

Supreme M 111

Chapter 111 Desperation 2

Despite he could see it with Invigoration, a mana core wasn't a physical organ. It was inside the human body but at the same time it wasn't. During the years spent as a healer in the Lutia village, he had cured countless peoples with stomach wounds, but none, no matter how deep, had ever affected a core.

Lith had to rely on his newfound mana sensibility, sending a tendril of pure mana from his core to the woman's. At first, nothing happened, her core seemed stable, keeping its yellow colour despite the flood of alien energies.

But a few seconds later, Lith could see that the zone where he had attached the tendril was getting weaker and weaker. The yellow was turning to orange, slowly spreading to the whole core.

The woman suddenly started to scream in pain, all her veins and arteries bulging out, as if they were trying to shake off her skin. The red of the blood turned blue as the mana that was invading her body.

When it reached her head, she started to bleed the cyan liquid from her eyes, nose and ears. The shrieks of agony showed no trace of her previous defiance, only desperation.

Her voice when from shrill to hoarse, until it didn't sound like a human voice anymore. She kept yelling and yelling, until she had no more air in her lungs, but she seemed incapable of drawing breath again.

Lith stopped, leaving her a couple of seconds to recover and feel the temporary relieve from the lack of pain.

"Ready to talk now?"

Sobbing in terror, the burly woman swore to the gods that if she managed to survive, she would have changed her way of life. No more trading lives for money, she would redeem herself.

"My name is Melia." She said trying to establish a connection, to force him to perceive her as a person. It was a trick that had worked countless times in the past, even if she had never been the one to attempt it, but Rodimas.

She always said that every man dreamed of being the hero of a sobbing woman.

And this time, she was sincere, she wasn't just trying to backstab him as soon as he lowered his guard.

"I don't care." He replied with a cold stare. "I mean who are you? Mercenaries? Hunters? Assassins?"

"Mercenaries. We were paid handsomely to come here, kill as many beasts as possible and frame the students for it."

Melia's words confirmed his theory, but didn't trigger any vision, nor relieved his fears.

"Who sent you here, and why?"

"I don't know, I swear! I'm just the muscle of the team, Raghul is the one that deals with our contractors, while Rodimas is the brain of our operations."

"Raghul?"

"That man." She nodded in his direction.

"It's everything I know, please, let me go."

Leaving them alive was out of question. They had forced him to use too much of his true power, they were a liability. No matter their promises, as soon as they were out of reach, they would sell him to the highest bidder with a smile on their faces.

"Then I don't need you anymore." With a wave of his hand, Lith used spirit magic to twist her head 180 degrees, breaking the neck and putting her out of her misery.

"Now, mister Raghul, we can do this easy or painful. Tell me what I want to know, and I will give you a peaceful death. Resist and... well. You have seen what happens." Lith removed Raghul's gag, allowing him to speak.

- "Wouldn't have been better to leave her alive? To give them hope?" Solos objected. She really didn't like Lith torturing people. Every time he did it, she could sense something inside of him dying.

"What hope? They are professionals, not some girls scout. They know all too well that I will never let them live, because that's what they would do in my shoes." –

"Listen kid, I'm sorry we tried to kill you." His terror ruined his usually flawless poker face, making him sound fake like a three-dollar bill.

"You don't have to do this. You are still young, don't become like us."

Behind his fake empathy, Raghul only meant to buy time, hoping to find a way out of that predicament. But he discovered that his hands were blocked, he couldn't even feel the magical stone he hid in his boot in case of emergencies.

His only hope was to find a crack in the kid's morality and exploit it to escape.

"Too late for that." Lith ignored his ramblings, placing his hand over Raghul's core and forcefully sending mana into it. Raghul had a cyan core, just like Lith, so even if he was incapable of controlling it, the core's energies were able to repel Lith's clumsy attacks.

- "So, I can freely invade only weaker cores? It's a pity I don't have the time. It would have been interesting to discover what happens to someone once I degrade his core, maybe even below the red level.

Stripping someone of his magic could be a formidable threat, not to mention that it would allow me to keep prisoners without having to fear any trick from their side." –

Taking a mental note to experiment on that in the future, Lith stopped wasting his pure mana, adding darkness magic to it. Raghul's defences crumbled like a sand castle facing a tsunami, darkness quickly spread to the whole core.

Like for Melia, his veins bulged out, but their colour was black. Melia's suffering had been nothing compared to Raghul's, pure entropy was eating at every of his cells.

When Raghul started to bleed black blood from all his orifices, Lith stopped sending energy, but the pain didn't pause.

- "What the heck?" – Lith was flabbergasted. Trying to understand what was happening, he touched Raghul again, using Invigoration.

He was then able to see that even without his command, the darkness was still ravaging the mana core, that was now full of cracks, on the brink of collapsing on itself.

- "Seems that dark magic is too powerful to directly inject it. I need a softer approach for the woman, or all the information will be lost."

"Lith, the core is black." Solus sounded worried.

"What if you just created an Abomination?" –

Lith refused to believe that accidentally performing such feat could be so easy, but being cautious, he kept monitoring Raghul's status while ignoring Rodimas' whimpering and sobbing.

After just a few seconds, the black core crumbled, and Raghul's body when limp, devoid of life. Lith sighed with relief. Humans seemed to be no match for him, but Abominations where on a league on their own.

He was already sick and tired of that day, he just wanted to understand what was the source of uneasiness he kept feeling, solve the damn vision and then sleep for a whole week.

Lith had just turned toward Rodimas, pondering about what element use on her, when a sudden noise drew his attention.

Raghul's body was trembling again, writhing like he had a seizure.

By using Invigoration again, Lith could see that black and red blood were pooling where the mana core had been, forming a new one, brimming with dark energies.

The blood core was sucking all the remaining fluids in the body, making Raghul turn pale as a ghost, his eyes glowing with a red light, like a torch was burning behind them.

Lith could see his canines grow into fangs, his hands and feet breaking free from the stone ground as it was just soft mud. He immediately backstepped, conjuring a wind barrier to intercept all the rock projectiles flying towards him.

- "What the heck is a blood core?" Solus almost panicked.

"The bad news is that I think I have just created a vampire. The good news is that at least he doesn't shine under sunlight like a disco ball." Lith replied. -

Chapter 112 Lith's Monster

Solus had no idea what Lith had done, to be exact, either of them did. The creature in front of them wasn't dead nor alive, her mana sense had never perceived anything like that.

A normal core was a mass of pure mana, that could be used to interact with the world energy to give life to spells. Awakened beings seemed to be the only ones capable of using the pure mana to obtain various effects, like Invigoration or spirit magic.

An Abomination's black core, instead, was a stronger but corrupted form of mana, that constantly required massive amounts of world energy just to not dissipate. To do that, Abominations gained unique powers.

The Wither they had faced in the past, had the ability to drain life force even from a distance. The plant thing could split his consciousness to overtake and consume the surrounding vegetation while searching for animal preys.

That came at a price, though. Both of them had proved to have a deadly but limited skillset, to the point of having lost the ability to use magic in all of its forms.

The blood core that Lith had accidentally created was completely outside their experience. It was a mass composed by blood and darkness magic, with the remains of Raghul's mana core somehow holding everything together.

Based on what Solus could see, it had both a physical and magical nature. The blood core was completely messed up, without an internal balance or proper structure. It continually expanded and shrank, changing from spherical to ellipsoidal, sometimes it didn't have a shape at all.

It was a creature of chaos, and as such it wasn't bound to last. Every second it would rearrange its host body and itself, causing massive amounts of strain on Raghul's corpse.

When he was alive, he had been a well-built man of average height, with short black hair and a well-trimmed goatee of the same colour, that helped smoothen his square features.

Now his visage was deformed in a perpetual scream of pain, his sharp nose sunk into his face until only the nostrils remained. The skin kept rotting, turning green and peeling off, revealing the muscle tissue underneath before regenerating and starting over again.

The body swelled tearing apart the enchanted clothes, his arms became longer and deformed, enough to touch the ground, the legs bent backwards with an unnatural angle.

- "That's definitely not a vampire. What the heck have I done?" –

The young Byk ran away without a second thought, sensing the impending danger.

The creature started to hiss, watching Lith with eyes full of hatred and contempt. It moved with incredible speed, not even using air fusion to its extreme Lith was able to avoid the charge.

Raghul's fingers had become ten centimetres (4 inches) long razor-sharp talons, that made easy work of Lith's iron heart protector and earth fusion alike.

The hook shaped claws slashed vertically, deeply gouging his chest. Finger-sized chunks of flesh hit the ground, while blood sprayed around. Everything happened so fast that Lith felt pain only when he was already moving to avoid a second strike.

The shock was so intense that in another situation it could have made him faint, but with his life on the line, willpower and survival instinct allowed him to stand it, even if barely.

Lith could feel the rhythmic bleeding over his chest at every beat of his panicked heart, drenching his clothes. It was like having a white-hot branding iron ravaging his flesh, while ice needles pricked the surrounding skin, giving him a numbing feeling that was slowly spreading.

He managed to avoid the second hit, but only because suddenly the creature became distracted, making the swing sloppy and predictable. He exploited the opening to get some distance and heal his wounds.

To his surprise the talon marks were brimming with darkness magic, making the recovery spell much slower and less effective than normal. The creature, instead, had picked the chunks of flesh, playing with them enthusiastically.

It tilted its head sideways, making most of Raghul's hair fall like autumn leaves in the wind, seeming to have realized something important. Then it brought them to its mouth, wolfing them down.

- "The good news is that whatever that is, it's not a vampire. The bad news is that I have no idea how to defeat it." Lith used light fusion, trying to neutralize the dark energy infecting the wound.

"You can either run away or stall for time. It can't live for long." Solus pointed out. –

She could clearly see the blood core falling apart, the strength coursing through the monster was too much for its body, despite all the changes it had went through. Every move, every attack would damage it as much as it did to Lith.

Maybe it was because the creation of the blood core had been purely accidental, maybe because the creature was vulnerable to the sun but being mindless it didn't care.

Whatever the reason, ingesting raw flesh had barely delayed its decaying process.

After the hair, all the skin was shed, leaving the muscles exposed, wet and shining under the midday sun. All its teeth had been replaced by fangs, giving it an alien look.

The creature screamed with fury, noticing that Lith had got away, forcing it to decide if to hunt the creator for whom it felt a deep-seated hatred, or the helpless Rodimas. The sweet smell of dripping blood and the delicious taste of the meat settled the deal.

While Lith and Solus were still talking, less than two seconds after the first blood, the nightmare began.

Chapter 113 Lith's Monster 2

The monster darted toward Lith faster than a bullet, tanking everything he threw at it. Burning Prison, Lith's personal tier four spell conjured six fireballs, one above, one below and four around the creature, detonating at the same time.

The head exploded and regenerated, the limbs got turned to shreds but all the pieces managed to reattach themselves before the blast could scatter them away. Lightnings burned its flesh and burst its heart, more icicles pierced its body than needles a pincushion.

None of it managed to even slow it down. Yet recovering from all that damage took its toll, the creature's body had become thinner, while the talons fell, leaving the creature with just its fists.

Fists that struck Lith with the might of a titan, uncaring of his footwork and the technique he used to deflect part of their force. Despite being hardened by earth fusion, Lith's right arm shattered at the ulna, the humerus and the radius.

Bone segments pierced the muscles and skin, the white of the bone glittering under the sun because of the blood dripping on them.

Lith got blinded by pain, his eyes watering like waterfalls, yet managed to remain conscious, once again being saved by his restless paranoia. He knew that being a true mage was not enough, that being prepared was not enough.

The new world was a big place, he was bound to meet sooner or later someone stronger than him, someone capable of hurting him for real.

Among his trial and error experiments on himself, he had learned how to use darkness magic to cut his pain receptors, and that's what he did the moment he realized that all he had was not enough to stop a single punch of the monster of his own creation.

Lith also jumped sideways at the last second, borrowing the strength from the hit to put some distance between them. While flying through the air he kept casting as fast as he could, making all kind of spells rain down on his pursuer.

Even with only his left arm remaining, he managed to land another four explosions before the creature caught up, striking again, this time at his chest. Lith felt his ribcage collapse, spitting blood realizing that even breathing had become an excruciating torture.

The Raghul-thing lifted him by the neck, licking every single drop of the precious liquid, feeling its strength returning.

Both of them were wheezing, their expression distorted, but while Lith was desperate, Lith's monster was triumphant, using its unnaturally long tongue to lap all the blood dripping from his face.

Lith used that precious moment to wave a final spell, and when the monster opened its mouth to tear his neck open, he managed to conjure an icicle inside it, so that when the jaw attempted to close on him, it pierced its tongue, palate and brain.

The creature didn't care for it, not until realizing that not it could not bite. Then the monster simply grabbed and pulled the icicle out, uncaring for its own wounds, accelerating the decay process.

Its eyes withered and rolled into the skull, leaving only the red light of undeath behind.

The fangs finally bit Lith's neck, blood sprayed out his jugular.

But then the jaw fell off, shortly followed by the creature's right arm, holding the prey no more.

Lith's monster emitted an angry gurgle, drool flooding its mouth, right before the whole corpse dried out and collapsed on the ground, turning into ashes.

- "In your face, Mary Shelley." - Lith thought, casting all the healing spells he could manage before falling onto the ground, sprawled like a rag doll.

After so much pain and struggling, Lith finally felt at peace. His vision blurred until everything went black. He could feel all his anxieties, all his fears and traumas fading away. The pounding ache from the wounds was reduced to a dull sensation, no longer important.

He just wanted to sleep and forget about everything, but from a corner of his mind, something kept tugging at Lith's consciousness, refusing to give up. A part of him was fighting the stupor, knowing he would never wake up from that slumber.

Solus tried non-stop to reach his mind through the numbing pain and exhaustion, but to no avail. He had gone too far, the wounds were too deep. The only thing she could do, was use her own mana to keep his conditions stable.

Yet with only a yellow mana core to back her endeavour, she was just delaying the inevitable. Finally, light fusion was able to purify the wounds from the dark energy festering them, allowing all the healing spells Lith had previously cast to kick in.

The bleeding stopped, the wounds were still severe but no more life threatening, at least for the moment. Lith was now able to hear Solus' voice, to grab the light of her will and use it with his own to finally open his eyes.

Waves of searing pain were still ravaging his battered body, but he couldn't afford to heal himself. Not only he had little mana left, in his current conditions even light spells would add strain to his body, potentially killing him.

Gritting his teeth to endure the agony of each breath, he used Invigoration, to both assess his conditions and gain the energy he needed to survive.

- "Comminute fractures all over the ribcage, comminute and open fracture of the right arm, minor internal bleeding, several bones cracked and open wounds. I doubt I would still be alive without light fusion's regenerating factor and your help, Solus."

"Thank me later, first fix your chest. If any of the bone fragments pierces your lungs its over." –

Invigoration was an incredible tool, but it wasn't perfect. To use it, Lith required to remain still, focusing his mind and spirit to align the mana core with the world energy surrounding him.

The slightest distraction would sever the connection.

That was the reason why he couldn't use it during battles, otherwise he would have access to an endless supply of mana. Following Solus' advice, he used light and spirit magic to collect all the scattered bone fragments rebuilding his ribcage.

The process was slow and painful, but he couldn't make haste, his own life was on the line. After that, he had to take care of the hunger. Invigoration could make up for the lost stamina and mana, but recovering from so many wounds required nutrients.

The right arm was still a mess, but with the pain receptors disconnected it was bearable.

Lith felt like he had been fasting for a week, his head light and dizzy. He took food out of his pocket dimension, wolfing it down as fast as his left arm allowed him to. Light magic was accelerating his metabolism to the extreme, the food digested as soon it entered his stomach.

Time was of the essence, he walked up to Rodimas, removing her gag to get his answers.

"Who sent you here? And why?"

Chapter 114 Necromancy Lesson

Breath after breath, the exposed humerus slid back under the skin and in its place, soon Lith's body was back to normal.

Rodimas barely reacted to his voice. Seeing her comrades die, being helpless while Melia was tortured, all of it had been a terrible experience. But seeing Raghul's metamorphosis, smelling his stench of death and decay had been too much.

She hadn't bit her tongue only because of the gag, but had screamed the whole time nonetheless. She knew that after Lith's death it would be her turn to be eaten alive. Her eyes only showed the white, the pupil rolled almost backwards.

She had dislocated both her shoulders trying to break free from the restraints. Sweat, tears and mucus dirtied her face, making her hair stick to it like a filthy mask.

The terror had completely broken her.

Lith had to splash Rodimas with cold water to force her to regain her focus.

Her voice was hoarse from the strain, but still clear. She explained how the request hadn't come through the official channels of the mercenary guild, but via one of their contacts in the black market of the city of Kandria.

According to the books in Soluspedia, it was simply a market town, the nearest trading hub to the academy.

The contractor was a merchant, but the odd request coupled with the high reward had made the mercenaries suspicious. After taking a considerable down payment, they had investigated the matter, discovering that the merchant was just a middle man.

According to their sources, he served the powerful and noble Androse family, famous for its centuries old magical legacy. At that point, they only had two choices, return the money and back off from the job, or get involved in the political struggle.

Sobbing, Rodimas told how she had voted for the former option, but had been outnumbered, because the pay was too good and the risks seemed minimal at the time.

Lith didn't know what to do. Her story would have been much more significant, if he could do anything about it. The odd thing was that since he had created his own version of the Frankenstein's monster, the feeling of impending failure had disappeared.

"That's not all." Rodimas managed to say after some stuttering.

"Since we managed to get in and out of the forest many times, after complimenting with us, our contractor gave us another task. We were supposed to deliver a package tomorrow."

- "The time frame is way off. I had more than a day to catch up with them, so why the need to rush? Still, the vision showed me that the academy is somehow related to this. Whatever this thing is, it could be useful to change the course of the events. –

"It's in my dimensional amulet."

Lith took out all the amulets looted, allowing Rodimas to recognize his own and take out the package. Since magical items just needed a thought to work, he didn't free her hands, just placed it on her forehead while setting up several protections with spirit magic, just to be on the safe side.

Rodimas kept her word, materializing a wooden box the size of a briefcase. It had no particular markings or insignia, the only remarkable thing about it was the lock.

It was placed along the narrow and long side of the box, and it consisted of an octahedron shaped stone, with several runes engraved all around it, forming a spiral. Using Invigoration, Lith was capable of examining its pseudo core.

- "It's nothing I have ever seen before. I bet everything I do not have that without the proper code it will self-destruct, explode or something. And if I really want to discover what's inside, I have only one shot." –

"I suppose you don't know how to open it."

"No, I don't. Please, don't hurt me." Realising to have outlived her usefulness, Rodimas cried in desperation, knowing it was useless to beg for mercy.

"A deal is a deal." Lith double tapped her head and heart with bullet-sized icicles, making sure she wouldn't suffer.

He was about to leave, when a thumping sound made him turn around, ready for combat despite his mental exhaustion.

To his surprise, it was just the young Byk, again.

"You do really have a talent for escape. How those hunters managed to corner you is a mystery to me." Lith said with an angry tone. Both times he had needed help, the Byk had disappeared leaving him in hot waters.

In Lith's eyes, that made it persona non grata.

"Dude, that's harsh! After you rescued me, I was scared sh*tless. Besides, you didn't seem to need any help. This time I didn't run away, I went for help. You have no idea how long it took to reach my mom."

"Your mom?"

"Yeah, according to your definition, she is my best friend."

"And I wouldn't have delayed my departure for a mere human, if not for the fact that you saved my cub and was so stupid to lose control of your own necromancy spell. Hence, as part of your reward I'll teach you how not to endanger yourself and others with darkness magic."

The Byk mother was an enormous beast, at least 1,8 meters (5'11") tall at the shoulder, with a weight close to a ton. Its fur was deep brown with shades of black all over.

Lith was about to defend himself, explaining that it wasn't a spell, as much as an experiment, when he realized what had happened.

- "Delay the departure? So that's why I needed to make haste? All that's happened was just a step to speak with this Byk?" –

The Byk mother moved closer, sniffing at him with curiosity.

"You look like a human, but there something different from the others I have met so far. What's your name, cub?"

"Scourge." Lith deemed wiser using the name bestowed upon him by the Trawn woods' kings. If the Byk mother knew humans, he had to protect his identity.

"Strong name for someone so young." It snorted. "A Byk name, even. That's a good omen. I'm Kalla, and that's my youngest one, Nok."

Lith gave both a polite nod with the head.

"Listen well, cub. There is a reason if light and darkness magic are so scarce in nature, and that is because they are the strongest elements. Light nurtures life, according to legends, can even resurrect the dead or create new beings.

Darkness, instead, is the element of death. It's not evil by itself, it's just that all living beings are scared of death, so they fear it. And fear can easily turn in spite and prejudice."

Lith inwardly scoffed at those words.

- "I have yet to meet someone, human or not, that doesn't consider the element they are best at as the strongest. As for light magic, is a great tool, but powerful is not the word I'd use to describe it. Convenient at best."

"Whatever." Solus mind rolled her eyes. "Why you don't stay quiet and listen? When are we going to find again someone teaching us real magic?" –

Kalla stared at him for a second, sensing his disbelief.

"Tell me, Scourge, how many magical beasts have you met that use light magic?"

"None." He was forced to admit.

"And how many capable of darkness magic?"

"Just one. It was a Byk, a few years ago."

"Zero and one, while there are countless beasts that use the other elements. Have you ever wondered why? Let me show you an old Byk trick."

Kalla tapped the ground twice with her left pawn claws, dark energy swirling around her massive body.

"Arise."

Chapter 115 Necromancy Lesson 2

The energy seeped into the ground, and countless skeletons, both human and animal, emerged from below. Their mouths were agape in a silent scream, fighting their way out of mud and roots.

Several hands grabbed Lith's feet and ankles with an iron grip. In a few seconds he was surrounded by a small army of undead, each emitting an ominous aura that sent a cold shiver down his spine.

Lith knew they posed no threat to him. A single lesser undead was nothing more than an annoyance, even that many couldn't harm someone like him. Worst case scenario, he would simply take off and attack them from the sky, leaving them no possibility for retaliation.

But his body seemed to ignore all that knowledge. The only things he felt from their shiny red eyes were innate fear and revulsion.

He kept his cool, keeping those emotions sealed in a corner of his mind, while exploiting that contact to use Invigoration on them and understand how did Kalla manage to do it.

Lith discovered that each of the skeletons grabbing him had now a small red mana core.

Invisibles to the naked eye, countless tendrils of energy departed from it, keeping all the bones together and allowing them to move and feel. Unlike normal cores, though, they had black stripes, pulsing and growing every time the undead moved.

"In this world the dead outnumber the living by hundreds. An expert Byk will bury its preys and turn them into a weapon. The shock they cause and the sheer numbers can easily turn tables, if properly used."

With another tap of her pawn, the skeletons crawled back underground, and through her use of earth magic, no trace of their passage remained.

"Necromancy can be roughly divided in two branches: lesser and higher.

Lesser necromancy, which I just used, allows to temporary turn any corpse into an undead. It doesn't require much energy, but the effects are short lasting, and its creations are incapable of thought, they can only obey simple orders.

Higher necromancy, that you foolishly attempted, though, is an entirely different matter."

With a flick of her snout, Kalla conjured near her the ashes of the Lith's monster, stirring them with a darkness imbued claw, biting her own other pawn to let some blood drip on them.

Horror struck Lith when he saw the ashes turn into a semi liquid state, coiling around the claw and using it to stretch closer to the blood source.

"That thing is still alive?" He unconsciously took a step back.

"No. I'm just playing with the residual energies, just to show you how powerful necromancy is." As soon the Byk stopped infusing dark energy, the blob turned back to ashes, despite the blood still dripping on it.

"Higher necromancy allows to create lesser undead capable of lasting forever, or even superior creatures, capable of independent thought. Yet no matter what you do, higher necromancy has a flaw compared to the lesser branch.

After I called back my spell, the skeletons were still intact, and if I or anyone else were to raise them again, they would still serve their master. The same would have happened if I kept them around until the spell wore off.

But when something is created out of higher necromancy, the unbalance is too severe.

If the caster doesn't feed his creatures with the proper amount of light energy, the dark magic that animates them starts to corrode their bodies, until they turn into dust."

The Byk sighed sadly.

"I tried countless times, but my inability to use light magic prevents me from truly mastering necromancy. All my creations have the lifespan of a butterfly. Undeath is no life, to sustain it a price has to be paid.

The better the necromancer, the less energy the creatures require. But no matter how little it can be, raising a permanent army would either drain the caster or require an external source."

"Do you mean taking lives?"

Kalla nodded.

"Skeletons are simple, they require raw energy, it's irrelevant to them the source it comes from. Other creatures can be pickier, and require living flesh or blood to sustain their existence if the necromancer's energy is not available.

And that usually means that lots of people have to die."

"Wait, are you telling me that an undead army has to 'eat' regularly? Isn't that a contradiction?"

"Contradiction?" Kalla snorted. "Have you ever found anything, alive or not that moves without needing energy? Humans need to eat, and so do plants. For a stone to roll, someone has to push it.

Or else both humans and magical beasts would only fight with undeads. Imagine an army that does not rest, eat or fear, that grows in number with every battle. No, Scourge, that would be nonsense."

- "Kalla is right, otherwise necromancy would ignore the first law of thermodynamics, energy cannot be created or destroyed. Only be transferred or changed from one form to another. But that poses another question.

Then how can magical objects never run out of juice? What is their energy source?"

"The magician." Solus observed. "That must be the reason why the imprinting process is necessary before using one. Is not only a safety measure, but also a way to feed them. That would also explain why magical items can be reused after their master's death." –

"I have a question. According to what you say, undead should obey the necromancer. Why the creature attacked me?" Lith asked.

"As I said, I haven't mastered necromancy, yet. But the most likely explanation is that your clumsy spell didn't bear your mark with it. Because of that, it didn't recognize you as its master, but only as a prey.

Especially so if it hated you when it was still alive."

"What do you mean with mark?" Lith was clearly lost. "And why should a dead man feelings matter?"

Kalla snorted even harder, causing Nok to chuckle at his expenses.

"By the Great Mother, how could your parents let you walk alone in this world being so ignorant?" It said shaking its huge head in desperation.

"Based on what Nok told me, you used higher necromancy, turning someone that was still alive.

It wasn't a mindless corpse, but someone that died cursing you with his final breath. Even if your attempt failed, the creature was bound to carry with itself the deepest emotions linked to its death.

Not having a mark, its primary instinct was likely to exact revenge. Are you finally starting to understand the foolishness of your actions?"

Lith nodded, recognizing that being so powerful and yet so ignorant in the ways of magic was a terrible combination.

"Do you at least know how to raise a single undead?" She then asked.

"No. What happened earlier was an accident." Lith didn't like admitting his incompetence, but having worked in the science field, he knew that knowledge could not be faked. Either you accepted your ignorance, or studied to fill the gaps.

They walked up to Rodimas' corpse, then Kalla started explaining.

"If you were to simply use darkness magic on a corpse, it would rot and disappear. What you need to do, instead, is to let the necromantic energies fill the body or the skeleton, like this."

The Byk placed its claws on Rodimas' hollow forehead, while Lith used Invigoration to see the stale blood turning black because of the dark magic, the veins bulging out.

"Once it's saturated, add a speck of light magic, even first magic is fine. That will be your mark, the only life force the undead will respect and obey to."

Rodimas' corpse eyes opened again, the chestnut colour replaced by the bright red. Kalla was about to withdraw her energies, but Lith asked her to wait a bit. That way he was able to notice that the creature had no blood core, just a red one striped black like the skeletons did.

Chapter 116 Necromancy Lesson 3

- "I'm starting to suspect that higher necromancy requires a living subject. To properly turn Raghul, I would have needed to fill his whole body with dark magic, not only his core. And of course, add my mark.

Probably the reason why Kalla can't master necromancy isn't because it can't use light outside of first magic, but because has no knowledge of the cores."

"Makes sense." Solus concurred. –

With Kalla's guidance, Lith managed to raise his first skeleton after a few tries, destroying some of them in the process. When he felt sure to have grasped the basics, he even managed to raise Rodimas' ghoul.

Before following Kalla to receive her final gift, Lith went back to put the two badly burned mercenaries out of their misery.

- "A part of me would love to experiment on them with higher necromancy, but honestly, I had more than enough for today. Also, if I manage to turn them into sentient undeads, I would feel responsible for their lives.

I would be either forced to kill them, and that would be a waste, or let them roam free, and that would be plain madness. I'm done playing with powers I don't fully understand. Guess now I have one more thing to research in the library." –

After walking for a bit, Lith started to feel a headache growing, his desire to go back to the academy and rest was almost unbearable.

"Where are we going?"

"To my cave." Kalla explained. "Since I'm leaving, feel free to pick whatever you like from my trophies' pile. That will be my thank you for saving Nok's life."

"Teaching me necromancy is a great gift already. I don't need more. By the way, where are you going?"

"I don't know either. I have reached a bottleneck. All my instincts tell me that either I overcome it or my talent will rot. Now that all my cubs are big enough to be self-sufficient, I can finally set off to explore my limits."

"Have you tried talking to the Lord of the forest, first? Maybe the Scorpicores could help you." Lith didn't dare offer his help directly. He had no idea how men would react to him teaching true magic, let alone magical beasts or monsters.

Yet if the academy was to be in any danger, he would much prefer for someone like Kalla to be present.

"I already did. Scarlett tried to explain to me many times about things like 'cores' and 'world energy', but they are only empty words to me. So, it advised me to travel outside the forest and search for enlightenment."

After a while, they reached a small hill. It was about ten meters (33') high, covered by tall green grass, with tilted saplings growing on its sides, fighting with the nearest forest trees for the sunlight.

Lith could see many small animals, squirrels and birds alike, moving around in the vicinity, without care for their arrival. Like a mouse on the back of a lion, they weren't afraid of predators, the presence of the powerful Byk was their lifeline.

The cave was deep, and had an entrance big enough to let two creatures the size of Kalla to move freely in and out, probably to allow her to move with her cubs.

The so-called trophies' pile turned out to be just trash. Weapons, tools, clothes, were amassed together in a random order. Most of them were damaged or broken, making them useless.

"I took those things from humans and creatures that invaded my territory, trying to kill me or my spawn during the years." She explained.

After a little search, Lith could see there wasn't anything interesting in the bunch.

"What about rings or amulets? Didn't they have any?"

"Those I took for myself, silly one. They will be especially useful once I'll be away from here." Lith sighed with annoyance, thinking how he could have already been resting back home, instead of junk hunting.

"But there are some I couldn't figure out their use nor throw them away. I feel they are too dangerous to be left in clumsy hands. Feel free to take them, if you wish."

Kalla touched the left side of the cave, revealing a small secret chamber, holding a pile of small wooden boxes, all identical to the one Rodimas had given Lith.

Suddenly he felt a chill running down his spine, his vision blurring making the headache almost unbearable. This time he saw groups of armed soldiers fighting and destroying entire cities.

- "Not the vision again! What does this mean? Is the war really this close? And what does it have to do with me?" –

Lith saw several envelopes scattered among the boxes, their wax seals still intact. After checking with Invigoration that there wasn't any magical trap, he opened them, discovering that all of them were written in a code he couldn't figure out.

Reading those apparently random words, other images flashed before his eyes. The last thing he saw was an image of his house in Lutia, burning. The barn was open, the animals dead or escaped, while the fields in front of his house seemed to have been trampled upon.

His point of view moved inside the house, allowing to watch the dancing flames, the walls splattered with fresh blood. His father lied on the floor, his head cracked open by some heavy blunt weapon, the brain almost visible.

His expression was of pure despair and terror, his clothes were drenched by his own blood, coming out from multiple deep cuts. His bruised hands still clenched to form fists. He seemed to have died fighting.

The vision moved to the kitchen, where the corpse of his mother, Elina, rested. Her eyes were wide open, a pool of blood was under her head, a huge chunk of her tongue was visible among the blood.

Her clothes were ripped to shreds, not even death had stopped her aggressors. Lith could see human bite marks all over her breasts and genitalia, a pool of white sticky substance defiling her legs and mouth.

Anger was raising inside Lith's chest, a thirst for blood like he had never felt since his days back on Earth.

Then, he heard his sisters' voices calling for help, Rena was calling her husband's name, but Tista was calling for Lith.

He tried to force the vision to show them to him, but suddenly he felt pulled up and away from the ground, watching everything in miles of radius from the sky.

The whole village had been razed to the ground.

Once Lith regained his senses, the headache was suppressed by the killing intent he could barely contain.

"Where did you find them?"

"Most come from the dimensional items of the hunters that I recently killed. In the last months, lots arrived believing themselves to be predators only to end up as prey." Kalla snout deformed into a grin.

"But others I took from the white-furred pups that live in the man-made mountain."

"The students?" Lith was shocked, not at the idea of their death, as much at the implication such event had.

"Yes. It happened when I was chasing the hunters who had killed one of my cubs. They had escaped me the first time, yet days later dared to return in my turf."

Anger overloaded her eyes with mana, turning them in pitch black holes.

"I stalked them, and when the opportunity arose, I exacted revenge. From that moment onward, every time hunters arrived, I would follow closely to kill them along with their pups, to let them know what I felt."

"How did you manage to do that?" His interest was piqued. He doubted to be able to cleanly kill a group of mercenaries and students at the same time, without any of them escaping.

Even with all her undeads, being unable to fly made Kalla weaker than himself in Lith's eyes.

"Clackers, that's how." The Byk's laughter was like stone grinding against each other.

"I know how they communicate, via earth magic. I lure them with their feed call, and when everyone is busy fighting with the spiders, my undead sweep the field. The Lord prohibited us to kill the white-furred, but Clackers do not answer to its orders.

I only take care of the hunters. It's not my fault if the little b*stards don't know how to fend for themselves."

Chapter 117 Reborn

There were still many things Lith wanted to ask Kalla, like how she managed to perceive the Clackers' calls and how to manipulate them, but as his bloodlust receded, he could feel that something was wrong with his body.

The headache had returned worse than ever, and no matter how much he used Invigoration, his energy was leaving him like sand slips between fingers, no matter how hard one clenches his fist.

Soon he wasn't even able to stand, his eyelids were drooping, forcing him to fight just to remain conscious.

- "You seem to have a fever." Solus warned him.

"Impossible. Except during my first years of life, I never got sick. Not even a flu." –

His breathing turned ragged, Lith lied on the cavern's floor, feeling the comforting coldness of the rocks ease the heat waves ravaging his flesh.

"I think I need to rest for..."

Lith fell asleep even before finishing the sentence. Both Byks had no idea what to do. Even with their limited knowledge of humans, they were capable of understanding that Lith's constant shivering and sweating bullets wasn't normal.

"Mom, do you know anyone capable of using light magic?" Nok lapped Lith's cheeks trying to comfort him.

"Outside of the Lord of the forest, no. Maybe Scourge is just exhausted..."

A snapping sound from Lith's body cut Kalla short. The Byks stretched their ears, sniffing the guest. Another snapping sound occurred, this time louder. It was akin to a fresh log thrown into the fire, cracking because of the heat.

Snap and pop sounds came one after the other, if an earthling happened to be there, he would think that someone was making popcorns. From the inside, Solus could see his bones cracking and heal continuously at an alarming rate.

Sometimes it was just a fissure, other the whole bone would shatter in small fragments before they assembled again. When it was the skull's turn, Nok jumped backwards out of fear.

Suddenly a porcupine seemed to have slipped under Lith's face, sharp ends bulging under his skin, barely able to contain them.

Each time a bone would crack, impurities would ooze out of them, finding their way out through any of his orifices. Most of it flowed out from his eyes, ears and mouth, forming a pool beneath his head.

The stench was unbearable, Kalla was forced to destroy the tar-like substance with darkness magic, fearing it could harm them.

"Is he going to become an undead?" The events unfolding in front of Nok reminded it what had happened to Raghul just a few hours prior.

"Unlikely." Kalla replied. "I don't sense a massive amount of dark energies surging." Nonetheless, she closed Lith in the secret room, leaving just enough space for the air to flow, strengthening the cave walls in case of attack, just to be safe.

Thanks to Invigoration, Solus perceived the world energy flowing inside Lith's core, the body was finally able to withstand its growth, surviving the changes necessary to wield the new power.

- "The unconsciousness is actually a blessing in disguise. The pain would be excruciating if Lith was still awake." – Solus thought.

Hours later, he finally woke up, feeling like the Walmart doormat after the Black Friday. Every inch of his body ached, his already tattered hunter suit was soaked in impurities beyond saving.

He managed to cancel the smell with darkness magic, but removing the stains would destroy the leather as well.

- "What happened?" Lith shook his head, trying to remember where he was.

"Good news! You have finally got past your bottleneck. Your mana core is finally halfway through the cyan. Probably the constant strain and healing cycles of this last few months did the trick." Solus words made little sense to him.

"It's not my first rodeo. Why did I faint? And why do I feel like cr*p instead of refreshed?" –

It was too complicated to explain, so Solus just showed him her memories.

- "What the f*ck? All that pain just for a shade of cyan?" –

Once Lith managed to get up, even opening the stone door with earth magic proved to be a challenge.

"Rise and shine, sleepyhead. You have slept for three days. I was starting to get worried." Nok trotted to him, rubbing his snout strong enough to make him fall.

"Three days?! Sorry Nok, I have to run!" Lith yelled in desperation. He didn't care for the lost lessons, as much for all the time wasted doing nothing. If the vision was correct, he hadn't even a second to spare.

Nok laughed at him.

"I was joking, it's barely sunset."

Cursing the Byk's ancestors and doubting the morality of their mating choices, Lith punched the nearby wall with the feeble strength he could muster.

"It's not funny!" He yelled, striking again.

"My family is in danger, who knows what could have happened to them in three days? You scared me to death!"

"That makes the two of us." Nok took two cautionary steps back, keeping its gaze on him, ready to run away.

"Why are you scared?"

"Don't want to end like the wall just for a stupid joke."

Lith looked at his punch, discovering that it had created a small socket in the wall. A spiderweb of small cracks originated from the impact point.

- "What the heck?" Lith and Solus thought, still in a daze.

"I didn't feel anything. How can I be this strong?"

"It must be because of what happened to your skeleton. Your mana flow is completely different from before." Solus pointed out.

"The quality of your mana has barely changed, but now even at rest, the energy that your core passively produces is able to reach every inch of your body. I have seen something like this only in magical beasts like the Protector." –

"What's happening?" Kalla rushed back to the cave after the first pounding sound, expecting the worst.

When it saw both cubs alive and well the Byk sighed in relief, but then an odd smell reached its nose. Not beastly nor human, it was something lost in between.

"Scourge, you have changed." It was a statement, there was no shred of doubt in her voice.

"Your smell is even less human than before. It's akin to the one the Lord of the forest emits." Its eyes gleamed with comprehension of the true nature of their guest.

Before leaving, Lith asked Kalla how to perceive and lure the Clackers. Sadly, the former required a high earth magic sensibility that he lacked, while the latter was far simpler.

The spider's feed call sounded exactly like the human heart rhythmic beat, only it had to be emitted via magic through the ground.

On his way back, while flying through the air, he activated Life Vision, searching for more changes in his abilities. Lith discovered that now it didn't just show the life force and mana simply through colours.

Lith now could see the world energy flowing from the trees, the leaves, even from the stones. The whole forest around him was breathing, generating a mana wind that had been invisible to him before.

- "It has become much more similar to my mana sense." Solus said.

"Yes. In a way is still worse, in another is better. Look at that." –

Lith pointed at a clearing in the forest. It was near to the point where he had fought with the mercenaries, but from the sky and with its ordinary look, normally he would have failed to recognize the place.

But now he could see everything. The red wind originated from the animals, the green from the plants, the grey from the stones, and the black from the dead.

Lith only had to extend his hands and will to feel the rotting energies waiting for the call.

"Rise! Rise my legion!"

He could sense the many corpses stirring underground, clawing to escape.

And then he let them go. He had no time to lose, there were many things he had to do before nightfall.

Chapter 118 Half Truth

Lith immediately regretted his latest experiment.

- "Dammit, my body is still weak. Even though my core is still cyan, the effects of the change are similar to the evolution process. Invigoration has no effect. I need real rest to recuperate."

"Your mind is not faring better either. You are still wearing your hunter suit, if you don't change it, not only it would rise lots of questions, but I doubt they will let you in the academy." Solus pointed out. –

The leather sleeves were reduced to shreds, the chest presented a giant hole, like someone had tried to rip his heart out, the metal protectors had whole chunks missing and between the bloodstains and the impurities it seemed that Lith had stolen the clothes from a battlefield.

Inwardly cursing his own stupidity, Lith returned below the tree line, swapping the clothes in mid air via the dimensional pocket.

After walking through the castle gates, he was halted by the front desk clerk, demanding to have back the distress device. It was the same middle-aged man that had lectured Lith that morning.

Seeing him with his hands and face dirtied by having slept on the ground, his short breath and worried expression, the clerk assumed that going solo didn't do well for the arrogant fourth-year student.

His chestnut eyes shone with gloat, while a condescending smile cracked his otherwise thick beard.

"Seems you had to experience for yourself how harsh the world out there. Not everyone can be a hero, now you know it."

Lith looked at him like a madman, he had already forgotten about him, so those words made no sense to him.

"There, there." The clerk continued, mistaking his confusion for embarrassment. "At least you came out alive without needing to ask for help. Also, you remembered my advice and returned before sundown. Realizing your mistakes and learning from your seniors is fundamental at your age."

Normally Lith would have recognized him already, pondering if attempting to poison the clerk's mana core from a distance with spirit magic.

But worried as he were, he just pretended to be listening, nodding from time to time. Lith was so tired that even thinking was a struggle. Ever since he had seen the end of the vision, he was trying to put the pieces together.

All he wanted was to take a short bath to get rid of all the dirt, sweat and blood dirtying his body and then sleep for a whole week, but the scene of his parents murdered and his sisters screaming for help haunted his mind.

- "According to the vision the steps of the events are: 1) the mercenaries killing Nok. And that is out of the picture. Then 2) after that they were supposed to do a delivery, somehow connected to the fall of the academy.

Guess that part was metaphorical, to bring down the castle it would take an earthquake measuring at least an eight on the Richter scale. Which would lead to 3) a civil war and to 4) the destruction of Lutia.

It's unclear if it would happen by coincidence or because I pissed off someone in particular, but it doesn't matter. If my soul is a d*ck as much as I am, the reason it showed me all this is because more than anything I want to save them. Right, Solus?"

"Yeah, it makes sense, especially the d*ckery part. Guess that savings fluffy cubs and thousands of innocents is really not your style..." She had a dejected tone. After all that hoping for him to find true love or friendship, once again was just an egoistical reason. To her Lith and his soul were indeed a match made by the heavens.

"F*ck the innocents! I'm nobody's hero. A world that despite having billions of people can only be saved by someone brave and dumb enough to sacrifice himself for strangers, it's a world not deserving to be saved." –

In the privacy of his room, Lith took out the communication amulet, thinking what exactly to tell Marchioness Distar.

He couldn't sleep before making sure that the events he had spectated had yet to happen, but if he did call her, then he would need to spill the beans without having the opportunity to make up a believable backstory.

The truth was too dangerous for him, and calling her the day after would destroy his credibility. Who in his right mind would take seriously someone that needed a power nap before reporting a threat to the Kingdom?

But without sleep, he had a hard time concentrating, let alone being convincing while spouting bullsh*t. It was another catch-22 paradox

Too tired to find a solution, he simply made the call.

The Marchioness answered almost immediately, seated behind a luxurious desk riddled with books and sheets of papers. She had her hair down with no particular hairstyle, wearing something between a pajama and sweatpants.

She looked almost as tired as him, her annoyance was visible as much as audible.

"You again. What has happened this time?"

"I'm really sorry to bother you at this hour, your Ladyship, but I need to know if everything is alright with my family. I bring grave news."

The last phrase, coupled with the desperation in his voice changed her attitude in a blink.

"I already received today's report, but let me double check right now."

The communication remained open, but her image disappeared for a few seconds.

- "This thing can put on hold?" –

"All present and accounted for, the sky has yet to fall." She said with a slight smile.

"Now, what were you saying about grave news?" She leaned with her elbows on the desk, her eyes steeling.

"Before starting my story, your Ladyship, do you believe in supernatural? Things like souls, destiny and so on?" Lith was desperately trying to find a way to not look like a raving maniac.

"Child, you are starting to sound like my husband when he proposed. If you have just disturbed me because of a girl, that's inappropriate at best. No matter what you believe right now, whoever you have met is not the right one."

Inwardly cursing his poor choice of words, Lith rushed to explain.

- "The best lie is a half-truth. Here goes everything." –

He told her how he managed to save a dryad by sheer luck, and that she rewarded him with a vision about his heart's desire. That following her directions he had found a group of hunters fighting to the death with a powerful Byk necromancer defending its cub.

In this version of the story he was just a spectator, and Kalla did all the hard work.

Lastly, that on the verge of death, one of the hunters still alive, after Lith had tried to save her, had a change of heart, regretting her life choices and gave him a wooden box and a coded letter, revealing

to him that she was meant to give it to someone inside of the academy, but had died before telling him who.

"A dryad needing your help?" She had a good laugh at his expenses.

"Didn't she give you something more practical than a silly vision? I don't know, her heart or some earthly treasure?"

"I refused her heart." Lith explained making the Marchioness almost choke on her next laugh. "I'm too young for a relationship and she was way too flashy for an academy. But I still got loot, I mean rewards."

He took out the ransom the blond dryad had paid to save her sister's live.

"I can't see them well like this. Put them over the amulet's gem, please." She didn't know what to think. So far, the story was too odd to be made up.

When Lith did as instructed, the various natural treasures floated in the air. The light from the stone enveloped them like a 3D scanner, giving the Marchioness a life-size image that replaced Lith's.

- "Is there something this thing can't do?" Lith was flabbergasted by the second unknown function of the day. "Why can't it make a decent coffee? I miss coffee so much I could kill for a cup." -

"By the gods and their children, I believe you! Now put those treasures away and show them to no one. They are very precious. Many would say too much for someone like you to have them." Lith saw the greed in her eyes, but it was a calculated risk.

To further his story, he described in detail the plant Abomination, nerfing it enough to make plausible for Lith's normal skillset to defeat it.

"If you still have any doubts, there is a whole patch of the forest that's gone completely bald. It will take months for it to recover a shred of green."

The Marchioness looked at him with renewed admiration.

"I had heard great things about your little team, but honestly I didn't expect so much from them. It's amazing for fourth-year students, no matter how talented, to suppress a monster"

"All thanks to teamwork." Even half-asleep, Lith realized that a gun he was completely unaware of, had just shot his own foot.

Chapter 119 Half Truth 2

- "Why didn't you tell her that you defeated it alone?" Solus was surprised by the sudden turns of events.

"Because she didn't ask me how I managed to, or if I did have help. She jumped the gun and assumed it was a team effort. That means I didn't nerf the plant Abomination enough, or simply that a kid killing a monster is unheard of." –

Anxious to change topic, Lith took out from the dimensional pocket the wooden box Rodimas had surrendered to him and one coded letter at random.

Marchioness Distar threw a glance at the letter, and being incapable to understand its meaning, just copied it with water magic. A flick of her wrist and ink flew from the well to a blank piece of paper, recreating the original in a few seconds.

When the life-size replica of the box appeared, her expression became severe.

"I don't recognize the lock, but I know these runes. This isn't just a wooden box, it's a high-end dimensional item, capable of storing complex structures rather than single objects. It could even contain a whole furnished house.

It's definitely something that a magical beasts hunter could never afford, let alone give it away to a stranger. Depending on what's inside, it could be worth thousands of gold, if not tens of thousands. But why are you showing it to me instead of Linjos? And why are afraid of it?"

After a deep breath to calm his nerves, Lith told her all about the vision and how it ended, along with his hypothesis about it.

"The last time we spoke, you told me you are on the Queen's side. If what the dryad has shown me is true, then I need all the help possible to prevent these events from happening.

With all due respect, the Headmaster is a good man, but has proven to be too much of a naïve fool to be trusted with such a delicate matter. He expected people not needing Ballots, yet now they are all in use.

He didn't predict that his radical changes would backfire so fast and hard, or if he did, his contingency plan must have failed big time. Also, he doesn't know me, you do. For him I could as well be a homesick boy pulling a prank.

I don't have the time to make him listening to me and believe a ridiculous story about dryads, souls and visions. I need someone capable of seeing the bigger picture and reacting accordingly. Whatever this is, its ramification go beyond the academy."

The Marchioness drummed her fingers on the desk, pondering about Lith's words. His judgement on Linjos' character was harsh, but she fully agreed with it.

And while the Headmaster would take in account only the possible consequences for the academy and his precious students, she was capable of understanding also the political repercussions the events Lith described could have.

Her fief was already torn apart by internal and external enemies, trying to replace her with someone more pliable to one side or another of the conflict. If a storm was really brewing under her nose, could she afford to ignore such a timely warning?

The answer was no. After all the sacrifices she had made trying to protect her daughter and husband, after the failed assassination attempts, this was the first lead the Marchioness had that could allow her to act instead of react.

Also, it would give her an opportunity to prove her worth and loyalty to the Crown in a moment of need, potentially reaping endless benefits. All things that made such information more valuable for her yet were meaningless to Linjos.

The dedicated Headmaster had no interest in politics, his mind seemed to be incapable to consider anything outside the boundaries of the academy. That what made him an excellent teacher also made him a terrible pawn.

- "I wonder if he took all these factors in account before contacting me. It would be amazing for a youth of humble origins to be so cunning. He could be a great asset in the future." – She concluded.

- "From what I have seen in the past, the Marchioness is not a power hungry noble. She truly cares about her family. Also, she is the most powerful and influential person I know.

If the civil war really happens, a backwater village like Lutia would simply be collateral damage. It's her city, Derios, the capitol of the Marquisate, that would be first burned to the ground during the fights.

She has much more to lose compared to me."—

In none of his existences Lith had ever cared for schemes. His reasoning was simple but straightforward.

"Fine." At those words, Lith sighed in relief, finally his body was able to relax, the built-up tension quickly disappeared.

"No matter how crazy your story sounds, I believe you. There's only one problem. It's impossible to open Warp Steps inside the academy without the permission of a member of the staff.

Hence, to get my hands on that box, I'll need to talk to Linjos first. He'll probably summon you kids to listen to your side of the story. If I were you, I'd expect him to be pretty pissed off from your lack of trust."

Lith stared at the hologram with adamant eyes and a grave expression, without saying a word.

"That's the attitude, face him like that and you'll have nothing to fear."

More staring and silence ensued.

"Lith?" She asked starting to be worried. "Is everything all right?"

His eyes remained sharp, yet a faint snoring became audible.

"Have you really fallen asleep with your eyes wide open? Wake up!" The sound of her fist slamming on the desk did the trick.

"Sorry, I was absent minded for a second." He said buying time for Solus to bring him up to speed.

"I'll wait for the Headmaster's call together with my companions. As per your request, they are still oblivious of our partnership. Do you want to keep things that way or can I inform them?"

"At this point, it doesn't matter anymore. I don't know what excuse you used to remain alone and make this call, but if you don't start telling the truth, you'll lose their trust."

After closing the communication, Lith rushed towards Quylla's room, where his schoolmates were supposed to spend all day practicing triple casting and dimensional magic.

- "What a rotten luck. To think that I'm forced to ask for help to a bunch of kids."

"Didn't you complain that you have grown stale as a person just a few hours ago? Maybe this is a good occasion to start opening up. Be positive for once."

"Yes, I did. But I was talking about stupid things like sharing feelings, hobbies and all that jazz. Not potentially entrusting some of my secrets to others!" —

In his mind, Lith could see many obstacles riddling the path he had been forced to take. Linjos could summon to his office not only Lith, but also the others. And unlike the Marchioness, being able to see them calm and rested, he could see past Lith's lies.

To avoid blowing the cover he had created over the years, Lith needed his so called 'friends' to perfectly play their part. There were so many things that could go wrong, and he had so little time to convince them to help him.

Being caught unprepared was what he hated the most, his only remaining option was hoping for once in his life to be lucky.

A few seconds after he knocked on the door, Phloria let him in.

The mood in the room was gloomy, all those present had dejected faces and black circles under the eyes. It seemed like they had finished a shift in a mine while mourning their grandfather's death.

"Thank the gods, you all look like crap."

Chapter 120 Two Truths

"Thanks, it's nice to see you too." Phloria sarcastically replied

"What happened?" Lith asked.

"It's terrible!" Yurial groaned. "After all these hours, zero progress. We have barely eaten to have more time, but it was all for nothing. I'm going to fail dimensional magic so bad it's going to destroy my grades."

How can we focus on a subject so hard with all that's happening? Every time I am alone, I have to watch my back from Lyam and his goons. The rest of the time I am either studying or worrying about what could happen if a civil war really breaks out.

I could lose everything and everyone I love. The work of generations destroyed in a few days, simply because people like the Lukart think that might makes right. I can barely sleep at night anymore."

He held his head between the hands, his eyes watery due to stress and exhaustion. Phloria just nodded, sharing his worries. She had almost developed the compulsion to call in once an hour, to check the wellbeing of her brothers.

"So basically, you are saying that living like a commoner is driving you crazy?" Lith replied furrowing his eyebrows.

"Your first worry is the same one every Ballot less student has to live with. As for the second, well, back in my village, wandering nobles were treated like natural disasters, since they could pillage, kill and r*pe at will."

And we were the lucky ones, since the presence of my mentor kept most of them at bay. Sorry, but I'm not sorry to break your self-pity bubble. Not to mention that basically you two are the living proof their strategy is working.

If everyone were to freak out like you do, very few would graduate this year. That would be considered as the Headmaster's fault, with the only result to push the Kingdom one step closer to the civil war."

Phloria and Yurial only got gloomier after his speech.

- "Way to go, you idiot." Lith scolded himself. "Why don't you beat them down while you are at it? We need their help, so try to be a decent person for a change." –

"Sorry, guys. I didn't mean to be a jerk." And for once he was sincere.

"But something absurd happened to me while I was in the forest, and I'm still messed up."

Before any of them could ask a single question, Lith told his story once again, but unlike the Marchioness, they didn't allow him to continue after the part about defeating the plant Abomination and rescuing the dryad.

"Are you telling us you defeated a monster alone?" From her voice and expression, Phloria didn't believe a word he said.

"Was the dryad hot?" A tinge of colour returned on Yurial's face, even with Lith avoiding to mention the nudity part.

"Are you all right? I can't believe you are so calm after that thing almost managed to eat you alive." Quylla had turned ashen, with Friya preferring to calm her rather than express her surprise.

"Yes, yes and yes." He replied.

"Thanks for being the only one that not only believes me, but also sincerely worries about me, Quylla."

At those words the others acutely perceived Lith's poke, realizing their rudeness, rushing into expressing overdue concerns about his wellbeing.

"If you find this part incredible, wait for the rest." He resumed the narration, taking out the natural treasures, the letter and the box at the right time to prove them he wasn't making any of that up.

When Lith finished, it was hard to understand if they were more incredulous or scared. Incredulous because both the ideas of the monster and a prophecy for a soul, seemed too much something out of a fairy tale to be real.

Scared because the content of the prophecy wasn't about endless riches, a future harem of world class beauties or Lith becoming King, like in the legends. It was the stuff their nightmares were made of.

Without the academy, Quylla would be back to be a homeless orphan. And if the war really ensued, there was no telling how it could end. The only certainty was that both sides would spill a lot of blood, maybe enough for the bordering countries to invade, erasing the Griffon Kingdom from history.

"Why are you telling us all this? You do know how crazy all this sound, and if your patron, of which we never heard about before, has already took matters in her hands, what do you need us for?"

As usual, Phloria was the first one to speak. She had taken her leadership quite seriously. Despite their bond, she always felt he was keeping many secrets from them. More than not believing him, she wanted Lith to crack his impenetrable armour and show her some real trust.

"First off, because you are my friends, and you have the right to now the truth." Every fiber of his being was cringing at those words, yet he pushed forward. Like Solus had reminded him earlier, progress, not perfection.

"Second, because even my patron, just as you, Phloria, don't believe me capable of such a feat. Before I continue, there's something you must know."

Lith sat on Quylla's bed, massaging his temples while inwardly cursing the fate forcing him to take a gamble after another.

"Life at the edges of civilization is really hard. I had to fight for everything since I have memory. I'm not like you guys, I killed my first human at the age of six. Then, after I finished my apprenticeship, I became a bounty hunter, killing people for money."

- "There, I have said it. They finally know I am a bona fide murderer with a penchant for gold." –

With a deep sigh, he raised his head to look them in the eyes. Contrary to his expectations, there was no surprise, disgust or spite in their expressions.

"Why you don't look shocked in the least?"

"Well, I already knew everything." Friya shrugged.

"After how you handled the school's queens the first day and reading Professor Vastor's report about your achievements, I was too curious. So, I had a background check made on you."

"You did what?" Either in the new world or on Earth, violations of his privacy never felt nice.

"Sorry, but between your skills, glare and awful character, I thought it was best knowing the competition. Besides, is not like I had to dig that hard, it was all public knowledge."

"And she told me everything once we became friends." Quylla chimed in.

"I never thought badly of you for that. On the contrary, I find you amazing. Wish I was able to do the same, instead of being constantly forced to rely on others." She blushed a little, keeping her eyes down and fiddling with her long hair.

"Same. I mean that I had a background check made too, not the cool part. To be honest, I found you to be quite scary at the start, but then you turned out to be a chill guy."

Yurial patted some invisible dust off his shoulder, incapable of looking Lith in the eyes. He still found him to be quite scary.

"And so did I. Hope this isn't the big secret." Phloria snorted.

"It actually is. At least part of it." Lith stood up, taking a deep breath to calm himself.

"But showing is much better than telling. Phloria, would you mind taking out your sword and attacking me?" He gestured the others to clear the space around them, for their own safety.

"Are you crazy?" She asked with her eyes wide open.

"Humour me. And while you are at it, drink a defence potion too. I'm too tired to hold back, I could hurt you quite badly."

Seeing that she kept not moving, Lith closed in too fast for her to react, tapping with his right index and medium finger on her solar plexus, forcing the air out the lungs and making her cough uncontrollably.

When Phloria tried instinctively to reach for her sword, Lith swept her with a kick. Before she could adjust her body for the fall, he was already up, clenching her sword hand with his left hand and lifting her by the throat with the other one.

He then gently helped her standing up again, while a shocked silence filled the room. Thanks to his new body, Lith hadn't needed to use fusion magic, his enhanced physical prowess was enough.

"Ever since I was little, I noticed my constitution was quite unique. That's how I manged so well in the past, before the academy."

"That's amazing! Why did you hide it? I would flaunt it all day if I was in your shoes." Yurial said.

"Yeah, you could. Because of your status. If so many nobles get angry when a commoner surpasses them in any field, imagine what would happen if they knew that a commoner that is both a good mage and fighter exists."

It was the best explanation Lith had come up with. It covered the reticence, partly explained his exploit, and most importantly exposed as little as possible of his secrets.

"I would be either targeted by those that perceive my existence as a threat, or forced into servitude. My mentor always said to never reveal it to anyone, and this is the first time I'm disobeying her.

Because I need your help."