek...

...Fourchenault...

...gently took her hand in his, and raised it up, and gave it a gentle kiss of his own.

...in public. Whilst everyone in the Phenomenon Auditorium was witness.

...Which, frankly, said a rather indescribable amount about just the way that Fourchenault Leveilleur had come to feel about the woman who was once his "irritating shadow".

As for Ameliance's parents... there was, in fact, no friction at all.

They had actually opposed Ameliance entering the Studium not out of a desire to control the girl, but because they had assumed it a fit of thoughtless impulse, which would only set their daughter behind in life, whenever her youthful recklessness gave way to reality and disappointment.

But, seeing their daughter confidently lay out a humble new field of study... and then go about her chosen path with genuine confidence, happiness, and satisfaction...

...That was fine.

Ameliance's brothers and sisters, after all, still went on to attend the Solonon without complaint, and thus carried on the family traditions.

And so, seeing Ameliance so truly pleased with her life — that was enough to satisfy the Hommedeloi family.

Subsequently, Ameliance happily-accepted an offered position as a teaching aide at the Studium — pleased to take command of tutoring and mentoring younger students, and helping to guide them through the rigorous and exhausting standards and demands of the prestigious institution.

Sharlayan Pedagogy, meanwhile, would take off as its own humble field — hardly the sort that earned the headline-grabbing attention of the Sharlayan gazettes, but also neither being forgotten nor ignored!

And the basic principles that Ameliance had laid out would gradually begin to be refined and developed into genuine advancements and improvements in the manner in which Sharlayan institutions not just proffered knowledge, but also — as Ameliance had hoped — began to recognise the signs of those who truly needed help with grasping some of that knowledge... even if they otherwise seemed brilliant.

Ameliance, however, was entirely-comfortable with personally-admitting that she had no aspirations to any higher positions — finding true joy as a teaching aide and mentor.

In fact, Ameliance flatly-realised that, should she become some prestigious Professor or other, she would no longer have the time to do that which she truly felt so passionate about!

And so, with a humble sigh, she came to accept that this was her place — and she was happy with it.

Nonetheless, Ameliance would continue to document her 'case studies' — and frequently publish them, in anonymised form. And — after a private and stern discussion from Fourchenault — also after, er... receiving permission to do so.

And those 'Pedagogical case studies' would end up becoming of great use to other Sharlayan instructors, both within and without the context of Pedagogy itself.

Thus, despite her disinterest in ascending the academic ladder, Ameliance's imprint on Sharlayan academia ultimately would not end with her Bachelor Thesis, even if she was herself too humble to ever suggest otherwise.

In 1555 6AE, Fourchenault Leveilleur presented his Studium Thesis for defense before the Thesis Committee that had been assigned to him.

He was... also mildly exasperated that portions of his Thesis had already been obliquely suggested and revealed during the Thesis presentation of Ameliance Hommedeloi...

...but he ultimately chose to... forgive... that matter.

And so Fourchenault presented his own Bachelor Thesis, nearly 2 years in the making:

A dry, practical, and thorough survey of literature about the recently-developed "Nouliths", extending backwards nearly 30 years to include all of the preliminary ideas and prototypes that led to their design, as well as an overview of the disciplines that Sage Studies had been attempting to unify for over 1000 years.

He then leapt forward to the modern day — surveying, collating, and organising all of the hundreds of papers that had been published since the successful development of the Noulith over a year prior.

Finally, Fourchenault included a series of rudimentary experiments and data comparing the efficacy of singular Nouliths to a variety of other examples, such as Conjury, along with precise aetherial measurements and calculations — arguing that his results supported the idea that even amateur, untrained healers could benefit from the employment of an attuned Noulith, rather than simply improvising without guidance.

Such a cautious and grounded Thesis was hardly going to make any academic shockwaves, as it presented nothing particularly surprising or original — but it was still impressively thorough, and the rigor of the research, organisation, and data was described as "both fearsomely-detailed, and remarkably-disciplined".

And, having voluntarily made himself an expert on the subject that fascinated him so, Fourchenault effortlessly fended off the barrage of questions that followed his presentation.

Thus, it did not take very long at all for the Thesis Committee assigned to Fourchenault's Thesis to unanimously agree to endorse the sternly-studious student's Studium graduation.

As Fourchenault exited the chamber after being informed of the success of his defense, he was startled to find Ameliance Hommedeloi waiting for him — and in a rather lovely dress.

"Is... aught amiss?" asked Fourchenault cautiously.

Ameliance sighed, then laughed: "Fourchenault, my dear, you just completed a thesis defense."

"Yes... and? Such was expected of me when I first enrolled," he replied flatly.

Ameliance closed her eyes, smiling patiently, then looked up at Fourchenault with her sparkling, umber eyes: "Fourchenault. Please. Normal people celebrate such an occasion. May we please celebrate such an occasion for ourselves, as well?"

Fourchenault hesitated, then nodded gently. "Yes, if that pleases you, then I suppose—"

"No." stated Ameliance firmly, lightly pushing her finger into his chest. "May we celebrate it together?"

...She had learned his nature well by now, and knew to leave no detail unspecified.

Fourchenault sighed. "I... er..."

Ameliance remained staring up at him, smiling patiently.

...and so, Fourchenault closed his eyes and sighed. "...Y-yes. That is... well. Just... allow me to change out of this gown..."

Ameliance brightened, and smiled sweetly, clasping her hands together in exaggerated excitement: "Oh, excellent! I am so pleased to hear that we are in agreement about this proposal!"

...Well, for whatever disinterest he had outwardly projected, Fourchenault seemed to spend a remarkable amount of time fussing and fidgeting with his appearance and outfit, before finally reemerging from his dormitory.

Ameliance gasped pleasantly: "Oh!" She placed a sincere hand over her mouth. "Fourchenault! You look positively... handsome!" Then, after thinking a moment, she added: "Or, more handsome than usual!"

Stammering and flustered, Fourchenault attempted to... change the subject, but Ameliance persisted, wrapping her arms around his: "Oh, no no no. You'll not fool me. You went and truly tried to look nice for this occasion. And it shows! I'm quite impressed. Thank you!"

Fourchenault was... mortified... as other students in the same hall were eavesdropping, glancing, and tittering incessantly.

This would soon be gossiped from one side of the Studium to the other...

...And yet...

...he could not bring himself to shake Ameliance off his arm.

In truth, he did not... want to shake Ameliance off his arm... for reasons that he struggled to accept or come to terms with.

So Fourchenault merely sighed, and allowed the perplexing woman at his side to rest her head happily upon his shoulder...

...as the two nicely-groomed and formally-dressed Graduates strolled off to the Last Stand, to enjoy a celebratory dinner together.

Act 4: Happily ever after?

One month later, the dream that had been held by young Fourchenault since childhood was at last fulfilled: he was accepted for apprenticeship at the Physis Technon, becoming an Apprentice Physician First Year.

Fourchenault entered that year's class of Physis Technon apprentices with pride, and — during the brief remarks that each new apprentice was invited to give at the assembly — Fourchenault assured his fellow First Year medicine students that he lived in "complete opposition" to his father's "constant, unforgivable squandering of energy, of brilliance, and of life itself upon purposes fruitless, destructive, and external to our great nation's own concerns".

He then vowed that he would "live forever-guided by the principle of renouncing all that which brings strife, and seeking to advance mankind only through knowledge and reason", and that he was determined to use his intellect and training "only to uphold the ideals of Archon Nyunkrepf and the oaths of Sage Medicine", and through them, to do something "practical, tangible, real, and rational, for the good of all Sharlayan people".

Perhaps as a telling sign of the changing times that the Garlean Empire's consumption of all of Ilsabard and Othard had wrought upon the Sharlayan consciousness, Fourchenault's brief remarks received a thundering ovation from the auditorium full of Graduate-aged medical students — many of whom had been quietly angered about the Techne Makre demonstration that had occurred recently within the halls of their healing institution. Ameliance, meanwhile, sat politely in the "guest" section of the audience, and smiled proudly.

She did not usually agree with everything that her boyfriend said or believed — including in those brief remarks.

But she had come to accept that she loved him all the same — and that she did very much admire his sincere passion for medicine, and his deep convictions about the inherent value of life.

Where she and he differed most sharply — and, whether the stubborn young man wanted to admit so or not, where Ameliance could plainly see that Fourchenault also differed most-sharply with his father, Louisoix — was whether Sharlayan life, specifically, was to be given higher priority than other lives of the Star, if forced to choose.

Yet Ameliance felt that she was in no position to be able to speak with certainty on that difficult question.

And so, she was comfortable dating a man that she disagreed with, because she could see that his convictions were born not out of petty cruelty or callous malice, but instead out of a different way of approaching his own particular passion for the value of life, and his own way of expressing his desire to protect it.

~Fin~