

Supreme M 211

Chapter 211 Dead on Time

Vinor almost choked from the surprise, many students stared at M'Rook like they were seeing a magical beast for the first time in their lives.

"Yeah, he can." Ironhelm corrected Vinor. "Minus two hundred points for lying to a teacher." The rest of Vinor's rings turned grey.

"How can you believe to stupid beast instead of a student? Are you even human? What side are you on?" Vinor whined, jumping away after hearing a snarl right beside his head.

"Who are you calling stupid?" M'Rook was so close that Vinor could smell his pungent breath. His lips were curled up, revealing fangs the size of a small dagger.

"Minus five hundred points for offending our protectors." Vinor's uniform turned from white to grey, losing all of its magical properties.

"Listen up, you idiots." Professor Ironhelm's voice roared.

"For the next three days, we are guests in this forest. Magical beasts are our landlords, protectors, and first line of defense. Whoever dares to attack another student or disrespects them will have all of their points null and void.

"It's time for you to learn that if a magical beast lives long enough, it develops mystical wisdom. They can talk, reason, and read, just like us humans. Before opening your stuck up mouths, remember where you are if you want to live.

"If they refuse to protect us because of your behavior, I'll gladly sacrifice an idiot or two to save everyone else. Is it clear?"

The students from the fourth and fifth year looked around, finally seeing that the town had no blind spots. Magical beasts could be seen soaring the skies, patrolling the streets, and even felt while tunneling underground.

Unlike inside the academy, every single move they made was watched, every word heard. Now they also knew that magical beast could talk, making them a living security system with heightened senses.

Lith walked away after giving M'Rook a polite bow, starting to look out for Phloria and the rest of the group.

- "If they live long enough. That's a good joke." Lith inwardly laughed at the charade magical beasts had put up for humans.

"Yeah, even Nok could talk and he was just a Byk cub." Solus smiled remembering their little friend. -

Meanwhile, Professor Ironhelm's curiosity had been piqued.

"Why didn't you intervene? If I hadn't stopped that icicle..."

"Nothing would have happened." M'Rook cut him short. "The oaf was a threat only to himself. I would kill him if I were you. He's a bad apple. He will bring only harm to your pack."

The Ry's words made another question arise.

"Why are you calling the big one 'oaf' and the other one 'young wolf'?"

"The big one is one of you, the small one is one of us." M'Rook snorted like someone had asked him if the water was wet.

"One of us?" Ironhelm was getting more confused by the second.

"The oaf is a human. Sees food, wants food. Sees female, wants female. Sees things, wants things. No matter if he needs them, he takes them with violence. That is human nature.

We don't eat unless hungry, we have a mate for life, we don't need useless trinkets. He is one of us."

Professor Ironhelm felt slightly offended by M'Rook's words. They sounded a lot like racism. His problem was that he couldn't argue with them. Without law and order, the world of men would take days at most to plunge into chaos, while magical beasts lived according to unwritten rules that every one of them adhered to.

Lith was amazed by the total number of people the White Griffon hosted. The first three years were composed of at least one thousand students, making him doubt that the mining town could accommodate them all.

- "Damn, I'm here for less than five minutes and I am already lost. I hate crowded places. They give me a headache." Lith thought.

"We need to find a Professor and fast!"

"Or you could call them and ask them where they are." Solus suggested, making Lith sneer.

"My sweet, innocent Solus. If after carrying out this monumental work Linjos has left the communications open, he would be too much of an idiot to be the Headmaster."—

As Lith predicted, the communication amulet was as dead as a doornail.

"Lith, nice to meet you again. I wish our circumstances were better." Lith turned around, meeting the eyes of Colonel Varegrave.

"Colonel, this is an unexpected surprise. Is the army involved too?" Lith replied, giving him a small bow.

"Yes, of course. We cannot take any chances. I assume you already know everything." Lith nodded, asking him for help in finding his teammates.

"Not a problem." The Colonel touched his communication earpiece, requesting information. While waiting for the reply, he and Lith talked about the situation at hand.

"Can the Small World be used here?"

"Sadly, no." Varegrave sighed. "It works with principles similar to the academy's arrays, it's just more powerful. Those creatures would barely be slowed down, while we would be powerless.

Follow me, the show is about to begin."

Varegrave lead Lith to the town's outskirts where students and Professors were still waiting. Suddenly, the earth started to tremble and a rock plateau four meters (14 feet) high emerged from the ground.

Linjos had chosen a spot that allowed all those present to have a clear view and listen to his magically amplified voice.

"My dear students, this will be our home for the following days. The rules here are the same as the academy, but without lessons. At least for the fourth and fifth year students." At those words, most of the crowd erupted into groans, which Linjos ignored.

"You need to keep your hands and minds busy to avoid the stress from our current situation to eating you up from the inside. For this reason, fourth and fifth year students have two choices: help the Professors teaching their juniors the basics of magic, or mine magic crystals.

Both the endeavors will be awarded with magic crystals or points according to your contributions. I have assigned you your housing based on your social status and age, but don't misunderstand.

I did it only to prevent the seniors from harassing the younger students. All houses are identical and have the same comforts." More groans filled the air, many students spit on the ground, disgusted by Linjos's words.

They had hoped to get some fun at the expenses of the commoners.

"As Professor Ironhelm already pointed out, remember we are guests here. Allow me to introduce you to our Lord."

Scarlett the Scorpicores plunged from the skies, right beside Linjos, its landing as soft as a plume.

"I'll be brief, humans." Its voice was harsh but feminine, allowing the students to understand she was a female.

"Respect my rules and you won't even notice our presence. My rules are simple. One: do as Linjos says. Two: never harm a cub, human or otherwise, in my presence." One of the reasons the Scorpicores had decided to help the academy was that, having lost many of her offspring before turning into a Scorpicores, Scarlett had a soft spot for children.

The other was that, according to Linjos's words, the undead had too many abilities that reminded her of Abominations. She wanted to use that opportunity to check if the so-called god of death and her mysterious enemy were somehow related.

"Third: respect my underlings. They are risking their lives for you, those who do not appreciate their sacrifice can as well as die for what I care. If any of you needs help, whatever the reason, you can go to any of the magical beasts surrounding the city or my seconds in command."

Another monster descended from the skies on Scarlett's left side.

It was a giant wolf with two curved horns coming out of its forehead, right in front of the ears. Eagle-like feathered wings came out from his back and the tail seemed to be made out of dancing flames.

- "Ryman?"— Lith was shocked by his friend's arrival.

"He is Protector the Skoll. He will lead my troops in battle since I am forced to maintain all the protective arrays by myself." It was actually a lie. Many had contributed to securing the zone. Scarlett said that because she knew humans needed to be impressed to obtain their respect.

Also, it would make it easier to find out traitors since she had just made herself a target, pretending that her energies were all directed at the arrays.

A second creature appeared, this time slowly emerging from the ground.

It was a huge mass of shadows as big as a small house, which kept shapeshifting until it resembled a bear. Its only distinctive features were the glowing red eyes and its massive skeleton that glimpses could be caught of from time to time underneath the ever-changing darkness composing its body.

"This is Kalla the Wraith, our resident expert in the field of undead. She'll secure the perimeter in case things go south. Goodbye."

- "Kalla?" Her new appearance had shocked Lith, who was now fearing the worst.

"Is that an evolution or has she turned into an undead?"

"An evolution." Solus replied. "She now has a blue mana core, not a blood core. Yet judging from the red eyes and the black smoke exuding from her body, I'd say she's somehow related to them."—

The three Monsters disappeared as fast as they had arrived, leaving the center of the scene to Linjos again. With a clap of his hands, several boards materialized from thin air. Each one of them was a huge list of names in alphabetical order.

Beside each name, there was a number associated with one of the houses indicated on the map. Much to his surprise, Lith discovered that his housing was marked as one of an old noble family.

The Ernas couple had threatened the poor Headmaster, each one their own way, leaving him still pondering if to find Orion's yells or Jirni's subtle insinuations more menacing.

Having faced and lost against both in the past, he had made no objection to their request to keep together the five youths despite their different social status. When Archmage Deirus had also pressed Linjos towards such accommodation, there was very little he could do.

Putting together three members of an old noble family, albeit one in name only, one of a young noble family, and a commoner was something that he would never allow if not for their excellent relationship.

The hours passed until evening arrived. Lith worked in the mines, preferring to avoid both nobles and kids. Quylla and Yurial chose to help the Professors to teach the basics of magic.

Quylla was considering to pursuing an academic career. All the dangers she was going through were making her understand how much she loved her peaceful life inside the academy, away from bloodsheds and fights. Those things made her feel out of place.

Yurial's situation was different though. After having dined with his fiancé, his mind was a mess.

- "Libea has grown even more arrogant and stuck up than I remembered her. Thank the gods I didn't introduce her to Lith or Quylla, or we would have quarreled until her departure. I wish there was a way out of this engagement."— He thought.

The idea of spending his life with a girl he could barely stand, forced to search for his happiness in the arms of a mistress that he would be forced to keep hidden from the rest of the world, made him feel miserable.

Yurial had always known how caged his existence would be, but now that he could see its bars up close, he couldn't avoid searching for a loophole. Between spending his day alone in a dark mine and nurturing youths, he chose the second option.

- "I need to enjoy the sun as much as I can. Also, it will be a good practice for when I'll have children of my own."— He sighed.

Friya too went to the mines. Refining crystals required focus and isolation, allowing her to have a respite from the constant struggles with her inner demons. She was a noble, but didn't feel like one. She had a family, but it wasn't her own.

Her life was changing too fast and for the first time in her life, her future was a blur. Abandoning house Ernas would be a despicable act after all the attentions Orion had poured into her, treating Friya like she was his own.

It would also mean abandoning Quylla, the closest thing to a family she had left. Now, with the threat of the god of death, she didn't know if to be more afraid of her future or of her present.

Phloria followed Lith into the mines, spending most of her time watching him. Unlike the others, he didn't seem scared. Not even Balkor's shadow seemed capable of snuffing out the greed in his eyes whenever he met a high quality crystal.

She found it shallow and insensitive of him, yet incredibly soothing for her heart.

- "This is so stupid of me, but I don't know what else to do. My hands tremble too much at the idea of what is going to happen two nights from now to handle a crystal. Teaching is also useless.

I don't want to grow fond of people that could die anytime soon. I just wanted to quietly spend the rest of my time at the academy trying not to think about death. Yet it comes looking for me instead."

—

Phloria felt on the verge of tears, so she sat right next to Lith, putting her head on his shoulder. His steady heartbeat was like a lullaby to her ears, her hands stopped shaking, the fear faded away.

"Do you mind if I remain like this?"

"No, be my guest." Lith managed to kiss the top of her head without needing to stop the cutting process, making her giggle.

"At this point, you should put the crystal down and hold me, you jerk."

Lith was about to joke about how he would have never expected her to be a high-maintenance girlfriend when his ears perceived something.

"Do you hear that?" He asked, suddenly tensing up.

Phloria tried to listen. They weren't very deep in the mine but there were still a lot of echoes.

"No, what?"

"Screams."

Chapter 212 Dead on Time 2

Suddenly, all the communication amulets that were supposed to be offline projected the image of Headmaster Linjos, repeating the same message over and over.

"To all students, we are under attack. Return to your housing immediately. If that's not possible, seek shelter in the nearest building. To all students..."

While the others were still staring at the Headmaster's hologram, Lith grabbed Phloria's hand and made a rush for the exit.

"Wait, there are still people in the mine!" Phloria blurted, out trying to keep up with his pace.

"So what? Do you really think we can protect everyone? If they are stupid enough to freeze out of panic, they would not last long anyway!" Phloria was about to reply, but while squeezing Lith's fingers she remembered she didn't want to die.

Once outside, the scene in front of them seemed out of a post apocalyptic movie. People were screaming and running, trampling over all those that fell on the ground or moved too slow, hindering their escape.

The whole town was enveloped by a golden spherical barrier that was now visible to the naked eye. The mine entrance was a wide tunnel that opened in the ground near the outskirts, so it was covered by the array.

The sun was still visible above the horizon, yet black things were swarming the camp, attacking from all directions. Their bodies were naked, resembling only a human figure because they had arms and legs.

They had no facial feature, body hair, or reproductive organs, moving on all four with insect-like movements. Some had remained near the mine, ambushing those that were coming out of it.

A couple of undead jumped towards Lith and Phloria, emitting a humming sound.

"Stand b..." Lith tried to say.

"Stand behind me!" Phloria cut him short, pulling him back and slamming her conjured tower shield in the face of the first creature. The blue aura from Full Guard was already gushing all around her body, allowing Phloria to perceive every movement around her, leaving no blind spots.

After spending so much time with her father and Lith, she had learned to always expect the worst. Despite the run at breakneck speed, she had managed cast all her best spells, just in case.

Her estoc made short work of the second creature. The gemstones in the hilt emitted a bright light while releasing their power, allowing the blade to cut through their stone-hard skin like it was paper.

- "How can a girl that's always so afraid of dying charge forward like that?" Lith thought.

"Probably because she has someone important to protect." Solus pointed out. "There's something wrong with our assailants. Their movements are sloppy and predictable. Far from what Orion described to us."—

Lith didn't remain idle either. His eyes were checking out the surroundings while studying the creatures and Orion's blades at the same time.

There were no more undead targeting the couple, but Lith didn't miss how all of them had some kind of mystical ropes wrapped around their limbs, limiting their movements.

"The first barrier makes them weak! Let's go!" Phloria was about to move when Lith pulled her back.

"Watch out!" Several Plague Arrows, Lith's fastest darkness spell, struck the two undead laying on the ground.

Phloria only noticed then that each piece, no matter the size, was exuding black tendrils that allowed it to reattach itself to the rest of the body, making all the damage she had inflicted to them meaningless.

Even with their limbs and heads only connected by the tendrils, the creatures were already back at their peak condition. They had simply laid in ambush waiting for their prey.

The darkness contained in the bolts fought against the one reanimating the corpses, making their humming turn into a shrill sound.

Lith barely pretended to chant and form hand signs, quickly unleashing a barrage of Plague arrows on the still writhing creatures.

"Never lower your guard until the enemy turns to dust. Never!" Lith took out the shotel Orion had entrusted him from his pocket dimension.

The death cries of the undead had caused the other creatures to stop their attacks, hissing with hate at the sight of the two running away. They moved to intercept them, only to be cut down like ripe wheat.

Phloria's movements were small and precise. Years of practice allowed her swordplay to be shapeless, like water. Her form relentlessly changed according to the situation, switching from close combat shield bashing to quick stabs to exploit the range advantage the sword gave her.

With every strike, she released a pulse of darkness magic that was greatly amplified by the blade's magic, causing the small puncture wounds to turn into gaping holes. The lingering energy ate away the surrounding flesh, shortening the creatures' life span and making their regeneration slower.

Lith's movements were rough and amateurish. He only knew a few techniques learned on Earth alongside the basics that Phloria had taught him months ago. Yet he moved like a storm.

To the trained eye, his moves were too big, with lots of unnecessary movements, making them telegraphed. The undead were no experts though. Being short lived like butterflies, they relied on their superior physical prowess to overpower the opponent.

Thanks to the array restricting their movements, Lith was already faster and stronger than them in his natural state. Once he infused himself with fusion magic, the creatures could barely follow his movements.

A thick layer of darkness magic engulfed his shotel and it only grew stronger with each strike. Solus had linked herself to the blade, keeping an eye on its pseudo core, preventing the sword's control gemstones from overloading from the massive amount of mana Lith was pouring into it.

Each creature that barred his way received at least ten slashes, their bodies turning to ashes before they could even notice having been hit.

Phloria was too busy handling her share of undead to pay too much attention to him, throwing only the occasional glance to be sure Lith was all right. His technique was a mess, but the results left her in awe every time.

If the enemy closed in, the sword would mow them down in a flash. If they retreated, bolts of darkness would send them sprawling on the ground, shrieking in agony.

- "How the heck does he manage to cast that fast even while wielding a sword? His magic storing rings should already be depleted."— Her confusion didn't make Phloria lose focus. More and more creatures were coming out of the forest, closing any gap in the encirclement as soon as it formed.

"There's no end to them!" She barely had the time to yell that hell broke loose.

Professor Ironhelm appeared while riding M'Rook the Ry, followed by a pack of magical beasts. He was wielding a sword and a shield, but with the Ry protecting him, he could focus on the attack, wiping out dozens of undead in a matter of seconds.

"Run away, kids! Don't look back! I'll take care of the survivors."

Lith sprinted forward, storing the sword back in the pocket dimension and taking Phloria's hand to be certain of not losing her amid the chaos. The closer they got to the town, the more magical beasts they encountered.

Past a certain point, the bindings grew so strong that the undead became even slower than an average human, making it child's play for beasts and Professors alike to turn them into mincemeat.

Phloria regretted leaving behind her fellow students, but Lith didn't allow her to slow down for even a second. They reached their house, stopping only to open the door and ran inside as soon as the magic lock recognized them.

Even under the adrenaline rush, they couldn't help but stare at their new surroundings. The inside was much bigger than the outside. The hallway they were in was at least one hundred meters (328 feet) long and five (16.4 feet) wide.

It was a dimensional magic masterpiece, stretching the space enough to turn the small cottage into a single floor hotel. Each side of the corridor had ten doors, leading to as many apartments. The furniture was rustic. Aside from a long carpet on the floor and magical stones to light it, the hallway was empty.

They couldn't care less, starting to search for their name tags on the doors. They would have been quicker if they checked one side each, but their hands seemed to be glued together.

Their room was almost a replica of the one they lived in at the academy, just five times bigger. The furniture consisted of five beds with as many nightstands and closets. There were only two bathrooms though. One for the girls, one for the boys.

"What took you so long?" Friya asked them with a tired expression on her face.

An unbearable sense of guilt gripped Phloria's stomach. She had completely forgotten that her sister was with them in the mine. She hugged Friya so hard she squeezed the air out of her lungs.

"I'm so sorry, sis. I didn't mean to leave you behind! I'm so glad you are all right. Please forgive me." Phloria sobbed, leaving Friya flabbergasted.

Lith instead was amazed by how she was still without a scratch, just like them, but had managed to beat them to the house without even breaking a sweat. Even he was still panting from the mad rush.

"What are you talking about? You'll cry later, Quylla and Yurial need our help."

She pointed at the two youths, laying on their beds. Their uniforms were torn up in multiple spots, showing the signs of a lost fight. Their skin was deadly pale, their breath was short and shallow.

"Those idiots actually ran to get to the house, almost getting killed. They should have Blinked, just like us!" At those words, Lith and Phloria became beet red from embarrassment. In the heat of the moment, they had completely forgotten about the spell, relying by instinct on much cruder methods to escape.

"I already closed their wounds, but I can't give them any more life force without endangering myself. They need your help, Lith."

Lith nodded, chanting the spell and using Invigoration at the same time to check his companions' conditions. The situation was more dire than Friya believed. Not only was their life force fading away, but also some kind of toxin was attacking their mana cores.

Lith was shocked by the discovery, the god of death was supposed to be a fake mage. He neutralized the toxin, extracting it from their bodies before injecting part of his life force. Their breathing immediately became regular, their complexion healthy.

Friya was about to ask about the liquid floating over Lith's hand when someone knocked on the door.

"Is there any injured here? I'm Professor Vastor, let me in please."

Professor Vastor was still as round and bald as an egg, his waxed handlebar mustaches were still flawless despite the sweat running from his head.

"Oh gods, not my precious stars!" He rushed to the beds as soon as he recognized his students. Only after performing a complete check up, Vastor sighed in relief, sitting on a bed to catch his breath.

"Great job removing the toxins, guys. Most people would miss it until it's too late. Those goddamned undead freaks. Only a madman would create such creatures. Too dangerous and wasteful." His comments left them speechless, but only for a second.

"Who cares for their efficiency!" Phloria yelled. "Are Quylla and Yurial going to be all right?"

"What the heck happened?" Friya joined the fray. "Wasn't the attack supposed to happen only during the anniversary?"

"Can I keep the toxin?" Lith chimed in, storing half of it in his pocket dimension, just in case. "I would only use it for research purposes. I promise."

- "I wish I had a body to bash your head right now."— Solus scolded him.

The girls glared at him, clearly sharing Solus's outrage.

Vastor laughed out loud, dissolving the tension.

"Yes, of course they are all right. Otherwise I wouldn't be so calm. As for your other questions, I only have bad news. First, every time the god of death changes his target, he launches probing attacks before the anniversary. Consider today's invasion as a rehearsal.

Otherwise we wouldn't have moved so far in advance. I wonder how he managed to find us that quickly."

"That was just probing?" Phloria felt weak in the knees.

Vastor nodded.

"Well, yeah. Those are hardly greater undead. No magical powers, limited intelligence, no strategy at all. They simply swarmed the camp to test our defenses and reaction time. As for you, mister Lith, my answer is a no.

"One hundred points for extracting the toxin in such an unaltered state. The alchemists will wet themselves in excitement when they see it." Vastor's eyes shined like a kid unwrapping his Christmas present while storing the toxin in an alchemic vial.

"It was a group effort." Lith said, hoping to quench the three girls' anger.

- "Nice try, Scrooge. I don't buy it." Solus pouted. –

"Then one hundred points to each of you." Vastor said, too happy to even bother to remember that Phloria wasn't part of the Healer specialization.

Phloria and Friya smiled, accompanying the Professor to the door. One could never get enough points.

- "Two out of three is still a good result." Lith thought. –

"Jerk!" They said to Lith in unison as soon as the door was closed.

"Girls, the rooms aren't soundproof for security reasons. Wait for me to get away before beating him." Vastor yelled.

- "Or not."–

Chapter 213 What Goes Around Comes Around

Griffon Kingdom, Royal Palace. After the attack.

King Meron had sought an audience with Tyris for weeks, but her private chambers had always remained sealed. After returning from the Blood Desert, she had been too busy dismantling the secret lab first and checking the records about who had studied Arthan's Madness later to bother with his yearly worries.

Finding clues about the identity of the mastermind behind the Abominations was her priority, especially since the Council had washed their hands of the matter. She only yielded because of his unrelenting pestering of her 24/7.

King Meron couldn't help but think about Count Lark and how he must have felt after being rejected over and over by the Court just a few months prior.

Tyris's throne room was a perfect replica of the one the Royal family used during social events, except for the fact that every piece of furniture was made of stone. Even the throne itself was no exception.

Carpets, tapestries, even the ceremonial armors along the hallway seemed to have been carved down to the finest detail. More than once, the King had wondered if there was a secret behind the second throne room and which one of them was sitting on the real throne.

"First Queen, forgive my insistence, but I bring dire news." Meron knelt on the ground even though he knew that formalities were meaningless to her. Yet in his desperation, he wasn't willing to leave a single stone unturned.

"Let me guess, someone has died today." She snorted without stopping to look at the archives.

"The god of death..." A furious glance from Tyris stopped him.

"There are no gods. I know that all too well. Use his real name instead of that pompous title." The First Queen hated how easily men handed out godhood. The Great Mother, as humans and beasts alike referred to the planet's will, was the closest thing to a god she had ever met.

At the same time, it was the most indifferent and uncaring being she had ever interacted with, only thinking about the bigger picture and ignoring the single individuals, even the Guardians, unless they served to its purpose.

"This evening, Ilyum Balkor has attacked all the six great academies at once. Thank the g..." Another glare made Meron curse at his own stupid tongue.

"Thank heavens the number of casualties is low, at least for those that followed Linjos's protocol. The Earth and Crystal Griffon didn't though. Almost all the Professors died during the attack."

"Why should I care?" Tyris snorted, making the room tremble.

"I told you royal idiots centuries ago to follow Leegaain's advice and reform the nobility and academy system, but it was never the right time. Famine, internal strife, the royal baby. Any excuse was good to postpone your duties.

You and your ancestors have made your bed, now lie in it."

"Your Majesty, your subjects, innocent kids at that, are dying at the hand of a madman! You must do something!" He stood up, hurt by her indifference and most of all, by the truth behind her words.

"A madman? What if it was your family to have died for a practical joke? What if everything and everyone you loved had been defiled, gutted and left to be burned alive? What would have you done in his shoes?"

Her eyes were reduced to two fiery slits brimming with mana.

Meron didn't reply. The only way not to prove her point was lying, but she would notice, making his effort useless.

"Please, think of the children. They are innocent!" He played his last card.

"Innocent? Rotten apples from rotten trees. Wasn't Balkor a child too? What about all those that died that day and keep dying up to date because nobles value their status more than human life?

"My answer is still no. I will not solve the problems that you created by ignoring my advice. Otherwise I might as well take back the throne and do your job for you. By letting so many monstrous acts slide, you have created a monster.

Think about it, the next time someone asks for a royal pardon."

Before King Meron could reply, he found himself back in his bedroom. His sudden appearance almost made Sylpha stab him out of surprise.

"The first day has yet to pass and so many died already." King Meron sobbed, seeking comfort in his wife's embrace.

"We are alone. Our goddess has forsaken us."

Lith spent an awkward supper. All of his companions were having a hard time letting his blunder slide.

"Thanks for saving my life, man. Yet I would have appreciated more concern for my well-being and less for academic research." Yurial sighed, knowing it was like talking to a wall.

"You guys are blowing this story out of proportions. I wasn't concerned because there was no need to. I'm the best diagnostician I know, besides Manohar. I had triple checked you two from head to toe and removed every single drop of poison.

What was I supposed to be worried about? The softness of your pillows?"

Being scolded by his friends didn't bother him as much as Solus's mind pouting did. She was supposed to be on his side, not theirs.

"Believe me, no one appreciates your professionalism as much as I do, but if you don't want to end up like Manohar, you must learn to shut up from time to time." Phloria kept playing with her food. The near death experience had made her lose her appetite.

"Phloria, do you realize we are at war?" Lith stared intently at her.

"That poison could save our lives in the future, I had to try to butter up Vastor while I still had the chance. Now everything is lost. Sorry if I prioritize keeping you guys alive rather than coddle your feelings." He snarled loud enough for everyone to hear.

They looked at him, realizing that maybe Lith was a jerk, but a jerk with a damn good reason.

"You really sound like mother." His words reminded Quylla of the creepy lesson Lady Ernas had imparted her before leaving. About how and where to strike humans and beast alike to inflict the maximum pain.

"Your bedside manners are terrible, but thanks for saving my life."

"Thank Friya instead. She almost fainted to keep you two alive until our arrival."

"Thanks, Friya. You are the best sister I could hope for." Quylla embraced Friya, relieving the cold grip she always felt clenching her soul and making Phloria's gut twist in a knot at the same time.

She still couldn't forgive herself for forgetting about Friya when they were still in the mine. She felt like the worst sister ever.

The mood in the makeshift canteen was gloomy. A few students that had ignored Linjos's orders and got out of the town had died during the attack. Many others had been gravely injured and because the poison hadn't been promptly cleansed, their lives were hanging on a thread.

A sudden wail followed by sobbing coming from the infirmary told them that another one didn't make it. A small boy ran from the field hospital, hugging M'Rook and hiding his face into the thick fur.

The Ry let the kid be, gently stroking his head with his muzzle.

- "Poor kid. His friend must have succumbed to the poison." Solus said.

"Yeah. Something that damages the mana core is unheard of since we faced those parasites. Now you understand why we need a sample of that poison? We cannot trust anyone for our survival." Lith was still angry at her.

"Did you really have to bargain over your friends' still recovering bodies? Why didn't you store all the poison instead of half if it's so important?"

Solus knew he was right, but she didn't want for Lith to keep trampling the feelings of his companions without even a tinge of remorse.

"Because Vastor knows of the plague and the role I played in it. Because by giving him that half, I once again proved my value and showed my alleged loyalty to the Kingdom. It will earn me merits and points. As simple as that."—

Solus sighed.

- "In times of peace, I would be right. Right now, we are at war with death itself though. My mindset is a liability. I hope that Phloria manages to help Lith keep his humanity. It's in moments like this that I feel he is slipping away."—

Unlike the others, Lith wasn't scared. On the contrary, he was very calm. In his mind, the other students were just tools. He planned to use them to raise his status or as sacrificial pawns. He only cared for those at his table.

Some of his plans crept Solus out.

"Long time no see, Scourge." Kalla appeared beside them, making the group flinch.

"You have changed a lot from our last encounter, Kalla." Lith replied without stopping to eat.

"Yes, and so have you. When this is over, we have much to talk about."

Kalla disappeared after fusing with the shadow of their table, leaving Lith eager for a new lesson about true Necromancy.

"Scourge?" Yurial asked.

"Yeah, it's a long story." Lith sighed, suddenly not so happy anymore. He hated being forced to share bits of his past.

After returning to their room, Lith told them about his first encounter with Kalla and how magical beasts had named him "Scourge". He told them only the truth, but omitted all the parts about true magic and learning Necromancy from the Byk before her evolution.

"Why have you never told us magical beasts can talk?" Phloria felt a little hurt by his lack of trust.

"Because they trusted me not to." He replied.

"Also, because you wouldn't have believed me. Unlike Phillard, usually they are very careful about who they talk to. They probably would have kept silent, if not for the emergency." The memory of the Kroxy made them shudder.

Everyone was dead tired, so they decided to go to sleep early. They needed all of their strength for the attack that would come the following day.

Everyone was flabbergasted at Lith's pajamas.

"Are you really going to sleep with your uniform on?" Because of the mixed accommodation, Yurial had brought a thick nightgown.

"It's more practical this way. If anything happens, I don't have to waste time changing. Also, thanks to its magic, the uniform is always spotless, so why not?"

"You really are like my dad." Phloria laughed. "Every time he comes back from the battlefield, mom always complains about how hard it is to make him sleep without his uniform on and the sword on the bedside."

After everyone had their turn mocking Lith for his paranoia, they turned off the lights. Lith had waited all day for that moment.

He took the shotel out of the pocket dimension, using Invigoration to start collecting data about its pseudo core and how the mana crystals interacted with the spell matrix structure.

He had just started taking notes, after testing and probing the internal structure, when Solus warned him.

- "Watch out! Someone is getting up."— Cursing his bad luck, Lith put everything back in the pocket dimension, pretending to be asleep. There was almost no light in the room, but he was still able to see.

- "False alarm. Quylla went to Friya's bed. Probably she is too scared to sleep alone tonight."— Lith was still sighing in relief when everything went crazy.

Someone was pulling the blankets, cuddling up to him.

"Make a little room for me, jerk." Phloria's whisper sounded like thunder to his ears. He quickly used Hush to prevent the others from noticing what was happening.

"Are you crazy? What do you think you are doing?" Keeping his hands under control was a mammoth task. He couldn't stop his mind from picturing her naked body that, for some reason, he had never managed to forget.

"Don't worry. I used all the spells you taught me to move unnoticed. It happened during the mock exam. Do you remember it?" Her hands caressed his hair, causing his hand to tremble and his nether regions to go into an uproar.

"Of course I do, but I don't think you should be here." He kept whispering despite both of them knowing of the Hush spell.

"Then when would be the right moment? So many people died today. Quylla and Yurial barely escaped death. What if I die tomorrow?"

Solus was so envious of Phloria. Even if she had a body, she would never be so decisive.

Phloria's words made sense, so Lith embraced her while trying to kiss her, finding two unexpected surprises.

"After mocking me for it, are you wearing your uniform too?" He said with her hand pressing against his mouth.

"Your reasoning was flawless. Also, what did you expect? That I would jump on you in my birthday suit? You really have a perverted mind." Lith didn't reply, stopping his attempts for intimacy.

"Sorry, but no kisses. I don't know if I would be able to hold myself back if we start." She blushed violently, searching for his embrace again.

"I'm not ready for that. I just want to sleep beside you, not with you. Is it fine with you?" The sweet scent of her hair was driving him insane.

"No problem." He lied through his teeth, counting backward from one hundred while reminding himself of their age gap.

Contrary to his expectations, Phloria fell asleep almost instantly. Hours passed, Lith had constantly to keep himself in check while whining for all the lost time. There was no way he could study Orion's sword in that situation.

Then, a loud explosion shook the house to its foundations. Inhuman and human screams filled the air. Everyone got up in a rush, something was clawing through the walls and the ceiling at the same time.

Chapter 214 Hidden Agenda

Something was swarming the house from all directions, making it tremble like during an earthquake.

"They are disrupting the dimensional spell that keeps the house together!" Quylla yelled, running along with Friya to the bathroom to change their clothes.

"If it keeps like this, the place will either implode or explode. We need to get out of here and fast!"

"Ready when you are!" Phloria, like Lith, only had to take out her shoes from the dimensional amulet to be ready for action.

"I really hate being the fifth wheel!" Yurial rushed to the other bathroom, cursing his own bad luck. He knew that Friya and Quylla weren't romantically involved, but after seeing Lith and Phloria sleeping together, he would have paid his weight in gold to switch places with Quylla.

His blood was boiling to the point that he craved to kill some undead, just to blow off some steam.

- "Every time Phloria makes a move on me, something happens. If it wasn't for Balkor being on a schedule, I'd say the universe is c*ckblocking me!"—Lith thought, checking the outside hallway.

It was full of students. Some were panicking so much, they were running around while still wearing nightgowns.

The communication amulets came back to life once again.

"To all students, we are under attack. Return to your rooms immediately. If the necessity arises, a Warp Step will lead you to safety. Please, be ready to defend yourselves. To all students..."

Linjos's hologram was the wake-up call they needed. They all went back to their rooms, dressing up as fast as possible.

When the tremors intensified, a Warp Steps appeared in the middle of the room as promised, leading them to the Town plaza. The moon was still high and the sky was clear, allowing them to witness the horror unfolding around them.

The black creatures were back, but this time their numbers were beyond calculation. Thanks to his heightened sense, Lith could see that they were not the same as the last time. They had a lipless mouth, filled with multiple rows of fang-like teeth and a single red eye shining in the middle of the forehead.

The mystical bindings were still restricting them, but they were simply too many compared to the defenders. Each beast and Professor would kill dozens of undead and hold back twice as much, yet many still managed to bypass them.

They were getting closer to the students by the second.

"F*ck waiting!" Phillard the Kroxy yelled in outrage.

"You hatchlings wait here and prepare to fight. I'll try to slow them down as long as I can."

Those present were panicking to the point that even a humanoid alligator 2.5 meters (8'2") high had managed to go unnoticed. Phillard took his axes and charged forward. His fighting style was crude but effective.

Each swing of his weapons would cleave several creatures in half at the same time. Those that managed to regenerate would have their head bitten off and gulped down. After that, the corpses would quickly fade away.

"Man, you taste like sh*t, but I had worse and lived to tell the tale!" The Kroxy laughed merrily while slaughtering everything that dared to come close to him.

Even when he missed a target, his weapons would make spikes of earth or ice erupt from the ground, impaling those that had managed to dodge, making them easy marks for the following attacks.

Lith didn't like that situation at all. Linjos had clearly placed all the students at the center of the arrays to better protect them, but at the same time, if the enemy managed to get past all the defensive lines, they would be trapped without a way out.

- "Something isn't right. Solus, can you spot where Scarlett, Ryman, and Kalla are? Why are they not taking part in the battle? They are supposed to be our heavy artillery." Lith thought.

"Sorry, I can't. Either they are hiding or they are too far away." Solus replied. –

Countless creatures kept swarming out of the forest surrounding the mining town. Lith noticed Colonel Varegrave standing on a roof with Captain Kilian right next to him. When they finished chanting, several dozen fireballs with a radius of ten meters (33 feet) rained from the sky like falling stars.

Each of them produced a loud explosion, turning the army of creatures into chunks of meat and black gas. When the smoke from the explosions dissipated, a new wave of undead entered the array.

"How are we supposed to fight against so many of them? Where is the Scorpicores? Where is Linjos?" Varegrave yelled in desperation.

Scarlett, Linjos, and the most powerful individuals of both the forest and the academy were watching the fight from a distance. Linjos and Scarlett were deep in a coded conversation that made sense only to the two of them.

"Why are we still here?" Protector growled. "The cubs need us!"

"Patience, Protector." Scarlett's tone was calm and confident.

"If we rush in, we would just follow the enemy's script. Remember that this is still the first day. What do you think of the enemy's plan?"

"What plan? He is trying to beat us with sheer numbers. Those creatures are mindless!" Protector snarled.

"My point exactly." Scarlett nodded. "They would make a great vanguard to exhaust us before the final attack, yet he is sending them out now. Our enemy is supposed to be a genius, yet his plan is apparently idiotic."

"Scarlett is right." Linjos chimed in, seeing that most of the Professors didn't seem to trust the Scorpicores's wisdom.

"If Balkor keeps his cards hidden, we must do the same. At least until we understand his endgame." None liked the idea of using the students as bait, but it was the only option they had to force the god of death to reveal his hand.

Watching the battle unfolding in front of his eyes, Lith felt helpless. He had a very limited number of options. Joining the fight would be his last resort. Because of the witnesses, he couldn't go all out.

Even if he did, the enemies were just too many. The second option was to provide cover fire for his allies. The last one was running away.

"F*ck Linjos!" He yelled making the group huddle up.

"We need a contingency plan. Friya, you are the best dimensional mage among us. How far can you Warp us away?"

Friya pondered for a while before answering.

"I could get us back to the academy, but it's too risky. There is a zone of the forest I'm the most familiar with since I spent most of my mock exam there. It's about ten kilometers from here. Is it okay?"

"It's perfect. Remember to close the portal right behind us."

"What about the others?" Quylla shuddered at the idea of leaving their juniors behind.

"First, Friya can't hold it that long. Second, what's the point of that? The creatures would follow us and the battle would just change location. I'm talking about saving our lives, not playing heroes."

Lith's tone was harsh like he was scolding a pampered child.

No one made further objections, but the mood became even more gloomy.

- "Solus, there's something wrong with Balkor's plan. I can't put my finger on it, but I'm sure there's a catch."—

Lith took out his staff from his dimensional pocket, unleashing a barrage of ice shards that once they hit a target, they would expand locking it into place. Once paralyzed, the undead were easily dispatched by the beasts or the Professors fighting in the front line.

It was just a way of stalling for time, but it allowed him to notice that something was wrong.

Every time he cast the spell, more and more ice shards would miss their target.

"What the heck?" Lith blurted, a crazy idea was taking form in his mind.

Suddenly, he dashed outside the Town square, going shoulder to shoulder with Phillard.

"What are you doing here? This is no place for hatchlings!" The Kroxy was panting heavily, his body covered in injuries. The creatures were capable of spitting a toxic substance that was seeping through his wounds, slowly sapping his strength.

To make things worse, they were also capable of storing and compressing their life force in the forehead, shooting it out like a laser. Doing it made them weaker and shortened their lifespan, but with each strike, their enemy was more and more debilitated. Soon a new wave of undead would come and Phillard would be too weak to stop them.

The creatures had no survival instinct, they were just obeying a single order: kill.

"For conquest!" Lith heard one of the creatures say right before jumping on Phillard and self-detonating, using the last of its darkness magic to cripple the enemy.

"For revenge!" Another said, shooting a beam of darkness magic before turning to smoke.

"For Balkor!" The undead chanted together before rushing in for the finishing strike.

Lith touched Phillard, removing the toxin while healing his wounds and filling him with life force at the same time. He could give him only two Invigoration breaths worth of energy, but it was all that it needed.

"I take back everything I said, but now take cover!" Between the arrays weakening them and the Kroxy's renewed strength, the undead were no match for him again. Lith kept close to him, using air magic to deflect the toxic spits and earth magic to shield Phillard from the darkness rays from time to time.

His real aim was studying the fight up close.

Meanwhile, the rest of his group was worried to death. Friya could use force to prevent Quylla from helping Lith, but Yurial could only talk Phloria out of it. She was way taller and stronger than him. If he ticked her off, Phloria was likely to send him flying.

"If he needs our help, he'll ask for it." Yurial tried to block her line of sight to the battlefield with his body.

"If you go out there, you'll only become a burden to him."

"Are you saying I should just stay here like a damsel in distress?" She roared.

"We all are. In distress, I mean. Not damsels." Yurial shrugged. "Worst case scenario, Lith will Blink here and Friya will take us away."

Phloria snorted. Suddenly death wasn't so scary anymore.

- "What meaning can life possibly have if I have to spend it alone? I can't back off every time I'm not sure of winning. Not when that crazy head is fighting for us all."—

Lith was actually fighting for himself. With the contingency plan already in motion, he was certain to be able to leave anytime he wanted. The god of death was the strongest fake mage he had ever met.

Even by fighting his proxies, Lith had already learned a lot about Necromancy's true potential and was now eager to see if his idea about Balkor's plan was correct.

Phloria's feelings were clouding her judgment, but at the same time, they were helping her to realize that the only thing she had to fear was fear itself. Yurial noticed her inner conflict, so he played his last card.

"Look, sometimes the most difficult thing to do is doing nothing. We are just children caught up in a war we didn't even know about, while Lith is... Lith. If you remain here and something bad happens, you can Blink in and out and take him to safety.

If you go there, well, we'll have to save both of you before getting out of here." Phloria nodded, moving her hand away from the hilt of her sword while flexing her fingers. She had to be ready to step in.

"By the Great Mother." Scarlett blurted out after finally uncovering the last piece of the puzzle. She quickly explained everything to those present, leaving them in awe.

"This god of death is too dangerous." Protector said. "We need to end this battle fast!"

"My thought exactly." Scarlett nodded. "We must resolve everything before he can suspect that we are aware of his endgame."

"How do you plan to do it exactly?" Linjos asked. "I mean without revealing our hand."

"It's actually quite simple." Scarlett grinned. "Balkor is not the only one that can think outside of the box."

Meanwhile, Lith needed only a final test to prove his theory. He asked Phillard to let through one undead at a time and the Kroxy delivered. Lith used one of the basic forms Phloria had taught him, easily killing the enemy with a few strikes.

He used the same form, again and again, noticing how the next one would manage to dodge his strikes and ignore his feints, gaining the upper hand until he added a new set of movements.

"Son of a b*tch!" He yelled after destroying the tenth undead in a row. He pretended to use one of his rings, cutting it to pieces with air magic before bombarding it with darkness magic from his free hand.

"Phillard, stop! There's something you need to know!"

"Oh gods no!" Scarlett's enhanced hearing had allowed her to listen to Lith swearing, moving her surveillance mirror just in time to see the results of his latest experiment.

"Kalla, go! Before the cub ruins everything!"

Kalla nodded, disappearing in the shadows.

"I told you that Scourge was not to be underestimated." Her voice faded away along with her body.

"What scourge is she talking about? The undead?" Linjos had been talking with the Professors, so he was unaware of the latest events.

"Wish I knew the answer." Scarlett replied, pondering about what Lith's real nature could possibly be.

Chapter 215 Hidden Agenda 2

Kalla's arrival was loud like thunder and fast like lightning.

"Rise my legions!" A command from her voice and two taps on the ground was all that it took for the undead army buried under the mining town to awake and fight for their master.

The bulk of her force was made up of Skeletal Knights, a class of undead that was not only physically superior to normal skeletons, but also could be imparted skills and techniques their maker was capable of executing.

Their strongest point was the ability to wield and use equipment properly. The academy had provided a huge number of enchanted weapons and armors, making them a force to be reckoned with.

Kalla's elite forces were the Wights, black hooded figures molded out of darkness magic and hatred. They would either fly or float mid air. Aside from their hands and heads, they had no body. Whatever they touched, it would wither and die.

Because of the unforgiving nature of the arrays, Kalla's thralls were weakened as well while under the mystical dome.

Both armies were fearless and unrelenting, but only one was backed by its own master. While Balkor's troops grew weaker with every passing second, Kalla's army was constantly fueled with new energy thanks to her constant use of Invigoration.

Every time one of her soldiers fell, she would simply raise it again after fixing the damage it had sustained.

Her mastery of Necromancy also allowed her to possess the bodies of her undead, making them use darkness magic like she was among them. Balkor's minions were designed to fight humans, hence they were ineffective against other undead who weren't affected by their aura of fear, the toxic spit, or the venom in their claws.

The battle ended as quickly as it had begun, with a one sided slaughter. Scarlett's plan had been a complete success. There had been no casualties. Only a few among the beasts and the soldiers had been injured, but they were promptly cured and brought back to their peak condition.

Kalla threw Lith a very meaningful glance, freezing him on the spot.

- "What a dirty son of a gun!" Lith thought, realizing the blunder he had almost made.

"Not only his creatures share a hive mind, learning about all of our tactics and security measures each time they force us to employ a new one, but they all also act as Balkor's eyes and ears!" -

Blood Desert, Balkor's secret lab

"What in the Great Mother's name has just happened?" Ilyum Balkor couldn't believe his own eyes.

"That bear-thing seems to be a Necromancer too, but none of its work makes sense. Only greater undead can use magic, yet its creatures defied such basic principle time and time again. Also, how could it possibly raise so many corpses at once?

It takes me a whole year to prepare this many troops, not to mention I need to put them into stasis to prevent them from burning out of energy. Things couldn't get any worse!"

Balkor Warped out of the lab, inwardly listing all the setbacks he had met so far.

First, there were those arrays that limited the strength of his troops, but that was a secondary issue. He had long learned how to adjust his thralls' defenses to ignore most of those annoying Warden formations.

Second, he had never taken into account that magical beasts could meddle in human squabbles. There was only a limited number of modifications he could apply to his creatures between each attack. Now he was forced to split his focus into three.

Anti human undead were easy prey for a magical beast and sitting ducks against other undead. Last, but not least, the battle had ended before he could collect any data about his opponents' real capabilities.

They had won relying on basic military strategies and on the hidden undead army, not letting him catch even a glimpse of the White Griffon's Archmages' strongest spells. The secret of Balkor's success had always been his meticulous preparation and data collection, but this time he had come back empty handed.

Walking back to his home in the Forgotten Plume tribe, he couldn't help but smile seeing his kids running towards him with their little arms spread in the air.

"Dad, dad! Where have you been?" Cyrl wanted his father to hold him and Balkor was happy to comply.

"I was paying my respects to your grandparents, but now I'm all yours. Let's see what mom has prepared for dinner." He walked inside his tent, holding the child in his arms.

Ilyum Balkor had many things to be happy about. After the first raid, the students of the Crystal and Earth Griffon had fled, leaving the academies empty. Balkor had an easy time butchering the remaining defense forces and destroying the power cores with minimal losses.

Two out of the six great academies were now just a bunch of stones, unable to nurture mages anymore. The remaining academies were proving to be a tough cookie, but he still had two days to complete his life's work.

Capturing and studying Abominations had been a mammoth task. Fusing part of them with his undead had proved to be even more difficult. Balkor wasn't new to pain and was more than willing to make some personal sacrifices.

Controlling all those undead at once, spying on his enemies' every move, using so many Warping arrays to move his troops, was too much for a single man.

Each attack took away years of Balkor's life span, but he didn't care. His job was almost done. After that, he would forget about the accursed Griffon Kingdom and spend the time he had left watching his children grow.

After the end of the battle, all the students rejoiced together, chanting Kalla's name like it was a good luck charm. At that moment, no one cared about her being a Wraith-like monster, nor about her army being quite similar to the enemy one.

For a few hours, nobles and commoners alike loved her like a hero, setting aside differences concerning social status, humans, or beasts. The only thing that mattered was being alive and well.

The students returned to their apartments, discovering that while some houses had been heavily damaged, they were already self repairing at a speed visible to the naked eye.

The damage sustained hadn't compromised the structural integrity of the houses nor of the dimensional magic, allowing everyone to go back to the safety of their rooms. The night was still very young, only an hour had passed since the start of the attack.

Lith's group had tried more than once to question him about what he was going to yell earlier, but he refused to speak until they arrived at their destination.

- "Solus, it's impossible for Balkor to hear us while we are in here, right?" Lith asked.

"Based on what we know about dimensional magic, I'd say yes.

Even if you are right and every undead thrall is a recording device, we are alone now. This room is enveloped in the dimensional and the protective enchantments. It's like being in a parallel dimension."

"My thought exactly." –

Lith chanted the Hush spell anyway, just to be safe. He and Solus could still be wrong, but even if that wasn't the case, he didn't trust anyone outside the room. Not after how Kalla had looked at him.

Lith sighed, taking away his shoes and lying on his bed while trying to put together all the pieces of the puzzle. He was searching for the right words to make the others understand his intuition without freaking out. At least not too much.

He was still thinking about it, drumming with his fingers on the nearby wall, when Phloria coddled up to him, drawing the gazes of all those present.

"What are you staring at?" She rebuked them. "You already saw that I was sleeping beside him, there's no reason to wait for the lights to be turned off again. I want to spend all the time that I can with my boyfriend, whether you like it or not."

- "I guess I am not going to study my shotel anytime soon."– Lith sighed again, while his hand moved like it had a life of its own, caressing Phloria's back and hair. She snuggled even tighter to him, emitting a purring sound of delight.

"So, what's all this secrecy about?" Yurial was having a hard time taking the edge off of his voice. He had never felt so envious and alone in his whole life.

Lith explained to them how he was certain that Balkor's so called 'lesser undead' weren't mindless creatures. Each of them was part of a hive mind that had collected data about all the spells and techniques used during both assaults.

"I also noticed that this time the array was less effective. The creatures were still very nimble and strong despite being so close to the town square.

"My hypothesis is that during the third attack, the array will be mostly useless and that when Balkor will use his real ace in the hole, his undead will have the collective memories of all the previous attacks, making most of our strategies obsolete."

"Good gods! How did you notice that?" Not even such a frightening piece of news managed to stop Friya from staring at Phloria in envy. Not because of Lith. Unlike the others, she still had a hard time accepting his switch-like personality.

One second he was a caring friend, the next one he turned into a murdering machine.

The jury was still out on which one was his real face. The reason for her envy was that she had never been that close to anyone. After so many near death experiences, she was starting to long for someone she could blindly trust, just like Phloria did.

"Because I suck as a swordsman and I completely fell for Balkor's 'mindless creatures' charade." Lith explained.

"Even during my first clash with the undead, I noticed that hitting them became harder with each one I killed. I didn't think much of it until tonight when they started to dodge my ice shards simply because I was too conceited to bother changing their pattern."

"So?" Quylla soldiered up without averting her gaze, despite being reduced to a lump of envy and hindsight about her lack of decisiveness.

"So, while people like Phloria, Friya, or Phillard are so good with their weapons that the skill gap between them and the lesser undead is insurmountable, I suck so bad at it that I could notice it closing every time I used one of the few forms I know."

"Where does that leave us?" Phloria mumbled with a sleepy voice that was in heavy contrast with the mood of the room. During the last attack, she had truly feared of she might lose Lith for good, so she was determined to make her move once the others went to sleep.

Yet everyone could soon hear a soft snoring coming from her.

"In a very rough patch." Lith replied to the sleeping Phloria, casting Hush on her ears to prevent her from waking up because of the conversation.

"We have only two options: one, Linjos and Scarlett have a very good plan that will save us all with a minimum contribution on our side. Two, we run away as soon as option one turns out to be wishful thinking.

"There are very few things I'm not confident to be able to kill, but sadly a whole army of lesser undead or a few greater ones crafted by a mad genius are among them."

The room's occupants sighed in unison. They had hoped for another one of Lith's miracles, but it seemed he was out of stock. They decided to go back to bed to catch some sleep before the next attack.

The following morning, despite being the only one that had slept like a log until the breakfast call, Phloria was in a bad mood.

- "I can't believe I missed my chance like that. Now I have to wait until after the next attack to get him in the right mood. I can't jump on Lith in the middle of the day like any Yurial would."— She thought.

Suddenly, the communication amulets lit up in unison, projecting Linjos's image.

"Good morning, dear students. Today's activities will take place just like yesterday, with only one difference. We cannot risk another surprise attack, so I instruct you to go back to your housing after the afternoon call, while the sun is still high.

Please, do not go out of town as your fallen companions did. I already lost enough students."

After the Headmaster's hologram disappeared, the dining room resounded with: "Morons!". The students were growing closer to each other and now had a hard time believing that the day before, so many had thrown away their lives just to spite Linjos's orders.

Lith, Phloria, and Friya were going back to the mine when Kalla approached them.

"I'm sorry Scourge, but there is little time left. We need to talk. Now."

Chapter 216 Tough Lessons

Without waiting for a reply, Kalla Warped Lith to Scarlett's headquarters. It was located in a secret building underground the mining town, kept out of phase with the outside world thanks to dimensional magic.

"I'm sorry for the rush, but there are many things I have to explain to you and a favor to ask." Kalla explained.

"What are you talking about?" Lith replied, being still a bit shocked by the sudden turn of events.

"I know from your smell that you have become a Necromancer too. Also, I learned from Protector about the changes you experienced. I have yet to completely master higher Necromancy, but my teachings could still benefit you greatly, at least to avoid repeating my mistakes.

"Power comes with a price and responsibilities, though. Are you willing to pay it?" She stared at him, waiting for a reply.

"What do you mean?"

"After yesterday's attack, I'm pretty sure that this Balkor guy will make me his primary target. My skills are the perfect counter to his own and now he is aware of my existence. I trust Scarlett, her strategy is sound.

Yet I want a contingency plan, in case something happens to me. I want you to teach to my children in my stead. I'm entrusting to you the core of my knowledge for it to be passed down to them."

"Do you mean Nok?" Lith still couldn't make heads or tails of her request.

"I have more than one, but yes. I'm worried about Nok too."

"Sure, okay. I like that furball and teaching one or two of them makes no difference." Lith was glad to accept her deal. He couldn't even imagine a fake mage defeating an Awakened one as strong as Kalla. There was little he wouldn't do for power and knowledge, helping the young Byk was nothing to him.

"First, I have captured and experimented on the thralls of the 'god of death'..." Judging by her sneer, Kalla seemed to find the moniker quite hilarious.

"...and discovered a great flaw in his creations. A flaw that proves he is a fake mage, not one of us." By waving her paw, she opened a dimensional vortex, conjuring one of Balkor's undead between them.

It was completely bound and blinded like a pig ready to be roasted.

"Unlike true mages that mix light and darkness magic when they raise undead, fake mages need a mark to control them." Kalla touched the undead, making several runes made of light appear on its forehead.

"Yes." Lith nodded.

"Have you ever tried to add your mark on a creature that already bears one?"

"No." Lith cursed at his own stupidity for not having thought of it by himself.

"Try it. Either the fake spell or the one I taught you. Both work just fine."

Lith did as instructed, using the fake spell to check such knowledge could be useful also to Tista and the other non Awakened. As soon as the second mark appeared, Kalla let go of the creature which started to shiver uncontrollably until it turned into smoke.

"Undead created with human magic can bear more than one mark. That makes them unable to attack both the new and the old master. Since their nature is to blindly serve, the inner conflict kills them." Kalla explained.

"Does it work on greater undead too?" Lith's eyes shined with hope. Maybe he had found a way out in case Balkor's creatures managed to reach him.

"Sadly, no. This applies only on creatures without an ego. A greater undead can use its will to refuse the second mark, sorry." Kalla shook her head.

"Don't underestimate this knowledge just because you are strong. Imagine if you were weak, alone, against one of those creatures. Do you realize you would still come out victorious? There's no need to destroy them with sword or magic, just a single spell."

Lith pondered about her words, recognizing their truth.

"Now I will teach you how to create a greater undead."

"What?" He couldn't believe his ears. He could solve Solus's problem and his own in one fell swoop.

"Scarlett told me about the friend you carry in your ring. I'm afraid you will not like what I'm going to tell you. Don't make the same mistake I did. Never create a greater undead. Please, I beg of you."

"Then why teach me how to do it?" Kalla was not making any sense to him.

"Because if you don't know how to create them, you can't learn how to destroy them if the necessity arises. Knowledge is power. You and I are similar, we never get tired of accumulating both, but I digress."

Kalla shook her muzzle putting her paws close to Lith.

"First, you need a corpse. The fresher it is the better. You can even use it on a live subject, but the only difference will be inflicting them an enormous and useless amount of pain.

Then, you need to infuse darkness magic, as you have already done the first time we met, but as soon as the blood core starts to form you must stop using darkness magic and inject light magic until the balance is reached."

Her right paw generated a small sphere of darkness, that became greyer the more light magic the left one infused until the color became uniform.

"Only then you'll make the blood core grow using both the elements at the same time until the undead comes to life." She held the sphere between both her paws, growing it until it was as big as an apple.

"That's it?" Lith was incredulous.

"Yes, but it's an incredibly delicate process. One mistake and either you'll create a crazy beast that needs to be put down or destroy the corpse. It took me several tries before succeeding and I spent weeks with greater undead, studying their rituals and cores.

Do you think you can do any better?"

Her tone wasn't angry or sarcastic. Kalla reminded him of Elina when she was teaching him how to take care of Tista.

"Considering that unlike you, I'm not attuned with any element, no." Lith admitted.

"Do not feel ashamed. Acknowledging your limits is the first step to overcome them." The more Kalla talked, the more she reminded him of his mother.

"As for the why you shouldn't raise greater undead, you deserve an explanation. During my travels, after I evolved, I met a clan of vampires. I stayed with them for a while, learning as much as I could from them about Necromancy and darkness magic.

"After witnessing how they turn a human into one of their own kind, I decided to replicate the process, just like I have shown you. After several attempts on the corpses of a group of hunters that had been chasing me, I finally succeeded.

"My test subject was a horrible person, a deranged human that only brought misery to others. Only one death wasn't enough, so I raised it back. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that unlike vampires, when a Necromancer creates a vampire, it's not the same person it was when it was alive.

"My hypothesis is that vampires turn living humans into undead, while I raised a corpse. Maybe the soul had already left its shell, or maybe my magic summoned another one with a stronger will to live.

"Whatever the reason, I immediately understood my mistake. I'm a mother, so when she came back to life, I recognized that feeling. She was naïve, innocent like a baby, her mind was a blank slate, completely dependent on my life force to survive.

"Creating a greater undead is like giving birth. It's a new lifeform entirely, completely unrelated to the corpse's previous existence. I am bound to her like she is to me. I couldn't hurt or kill her anymore."

"What did you do with it?" Lith shrugged.

"I adopted her. It's the other child I told you about."

"What?" Lith was flabbergasted.

"That's why I advise you not to use that spell and why higher Necromancy will not help your friend. The corpses you would raise will already have a soul of their own, you can't just create an empty vessel. Nature abhors the void, in all of its forms."

Lith sighed. Suddenly lesser Necromancy was much more alluring. Mindless thralls were much easier to handle compared to sentient undead that would look at him as a father.

The idea of nurturing such creatures just to dispose of them like trash was cruel even for him.

- "I'm so sorry, Solus." Lith thought. I really hoped to give you a body through Necromancy. Kalla hasn't evolved from long, though. She might be wrong, maybe there is a way to give you a physical form. Are you sure you don't want to try a construct or something?"

Solus didn't know whether to laugh or cry at Lith's stubbornness.

"I told you countless times: I already feel like a monster. I have the body of a construct, I feed off your mana like an undead or a construct would. I want to get out of my cage, not exchange it for a new one."

Seeing that Lith was even more disappointed than she was, Solus embraced his soul with her own. A warm sensation invaded Lith's being.

"Stop worrying about me. I'm fine, I really am. You are already giving me so much, sharing your life with me, your joy, sadness, and tears. My tower form is slowly recovering, who knows if sooner or later my wisp form will evolve into something more?

"If you really want to make me happy, live your life to its fullest. Enjoy what you now have with Phloria. It should be most precious to you because it's completely unexpected. That girl is rushing a little too much, but she really cares about you. She's a keeper."—

Lith could agree on the rushing part, but the rest? He had never discussed his love life even with Carl, let alone with another girl. He found most embarrassing that his hormones and loneliness were making him crave for intimacy with Phloria.

- "I guess that not being with a woman for thirteen year and a few months it's really taking a toll on me. I even keep counting. Maybe Phloria is right, I do have a perverted mind."—

"Scourge?" Kalla called him, noticing he was spacing out.

"Please continue."

"Another thing I discovered during my travels, is that greater undead can actually be harmed by light magic, but not in the way that you may think. If used directly, light magic works on them like it would on lesser undead. It would feed their hunger, making them stronger.

"But if you use it on their blood cores instead, you can temporarily fix the unbalance that is their existence. When a ghoul eats living flesh, a vampire drinks blood, or a Wraith drains life force with its touch, they are all doing the same thing:

"Consuming the light energy that living being possess to keep their blood cores from collapsing. Even if it's an oversimplification, let's just say that undeath at its core is a condition where the body becomes incapable of producing light magic.

"Without its counterpart, the darkness magic that's naturally produced keeps eroding both the core and the body, needing constant transfusions of light magic from an external source to survive."

"Are you saying that..." Lith's hopes were almost restored.

"Yes, I am. If you use light magic on their blood core, they regain most of their emotions, lose their hunger, and can even eat normally for a while, be they beasts or humans.

"Yet it comes with a price. As long as their blood core is balanced, they also lose most of their powers, becoming vulnerable and mortal again."

"Why are you researching this field? It's almost impossible to direct mana to a core in battle. We need to use Invigoration to find it first and then send the light energy. It's not like you can ask the enemy to stay still for a minute or two."

Lith was fascinated by the theoretical implications, but at the moment he found all that chat useless. He desperately needed an edge against Balkor's creatures if he wanted to survive.

"Because for some undeath is a blessing, for others it's a curse. I don't want my child to live forever in the shadows, hiding from the living like a rabid beast. My goal is to find a way to turn her back to human, giving her a chance to a normal life."

"Why are you telling me all this?" Lith could understand Kalla being grateful to him for saving Nok. He could also appreciate her seeing a kindred spirit in him, but the knowledge and the burden she was imparting him were too much.

"Because, just like me, you are different from the others. I'm one of the few magical beasts whose evolution borders with undeath, yet you treat me no differently from before, unlike even those of my own kind.

"I don't care if you are a human like your friends think, a beast like Protector says, or a new kind of monster like Scarlett fears. You are someone capable of befriending magical beasts without looking down on us, of carrying an unknown life form at your finger and calling her a friend.

That's why I trust you to teach and care for my offspring like I would."

Chapter 217 Valor

Kalla interrupted her lesson briefly, to allow Lith to have lunch and resuming immediately after he had finished. Lith filled several notebooks with his notes, describing all the spells she was teaching him, the feeling it gave when she used them on him or on a test subject, and the differences with his own performance.

Learning from true magic was both harder and easier compared to fake magic. Lith hadn't to memorize any magical word, accent, or hand sign, but he needed a deep understanding of the how and why the mana had to flow in a certain way rather than another.

Kalla knew that she couldn't possibly teach him in a day what she had learned in months during her travels or thanks to Scarlett mentoring her. So she imparted him the most solid foundations she could about her work, hoping he could achieve the same results through study and effort.

Meanwhile, inside the headquarters, Scarlett was teaching Protector how to use his newfound powers. Unlike Kalla, he lacked an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. After evolving, he had been content enjoying his life with Selia, studying magic only during his free time.

- "Damn, this country bumpkin of a Skoll is like the proverbial frog in the well." Scarlett inwardly cursed. "If after discovering the outside world the frog decided to not give a damn about it, of course. He is by far the weakest of us three, I need to bring him up to speed and fast!"—

Scarlett was dissecting one of Balkor's thralls they had captured, using her enchanted pince-nez to better understand the structure of the spells that kept the undead together along with its abnormal blood core. She would pass it to Protector from time to time, showing him how to recognize a spell's keystones.

"I knew there was something wrong with Balkor the moment Linjos described to me his creations." Scarlett explained.

"Lesser undead that requires flesh and blood to work, able to regenerate and ignore arrays. None of it made sense. Necromancy doesn't work like that. Do you see that?" Scarlett pointed to a black piece of flesh right besides where the blood core was.

"Yes." Protector replied while wearing the pince-nez. "It smells like an Abomination."

"Because it is one, or at least a fragment of it. This madman must have found an Abomination naturally resistant to magic, captured it, and integrated its abilities with his thralls.

"Abominations constantly need life force to survive while undead bear the spark of their maker as a mark. He used his own life force to keep together the blood core and the Abomination's unique abilities. This is the secret behind their powers and limited life span.

"As soon as Balkor's life force runs out, the Abomination fragment goes wild, destroying the undead and making impossible a full examination like the one we are performing right now. Whoever he is, this guy is insane."

"Don't you mean a genius?" Protector was barely understanding half of what Scarlett was saying. "Also, why is this thing still intact? Shouldn't have already self-destructed?"

"He is definitely insane. He didn't use light magic, but his own life force. It means that with each undead he makes, his life gets shorter. As for your second question, it should, but Kalla's array slowed down the decay process enough for us to collect all the data we need.

"The good news is that Balkor isn't the one I'm looking for. He isn't looking for immortality, rather he seeks the death of his enemies even if it costs him his own life. The bad news is that now I must add him to my 'to do' list." Scarlett sighed.

Blood Desert, Balkor's secret lab

Despite what Scarlett thought, Balkor didn't consider integrating undead and Abominations as his masterpiece. Finding the array resistant creature had just been a fluke. He viewed it as a sign that the heavens sought justice as much as he did.

What he considered his magnum opus, the only thing that he deeply regretted not being able to share with the rest of the world, was turning magic crystals into memory crystals.

They allowed his creations to act as one, learn from each other's experiences, and pass that knowledge to others. With each wave he sent there would be a few undead embedded with a memory crystal, the Controllers, that would keep themselves away from the fight while collecting and sharing the data.

Without the memory crystals, he would have never managed to give his thralls a hive mind, nor to be so successful in his endeavor. The first wave had been composed of Crawlers, whose purpose was testing the defenders' reaction speed and teamwork.

He had never expected the Crystal and Earth Griffon's Headmasters to be so stupid to hole themselves up in a confined space, making the number advantage overwhelming and letting themselves get butchered right off the bat.

The Tox Spitters of the second wave were supposed to do the heavy lifting, weakening the defence forces during the two following nights and making them reveal their aces in the hole.

Alas, the remaining four academies had foiled his plans by allying themselves with the beasts.

It was still the second act, yet Balkor was already forced to employ his strongest soldiers, the Valors. The silver lining was that after the fall of the two academies, he had a lot of Tox Spitters left that had almost half of their life span left.

He placed the memory crystals in the center of the array, awakening the sleeping warriors from their stasis and infusing them with all the techniques and spells learned during the first two waves plus a little something of his own.

All Valors had human appearance. They had been crafted to resemble Balkor, were animated by his very life force and now shared with him all of his hatred for the Griffon Kingdom.

The undead knelt to their master, eager to carry out his revenge.

"Let the Spitters be your meat shield. Do not risk your lives. Tonight is just a rehearsal for tomorrow's grand finale." Balkor instructed them while handing them the best equipment money could buy.

"Your goal is to force our enemies to reveal their hand and get rid of that annoying bear Wraith." His voice was feeble. Empowering them had added another grey streak to his hair. He had no idea how much life was left in him, but it couldn't be much.

"If the task proves to be too dangerous, do not hesitate to retreat. There is just ten of you for each academy and I'm at the end of my rope. If you fail, there will be no second chance. Now go."

The Valors nodded in unison, walking in the Warp arrays ready to inflict to others the pain that was ravaging their hearts.

"I'm sorry, Scourge. We have to end the lesson here. We'll continue it tomorrow, if both of us are still alive." Kalla tapped her paw, making the shadows swirl into a portal.

"Wait, why you didn't teach me how to do that?" Lith had been so engrossed by his first lesson of true magic to almost forget about the shadow gates.

"Teach you what, exactly?" Kalla was confused by his words.

"How to merge with the shadows and use them to move across space." Kalla laughed out loud, almost scaring Lith to death. It was the first time that he had ever seen her expressing any emotion.

"That's just a Warp Steps. I just mix it with light and darkness magic to make impossible to predict my exit point with Life Vision (*). Only a non Awakened one can afford not to. Otherwise, it would mean to throw yourself in the opponent's maws."

Lith lowered his eyes in embarrassment. He had only recently mastered Warp Steps and Blink. He had yet to find the time to convert them into true magic. Also, he had never even considered the possibility of covering his tracks while using dimensional magic.

"Damn. I forgot that, unlike me, you had no mentor." Kalla sighed. "I'll teach you dimensional magic first thing tomorrow morning. Now go, I have much work to do before dusk."

After Lith left, Kalla started modifying her Deathbane array. She was certain that Balkor expected her tricks to not work anymore on his thralls, but he was in for a surprise.

Kalla's Warp Step brought Lith back in the middle of the group, making them flinch.

- "Kalla is right, it's dumb to always open a Warp Step vertically. I should have thought about it by myself, but I always have too much on my plate. I'll think about it as soon the crisis is over." Lith thought.

"By my maker!" Solus was brimming with joy. "Finally you are accepting your limits instead of whining for not being perfect. Today is a red-letter day for you."- She wasn't even being sarcastic, which made her remark even more annoying.

"Where the heck have you been all day?" Yurial grabbed Lith by the shoulders, shaking him like a maraca.

"Yurial, have you lost it or what?" Lith angrily pushed him away.

"After your disappearance, Phloria almost drove us all insane with her nagging!"

"I don't nag!" Phloria's embarrassed look made her retort sound fake like a three dollar bill.

"Yes, you do." Friya sneered. "We resisted the temptation to knock you out only because none of us is strong enough to carry you around in case the enemy attacked while you were still unconscious."

The group started quarreling, giving Lith the time to think of an excuse for his sudden leave.

"I'm sorry to have made you worry, but Kalla and I had some unfinished business." Lith lied through his teeth.

"She confirmed my hypothesis." He winked to them, referring to the undead's hive mind, hoping it wasn't all in his head.

"Also, she told me that Balkor is likely to target her from now on, so she asked me to take care of her children in case something happens to her."

"Why you, of all people?" Quylla asked.

"She is afraid that because of her evolved form, other beasts could ostracize them and I'm the only human she trusts." Once again, he chose to mix together truth and lies to make his story easy to remember and play their feelings like a fiddle.

The always lingering fear of death and the sobbing story Lith made up about the cruel fate that would await Nok without his help, prevented them from asking questions he wouldn't know how to answer.

The mood turned gloomy, but even Solus agreed it was a small price to pay for lessons about true magic.

They had barely finished eating, when the alarm resounded, prompting the students to go back to the town plaza.

Soon the array was visible again, making them realize that Balkor's undead had already entered its perimeter. Lith trusted Kalla's judgment about Scarlett's strategy, but he reminded everyone about their contingency plan, just in case.

"I don't know what the master plan is and honestly, I don't care." Lith said.

"If anything happens to Kalla, that's our cue. It's better to run away to live and fight another day than dying an idiot's death." Everyone nodded, agreeing with the plan.

The seconds turned into minutes, but nothing happened. This time, instead of simply swarming the place, the Tox Spitters slowly marched into the town under the Valors' supervision.

Back in his lab, Balkor was amazed discovering that despite the modifications he had applied to his creatures, the array was back to full force. Yet it was within his calculations. The Valors had the Spitters positioning themselves in the key points of the array, before forcing them to self-detonate.

Kalla's Deathbane array crumbled, plunging the town into darkness. Back at full strength, the undead attacked with unparalleled vigor, easily cutting through the enemy lines.

Without support from the array, beasts and Professors quickly found themselves on the back foot. A single Spitter was nothing compared to their strength, but they were outnumbered over ten to one and every wound they suffered required specialized medical attention.

"Rise my legions!" Kalla roared, calling forth his undead army once again.

Two Valors approached her, moving so fast that none of the lesser undead at her command could react quickly enough to even slow them down.

"Filthy beast, your time has come." Said the first Valor.

"Filthy beast, your time is now." They both unsheathed their swords, moving in unison. The Valors attacked her at the same time from opposite directions, leaving Kalla no chance to defend herself.

Two deep wounds opened on Kalla's front shoulder and her back.

Kalla laughed bitterly, admitting her defeat. If she stayed, she would definitely die. Even if created with fake magic, those creatures were greater undead. Kalla had only recently become an Awakened one, she was still too weak to fight them and control her army at the same time.

If she left, her army would crumble, leaving her allies without any hope of victory.

Whatever choice she made, without her guidance, the lesser undead she had reanimated would attack indiscriminately friend or foes.

"Well, played creatures." Kalla's tone was sad, but devoid of despair.

"You have destroyed my array and turned my carefully prepared army into a liability in one fell swoop. It seems I have underestimated Balkor's ingenuity, but alas, he made my same mistake.

"Your master should have known that a cornered beast is the most dangerous one. I'm really curious to see if his plan can survive losing two of you right off the bat!"

Having her army become useless, Kalla recalled all the darkness magic she had infused into it back to her body, causing her mana core to overload. It resulted in a silent but massive explosion that engulfed all the nearby undead and briefly managed to cover the sky.

The collective death throes of the fallen threw both armies into chaos.

Chapter 218 Battle to the Death

"Gods, no!" Scarlett and Balkor screamed in unison, watching the scene unfold.

Everything had happened in just a few seconds from the moment the array had been destroyed, not leaving the Scorpicores the time to even think about sending reinforcements.

Losing Kalla was a huge blow for Scarlett's army. Despite the fact that she had only recently evolved, she was still the most talented Necromancer they had at hand.

Balkor had the advantage of experience and careful preparation. Their best counter was true magic's surprise effect and the versatility Kalla's true Necromancy had displayed earlier.

She had been able to reinforce her troops and change strategy according to the situation, while Balkor's thralls, without their master supervision, could only follow a script. The presence of greater undead had completely upset the balance.

"Damn you and your information, Linjos. The Valors weren't supposed to come out until the last day!" Scarlett roared.

"She has only recently evolved and close combat has never been her specialty. I only let her go alone because you guaranteed us that tonight we would face those black things again!"

"How I was supposed to know that Balkor would change his plans so much?" Linjos tried to defend himself.

"Look on the bright side, it means he is desperate. By butchering all of his Tox Spitters during the first day, you must have forced his hand. The Valors are his trump card. If we defeat them, the battle should be over. He shouldn't have stronger troops."

"What if he does? What if..." Scarlett stopped herself halfway. There was no time for recriminations.

"We can't afford to keep our cards hidden anymore. We can only go all out and pray that you are right."

Unbeknownst to Scarlett, Balkor's situation was even worse. Kalla's final move had been devastating to his plans. The massive release of darkness magic had destroyed all the Spitters attacking the north side along with the two Valors.

Unlike the lesser undead that required only a small spark of his life force, each Valor was empowered by a huge amount of it. It was a double-edged sword. On one hand, it allowed Balkor to share their senses and directly control them telepathically despite the distance.

On the other one, he would feel their lives slowly slipping away like they were his own. The sudden disappearance of so much of his life force further damaged his already compromised body. Balkor fell to the ground, convulsing and spitting blood non-stop.

With their mind link temporarily broken, the Valors were unaware of the huge blow their army had sustained. They continued to follow the original plan, going deeper and deeper into the enemy lines until retreating became almost impossible.

The same thing was happening on all four academy battlefields. The invaders were getting bolder, mistaking Balkor's sudden silence for approval. Despite their high intelligence and extensive combat expertise derived from the memory crystals, the Valors were still newborns.

By giving them his memories, Balkor had also infected them with his rage, a feeling they were incapable of controlling without their master's supervision.

Trasque, Nalear, Ironhelm, Linjos, and all the Professors with the richest combat experience finally came out of the headquarters, aiding the royal army and the magical beasts in holding their ground against the swarming enemies.

Only eight Valors remained, but each had strength on par with Protector, making them extremely dangerous. They looked exactly like Balkor did the day his family died.

Red-haired youths, barely sixteen years old with a naïve visage. They were about 1.67 meters (5'6") high with a skeletal build like they had long suffered from malnutrition. The red light burning inside their eyes and their savage visage revealed their true nature though.

"Thank the gods that Wraith warned us, otherwise I would be dead already." Professor Trasque had barely dodged the darkness bullet that the Valor had conjured at point-blank range.

Greater undead were naturally attuned with darkness magic, allowing them to use its true magic form even without being Awakened ones.

"That Wraith had a name! Couldn't you at least respect Kalla's memory, you oaf?" Ironhelm scolded him.

He had always considered magical beasts as inferior beings, but after witnessing their bravery and willingness to sacrifice themselves in a battle that wasn't their own, he now harbored a deep respect for them.

"If you have the strength to quarrel like an old couple, use it to destroy that thing!" Nalear scolded them both. They were three against one and under the effect of the best potions the White Griffon's Alchemists could provide. Yet they were still on the back foot.

The Valor displayed all the swordplay he had inherited thanks to the memory crystal, using dozens of techniques with such mastery that it was like he had practiced them for years. To make things worse, he was still faster and stronger than them.

He was capable of shooting rays of darkness from his free hand, eyes, and mouth with barely a split second notice, easily interrupting their casting whenever they attempted a spell.

The only reason they were still alive was because of their teamwork.

"Resistance is futile, humans. Surrender and die!"

The Valor spread the fingers of his free hand, which turned into a mass of tendrils that whipped towards the trio to immobilize them. Nalear preferred to dodge, while Ironhelm and Trasque cut them down with their weapons.

Each amputated tendril emitted a shrill sound, like it was alive, spurting a purple liquid with a pungent smell. Ironhelm managed to block the liquid with his shield, but Trasque wasn't so lucky.

He was wielding dual sabers, so part of the liquid reached his face, turning out to be a powerful acid. Trasque screamed in pain, suddenly full of openings that the Valor didn't miss, focusing all the tendrils on him and piercing his lungs, heart, and stomach in multiple points.

"Vastor, where are you? We need help! Man down!" Nalear yelled into her communication earpiece, making Vastor Blink to the rescue and bringing what was left of Trasque to safety.

Without Trasque, their formation collapsed quickly, to the point that their efforts barely slowed the Valor from reaching the students.

"Where are the reinforcements?" Ironhelm yelled in his earpiece, his body covered in wounds.

"Sorry for the delay, folks." Protector swooped down from the sky, hitting the Valor with his full weight. Protector was engulfed by flames, his body infused with enough air magic to turn him into a living meteor.

The hit was supposed to blow the undead away, maybe even injure it. Yet the frost aura the Valor had conjured to weaken his human enemies easily snuffed out the flames. The Valor didn't even attempt to dodge, the strike was too fast for him.

The impact only managed to push the creature several meters away, leaving deep furrows in the ground. Protector felt the opponent's bones cracking and reforming almost at the same time.

The regeneration speed of the enemy was so fast it was hard to believe.

"Filthy beast!" The Valor struck Protector with a fist, making his head turn abruptly to the side with a cracking noise.

"Damn, I should have really paid attention to Scarlett when she tried to teach me how to Blink." Protector realized in hindsight.

"If that isn't our cue, I don't know what it is." First Kalla had disappeared, then Professor Trasque had been severely wounded, and now a creature the size of the Skoll was faltering after a single punch.

Friya had every reason to be scared and so did her group. She focused on the place where she wanted to go, bending space to her will and materializing a Warp Steps.

"Quick, get in! I have to go last or the gate will close behind me."

The group nodded, but before they could start moving, another Valor reached the town square.

"There is no escape for you, vermin!" He unleashed several streams of lightning from his hand that struck everyone but Lith, who managed to dodge thanks to his enhanced reflexes.

With Friya convulsing on the ground, the Warp Steps quickly disappeared, destroying their hope for survival.

"Relinquish your useless lives and join us. At least your death will be meaningful." The undead's voice was oozing spite. Lith could see, thanks to Life Vision, that darkness magic was focusing on his fingertips.

"Thanks, but no thanks!" He yelled, trying to draw the Valor's attention on himself. Lith took his shotel out of his pocket dimension, going all out right off the bat to cut down the Valor's extended arm.

The undead reacted quickly, but not quickly enough. Infused to the brim with air magic, Lith managed to cleave the arm a few centimeters below the elbow. The limb fell to the ground, while the accumulated darkness magic faded away.

"How did you do that?" The Valor raised an eyebrow, curious rather than worried. Despite Lith's slash having been infused with darkness magic, black tendrils came out of the amputated limb, reattaching itself as if nothing had happened.

"That hurt, I'll kill you first then." The Valor promised, rushing for the kill.

Lith soon found himself in the opposite situation compared to his Professors. The skill gap in swordplay between them was enormous, making him consider for dropping the shotel and fighting barehanded.

Thanks to fusion magic, the Valor was slower than him, making him vulnerable to the martial arts that Lith had learned on Earth.

According to Life Vision and mana sense, the Valor's blade glowed like a Christmas tree though. That and the purple liquid dripping from the undead's fingers, made Lith realize that such plan was beyond stupid.

- "That thing is almost as fast and strong as me under the effects of fusion magic." Lith thought. "I can't allow myself to get tired, get hit, or get poisoned. I need a distraction to..."—

His planning was interrupted by the terrified screams of the students that were scattering in all directions to get as far as possible from the undead monster.

"I said there is no escape!" Seeing his prey getting away filled the Valor with rage, to the point of ignoring Lith to shoot them in the back.

Lith inwardly smiled, grateful for their stupid sacrifice. He exploited that moment to Blink right behind the creature, cutting off his head and piercing his heart.

Before Lith could completely engulf the corpse in darkness magic, the Valor kicked violently towards his head, forcing him to block and cracking both of his arms. The pain was nothing compared to his surprise.

Despite the amount of darkness magic he had infused in his sword, the hole in the chest was already closed, the head was taking its sweet time to reattach itself still showing a wolfish smile.

"What are you exactly?" For the first time in his life, the undead experienced the feeling of amusement.

Protector's fight wasn't going much better either. Even with Nalear's and Ironhelm's help, they were barely on equal footing. Protector was unable to use dimensional magic and his favorite elements, fire and air, were almost useless against the undead.

The initial advantage due to fusion magic combined with his superior physical prowess had been quickly countered by the Valor's acid blood that returned each wound Protector inflicted twofold.

Several of his teeth had melted and his paws were bleeding profusely.

Nalear and Ironhelm Blinked around, searching for an opening to unleash their spells, but somehow the Valor always knew where they would appear. He didn't react fast enough to counterattack, but enough to move out of their line of fire in time.

"How the heck can he know our every move?" Nalear cursed, getting away from the undead and hoping to lure him away from the town square. Alas, the Valor wasn't interested in fighting the Professors, his only aim was the students a few hundred meters behind them.

As soon as Nalear's position was left open, the Valor rushed forward, ignoring both Protector and Ironhelm, releasing a barrage of darkness projectiles from his fingers aimed toward the youths amassed in front of him like lambs waiting for the slaughter.

While the duo bombarded the undead with their best spells, Nalear cursed again. She Blinked in front of the death wave and using one of her artifacts to block most of the attacks.

"Coward! Stop using children as a shield and fight us!" She yelled despite the ragged breath caused by the massive mana consumption from the artifact.

"In battle, there is no bravery or cowardice." The Valor mocked her. "Only victory and defeat. Stop me if you can!"

He had already been hit by over a hundred of spells during the fight, but taken separately, they were barely able to make him falter. Thanks to his Abomination powers, the Valor would take little damage from all elements except darkness, but such spells were too slow and the creature would dodge them every time with ease.

Physical attacks and spells had proven to be useless, any damage sustained would regenerate so fast that the undead was able to keep his full mobility.

Protector cursed at himself for his stupidity, not studying the books Lith had left for him and spending most of his time nurturing his newfound family life with Selia.

His only remaining option was to use his physical prowess to block the Valor in place long enough for the Professors to strike him down with darkness magic. However, the undead was well aware of their plan, so he employed a vicious hit and run tactic that the Crawlers had learned from Ironhelm himself during the first day to wear out the Skoll.

Protector's fur was already covered in cuts, some shallow, some deep. He had suffered most of the hits while trying to defend the students and the Professors behind him. The Valor had exploited his good heart to poison him multiple times and was now waiting for the inevitable to happen.

Chapter 219 Battle to the Death 2

"You are too fast to be human." The Valor said to Lith, using a childish voice that matched his face for the first time. Lith let him blabber on, using the idiotic bad guy monologue to activate Invigoration to mend his wounds and replenish his strength.

"You don't care for the young ones." The Valor shot another student in the back, pleasantly surprised to see that Lith didn't even flinch.

"Do you care for the older ones?" By using their hive mind, the Valor didn't even need to turn around to shoot Nalear in the back. What any Valor saw, every Valor knew. That was the reason why Blink had been of no use to the Professors so far.

Thanks to the hive mind, by watching each other's backs, the undead had no blind spots.

The darkness bullet was deflected by Nalear's armor, but still managed to pierce her shoulder, making her yell in pain and surprise. Their already weakened formation fell apart.

"No, you don't." The Valor nodded. "Do you care for those ones?" He pointed his fingers to the four youths still laying on the ground, finally obtaining a reaction. Lith stopped using Invigoration, dashing forward to intercept the spell and deflect it with his blade.

"This is going to be fun!" The Valor laughed heartily.

"Not for you though." Lith replied with a wolfish smile. He Blinked in front of the enemy and activated Death Zone and Death Call at the same time.

Several tentacles erupted from Lith's body, while a dense fog surrounded both him and the Valor. Lith had used that time to also cast his two most powerful darkness spells. The dark tentacles wrapped themselves around the Valor's limbs, draining his strength and making it impossible for him to run away.

Meanwhile, the highly concentrated darkness magic summoned by Death Zone was eating away the Valor's lifespan like a starving man at an all you can eat buffet.

"No, you can't do it! I'm not allowed to die!" Balkor's orders were absolute. The Valor struggled with all his might, trying to get away like his master had instructed him to do in case of danger.

Lith was done talking. He only focused on dodging and parrying the enemy's attacks while the undead withered more with every passing second.

Soon the physical gap between the two was so wide that Lith could afford to go on the offensive, slashing the Valor's body over and over with his darkness infused blade. Despite being an undead, the Valor experienced blinding pain and desperation.

Each hit would eat away a good chunk of his master's lifeforce, making the Abomination inside him go wild and inflicting on him an agony that every Valor would share.

Back in his lab, Balkor's convulsions rose in intensity until he bled from his ears, eyes, and mouth.

Feeling their companion's imminent death sent the other Valors into a frenzy. Because of the hive mind, they shared more than just their senses. They also shared their rage, joy, and fear.

Protector exploited the enemy's sudden madness to bite the Valor's chest hard and pin him to the ground, trapping the Valor's sword and tendrils inside his own body.

"Quick, finish him!" He yelled to Ironhelm. His eyes were sad, but unwavering.

Ironhelm understood his intentions, casting his strongest darkness spell, Dark Star. Ironhelm wanted to cry, but his voice remained steady and his hands firm for all the duration of the spell.

Dark Star generated a pillar of darkness with a radius of ten meters (33 feet) that engulfed both the warriors until the Valor was no more.

Protector remained true to his name until the end, standing proud even in defeat.

Meanwhile, Linjos and Rudd were mercilessly taking down two Valors at once. Linjos was the strongest Archmage of his academy. His personal spells were fast and deadly, there was only so much the undeads' magical resistance could do against them.

To make things worse for the undead, although Rudd lacked his firepower, he had plenty of ingenuity and talent for dimensional magic. Whenever one of Linjos's spells were about to miss, a Warp Steps would open, redirecting it right into the back of a Valor.

Even trying to escape was useless, Rudd would simply Switch their positions with his own and Linjos's, who always took care to leave them a darkness based nasty surprise.

"Come on, that's all you can do?" Rudd sneered, opening many Warps Steps at a time, making the new barrage of Linjos's spells appear and disappear from thin air. When the Valors tried to escape in different directions, Linjos Switched their position, making them clash one against the other. Rudd exploited that moment to redirect the spells, which hit the Valors all at once and turned them to dust.

"Excellent work, Rudd." Linjos said.

"I'm glad to have you on my side."

"Two down, still six to go." The two Archmages Warped to the rescue of their colleagues, hoping the battle could be still won.

As soon as she came out of the headquarters, Scarlett hunted down the Valors one by one. Even with the hive mind supporting them, the other undead weren't much of a threat.

She hadn't missed how the destruction of the two Valors by the hand of Kalla had made the lesser undead revert to their frenzied fighting style and lose any semblance of order or discipline.

Of the eight remaining greater undead, two were keeping themselves at the outskirts of the mining town. Scarlett suspected that their refusal to budge even after losing two of their generals could depend on their role in keeping the hive mind active.

She Blinked behind their backs, infusing her roar with air magic, making them tumble on the ground like rag dolls.

- "If I'm right, they will attempt to run rather than fight. I must keep them away from their escape route and kill them as fast as I can."— Scarlett thought.

As she had predicted, the two attempted to cast a flying spell to get away from the Scorpicores, but she only needed another roar to send them tumbling again and interrupting their cast.

"Filthy beast, your time has come!" Said the first Valor unsheathing his sword.

"Filthy beast, your time is n..."

"Shut your trap." Scarlett cut the second Valor short, ripping the creature's head off with her claws. Her rage peaked when she heard those words again.

She wasn't sure if Kalla was dead or alive, only that if she had lost an Awakened because of humans squabbling between themselves, she would never forgive herself. A sudden sharp pain forced her to focus back on her enemies.

A big chunk of her paw was now missing, her flesh and bones melted by the powerful acid that ran inside the Valors' bodies instead of blood.

"Nice trick." She said, watching the bits of the undead's head reassemble themselves until no injury remained.

"Want to see a better one?" Her paw exuded a white brilliance and in less than a second, she was healed too.

"As for my final act..." Scarlett weaved the Blink spell, but instead of Blinking herself she forced one of the Valors to appear right in front of her. Her paw pinned him down, while she used Invigoration to find the blood core and flood it with darkness magic.

It was something that only her overwhelming strength and over three hundred years of experience in manipulating cores allowed her to do. The undead experienced pain as if its very soul was being ripped to shreds, pulverized, turned into a bucket someone used as a chamber pot, and then turned to shreds again.

Its agony spread to all the remaining Valors, making them easy targets. While the first one was still turning to ashes, Scarlett repeated the procedure on the second one, making Balkor's mind fall into a coma to escape from that torture.

"Damn you! Damn you all! For Balkor!"

Lith didn't know why the Valor had started convulsing, nor did he care. What worried him was that now the creature was willingly burning his life force to break free from the restraints.

Lith focused even more, increasing the density of darkness magic surrounding them to put an end to the fight. He didn't know how long he could still hold the Valor in place. Keeping both the spells active while trading blows with the undead was quickly draining his strength.

The Valor shot several rays of darkness from his eyes until he slowly turned to smoke and ashes.

"At least I will not die alo..."

Lith didn't stop the attack until the Valor's blood core was no more. He never trusted monsters to stay dead, so besides confirming it with Life Vision, he also asked Solus to double check with mana sense.

- "By my maker! Lith, behind you!"— Despite being on the verge of exhaustion, Lith followed Solus's instructions, ready to fight with the last bits of power he had.

He only then realized that what Solus was referring to wasn't an enemy, but the members of his group. They had yet to wake up from the lightning bolts, so unlike the other students, they had remained on the attack site.

Suddenly the Valor's words made sense. They could be the only reason why the undead had wasted his life force to cast spells that he knew Lith could dodge with his eyes closed.

After a quick inspection, he discovered that only Yurial and Phloria had been hit. The creature had shot blind, so most of the rays had just hit the ground. Yurial had been grazed on a leg while Phloria on a shoulder.

The wounds were superficial, barely bleeding, but the flesh surrounding them was turning blue and the veins were bulging out. Lith used Invigoration to understand what was happening.

A mass made of darkness magic was ravaging their bodies while advancing towards their mana cores.

- "Damn b*stard!" Lith thought. "He invaded them with his life force. If I don't stop it immediately, they are either going to die or turn into undead."—

Lith saw several students, that had been killed earlier by the Valor, groggily stand up with their eyes shining with the red light of undeath.

"Damn! I hate always being right!" Lith opened a Warp Steps, but he was too weak to go far from the battlefield. His destination was their room in the mining town. He threw Friya and Quylla inside and on to their beds, more or less.

Then, he picked Phloria and Yurial up and ran away from the undead mob that was chasing them, closing the gate right behind him. The monsters were fast enough to compete with Lith in his exhausted state while burdened by his companions.

Some of them were already crossing the gate when it disappeared. A few heads and limbs fell on the floor, emitting a screeching sound before turning into black smoke and ashes.

"Just Balkor's style. He sacrifices undeath's eternal life in exchange for explosive power. The fallen students turning so fast can only be a bad omen."

Lith lay Phloria and Yurial on the floor, discovering that the black matter was already halfway towards their cores. The corruption was spreading at an alarming rate. Almost half of their bodies had turned blue, with black veins bulging all over them.

Cursing Balkor's name, Lith had no choice but to activate Invigoration and wait until he had regained enough strength to make his blurred eyesight return to normal before attempting a treatment.

He used that time to call for help with his communication amulet. This wasn't the academy's healers first rodeo. The light magic department was bound to know a cure for their affliction, after ten years of fighting the same kind of undead.

Alas, the amulet was once again offline.

"F*ck Linjos and his idiotic plan! F*ck Manohar! He's nowhere to be found when you really need him!" Lith's rage was almost out of control. In that moment, he hated everyone. The academy for failing to protect them, the nobles and the Crown for having caused the crisis, and Balkor for messing with his turf.

- "Calm down, Lith" Solus did her best, using their symbiotic bond to quell his anger. "Healing is a delicate process, you can't brute force your way to save someone. Letting yourself go can only do more harm to your friends."—

Lith still rejected that word, 'friends'. Yet denying his attachment to them was hypocritical, especially his fondness towards Phloria. Aside from Solus, no one outside of his family had ever made him feel so special since his rebirth in the new world.

Lith swallowed his anger, studying the black matter only to discover it was some kind of darkness magic he had never met before. Light magic would be useless, while Invigoration wasn't able to purge it because of its immaterial nature.

- "Solus, please help me!" What can I do?"— Their bodies kept turning, their breathing had almost stopped.

"You can only brute force your way." Solus sighed. It was a gamble, but also the only thing she could improvise with so little time at hand.

"Use your own darkness magic to stall and destroy the Valor's one while using light magic to immediately heal the damages the conflicting energies will cause. That kind of power isn't made to last, if you resist long enough it should self destruct."—

Lith commenced the procedure even before Solus had finished her explanation, he had already understood her idea from the first sentence. First, he attacked the black veins, preventing the affliction from spreading further, then he focused on the black mass.

Chapter 220 Grieving

Handling two kinds of mana at once, on two different patients, was the hardest thing Lith had ever done. He had to repair all the injuries in a timely manner, using darkness magic against the wounds the Valor's life force caused, otherwise his companions would die of shock or organ failure.

At the same time, he couldn't relieve the pressure on the black mass, not even for a second. It was already only centimeters away from their cores, a single slip up and everything would be lost.

The memory of the kid dying in his arms during the plague was still etched into Lith's mind.

There was no way to repair a broken core. Lith only had one chance and had to make it count. His energy reserves were constantly depleted by his endeavor and replenished by Invigoration, but with every cycle, his breathing technique would lose part of its effectiveness.

Lith needed Solus's help from time to time, letting her take control of his mana flow whenever he felt his focus was slipping. Soon it became a battle of will, Balkor's against Lith's.

Ironhelm would have liked to let himself fall on the ground and rest, but Nalear was getting worse by the second. He placed his hand on the fallen Skoll's neck, caressing his soft fur for the first and last time before leaving.

Then, he felt a pulse. He immediately activated his communication earpiece.

"Manohar, Marth, get your asses over here! Otherwise, I swear to the gods that I will kill you!"

Blood Desert, Balkor's secret lab

When Ilyum Balkor finally regained his senses, everything was already over. Kalla's opening move had caused a domino effect, making months of careful planning go to waste. The shock from the sudden death of the Valors had taken him out of the picture long enough for the battle to be lost.

Without his supervision, the Valors had let themselves be blinded by the hatred Balkor had infected them with, making them conceited and reckless. Each time one of them fell, all the others would become weaker, making it easier for the enemies to kill another one, rinse and repeat.

While trying to get up, he coughed blood again and again. Not only was almost all of his life force gone, but also most of his magic. It would take him years to recover, if that was even possible.

"Mother, father, my siblings, please forgive me." He wept uncontrollably.

"I have failed you. Tomorrow, no blood will be shed. Your deaths will be forgotten because of my incompetence!" The Lords of the forests had proven to be way stronger than he anticipated and so too were their minions.

Many Professors had fallen, even the Lightning Griffon Headmaster had died during the attack, but only a few students had been harmed. The four remaining academies had survived, all of Balkor's efforts had been for naught.

Following Linjos's protocol, the other Headmasters had removed the academies' power cores, entrusting them to the Crown. When Balkor's minions had stormed the academies' gates, the castles were empty shells.

"I only have one choice left. I can't activate my last prototype. I would die in the process and without my control, it wouldn't be able to distinguish friend from foe. It could even harm my family. That accursed bear has ruined everything.

In the end, even the god of death dies."

Before Warping out of his lab, Balkor activated the self destruct mechanism. The memory crystals, his method to fuse Abominations and undead, his whole life work.

All of it was too dangerous to allow humans to ever get their hands on it.

"It all ends now." Watching the small mound collapse from afar, Balkor found himself sighing in relief. Even if things hadn't gone as planned, he still had his closure. Two of the six great academies were lost, several Archmages had died.

His legend would live on, instilling fear in the accursed old nobles' households for years to come. They would never know what had happened to him or why he had stopped his attacks.

For all they knew, the god of death would be biding his time, waiting for his enemies to lower their guard while building an even stronger army.

"Also, I would pay my weight in gold to see their terrified faces. Tomorrow night nothing will happen, yet their fear will make it the worst day of their lives."

Balkor laughed heartily, cleaning the blood from his clothes before returning home. His children deserved to finally have a full time father.

When Lith regained his senses, he had no idea how much time had passed. His body ached with every movement due to the strain of prolonged excessive mana use.

He barely had the mental energy to open his eyes. His vision was blurred from physical exhaustion and he had a splitting headache caused by the severe lack of mana. Human figures seemed to be moving around him, but because of the haze, he wasn't able to recognize any of them.

- "How... how long was I out?" Even in his own thoughts, Lith couldn't avoid stuttering. Thinking was a heavy burden, he just wanted to close his eyes and sleep.

"A few minutes." Solus replied.

"Just enough time for Friya and Quylla to wake up and infuse you with some of their life force. Try not to speak much, your core is almost empty. We already know what happens when someone forcefully goes beyond their limits."—

Solus was worried too. This time Lith had gone too far, treating his companions' condition until he had lost consciousness. She wanted him to be more human and compassionate, but not if the price was his life.

She had even given him part of her mana without him noticing. She didn't care about her own hunger or the weakness that was numbing her senses, she wanted for him to be alright.

Lith nodded, using Invigoration once again. His mana core was still empty and his body exhausted, but at least now he was able to see and talk properly.

"Lith what happened?" Both Friya and Quylla were worried to death.

"Why won't Yurial and Phloria wake up? No matter what spell we use, their condition does not improve, nor do we understand what's wrong with them. Also, how did you get so exhausted?" Friya asked.

"So nice of you to think about me too, even if only at the end." Lith rubbed his temples, trying to ease the pain.

Friya opened her mouth to reply in kind to his sarcastic remark, but remained silent.

- "Telling him that I can't help but see him as more of a monster than a human would be too cruel of a joke. Lith may be a bit scary sometimes, but he has always been nothing but a good friend to me. Thank the gods I can hold my stupid tongue."— Friya thought.

Lith used that respite to tell them about how he had escaped from the Valor bringing them with him. He also told them how the creature had infected their companions and his attempts to cure them.

Even if she meant it as a bad joke, Friya felt terrible for thinking those words.

"Please, go find a Professor. I don't know if I saved them or just bought them some more time. They need someone that knows what we are dealing with."

Friya nodded, leaving Quylla to take care of her friends while she Blinked right above their house, her rapier ready at hand. From the higher ground, she noticed that the battle seemed to be over. The town plaza was empty.

Some skirmishes were still going on between beasts, Professors, and lesser undead, but the black creatures were reduced to a few handfuls. From the moment Scarlett had killed the Controllers, the hive mind had collapsed.

Without it, the Tox Spitters had no combat awareness, they had reverted to mindless blank slates. It was only a matter of minutes before they got completely wiped out.

Friya identified a group of Professors and went to ask for their help, too late to notice that, what they were battling against, students that were turned into undead. Her rapier cut and stabbed the reanimated corpses mercilessly.

Her hand didn't even hesitate when she recognized some of them as her classmates. The only things Friya felt were the urgency to prevent her sister and friend from suffering the same fate and gratitude towards Orion.

The blade he had crafted for her fitted her hand like a glove. While the multiple enchantments he had forgedmastered it with made short work of her enemies, turning them into dust and smoke.

- "I swear that if I get back home alive, I'll start calling Orion 'dad'."— Friya thought, realizing the depth of care and love her adoptive father held.

"Please, I need a healer! My friends have been hurt!" Realizing what was affecting her friends, Friya's worry increased tenfold.

Professor Wanemyre nodded, activating her communication earpiece.

"There isn't a second to lose, tell me where to find them."

It took less than a second for Professor Marth to join them and open a Warp Steps back to Lith's room.

"How long ago have they been struck?" Marth knew that, once the dark energy entered the bloodstream, it was only a matter of minutes before the victim died, almost instantly resurrecting as a lesser undead.

"I don't know." Friya pointed to him the two youths lying on their beds.

Marth cursed their bad luck, casting a diagnostic spell to see how severe their condition was, only to discover that their system was completely cleansed. The two students were simply exhausted beyond reason like they had fought and won the battle of a lifetime.

Marth had no idea what could have possibly happened, and he was simply too happy to care. His joy was short lived though. As soon as he saw Lith, sadness gripped Marth's heart.

Lith seemed exhausted too, he barely had the strength to eat the medical provisions Quylla was handing him. Marth didn't want to burden him further, but time was of the essence.

"Lith, I'm really sorry." Marth placed a hand on his shoulder, trying to comfort him.

"One of your friends has been gravely injured. He doesn't have much time left and he is asking for you."

"A friend?" Lith's sleepy eyes were suddenly wide open, checking his surroundings.

"What's wrong with Yurial?" He couldn't help but be surprised by the worry he recognized in his own voice.

"Yurial is fine. Whatever you did, it worked. You don't know how proud I am of you." Marth smiled gently, he would have liked to ask him many things, but questions had to wait.

"I'm talking about Protector. He has something to say to you. I've never seen someone with such strong willpower. He is literally refusing to die before speaking with you one last time. Please follow me."

Something inside Lith snapped, making all of his exhaustion disappear. Solus knew it was only a placebo effect, caused by Lith's desire to cry clashing with his firm denial that something might have happened to his old friend.

"Take me to him."

Marth opened a Warp Steps, seeing ill concealed pain in Lith's eyes.

Protector's body was too big to fit in the field hospital and his condition was too severe to move him from the spot he had fallen. Lith's heart ached to see the flaming red fur blackened all over, the flames that made up the tails were reduced to embers. Protector's chest raised and lowered slowly, accompanied by heavy pants.

Manohar had done his best, arriving as soon as he had been summoned. He had used all his expertise to cleanse the toxin, close the wounds, and defuse the lethal effects that such a prolonged exposure to the Dark Star spell would induce.

He was called the god of healing, but he was no god. Just a gifted man that loved his job. There were things even he was helpless against.

"It's all your fault!" Manohar roared to Ironhelm.

"You should have called me earlier! I could have saved him. I never, ever fail!"

Manohar didn't care much for the Skoll's fate, nevertheless, he had done the best that he could. His work was his life, it defined what and who he was.

Lith pushed Manohar away, touching Protector to use Invigoration and check his condition. What he saw made his heart skip a beat. Protector's core was deeply cracked, his mana was slowly seeping out. It had already turned back to green and was losing strength with each passing second.

"Glad to see you before the end, Lith." Protector's voice was still calm and serene like the first time they had met.

"Don't be sad for me. I had a great life, a loving mate and many offspring. If it wasn't for Scarlett, I would already be dead. I was living on borrowed time. I am really happy to get the opportunity to return her favor."

Every one of his words was supposed to console Lith, to make him feel better. Yet every time he spoke, Lith felt a dagger piercing his heart. Tears started to stream from his eyes, but his voice was stone cold.

"This is all your fault!" He roared to Scarlett and Linjos that were standing at Protector's side after trying every single spell they knew to save his life.

"You screw up everything you touch! Who the f*ck is that dumb son of a b*tch that made you Headmaster?" Linjos could expel him for all he cared.

If something happened to Protector, Balkor would have to get in line to get his turn with the Headmaster.