

## Supreme M 221

### Chapter 221 Grieving 2

"Why did you ask for his help?" Lith yelled to Scarlett while his fury was peaking. "You knew he had never traveled outside the Trawn woods! This was too big for him, why didn't you leave him alone?"

Scarlett's guilt was already eating at her from the inside, she couldn't reply to Lith because she was thinking the same things.

However, when she felt a slight tremor in the ground, she was forced to speak.

"You are right, it's all my fault. Now please, try to calm down."

"Calm down?" Lith's roar was accompanied by another tremor, this time strong enough for everyone to feel it.

All of his mana was seething with anger, darkness magic exuded from every inch of Lith's body, spreading the killing intent of a mad beast desperate enough to throw away its life for a single chance to bite back its enemy.

All the Professors could feel it on their skin. The ones that were too injured from the recent fight to stand their ground, found themselves covered in cold sweat, retreating one step at the time.

Even Linjos's body reacted instinctively, a spell ready at hand to counter the imminent death threat.

- "I read the reports speaking about his ferocity, but this is unheard of for someone so young. His mana exudes such a powerful pressure that a normal man would have already run away out of fear."  
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With a wave of her paw, Scarlett Warped all the humans back to their apartments and sealed the space around the mining town to prevent the use of dimensional magic. Being the Lord of the forest was much more than a mere title.

Like an academy empowered its headmaster, a forest empowered its lord. It was similar to being a Guardian, but instead of being recognized by the planet's will, the Lord had a very limited area of influence and much lesser powers.

Otherwise, Scarlett would have faced and destroyed Balkor's army alone.

"You can ask me to calm down only after I have ripped off your tail and forced you to eat it!" A mass of clouds started gathering in the sky.

Scarlett knew a world tribulation was about to happen. That was the reason why she had sent all the humans away. While she had no idea what was causing the tribulation, the one responsible had to be protected.

Even if he was a young human Abomination hybrid on the verge of madness.

"Lith, please stop." Protector coughed. Hearing his voice turned Lith's anger to pain. A pain he hadn't experienced since Carl's death.

"What do you think you are doing? I didn't ask for you because I want you to turn into the new Balkor. Revenge solves nothing. Did you ever pay attention when I spoke to you?" Protector attempted to laugh, but it soon turned into a dry cough that made him spit black blood.

"I just wanted to say goodbye and ask you for a favor. Please, tell Selia that I'm sorry. Also, make up one of your ridiculous lies to explain to her how I died. Tell her that I would have never abandoned her like this." A few tears streamed from the Skoll's eyes, before disappearing under his fur.

"Please, take care of our child. I never had one with a human, I don't know if they end up resembling their mother or father more. Male or female, they'll need your help."

"Why does everyone want me to take care of their offspring?" Lith's scream caused several bolts of lightning to light the sky.

"I don't want to! I hate children! Live and take care of them by yourself." Lith hugged Protector's body, bawling his eyes out.

"You are the first friend I ever had. You may be a magical beast, but you have always been like a brother to me. You always treated me as an adult, annoying me with your words of wisdom and trying to make me into a better person.

Why are you leaving me? Why?"

"It's not that I want to." Protector's panting worsened, every breath was a struggle.

"It's just that sometimes you can't win. Death is a part of life."

"I'm sick and tired of life trying to snatch away what's mine!" Lith ignored Protector, focusing only on Invigoration and the bleeding mana core.

"First, I wasn't old enough to protect my brother. Then, I wasn't rich and powerful enough to even give him the justice he deserved. After that, I was too weak to heal Tista, forcing me to watch her suffering for years!"

By remembering each of the people he loved, the hatred he felt towards everyone else increased without limit. His body started to reshape itself according to the burning wrath that was consuming him.

Black scales replaced Lith's exposed skin up to his neck, leaving only his face uncovered. His fingers grew longer and were now ending in razor-sharp claws.

Lith's eyes were now inhuman. They had no pupil, iris, or sclera, only a burning blue light remained.

"Now I'm strong enough!"

Lith used Invigoration to call upon the world energy, not using it to strengthen himself, but to surround Protector's mana core and stop the leak. He had just realized that, unlike the kid's core during the plague, Protector's had yet to turn grey.

Its bright yellow color gave Lith hope and the strength to attempt a desperate gamble. After doing his best to prevent the damaged core from weakening any further, he started to shape an artificial core like Kalla had shown him a few hours before.

Instead of crafting it out of light and darkness, he used the surrounding world energy and of all of Protector's mana that Lith was unable to contain. It was something incredibly difficult to achieve.

He couldn't force the mana to do anything without running the risk of contaminating it with his own, making Protector's core reject it. Lith could only slowly and gently guide it to its destination, making sure it didn't fade away by protecting it from all external influences.

The world energy was naturally shapeless, like water, it assumed the signature of whoever managed to call forth its power. As more and more of Protector's mana reached the fake core, it started to mutate until the two energy signatures perfectly matched.

Lith was experiencing an unbelievable amount of pain. Not only because his body was already battered and his mana core running on fumes, but also because he had to take all of the impurities the world energy contained into himself to shape the fake core, allowing only the purest and strongest mana to become part of his creation.

Lith accepted the pain with joy, it was still nothing compared to what the void had done to him in the years following his brother's death.

The last step was the most dangerous one. Lith knew that light magic wasn't enough to allow Protector's core and the fake one to merge. Just like during Forgemastering, he needed something to connect the spell with the item.

Having nothing left, he used his own life force as a tool to achieve his goal. When Lith's energy rekindled Protector's soul spark, Lith was able to experience the Skoll's life from the moment of his birth.

The joy of meeting his first mate and having pups together, followed by the pain of losing them to disease, hunger, or the hand of hunters. Lith could feel how happy Protector had been when he encountered Selia, how strong his desire for a new family was.

Such happiness was something that Lith firmly believed he would never have, so he pushed forward. He consumed more and more energy despite his whole body screaming in pain, begging him to stop, and his core began to crack.

Scarlett watched the whole process in awe. Part of her hoped for him to succeed. Another part of her hoped for him to fail, to get rid of the dangerous unknown factor Lith represented.

Yet all of Scarlett's being hated the world's will because once again it was just standing there doing nothing.

- "I have been through my fair share of tribulations and I have yet to understand why they are called so. It's not like the world puts you to the test or something, it just watches you while the worst sh\*t happens to your life. Either you live or die, it never interferes, like our lives are nothing but a two-bit sideshow."— She thought.

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From her throne in the underground dungeon, Tyriss felt the second tribulation advent.

"That anomaly again." She thought out loud.

"It's better if I go check on it, before the others start pestering me about the lack of information." She stood up, appearing right before Scarlett. It was easy for a Guardian to ignore the Scorpicores' dimensional magic seal.

"What does this mean, Forest Lord?" She asked.

Scarlett instinctively knelt to her, explaining to Tyris all that had happened that night.

"I see. Another Abomination hybrid, it seems. But this one isn't a man-made fake Abomination, more like a jigsaw made of different pieces. He's already at the second tribulation, I wouldn't worry if I were you."

Tyris shrugged, preparing to leave.

"Wait, my Lady. What do you mean?" Scarlett was shocked by her indifference. Unlike Kalla and Protector, she had no affection toward Lith, but he still was a child trying to save a precious friend.

After witnessing so much death in a single night, she couldn't understand how the Guardian could leave without moving a finger. It would be easy for Tyris to save them both.

"You really don't know?" Tyris turned back, raising an eyebrow in disbelief.

"Tribulations happen constantly to beasts, humans, plants, and undead alike. Every single day. They happen whenever Mogar, the world we live in, thinks that someone can be useful for its purposes.

"During every tribulation, Mogar evaluates the candidate's worth through their actions. Success or failure depends entirely on the candidate, though. The first tribulation is usually about the skill the world is interested in.

The second and usually last one, is about self-control."

"What self-control?" Scarlett was flabbergasted.

"The kid is killing himself, burning his own life as we speak! Shouldn't the tribulation be failed already?"

"You completely misunderstood the nature of tribulations." Tyris chuckled in amusement.

"A talent is worthless if someone lets it control their life, as most living beings do. My talent is to inspire the change, but it could be easily subverted into bringing chaos if I was never content with the status quo and I did not give the changes the time to prove their worth.

"Leegaain's talent is knowledge and preservation. Yet imagine how easy it would be for him to turn it into greed, hoarding everything and every life form for himself, turning from the keeper of the world into its warden.

"Salaark embodies the desire to rule and lead by example, but she could just as easily become a tyrant obsessed with world domination. The self-control I'm talking about is the will to resist the urges your talent pushes you towards and do the opposite.

"Take the kid, for example. Judging from his first two tribulations, the world seems to have chosen him to kill a lot of people, yet it's checking if he's just a soulless monster or if he has the will to choose the hard path and grant life instead.

"We all serve the balance. There would be no need for a Guardian of destruction, the races do an excellent job by themselves already. That's why you don't need to worry. If he ever succeeds in passing all the tribulations, we'll just have another Guardian."

"What if he fails? The prolonged exposure to the world's will has already altered him that much." Scarlett rebuked, pointing at Lith's scales covered body.

"Aren't you afraid of what he could do if he manages to control that kind of power?"

"No." Tyris shook her head. "That's just a promise of payment, barely cosmetic. As far as I know, you have passed all of your tribulations. Have you gotten any stronger?"

"No. I've learned how to shapeshift, but my strength is always the same, no matter the form I take."

"Exactly. Until he becomes a Guardian..." Tyris giggled at the idea.

"he will just remain whatever he is. While if he fails, he will die. As simple as that. There is no do-over with tribulations. The number of tribulations varies from person to person, but most fail at the second one. Even if he succeeds, he could fail at the next one, or at the one after that." Tyris disappeared, leaving Scarlett more nervous than ever.

"This is great. Now I not only have to worry about Scourge and Protector, but also about myself! I never imagined tribulations were so dangerous. Gods, I wish Kalla were here. She would know what to do."

"She would say to move your stinger-equipped a\*s and help the child. You always whine about the world's will being indifferent, yet you stand there doing nothing. What's the difference between the two of you?" A limping Kalla pointed out.

Scarlett flinched at her appearance, but recovered quickly and did as instructed. Lith had already consumed several years of his lifespan to keep Protector alive and his core was about to crack too.

However, he had managed to fix Protector's core enough to allow Scarlett to finish the job. She saved both their lives at once, before questioning the Wraith.

"How did you survive that blast?"

"First, as you should know, no one can be harmed by their own mana. So the only damage I took was from overloading my mana core. It was a calculated risk. My odds of survival were pretty good since my undead nature makes it really hard to kill me with both conventional and unconventional means.

"Unlike you, I never trusted the men's words or underestimated a fellow Necromancer's madness. I had a contingency plan in case I was cornered and another one in the eventuality of my death." Kalla was referring to Lith's promise.

"Don't you mean your partial undead nature?" Scarlett corrected her friend.

"Have I already mentioned all Necromancers are a bit insane?"

Kalla used Invigoration to further her healing process, revealing to the shocked Scorpicores that her body held both a mana and a blood core.

Chapter 222 After the Storm

"I don't understand. What is that thing? How did you manage to survive the explosion?" Scarlett was happy to see Kalla alive, even if she was heavily injured.

Most of the shadow that usually covered her massive skeleton was gone, leaving it completely exposed. Only a faint mist covered the zone where her internal organs were supposed to be.

One of her front paws was missing and the red light that usually burned inside her eyes was almost gone.

When it started blinking, Kalla collapsed on the ground.

"Survive is a strong word. Let's just say I'm not completely dead. As for your questions, it's a bit complicated to explain. After my evolution, I have been shunned by humans and magical beasts alike.

"They don't see beyond my physical appearance, that's why I started spending so much time with the various tribes of higher undead. I felt like I didn't belong in the forest anymore, so I was searching for a new family."

"Why didn't you tell me that earlier? I would have taught them a lesson!" Scarlett roared in outrage.

"To what end?" Kalla sneered. "Nothing would have changed. They would behave in front of you and keep ostracizing me as soon as you turned your back. I don't need anyone's pity nor protection."

Her voice was feeble, but filled with determination.

"However, greater undead always treated me with respect. After I adopted my daughter, I was seriously considering turning myself into a true undead instead of being stuck in this half baked form.

"So, I started researching the blood cores, experimenting on myself to see how they interact with a living body with an intact mana core. Worst case scenario, I would have become a real undead. Nothing would have changed for me.

"I would still be an Awakened one and Nok would follow me even if I had three heads. The actual result was quite underwhelming. The second core does nothing except take enough energy from me to sustain itself.

"Since it didn't seem to have any side effects, I kept it as a study subject for my research on how to cure Mina. It pains me to admit that I hope the same cure will help me too. It's so frustrating always being alone."

Kalla paused, the shadow inside her body kept getting thinner.

"It's only thanks to my experiments that, when I recalled the darkness magic animating my undead, I was able to avoid the overload by splitting the energy between both cores. That way even if one shattered, the other would remain.

The problem is that now that they have almost the same strength, I don't know which will prevail."

"How can I help you?" Scarlett asked, wishing she could do the same thing Lith had done for Protector.

"Not much. Just wait for me to come back and be my friend no matter what the result is. Also, I would greatly appreciate if you helped me find a safe place for me and Mina to live. Your forest doesn't suit any of us."

Kalla finally succumbed to exhaustion, the light in her eyes went out completely. If not for some shreds of darkness still lingering over her, it would have been impossible to distinguish her from an old carcass.

Scarlett felt a deep pain inside of her. By choosing to help the humans, she had endangered the lives of her underlings, causing the death of many of them. M'Rook had died fighting the Valors, leaving her without a second in command and many more had been gravely injured or maimed.

As long as they were alive, she could heal them, but it would take a long time for the forest to recover from its wounds. In just two days, the combat prowess of her turf had been halved.

Her dear friend Kalla was now on the brink of death, Protector had almost died, and she couldn't help but consider it as her fault. Her arrogance had blinded her. She had been so confident in her strength that she almost lost everything she had.

- "Now I understand why the members of the Council are so detached. The longer you live, the more painful it is when you lose someone. I've known M'Rook and Kalla since they were just cubs, and I raised them both like they were my own.

"Now M'Rook is dead. Kalla will survive or turn into a true undead, either way she will leave the forest forever. I've been so obsessed with the Abomination threat, by pursuing my 'master plan' and always thinking big picture that I've disregarded the details.

"Those small, precious details that make my life worth living. I've neglected both the lives of my subjects and their happiness. Maybe I have become too old to be a Lord of the forest. Maybe Leegaain is right, I should leave my turf to someone better than me and strive to become a Guardian.

"By the Great Mother, I never thought the day I would get tired of living could ever come."—  
Scarlett was lost in thought when she heard a movement from her right.

Protector was getting up and for the first time since they had known each other, he seemed to be out of his mind with rage.

"Don't worry, Protector. Your friend is fine, I made sure of that myself." Scarlett tried to calm him down.

"Fine? How dare you to call losing decades of his life being 'fine'? Why the heck didn't you stop him?" He pointed his muzzle to Lith's shrivelled body. He had lost so much of his body weight before losing consciousness that he was unrecognizable.

Protector was still as weak as a baby, his life hanging by a thread while his core could never recover completely from the damage it had suffered. Yet his rage was stronger than all that.

"You wanted him to die, you crazy f\*cker! Did you think I have gone deaf? I heard your whole conversation with that pompous a\*s, whoever she was. You can forget me helping you again in the future! If you don't want to make an enemy out of me, you'd better do as I say."

Scarlett nodded. Her guilt prevented her from even trying to defend her foolish actions.

"As soon as Lith wakes up, you'll tell him that I'm dead."

"What?" Scarlett didn't see that coming.

"What he did was stupid, reckless, and immature. He may act all wise and mighty, but his earlier actions were those of a child throwing a tantrum." By sharing their life forces, Protector had been able to see Lith's life just like Lith had seen his.

He still couldn't believe his friend was actually older than himself and an alien from a gods forsaken world at that. Yet the revelation hadn't changed the feelings Protector harbored toward Lith.

Quite to the contrary, it made them even deeper.

"He has gone through a lot of pain, maybe too much, but that's not justification enough to put an end to his own life in a mad attempt to save me. If Lith learns about my survival, he will not hesitate to repeat the same mistake.

I would have died, leaving my mate alone, but so what? He didn't stop for a second to think about what he was throwing away. All he cared about was keeping life and death in his own hands, like it was all a game and he refused to accept defeat.

His obsession with control will sooner or later kill him. He needs to experience the pain of loss again to appreciate what he has. His family, his friends, the little female, and you, Solus." Protector said to the ring at Lith's finger, leaving Solus shocked.

"Solus?" Scarlett asked.

"The female that inhabits the ring. That's her name."

Scarlett pondered for a while. The name didn't ring any bells. She had no idea it was something Lith had come up with years ago, so all of her knowledge was useless in solving the mystery behind her existence.

"You too must keep my survival secret from him, otherwise he'll never change. So far, he has lived pushing everyone away, never letting people come close to him and making up one excuse after another to justify his actions.

He has lost years before appreciating even his own family. If he keeps acting like this, he will understand how much he cares for those around him only after he has lost them for good and then he will turn into another Balkor. Is this what you want for him, Solus?

A life of self-inflicted isolation followed by killing sprees with no care for the consequences?"

Even if Scarlett had allowed her to respond via a mind link, Solus didn't know what to say. Earlier she had tried to stop Lith, but she was too exhausted to push through the barrier the world's will had put him into to prevent her from interfering.

"Please Solus, listen to me." Protector continued.

"This is the only way to help him. By telling him of his success, you would be enabling his obsession. It would only be a matter of time before he does it again. He will suffer for my loss, yes, but it should act as a wake up call.



"He needs to stop indulging in his obsession. We exist to pass down our hopes and dreams for the future through our actions. Our lives are like rivers that cross paths, sometimes briefly, sometimes for a long time creating a bond.

Those bonds are what allows us to leave a part of ourselves behind.

"Our legacy is not limited to our offspring. Every person we meet changes us, as we change them. I know he will suffer for my loss, but it's not the end of the world.

Either he learns to open himself up to others, instead of trapping himself into plans and preparations for what may or may not happen, or he will end up cutting his ties with everyone to avoid getting hurt.

Whatever he decides, at least he will find his way in life. What we are going to offer him, is a chance to understand every day is precious and it should not be wasted on revenge and recrimination."

Solus didn't say a word, crying the whole time.

"Solus, these are my last words, so please find a way to pass them to Lith. Hate is a double edged sword. It can give you the strength to face your enemies and protect those you love. Yet if it becomes your reason for living instead of just a tool for survival, it will turn into a venom that will consume you.

Even if we met late in my life, even we aren't even of the same race, know this. I've always loved him as a son and I always will."

Solus was still hesitant, lying to Lith was something she had never thought about before. She didn't even know if she was capable of doing it.

"How many people has he ever called a friend?" Protector's voice resounded in her mind.

"Just you and me." She replied.

"Then you know that I'm right. Scarlett, send me back to Lutia. I'll move away with my mate to not let him discover the truth."

Scarlett dispelled the dimensional seal, sending Lith to the field hospital through a Warp Steps before opening another one for Protector. She decided that, if she managed to survive the third and final night, as soon as her forest was restored, she would hunt Balkor down like the monster he was.

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Just as Balkor had predicted, the anniversary of the day his family died was the worst day that everyone in the four remaining academies had ever lived. The Professors spent the morning treating the injured, counting the dead, and notifying the families of the victims.

After the events of the last night, the survivors felt hopeless. Several Professors, including Trasque, had died, others, like Nalear, were so badly injured that they were not able to take part in the final stand.

The White Griffon academy had suffered the fewest casualties during the first day, but now its occupants felt like they had got the short end of the stick. Their academy was the only one to have lost all of its evolved monsters except the Lord of the forest.

Without Kalla, there would be no protective arrays to weaken the enemy or her undead army to take the brunt of the damage. Without Protector running like lightning through the battlefield, any delay in sending reinforcements could prove to be lethal.

Lith, Phloria, and Yurial were hospitalized and kept away from the battle. Phloria woke up around noon. Aside from crippling exhaustion, she felt fine. She had no idea what had happened after she had been struck by the lightning.

When she saw Lith laying in a bed nearby her own, her heart skipped a beat. He was deadly pale and he looked like a sixty year old man, his hair had become completely grey and some spots of his head were bald. With skin pulled tight over his bones, he appeared skeletal. His entire body burned with fever, drenching the bed with sweat.

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"What happened to Lith?" Phloria needed to lean against the walls or the beds to avoid falling on the ground. Every step she took towards his bed felt like she was trying to uproot a tree, making her sweat bullets. Yet she didn't stop until someone finally noticed her struggle.

"Good grief, you shouldn't strain yourself anymore, young lady. You are lucky to still be alive." Professor Vastor rushed to her aid, taking out a chair from his dimensional amulet to make her rest.

"Please Professor, tell me what happened." Phloria was on the verge of passing out again, but her tone was determined enough to not leave room for doubts. Vastor could only tell her the truth or sedate her, there was no other way to calm her down.

It was likely to be the last day all of them had to live. Vastor decided that forcing such a young girl to spend it unconscious in a bed would be too cruel. There was a reason why they couldn't just send the students back home.

They were still Balkor's target.

After the Earth and Crystal Griffon academies fell, their students had been Warped to the Royal palace to keep them out of harm's way. Some of the old noble families had decided to bring them home, only to be attacked during the second night by Balkor's Crawlers.

Only those that had timely fled to a different region or remained in the palace had been spared from the onslaught. The number of casualties was already in the hundreds and counting. Without the protection of the arrays, a noble house was as safe as a commoner one.

"I don't know, I really don't." He replied seeing the concern growing in her eyes.

"You and Lord Deirus were tainted by a Valor, but Lith somehow managed to prevent you from turning into undead. Then a friend of his called Lith on his deathbed. From what I heard, Lith freaked out.

Then, all that I know is that he arrived here like that."

"Is he going to die?" Her eyes were watery, but she was unwavering. She would not let Vastor get away with a vague answer.

"It's unlikely, but possible." He finally admitted after much thought.

"I've seen a similar condition in patients that had pushed themselves too hard using magic. The only thing we can do is let him rest.. He should get back to normal in a couple of weeks."

- "If he doesn't die tonight, either at the hand of Balkor's thralls or from going for broke to save your lives earlier."— Vastor inwardly added.

"Thanks, Professor." He had expected her to cry and whine like the little girl she was, yet Phloria smiled. It was something that Vastor hadn't seen in days.

"Can I stay here, please?" She took Lith's hand in her own, hoping he could feel her touch and somehow draw strength from it.

Usually Vastor would have scolded her and sent her back to her bed, but the sincerity of Phloria's feelings despite her own predicament had moved even his old, shriveled heart.

Vastor used magic to rearrange the beds, moving Phloria's right beside Lith's. He even gave her blankets large enough to cover both beds, turning them into a makeshift double bed.

"Just promise me you'll keep your hands where they belong. This is a hospital, after all." She turned beet red while Vastor laughed at his own joke. A short while later he finally left them alone.

He doubted Lith would wake up to enjoy her company, but if it that was going to be her last night on Mogar, Phloria had the right to spend it with someone she loved.

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Without Kalla's arrays, there was no reason to keep all the students in one place. They had learned from the previous night that rounding them up like that without a rock solid defense was akin to wrapping them up and offering them as a present to the enemy.

This time they kept the students in their own housing, preparing multiple Warping arrays ahead of time to scatter them all around the forest in case the last line of defense fell again.

When the sun started to set, fear started to spread. When night fell, the fear turned into panic. Many students broke out into hysterics, forcing their roommates to knock them out before they hurt somebody.

When the night was about to end, even the Professors were drenched in cold sweat. The stress from the prolonged wait had tired them out almost as much actual combat.

"What the heck is he waiting for?" Linjos was a nervous wreck, pacing non stop inside the headquarters.

"Usually Balkor keeps the worst for the precise hour his family was killed, but we are way past that point!"

When daylight finally came, the whole Griffon Kingdom rejoiced. Four out of the six great academies were still standing and the anniversary had ended with no further bloodshed.

The Headmasters contacted the Crown, who ordered them to keep waiting and not lower their guard. Balkor's shadow was so deeply etched in their minds that the Royals couldn't believe their own luck.

It was noon before the King ordered them to send the students back home. The yearly god of death's threat was over, but the wounds he had left behind were deep. Many things had to be done before life could go back to normal.

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After Balkor's eleventh assault was over, the smoldering embers of the civil war were almost completely extinguished.

During the first five years of the god of death's reign of terror, the ancient noble households didn't care much for his actions. There were too many of them, hence the odds of being Balkor's victim were low.

Most families would secretly pray for the god of death to get rid of their most dangerous competitors in their stead, so they could get hold of their lands and riches.

When the god of death started targeting the Crown and the Mage Association, the ancient noble households rejoiced. They even started to consider Balkor as their benefactor.

He had kept the Crown off their game for years, forcing them to invest more time and resources into defending themselves from the next attack rather than in investigating the nobles' schemes and illegal trafficking.

Balkor was the reason why the Crown had been weakened for so long, allowing Lukart to pursue his dream of becoming the next King. Balkor's anniversary had been a red-letter day for organized crime during the past five years.

However, when the god of death announced in his own twisted way that he would go after the academies, everything changed. The old noble families didn't need the Crown or the Mage Association to thrive, but without their most talented offspring, they were as good as dead.

Most of the students of the six great academies came from their ranks. They were the future family leaders and the only ones that could ensure their prosperity in a world where magic was the cornerstone for all lucrative business.

The ancient households' magical legacies amounted to nothing without heirs talented enough to wield them. The eleventh attack had proved to them how weak they actually were.

They were completely at the mercy of a madman, capable of destroying years worth of efforts nurturing a mage in a single night.

The new situation required reprioritization of both their short and long-term goals. Any attempt to overthrow the Crown or undermine its authority was now a liability for them too.

Only the Royal family and the Mage Association had managed to obtain samples from Balkor's creatures over the years. Further, they had been actively researching countermeasures against them.

Even the most radical among the old noble families had to be concerned with what Balkor would do next year. Many of them had chosen to send their heirs to the Crystal and Earth Griffon academies, away from the Queen's pet projects.

Not only had those academies fallen, but also more than half their students had perished during the second night. It was enough to bring the old families low, forcing them to have their magicless offspring marry mages and have them take the family name, even if they were of humble origins.

Their future had suddenly become an unknown variable. To improve their odds of survival, they were even willing to help the Crown with their personal funds to find and neutralize Balkor once and for all.

To make things worse for the ancient households, now they were also terrified at the idea that other Balkors could be born by their own hand.

Forbidding the practice of magic to commoners was impossible.

Without them, it would take barely a generation for the Griffon Kingdom to lose its military prowess and be conquered by the neighboring countries. The second and almost as important reason was that the survivors of the eleventh attack had learned their lesson.

Living together, fighting together, and dying together had overturned the noble youths' perspective on life. They had experienced first hand their own mortality and how their titles were nothing in front of true power.

Most of the children stopped pursuing their parents' agenda and dedicated their time to the study of the only thing that mattered: magic.

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Ernas Mansion, the morning after the day of the anniversary

Like all those that were aware of the events taking place at the academies, the Ernas were living in a state of unrelenting terror, barely able to sleep or eat. Jirni and Orion had stopped working for the last three days. They were off their game, always worrying about the fate of their children.

When she learned from the report of the second day that Lith had saved Phloria, she was walking on air to the point that she recommended preparing a betrothal gift for Lith to Orion.

Orion was so moved by that little monster's care for his daughter that he almost agreed.

Both of them remained deeply shocked reading about how critical his condition was and how it was likely to be related to his effort to save Phloria's and Yurial's lives.

Jirni swore that if her daughters survived this hurdle, she would never meddle in their love lives again. They each seemed more than capable of finding a good man by themselves.

Orion swore to his wife that he would make no more objections to Lith's relationship with Phloria, as long as he brought their little Flower back home in one piece.

When the final report arrived and they learned that all three of their daughters were alive and well, the Ernas couple wept with joy for over an hour. Even as a royal constable, Jirni would only receive the status reports once a day after sunrise, just like any other royal servant.

They were so happy that they decided to take the rest of the week off, to welcome their daughters back and spend as much time with them as possible. The royal heralds called them more than once, saying that it was impossible to grant them another leave.

Every single civil servant with a child in an academy had had the same idea, either to spend some quality time with their families or to grieve their loss. The Ernas were among the most loyal subjects to the Crown, always putting duty above everything else during their long years of service.

This time, Jirni and Orion replied that the Kingdom could go f\*ck itself off and refused all the following calls. Their move greatly embarrassed the Crown, but there was nothing they could do about it.

Most of the parents were ready to give their resignation rather than miss their children's homecoming.

Jirni spent the morning of the third day speaking with her daughters. While they were still in the forest for security reasons, the communicators were finally online again. She was deeply shocked to discover that Phloria was in such a pitiful state when she told her everything that had happened and how critical Lith's condition was.

Their mother-daughter relationship had been getting better, but such news was still something that Jirni would expect Phloria to speak about with Orion, not her.

Balkor's threat was over, so her concern faded away while a plan took form into her mind. She immediately had the servant prepare the best guest rooms of the house for their future occupants.

Jirni gave precise instructions to tone down the staff's dress code. She had also prepared clothes that she and Orion usually wore during their vacations to their country cottage, where they dedicated themselves only to their hobbies and were away from the prying eyes and the uncaring nature of the rules and etiquette their usual social life required.

It was Orion's and Phloria's happiest time of the year since the former could swear, get dirty and play with his children like a normal father, while the latter could avoid wearing dresses and act like a tomboy until their departure.

- "Lith's family should still not know anything about what happened. I think it's time I pay them a visit. It's better if the bearer of so much bad news is a mother who went through the same nightmare, rather than a royal messenger that has been forced to repeat the same script hundreds of times.

First impressions count, so I need to play this to perfection. If I get his mother on my side, it's game, set, and match. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity."— Jirni thought.

## Chapter 224 Meet the Parents

Phloria, Friya, and Quylla returned home in the early afternoon. Much to their surprise, the academy had received instructions for the trio to bring Lith along with them. After getting the news, Phloria was overjoyed.

He had yet to regain his senses and his condition was still critical. He needed to regularly be forced to drink potions to sustain his life. Solus had been constantly using Invigoration to stabilize his mana core and mend the countless internal wounds that overexerting his body had caused.

- "The worst should be over. Lith now needs to rest." Solus would perform a full check up every hour.

"What worries me is his mind. He has yet to learn about Protector's alleged death, but I can feel his heart withering away. It's like he has never stopped grieving, even in his unconscious state."—

- "I take back most of the bad things I've thought about mom over the years. Not only did she bring Lith home with us, but she also assigned the best guest room to him."—

Phloria lay him on his bed before wiping off the sweat from his face with a wet cloth. She had learned how to feed him and keep him clean from the medical staff during the third day.

Phloria wouldn't let anyone else take care of him. She didn't want Lith to be alone when he woke up.

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For a regular person incapable of using magic, reaching the village of Lutia would prove to be a long and boring journey. The village was in the middle of nowhere and the nearest branch of the Mage Association with a Warp Steps was hundreds of kilometers away.

Jirni Ernas wasn't regular and according to many, barely a person. To accomplish her goal, she contacted Captain Locrias, the leader of the Queen's corps unit in charge of protecting Lith's family, and had him open a Warp Steps for her.

Jirni was officially on leave, but her reputation as royal constable preceded her. Captain Locrias was aware of her amazing yet gruesome track record.

- "It's much better to be on the good side of such a person, rather than on her black list."—

Captain Locrias knew that he was likely to be forced to pay for the long range portable Gates out of his own pocket, but if it meant Jirni Ernas owed him a favor, it was worth the price.

Even with her plainest clothes, only someone deaf, dumb, and blind could mistake Jirni for a commoner. She was aware of this so, before knocking at the door, she had already handpicked the most suitable words to introduce herself.

"Good evening, my Lady. Are you lost?" Raaz recognized the woman in front of him as a noble at first sight. He hid his left hand behind his back, alerting Elina to pick a weapon and Tista to ready a spell.

"Good evening, good sir." Jirni brought out her best smile, creeping Raaz out. Despite her small size, he had an eerie feeling just by looking her in the eyes.

"My name is Jirni Ernas. I'm the mother of Phloria, Lith's girlfriend." In her experience, it was better to sandwich the bad news between good news, to lessen the impact.

Raaz looked at her like she was insane. Lith had no girlfriend, he was certain of that. The women of the family kept complaining that even if his thirteenth birthday was just around the corner, Lith had yet to date or even show interest in any girl.

On Mogar, the new world, teenagers' bodies would fully develop around their thirteenth year of age, but they wouldn't be considered adults until they turned sixteen.

The marrying age for both men and women ranged from sixteen to the twenty-five years of age. After that, it was considered a late marriage and it would be much harder to find a spouse unless of course, the betrothal gift was juicy enough to make the age gap irrelevant.

Raaz was about to rudely send her off when Tista pushed him away, inviting Jirni to come in.

"Lady Ernas, it's such a pleasure to finally meet you. Lith always talks fondly about you." Tista lied through her teeth, just like her brother had taught her over the years.

She had never heard Jirni's name before, but Lith had often talked with her about Phloria Ernas. She knew they were dating for a while and didn't want Raaz to ruin things for him.

Jirni recognized the lie, but appreciated the talent and the effort behind it.

"Thanks, dear Tista. It's better if you all sit down. We have a serious matter to discuss." The whole family turned as pale as a ghost. A mother visiting a young man's family talking about a serious matter could only mean one thing: pregnancy.

Raaz couldn't believe his ears, staring at Tista as though she had poisoned him.

"Wait, you knew about the two of them?"

"Yes." Tista nodded, feeling the need to sit down. Suddenly she had weak knees at the idea of having a nephew from her little brother.

"Why didn't you tell us about it?" Elina was happy and scared at the same time. Happy because her cherished son had finally found someone to love. Scared because there was no way out of that situation but marriage.

Becoming a father would turn his life upside down, not to mention becoming part of the wife's family to preserve their honor and avoid the scandal.

"Because he told me not to! Lith said you would make a big deal out of this and he didn't want you to pester him about it." Tista was regretting keeping his secret for so long.

The truth was that Lith was worried about Tista. She kept idolizing him and disdaining the company of other boys. So, he had decided to help her grow out of her brother complex by telling her about his 'girlfriend' and exaggerating things a bit.

Now his plan was backfiring. Her parents could read Tista like a book, her panic spread like wildfire during a summer day. Elina tried to prepare some tea for their guest, but her hands trembled so much that she was unable to hold the small pot.

Jirni had purposely created the misunderstanding to have them all dancing in her palm.

"Don't worry, dear Elina. Let me take care of it." Jirni made them sit while she prepared the hot beverage. She spiked it with a powerful tranquilizer she always carried inside her dimensional ring.

- "Poor souls. After I tell them the truth, they will regret that my visit wasn't about our grandchild."-

After they took several sips of tea, the tranquilizer kicked in soothing their nerves. Only then did she explain Balkor's existence and what their son had gone through over the last few days. It took them a few minutes and a lot of spiked tea to recover from the shock.

"Why didn't he tell us anything? We thought he was taking the academy's third test." Elina broke into tears. Even knowing that her son was alive and well couldn't stop her from fearing for his fate and feeling hurt by his lies.

Jirni took Elina's hand between hers, trying to console her.

"He did it to protect you. There was nothing you could do for him, believe me. I spent the last three days crying and worrying I'd never see my little girls again. I had him moved to my house to make sure he receives the best treatments available.

"House Ernas has a private Warp Steps. It allows the finest healers of the Kingdom to reach the estate within a few seconds. I couldn't leave the man who saved my daughter's life in the hands of strangers.



Lith and Phloria have been dating for over a month and after all that has happened, we are basically family."

While Jirni's tone was full of sympathy and her voice almost broken with emotion, she was actually inwardly congratulating herself for her sob performance. By reading the mood in the living room, she decided it was time to land the final blow.

"Lith has yet to regain his senses, but I'm sure that when he does, he'll need his family to recover from the terrible experience he went through. I have already arranged our transportation. You will be my honored guests for all the time you need."

"Thank you, thank you so much." Elina clenched Jirni's hand like it was a lifeline,

"Lith is so lucky to have a friend like you. We'll never forget your generosity." She said while crying her eyes out.

- "One down, two more to go."— Jirni thought.

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When Jirni arrived back home it was almost sundown. Winter was coming and the days were getting shorter. Even with the help of the tranquilizer, Lith's family had required some time before being able to move.

After informing Rena, she had insisted on accompanying them.

Jirni was pleasantly surprised to discover that Phloria was still at Lith's bedside, washing his chest and arms with a wet cloth to clean him from the sweat. She knew that Phloria was capable of doing it with magic.

It meant that, even if Phloria herself had yet to realize it, her daughter's affection for him was rooted deeply enough to feel reassured by the physical contact.

Jirni smiled, another piece of the puzzle had fallen into place by itself.

- "I love it when a plan comes together."— Jirni inwardly rejoiced.

"Phloria my dear, you need to rest." She said.

- "Those bags under your eyes and your dedication will surely win over your mother in law."— She actually thought.

"Thanks, mom. I was thinking about taking a nap as soon as I finish here." Phloria's smile was tired, yet she appreciated her mother's concern instead of her usual nagging. Since her visit to the academy, her mother had become as thoughtful as Orion.

"I'll immediately have a warm bath prepared, and fresh sheets placed on your bed. You deserve a good night's sleep." Phloria tensed up, just like Jirni had hoped.

"Thanks, but I think I will remain here." Phloria's voice lacked the earlier kindness and was now filled with the stubborn determination that Jirni had learned to love and hate over the years.

"It's not proper for a lady to sleep in the same room with a young man, even if he is unconscious."

Jirni faked her disapproval while keeping an ear on the approaching steps. According to her estimations, to take advantage of those unexpected circumstances, she needed to buy a few more seconds and poke Phloria once or twice.

"You have gone through a lot, yet you never left his side for almost two days." Jirni seemed to be genuinely worried, even making her eyes watery at will.

"You need to take better care of yourself. Let the medical staff replace you for a few hours, you need some rest. Lith is still going to be here when you wake up."

"I don't give a damn if it's proper or not!" Phloria yelled loud enough that even Captain Locrias back in Lutia could almost hear her.

"I'm not going out of here until he wakes up or his family arrives! I don't want him to wake up in a strange place surrounded by strangers!"

I know it's just a superstition, but if there's even one chance in a million that having someone close that cares for him may help him recover, I'm willing to stay here as long as it takes!"

Phloria had yet to give her mother a piece of her mind, but Elina's sudden arrival stopped her in her tracks.

"My little Flower, I only meant that you should at least ask for his family's approval first." Jirni said with an apologetic tone like it was all a misunderstanding.

When a second later Lith's father and sisters entered the room, Phloria realized her mother had played her like a fiddle. She turned pale, emphasizing her bloodshot eyes and the dark bags below them.

Elina reached the bed, remaining horrified by her son's condition. His body looked like a dried up corpse, his hair had turned grey, and wrinkles had appeared on his face and hands. He seemed to have aged decades from the last time she had seen him.

His breathing was ragged, but regular. After Tista triple checked him, reassuring the rest of the family that Lith's life wasn't in danger despite his appearance, Elina turned to Phloria and took her hands between hers, kissing them non stop.

"Thank you so much for being by my son's side all this time. You have no idea how scared I was of him being alone in a moment like this. He is really a lucky boy to have found such a wonderful and beautiful girlfriend."

Then, Elina embraced her, soon followed by the whole family in a long group hug. Phloria had become beet red, not only was she embarrassed to death by what she had said in front of Lith's family, but also because she couldn't help but compare herself with his sisters.

Aside from her height, they ran circles around her in every regard. Looks, curves, and even their natural scent were leagues above hers. Tista was the one that crushed her self esteem the most.

Having received Lith's treatments since she was very young, Tista had flawless skin, soft curves in all the right places, and was even almost as tall as Phloria.

Phloria was moved by their gratitude and kind words, but the insecure teenage girl inside her kept nagging at her, quoting Professor Manohar in calling her "a flat beanpole".

Griffon Kingdom, Tyris's underground dungeon.

"Please, tell me that you found the time to go and check on the anomaly this time."

Leegaain was burning with curiosity.

"Yes, I did." Tyris nodded without moving her eyes from the archives' records of the last ten years. She was investigating those who had access to the remains of Arthan's Madness, hoping to find a clue about the mastermind behind the Abomination threat.

"It was nothing special. It was a male human Abomination hybrid, just as we sensed the first time. The only odd thing about it is that he underwent a tribulation similar to our own. The second test was about self control, like for evolved beasts."

"What happened then?" Leegaain was eager to hear the whole story.

"I don't know." She shrugged. "I left while he was in the middle of an elaborate suicide attempt. He chose to trade his life to rescue someone from death. I don't have time to waste with the small stuff. He has failed the tribulation or he managed to save his friend, either way he is dead now."

"What?" Leegaain jumped in surprise, the combined impact of his four claws on the ground sent a small tremor through the Gorgon Empire's castle. Its inhabitants went into a panic, since floating castles weren't supposed to be affected by quakes.

"Tyris, old friend, after hearing your words I'm almost tempted to rule a country for the first time in my long life. It seems that between civil wars, plagues, gods of death, and the internal strife between the nobles and the Crown your life must be really exciting.

"Otherwise, how the heck could you brush off the existence of a new life form that has already undergone two tribulations within such a short time frame? What if he survived? What if he isn't Guardian material, but something else entirely?

"Very few beings manage to pass the second tribulation. Getting a hold on your own desires is one of the hardest things to do. We could likely have a being that could side with the Abominations and upset the balance permanently on our hands.

"If the anomaly is still alive, we must absolutely keep watch on his next tribulations to understand what the heck is going on. A human Guardian would already be a shocking enough piece of news, let alone a hybrid!"

Tyris froze for a second. Aside from his stupid jokes, Leegaain's words always held great significance.

"Maybe you are right." She replied trying to cover her blunder.

"I seem to remember he wore a White Griffon academy uniform. I'll send someone to keep an eye on him so, in case your fears come true, we can take him out before he becomes too dangerous."

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During the following days, life was hectic for most of the Griffon Kingdom's upper echelons. Countless scouts were sent to the Blood Desert to search for Balkor's whereabouts. Killing him was the safest way to prevent the next attack from happening.

The Alchemists of the Mage Association were having a hard time studying the toxins extracted from the undead. With each passing year, the god of death would make them more complex and harder to cleanse. If they didn't keep up with him, their antidotes would become useless.

This time, the Healers had collected a great number of tissue samples from the captured undead. It had allowed them to discover the Abomination fragments mixed with the flesh, causing an uproar in the field of research. Until that moment, Abominations had simply been considered another species of monsters, a twisted evolution of magical beasts.

However, thanks to Balkor's effort to stabilize them and the ten year long experience of the royal Healers in preserving the samples, the human scientists managed to gain a deeper understanding of their nature.

Researching Abominations became the top priority. It would help the Wardens to create new defensive arrays capable of weakening, if not killing, Balkor's thralls.

The remaining four of the six great academies were in desperate need of staff. Between the injured, the dead, and those who had resigned to look for a less dangerous job, like hunting dragons or defusing explosive arrays, there were many classes left unattended.

Balkor's shadow made serving as Professor in an academy less of a prestigious position and more like a death sentence.

Among the Headmasters, Linjos had gotten the short end of the stick again. Not only did he have to find trustworthy mages to replace the Professors he lost during the attack, but he was constantly bothered by the other Headmasters.

His plan had saved their academies, their careers, and most importantly their lives.

They no longer saw him as a young, arrogant brat that had become the youngest Headmaster ever only because he was the Queen's new pet project. They finally recognized his worth and the brilliance of his mind.

They were willing to set aside their pride along with the old ways, often asking Linjos for advice about who to hire and how to change their academies for the better.

He was really flattered by all their attentions, but he was forced to spend half his time taking care of their academies instead of his own. Yet Linjos could only grin and bear with it, he knew it was a once in a lifetime opportunity.

If he managed to obtain their trust and cooperation, the academy system could finally be changed for good. Once the Council of the Headmasters made a decision, the nobles could only comply.

It would solve one of the most pressing matters that had plagued the Kingdom for years. Sure, it would still take decades to iron out all the details and to win over enough of the old noble families to prevent other sabotages from happening, but it would still be a great start.

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House Ernas, five days after the attack

Lith's condition was getting better with each day. The fever was gone and thanks to the constant care he received from both families and Solus, his shriveled body was slowly returning to normal.

Yet he still looked like an old man and gave no sign he would wake up any time soon. Jirni proved to be an amazing host, providing Lith's family with the best rooms and with everything they could need.

She had taken her time, showing them around the house little by little and telling them about its history.

Phloria spent a lot of time with Rena and Tista, since they would either help her to take care of Lith, or force her to take a break and rest while Elina and Friya would relieve her.

When Lith regained his senses in the afternoon, he already knew about his failure. His last memory before fainting was of Protector's still cracked core. Even burning his life force had not been enough to repair such extensive damage, not with his own core already running on fumes and his body on the verge of collapse.

Yet he had to ask.

- "Solus, is Protector..."

"Yes, he is gone." She replied, carefully avoiding to lying to him. "I'm so sorry for your loss." She wept remembering Protector's parting words. She had to find a way to pass them to Lith.

"I knew it. No matter how hard I work, no matter how much I try, I always fail when it really matters."- Tears ran along his cheeks, they were the first sign of life in more than five days.

"Lith, are you awake?" Normally, he would be surprised hearing Phloria's voice, but now he was too tired to care. His mind kept replaying Protector's last moments of life. The grief overwhelmed him again, making him feel like his heart was getting squeezed in a vice.

"Yes." Lith was unable to recognize his own voice. It was hoarse and feeble, like a hiss. He tried to get up, but his arms were too weak for the task. The attempt almost made him pass out from overexertion.

Lith took a deep breath, yet even that was too much for his current condition. He felt his lungs burn and he coughed uncontrollably. He heard the footsteps of someone running away and felt someone helping him lie down comfortably.

Lith recognized Tista's scent as soon as she got close.

"Don't push yourself, lil brother. Your condition is getting better every day, but you need to rest. Dad is going to be here soon."

Lith was too sad to ask why Phloria was in their home, or what had happened to him. The only thing he could think about was finding a way to make the pain stop. Ever since his rebirth, he had made sure to keep everyone and everything under his control.

He knew he wouldn't be able to endure what had happened to Carl again. His unquenchable hunger for power had started as a way to escape from the madness his death and rebirth cycle represented.

Over time, the love he had developed for his family had changed it into a way to create a small ecosystem where he was god and all those he cared about were bound to be safe.

First, he had taken care of the hunger, then he had cured Tista, and got rid of every single threat the new world posed to his family. Magical beasts, wanted felons, Abominations, he had taken care of them all, permanently.

With every success, Lith had grown more confident of his plan until he had managed to reassure himself that, as long as he followed that pattern, everything would be alright.

Protector's death had crushed that illusion, shattering the beliefs on which he had based his whole existence up until that point.

He kept weeping, not only for Protector, but also for himself.

- "If someone as strong as Ryman died so easily, there's no way I can keep my family safe. They are all so weak. It's only a matter of time before I lose them all. What's the point of trying so hard if I'm destined to fail? No matter what I do, I can only delay the inevitable."-

His constant weeping and sobbing were only interrupted by the cough.

Raaz arrived at his bedside, holding him to his chest to calm him down.

"Does it hurt so bad? Do you want some pain medication? Please, speak to me. Tell me what's wrong."

He was holding back his tears. Raaz had never seen Lith so weak, both physically and mentally. He was afraid that his condition could be even more severe than it appeared, but he didn't know what to do.

It was the first time that his son needed his help, yet Raaz felt completely useless. The only thing he could do was to stay strong in front of him. He didn't want to add himself to the list of Lith's worries.

"It's not my body that hurts, dad. It's the loss. My only true friend died today."

Phloria felt hurt by those words, but she kept silent. Lith's relationship with the evolved monster seemed to be deep and he was clearly confused, believing it was still the second day of the attack.

Before his brain could realize what he was doing, Lith let everything out. Telling Raaz about how he and Protector had fought when he was still four, how they had become friends when he was eight after he killed Gerda, and how from that moment onward they had spent more and more time together.

He told him about how Protector had taught him to be a better hunter, about all the creatures that they had fought together to keep the Trawn woods and their families safe until Lith had joined the academy.

Even if he managed to leave Solus and the Awakened ones out of his story, every memory he shared worsened the pain. Lith second guessed everything he had done to and with Protector.

"When we met, I just thought of turning him into warm fur for the winter. After he attempted to befriend me, I belittled him, only considering him as a means for an end. I exploited his kindness to bring food to our table and keep our family safe.

"When I understood he was much more than a tool, I never told him how important he was to me. How precious it was to have someone I could share my burden with, someone who I could talk about all the things I had to keep secret from you and mom to keep you from worrying.

"Now it's too late. I failed him the only time he needed me and now he is dead. It's all my fault. He wouldn't have left the Trawn woods if I didn't tell him about the academy.

"He wouldn't have died if I wasn't too weak to save him. He will never know how sorry I am for all the bad things I thought about him nor how meeting him has changed my life. All of it happened because of my weakness and cowardice.

I should be the one who died."

Lith was incapable of accepting that some things were inevitable, that life wasn't a game where he could save and load until he obtained the desired outcome. He needed someone to blame and his first choice was himself.

All those in the room were shocked to the bone. The events that Lith considered as fond memories were a parent's worst nightmare. He had candidly confessed how he had put his life at risk time and time again, revealing that his family's wealth was built on a pile of lies and bones.

## Chapter 226 Truth Hurts

Raaz was mad at the idea of his son's double life outside of his family, doing things that no child should ever even attempt to do. What angered him the most weren't all the lies Lith had told him, Raaz was already way beyond that point, but how he spoke about fighting to the death as if it was perfectly normal.

He took deep breathes to control himself from time to time. His son needed to vent the pain that was eating at him from the inside. Raaz could always scold him later. Alas, Tista wasn't as strong as her father.

She started weeping together with Lith, needing Phloria's help to be able to stand.

"Why did you do all those things?" She blurted out.

"I would have rather starved than allow you to take so many risks. A few meals and some extra coins will never be worth your life. What if something happened to you?"

Tista only spoke out of concern, the revelation had been too shocking for her to accept it quietly. Yet to Lith's ears, her words sounded ungrateful like she was spitting on all the sacrifices he had made and the help Protector had given to him.

"Why do you ask?" He was already used to the cough, he kept his voice low and hissing so it didn't interrupt him again. Not now that he found someone else to blame.

"Have you already forgotten about the cold? About how sickly you were and how drafty our house was during winter? We were all so hungry that Orpal and Trion would steal eggs from the henhouse and milk from the stable whenever they could.

"Rena only took from the pantry what she needed to avoid fainting from hunger. Our parents knew it and they could only pretend everything was all right, but it was not! Why do you think Orpal was always picking on us?

"Someone had to do something, it just happened to be me! If it wasn't for Protector, all of us wouldn't even be here. How dare you whine in hindsight, now that you are healthy and well fed? You should be thanking me and grieving him!

"Stop being a baby and grow up, dammit! Everything in life comes at a price. The only reason you can allow yourself to be so naïve and carefree is because others have always paid it in your stead. If

I died back then, there would have been more food left for the rest of you. It was a win-win situation."

Lith was so angry that he managed to stand up and open his eyes, staring at Tista with hatred. Phloria had to hold her tight to keep her calm. Tista had never seen Lith angry at her, nor had she ever witnessed the mad beast glare he used on others.

She had always been her brother's princess. The way he was speaking and acting towards her were ripping Tista's heart to shreds.

Raaz poked his forehead gently enough that Lith barely noticed the hit.

"Consider yourself slapped, young man." He said with a sad but firm tone.

"I'm sorry for all you went through. I must have been a horrible father to make you feel the need to sacrifice your childhood to give us a better life. I'll never be able to forgive myself for that. It's a father's duty to take care of his children, not the other way around."

He wiped off a silent tear off his own cheek, poking Lith's forehead again.

"However, what you just said to your sister was just cruel. The gods only know if she would still be alive without all the care you gave her. There is no one in the family that has ever overlooked your efforts, especially Tista.

You have always been her hero. What she was trying to say, is that you can't ask us to accept you risking your life like that. Yes, our life was harsh, but at least we had each other. You didn't have to push yourself so far, it wasn't worth it."

"I had no choice." Lith rebuked. "Someone had to do something."

"No, you had a choice." Another poke.

"You could have just followed your siblings' lead, helping with the farm. It was our duty as parents to find a solution, not yours. You chose to play god instead. I don't know if you did it because you are incredibly smart or arrogant, but lying to your family and taking so many risks was the wrong decision.

Even if you did it for the right reasons, it doesn't change anything. Gods, I'm so stupid."

Raaz pinched his own nose, closing his eyes to hold back the guilt that was ravaging his heart.

"When we saw that huge Byk pelt at Count Lark's mansion, we understood you were hiding many things from us. We choose to keep our eyes shut because we were so proud of your achievements that we feared our interference could ruin your future.

If you want to blame someone, blame me."

Seeing his father despair and his sister crying was too much for Lith. Even grief-stricken, he knew that Raaz was right. They had never asked anything of him aside from being a happy and healthy child.

It had been his decision to go hunting, just as it had been his decision to protect his family on his own. He knew the risks and had chosen to ignore them time and time again. Until Protector's death, his magic had made him overconfident.



There was no one to blame but himself. Lith suddenly felt like a child throwing a tantrum. His rage disappeared and with it the strength he had left. His head collapsed on the cushions with his eyes closed again.

"You are right, sorry." Was the only thing that he managed to say.

Raaz recovered quickly, poking him again.

"Don't you dare start blaming yourself, young man." Raaz held his hand, letting Lith notice for the first time how shriveled it was.

"It's not your fault if Protector died. From what you told me, he was a brave and smart beast. He wasn't your toy or your puppet. No one forced him to do anything. He knew the risks and he decided to help your academy anyway because he cared for you.

He sacrificed himself to let you and all the other kids survive. If there is someone whining in hindsight here, it's you. Lith, you have every right to cry and mourn, but don't try to inflict pain on those close to you just to relieve your frustration."

Lith felt deeply ashamed of his outburst. Taking it out on Tista and exposing his shared past with Protector had been childish. Yet, he felt better for it. Now he wasn't the only one who knew of Protector's gentle soul and valor.

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The last few days had helped Quylla to sort out her feelings. Unlike Phloria, she found herself too scared to spend so much time together with Lith's family. His mother and sisters were so beautiful that even the thought of being compared to them made her wish to disappear.

Also, while her heart was gripped by fear for Lith's condition, Quylla couldn't stand to see him in such a poor state. After he had woken up, things had gotten even worse. It wasn't only his body that had been hurt, but his spirit too.

Quylla had never seen Lith cry or mope before. Until that moment she had considered him unshakable, always confident, capable of going against any odds and coming out victorious. Now he was reduced to a shadow of himself, waiting for his death.

She felt mean and shallow for thinking such things, but she couldn't help herself. Quylla realized that because of her indecisiveness, their relationship had never become something more than a simple friendship.

Lith had no reason to let her into his life and she had always been too afraid of rejection to approach him. After Phloria had asked him out, they had grown even more distant. Quylla knew that her feelings for him were withering by the day.

In a way, she felt relieved. She and Phloria were sisters now, it would be terrible to force the rest of the family to pick a side between the two of them because of what she now understood had always been puppy love.

Yurial wasn't doing well either. After returning home, he had hoped the joy of his survival would have been sufficient to convince his father to change the plans for his future.

"Please, dad. Let's call the marriage with Libea off. She is indeed a beautiful young woman, but aside from that, we have nothing in common. She despises commoners, has no interest in magic, and cares more about looking pretty than about the prosperity of our lands.

I can't spend the rest of my life with such a shallow person."

Velan Deirus sighed, he understood his son's situation all too well. It was the same one he had found himself almost twenty-five years ago.

"Yurial, I know that, after what you have gone through, you feel the need to make changes in your life, but I need you to face reality. This marriage was arranged over ten years ago. You gave your approval and renewed your vow before departing.

"To cancel the agreement would mean losing a lot of face for our family. Who would trust someone that doesn't keep their word on such important matters? Not to mention that it would delay our plans for expansion by at least a generation.

"Magic doesn't allow us to perform miracles, we still need men and funds to improve our lands. Your marriage will open our way in the old system, making everything faster and easier. Why do you think I married your mother?"

Now it was Yurial's turn to sigh. There was little if no love between his parents. From the moment he had shown his magical potential, his mother had disappeared from his life. She had no role in raising Yurial, Velan was the only parent he ever had.

Considering that he had to share his father with Velan's magical research and his duties as a Grand Duke, it didn't amount to much. That was one of the reasons he had fought so hard to become the heir. He desperately wanted Velan's recognition and love.

His mother was at least able to manage the finances of the Grand Duchy, but the only reason she cared about magic was to flaunt her husband's skills and achievements in front of the other noble families.

"It's painful to hear it from your father, but remember that once you give the family an heir, you'll be free to have any woman or man that you want. Just be discreet about it and don't get caught. Being discovered or having a bastard would be a disgrace to our house."

Yurial nodded. Despite his young age, he had already had several lovers, but reality was proving to be a cruel mistress. The only thing he could do to fight the feeling of desperation gushing from his heart was to take a gulp of tranquilizer.

After killing a man during the second exam, Yurial had used several kinds of potions to keep his mind in check and had almost become addicted to them. It had taken him time and effort to progressively stop taking his medications, but after almost dying twice during the god of death's assaults he couldn't avoid a relapse.

He had yet to find the courage to check Lith's condition in person. Yurial felt responsible for what had happened to him and didn't know how to face his friend's family.

The Deirus household had done its best to help his savior recover, but when even Manohar had thrown in the towel, saying they could only wait and see, there wasn't much anyone could do.

Also, because Lith was currently living at house Ernas, Yurial could only talk to the girls via the communication amulet. That left him with nowhere to go and no one to turn to for help. He was trapped inside his own house, surrounded by servants but without a single friend.

- "Gods, why are you doing this to me? I spent my whole life preparing to become the Lord of these lands. I worked hard every day to make my dream come true, only for it to turn into my worst nightmare.

"I have only two choices in front of me. I can accept my fate, sacrificing my happiness to build a better future for my family, my subjects, and the Kingdom. Or I can leave everything behind, throwing away years of planning and study to become a vagrant mage.

"Whatever I decide, life as I know it will be over. I wish I had been born a commoner. Maybe I wouldn't have been able to enroll in an academy, but at least my destiny would be in my own hands.

"There are too many lives on the line, dad has no time to find a new heir. If I fold now, house Deirus will probably disappear the moment my father dies."

Cursing his fate, Yurial took several sips from the potion, until the intoxicating feeling of relaxation wiped away all of his worries.

## Chapter 227 Death Visions

After Raaz's speech made Lith realize how self centered he had been, fatigue overcame him, making Lith fall asleep again.

When he woke up, only his mother stood beside him.

"Mom, what happened to me? Can I have a mirror?" Lith asked.

"That's something you should tell us, baby." Elina was happy to see him awake again so soon. The fever was finally gone.

"Your Professors say you were alright when they left you at Protector's deathbed, but when they found you, you were already in a terrible state. You have recovered greatly in the last five days, but I wouldn't look in the mirror if I were you."

"Please, I want to see the price of my foolishness with my own eyes." Lith squeezed her hand.

When Elina conjured a water mirror in front of him, Lith didn't even flinch.

Despite all the potions and the treatments he had received, he was still severely underweight. He had no more bald spots, his hair was regrowing fine, but it was still grey. Only his eyes were unchanged, cold and uncaring.

- "Solus, can I use Invigoration?"

"I don't know." She replied. "Your core is perfectly fine, but your body worries me. After burning so much of your life force, most of your healthy tissues are still recovering. You were left with mostly impurities. I'm afraid that by recovering so fast you may trigger a breakthrough."—

Lith mind nodded. Healing overnight would be impossible to explain, releasing so many impurities in front of witnesses even more so.

"I guess I'm finally as ugly on the outside as I am on the inside." He cruelly laughed at himself.

"Do you mind telling me what happened?" Elina changed the subject. In the past, she had experienced the pain of loss and how hard it could be for someone so young to face it.

- "Between his best friend's death and his current condition, there is no telling how he must be feeling. It's better for him to share whatever is burdening him. It should help him recover."— She thought.

For once, Lith was honest with her and told her how he had attempted to save Protector, giving it all he had and more.

"There's no need to scold me. Now I know that what I did was stupid and useless, just like me."

"No, you are wrong again." Elina lay on the bed beside him, hugging him tightly.

"Stupid? Yes. Reckless? Sure, but it wasn't useless. You did it out of love because you cared for him. I would do the same thing for any of my children if I had the opportunity. No parent should outlive their children, it's a pain too great to bear."

Lith nodded. Carl had been more like a son than a brother to him, his death still haunted him. He conjured another water mirror to look closely at himself. Maybe it was the aftermath of his failed spell, maybe it was because of the grieving, but for the first time, Lith felt his age weighing on him.

He felt old and tired. Too tired to keep fighting a losing battle. He thought about leaving the academy. Being there every day would remind him of Protector, also he didn't know how Linjos would punish him for his behavior.

He also thought about abandoning his family for good. It would mean no more chains, no more ties, no more weakness. He was already tall enough to pass for an adult and with his magic talent, money wouldn't be an issue.

Solus was deeply scared of his mental condition. She could sense his mind swinging back and forth from desperation to anger, Lith's calm was only an appearance. She had spent the last days pondering what to do.

Telling him the truth would lift his spirit, but what about the long term? What if one of his relatives suddenly died or they were beyond saving? Despite all of his power, despite his strength that grew by the day, Lith was far from invincible.

Solus had noticed right after he had been hospitalized that his body was rebuilding itself stronger than before, the problem was his mind. It was shattered once again, now another deep scar was engraved in his soul, but it also represented the opportunity for him to change.

Solus didn't want him to become a saint or a hero, nor to forget about his past. She just wanted him to live his life without letting Carl's death affect every important choice he made.

- "He needs to learn that loving someone means knowing when to let them go.

I don't know what I feel for him anymore. It could be love or the childish desire of a little daughter who wants her father all to herself. I know nothing about human relationships outside of what he has taught me.

Maybe I'm just scared at the idea we may grow apart once he has a real girlfriend instead of a high school sweetheart. Even if it's love, and even if he returned those feelings, I have nothing to offer

him. I could have cried and begged him not to be with Phloria, but it would have been just cruel and egotistical.

She can give him everything I can't. A shoulder to cry on, the warmth of a real embrace, maybe some love. I don't care what he chooses to do, as long as he doesn't punish himself out of fear of being hurt."— She thought.

- "Life sure has a twisted sense of irony. It's only thanks to Balkor's past that my family is so heavily protected, yet it's also because of him that Protector died. I must remember to thank him before killing everyone and everything he holds dear in front of his eyes."— Lith thought.

From that day, Lith could finally start eating real food instead of being forced to drink potions while he was asleep. It took him less than two days to be able to walk again, even if he needed help to do it.

Lith would have liked a walking stick, but there was always someone offering their arm to him, to not leave him alone for even one second.

Even if his body was quickly recovering, his psychological trauma was only getting worse. Ever since he had regained his consciousness, his eyes kept acting weird. If he looked at someone long enough, Lith would start to see odd things.

The first time, it happened with Phloria, since she was the one spending the most time with him. She was telling him about what had happened to the academy and the Griffon Kingdom while he was unconscious when he saw an invisible hand cut her throat.

Blood spilled everywhere, leaving Lith incapable of moving from the shock. The moment he blinked, Phloria was alright again, like nothing had happened. Then, he watched her aging decades with each passing second.

Phloria turned into a nice looking woman, then into a mature lady, and into an old woman with a kind smile. Lith felt like he was living in a nightmare, but it became even worse when she turned into a corpse, her old body started to rot while fleas and maggots feasted on her flesh until only a skeleton remained.

Tears streamed down his face.

"What's wrong? Are you in pain? Is there something wrong with your body?" Phloria asked.

Blinking returned everything to normal again.

- "Solus, what the heck is happening?" He was too shocked to answer Phloria's worried questions. He needed to know if what he was seeing was real or if it was just madness seeping into his mind.

"Nothing happened." She replied not understanding the reason for the question. -

After checking his memories, Solus didn't have any idea what he had seen either. They both checked his body and brain, but aside from the after effects of his attempt to save Ryman there was nothing new.

Then, Lith watched Phloria's heart getting pierced by a sword, her head cut off by an ax. He was forced to watch her die in a different way over and over again, and there was nothing he could do.

It happened the same way with everyone, be they members of his family, of the Ernas household or their staff. Soon Lith wasn't able to take it anymore and would keep his eyes closed most of the time, pretending to be tired.

- "Is my mind playing tricks on me or is this some kind of new power I developed? Seeing the death of the people close to me without any indication about how to stop it seems more like a curse than a power though. Solus, tell me the truth.

Am I losing my mind?"

Solus was hesitant to reply, she knew how fragile his psyche was.

"I think your mind is slipping, yes. I don't know if it's all in your head or it's somehow related to your current condition, but I believe you are torturing yourself. In a very twisted and cruel way, you are trying to get accustomed with the thought that sooner or later, everyone dies.

It's like your subconscious is showing you that some things are inevitable and there's nothing you can do about it ."-

Solus's words made sense. Lith was still conflicted between finding a way to hide everyone he loved away from the world to prevent them from getting hurt or just cutting his ties with his current life. If he was alone, then he had nothing to lose.

However, the thought of spending the rest of his life alone made death look alluring. Power and immortality had no meaning to him by themselves, they were just a means to an end. Lith's end had always been to find a place where he belonged and live a happy, quiet life.

He was only twelve yet had already experienced more battles to the death than most of Earth's professional soldiers. Lith wasn't willing to give up on life again, but he didn't know what he was fighting for anymore.

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After she had returned home, Friya was giving her all practicing swordsmanship. She had too many thoughts crossing her mind to practice magic. She decided to keep her promise and use that unexpected free time to get to know Orion better.

Orion was overjoyed. It was the first time that his adoptive daughter had asked for his help. He knew that it was only a matter of time before Quylla joined them too. Those two were inseparable.

They spent the first day going through the basic forms. Only when Orion grasped what her skill level was, he decided what style was more suitable for Friya. Over the years of his military career, he had become proficient with most weapons

From the second day onwards, Quylla joined their practice as Orion had predicted. He had several of his subordinates come to his house to use them as sparring partners for Friya while he taught self defense to Quylla.

"I know you don't like fighting, little one,..." He caressed her head every time she learned a new move.

"...but there's no telling when it might come in handy."

As for Friya, her basics were solid. She had studied under a good master for years, after all. What she lacked was practical experience. Orion had arranged opponents of different genders and builds for her to help her learn how to adapt her style according to the situation.

Fighting someone smaller or bigger than Friya required adjustments that she needed to execute in a split second, otherwise a skilled enough opponent could take advantage of such an opening to put her on the back foot right from the start.

When Orion corrected Friya's mistakes during a sequence or a stance, she would only reply: "Thanks, dad." With a smile that almost moved him to tears. Until that moment, she had only called him by his first name.

Orion was happy that Friya was starting to accept her new family.

There were only two sore points in spending quality time with his two new daughters. The first was that Phloria wasn't willing to join them, spending all of her time taking care of Lith.

Orion dearly missed the good old times when his little Flower would only have her dad in her eyes and ignored all the stuck up brats that Jirni sent her way. Back then, they were like minded, only thinking about magic and sword.

Sure, he had to suffer Jirni's daily nagging every time she failed, but keeping his baby safe was worth the price. Now he and his wife had switched position. Jirni now gloated all day and he could only prepare for the worst.

The second one was that too many of his subordinates looked at Friya with lustful eyes. Orion had to admit that she was almost as beautiful as Phloria. His fatherly eyes still refused to accept that, while Phloria was a really cute girl, Friya was a true beauty.

The tiny droplets of sweats during the exercises would make Friya's visage sparkle under the sunlight.

Her long black hair framed her face, bringing out her fair skin and light chestnut eyes. Coupled with the grace and elegance of her movements, she was truly a sight to behold.

Most of the times it was enough for Orion to clear his throat to remind those idiots of his presence. Sometimes, he was forced to take Friya's place to show her what she was doing wrong and wipe the floor with their asses.

He only did it for educational purposes, of course. Friya needed to learn her forms while the others their own place in the world.

## Chapter 228 Moving On

After the training session was over, Friya, Quylla, and Orion spent some more time together in the park nearby. House Ernas had two training areas. One indoors, to practice during bad weather or run fighting simulations in different scenarios.

The walls and the ceiling were enchanted, allowing them to shapeshift to recreate caves, narrow corridors, or small rooms.

The other one was located behind the house. It was a large clearing, with no vegetation or furnishing outside training dummies. It was the perfect place to practice magic and sword techniques in the open under different weather conditions, with complete freedom of movement.

"Dad, there's something I need to talk to you about." Friya sat on the ground in front of him with a sad expression on her face. Orion could tell there was something haunting her.

"During the last day of the attack, I killed a few undead. I wouldn't even mention it, if not for the fact that they were people I knew." She told him about what had happened while she was looking for a Healer to save Phloria and Yurial.

"When I killed that woman, during the second exam, I felt terrible. Some days, I can still see her terrified expression the moment before I executed her. This time I didn't feel anything. I know they had become monsters, but they were still my classmates.

"I should feel remorse, some pain for their deaths, something. Does this make me a bad person? Am I turning into a cold blooded killer?"

"No to both your questions." Orion shook his head without hesitation.

"It just means that you have got your priorities straight. On the battlefield, remorse or hesitation leads to premature death. Even if your enemies are humans, mercy is a luxury you can't afford.

"You killed the first woman in cold blood, you killed the others in self defense while trying to save the people you love. The two events are worlds apart. Also, they weren't your classmates. At least not anymore. They were just reanimated corpses, there's no reason to feel guilty. I'm proud of both of you."

He hugged them, kissing the top of their heads.

"Dad, I have something to say too." Quylla had never had a family before. She still found hard to believe that someone like Orion was her father now.

Orion was brimming with joy. Quylla had finally called him dad instead of father.

"Surviving the god of death's anniversary made me understand a few things. After so much death, I realized that I don't like fighting. Unlike my sisters, I'm not suited for the battlefield. I want to become a Healer and help people."

Orion nodded.

"It's good that you found your way so soon. Fighting is not everything. You must always think about your happiness and your future first."

"About that, I don't want to spend the next year only studying magic." She said averting her eyes and fiddling with her hair.

"There's more to life than grades and exams. Phloria is right, we have so little time left before our duty replaces our life. I want more. I can't just wait for good things to miraculously fall into my lap."

"Yeah, me too." Friya chimed in.

"Honestly, I never thought Lith's and Phloria's relationship would last this long, nor that it would become so special."

"No one did." They both blushed in embarrassment. They had secretly bet against it. Quylla had given them a week before breaking up, while Friya's wager was that their first date would also be the last.



"While we were at the mining town, I was so envious of them that more than once I daydreamed about being in Phloria's place. So there's one thing I have to ask you."

Friya looked resolute, making Orion worries go through the roof.

"So do I." Quylla became beet red. He could now only fear for the worst.

"Can you please bring us to social events during the weekends?" Friya said.

"I don't want to marry yet, but I want at least to start dating. Please dad, can you help us?"

Despite only just getting to know them, Orion felt like he was already losing them. Inwardly cursing his bad luck, he could only agree.

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'It's time to hasten my recovery. To use Accumulation or Invigoration I need to be alone though. I cannot risk a breakthrough occurring in front of witnesses, it would raise too many questions. Loneliness is a luxury at the moment, but luckily, I know a heavy sleeper.'

Lith had noticed that his natural recovery had made most of his impurities nearly reach his core. Even if he did nothing, it was just a matter of time before a breakthrough happened. He decided to avoid relying on luck and take the matter in his own hands.

That evening, after a particularly large meal, Lith made his move.

"Mom, Lady Ernas, I'm really thankful for everything you have done for me so far. I think now I have recovered enough. It should be safe leaving me alone for a good night's sleep."

"I don't think that's true, young man. You could still have a relapse. It's better if someone keeps you company, so if anything bad happens, help will come immediately." Lady Ernas shook her head.

She was spending a lot of time with Elina these days. Which meant she also spent a lot of time with Lith and his sisters

He could clearly see what Jirni's goal was and he didn't like it one bit. Yet she was the reason why he had been able to improve so quickly while his family managed to remain so calm despite his situation.

Lith knew he was indebted to her and that she was going to use it as leverage to ask him for something in return at the right moment. It was exactly what he would have done in her shoes.

"Then what if only Phloria stays with me tonight? We have much to talk about, yet we never managed to get a little alone time." The cough was long gone, his voice back to normal too.

Yet Lith pretended to cough a couple of times, using that horrible raspy, hissing voice that had tormented him after he woke up to appear as harmless as possible.

Phloria and Elina turned beet red, while Tista and Rena giggled like crazy. They whispered things among themselves that Lith had hoped his sisters would never think about him.

"When I say 'talk', I mean it." He coughed again, looking at them sourly.

"I'm still recovering. Not to mention that I look like a monster." Lith's hair had yet to regain their color. He didn't look like an old man anymore, but he had still a few wrinkles on his face and hands.

Because of the massive weight loss, Lith also had deep set eyes, like he had been recently resurrected from the grave. The only problem with his claims was that despite his visage being still quite unsettling, the rest of his body told a different story.

He had lost almost all of his body fat, so his physique was almost purely muscle. Lith was quite thin, but exactly because of that, he had a six pack for the first time in his life.

"If you call this being a monster, lil bro, you should have seen how yourself when you first arrived here. Yet your girlfriend never left you until we forced her to. You should really find a way to thank her properly." Tista giggled.

"Tista, what are you saying in front of our host?" Elina was embarrassed by her daughter's words and so was Jirni, at least apparently. Lady Ernas saw through his lie and inwardly nodded at Tista's words.

"Well, Elina, your son may be a little too bold, but he is right. We both know there are some things that a young couple shouldn't discuss in front of their parents, right?" Jirni whispered in Elina's ear.

When Lith and Phloria were left alone, Lith started wracking his brain about something to say. Also, he needed her to quickly fall asleep, since he had no idea how long he could last before fatigue overwhelmed him.

If he fell asleep first, he wouldn't wake up until the next morning, increasing the risks of a breakthrough. Both of them remained silent for a while until Lith found his answer.

"Why don't you come closer? Back at the mining town, you had no problem sleeping beside me. Or was I just some kind of teddy bear to you?" He said with his best smile. Lith knew from experience that Phloria was weak to cuddles.

They made her sleep like a baby.

Phloria swallowed a lump of saliva, taking only her shoes off before going under the blankets with him. She wrapped her arms around Lith, making him flinch.

The unexpected warm embrace soothed his restless spirit for the first time since he had regained his senses. Lith couldn't stop looking at her while she rubbed her body against his, making him feel pleasure and embarrassment at the same time.

"To think that you mocked me so badly for using my uniform as pajamas and now you do the same." He tried to stop her by caressing her hair and kissing her gently, but it only made things worse.

He heard her emit a soft moan while she shivered under his touch.

"You are right. It's a little hypocritical of me." Phloria's head disappeared under the sheets. Lith heard a rustling sound before seeing her naked arm throwing away the shirt first and the pants later.

"Is it better now?" She asked pressing her body against his again. Lith only wore light pajamas, there was little he couldn't feel through the fabric and the same could be said for her..

"I should have done this much earlier." She said giving him a gentle kiss, unsure how much he could take. In her eyes, Lith was like a cracked vase. Also, she had no idea what she was doing.

"I was so scared. I thought I had lost you for good." She started sobbing, clinging to him for comfort. Lith was moved by her boldness and at the same time frozen in surprise.

No matter how long he looked at her, nothing happened. Lith could see Phloria's body only down to her shoulders, the rest was covered by the sheets, but she was the picture of health and stayed that way.

He was so relieved that his hands wrapped her back, caressing it along the spine and enjoying her soft skin. He sensed her shivering again, but this time he was able to notice that it wasn't because of pleasure, she was wound up like a drum.

"Lith, I have to tell you before it's too late: I l..." Lith placed his hand on her lips, stopping her before it really was too late.

"No, you don't." He said as he never stopped caressing her head.

"It's a little too early for you to use that word. We met months ago, but we have only really known each other for barely a month. You are not ready for this and neither am I. You are just scared of the future, so you are rushing blindly to escape from your fears."

Lith didn't know whether he was talking to her or himself.

"I care too much about you to let you make this mistake. It would scar both of us and likely put an end to our relationship. Never make important decisions when you are angry or afraid.

"Those are not the kind of emotions you want to let cloud your judgment. They will always make you pick the wrong path. You deserve someone better than me, especially now that I look like your grandpa."

Phloria managed to chuckle even if she was still sobbing a little.

"The Phloria I know is bold, but not reckless. I'm not going to die anytime soon, so there's no reason to force yourself." He kissed her back gently, needing his sheer willpower to keep his hands on her head.

"All I want is for you to be happy. When you have calmed down, if you still think I can make you happy, we'll resume this conversation. I beg of you, remember that I am a broken person and that I have been broken once again.

You deserve someone normal and sane, while I could shatter anytime and hurt you."

Phloria never stopped sobbing, but he could sense her relaxing under his touch.

"There is only one thing that I must ask of you before the night ends." He said, wiping away her tears with his hands.

"Anything." She replied blushing violently.

"Please, put your clothes on, or when our mothers will enter this room tomorrow morning, they'll start arranging our wedding."

'Also, even in this debilitated state, I don't know how much longer I can hold myself back.'

Lith inwardly added. He knew that, between being emotionally vulnerable and the self-inflicted prolonged isolation from all kinds of human contact, he was really susceptible to temptations from the only girl that he had allowed to become close to him, both physically and emotionally.

There was only so much he could take before his pubescent body took the wheel. Phloria was well aware of this since she could feel something hard pressing against her abdomen from the moment she had taken off her clothes.

She turned off the lights before getting out of the bed. Luckily, she hadn't thrown her uniform far and it was designed to easily come on and off. Lith instantly started regretting what he had done and the fact that none of his abilities allowed him to see in the dark.

## Chapter 229 Moving On 2

As soon as Phloria fell asleep, Lith got out of the bed and used Accumulation. This was the second time that a battle to the death had pushed him on the verge of a breakthrough. If not for his debilitated state, it would have already happened.

The process was even more painful than the last time. Not only his bones, but also his flesh kept being destroyed and regenerated almost at the same time to force the impurities out of his body.

Lith had enveloped himself inside the Hush spell, to prevent anyone from hearing his screams, but not before checking the room for listening or recording magical devices.

He had the feeling that there was very little Jirni Ernas wouldn't do to reach her goals. After finding none, Lith could afford to relax. He tasked Solus to get rid of the impurities as soon as they appeared, in case he didn't make it back to bed.

Leaving any kind of proof behind wasn't an option.

The process was slow and excruciating, but it brought him one step closer to the blue core. Lith didn't know if it was due to exhaustion or because of Phloria embracing him even in her sleep, however that night he finally felt at peace with himself.

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The next morning, the awkward relationship Raaz and Orion had developed turned even more awkward. Unlike Jirni, who was able to talk about any topic, the two men had nothing in common outside of being both parents.

Yet their wives were spending a lot of time together and were pressing them to do the same. The only thing they could talk about was their children, their experiences in raising them, and their expectations about their future.

So, when they entered the room and found Lith and Phloria laying on the same bed, Raaz was really happy to see that she had slept above the sheets while Lith was under them. There was a throbbing vein on Orion's neck that didn't bode well.

"I swear to the gods, if it wasn't for the fact that he is my guest and he is already injured, I would be tempted to kill your son. How do you manage to be so calm despite having two daughters?" Orion asked.

"The gods seem to love me." Raaz scratched his head nervously.

"Rena didn't start dating until she became an adult while Tista doesn't seem interested in dating anyone. She has set her standards too high. She compares everyone to her brother. How can a country boy measure up to a magician?"

"Maybe I've failed as a father." Orion sighed. "She is still so young and yet so reckless. What did I do wrong?"

Raaz would have liked to reply that Phloria was already past fifteen years old. On Mogar, the new world, most girls that age would already be at their second or third relationship.

Being the father of the culprit and being Orion a head taller than him, Raaz preferred to remain silent. He knew what he would have done if their situations were reversed.

"Time to wake up, my little Flower. Breakfast is ready."

"Thanks, dad." Phloria was a bit embarrassed, making her cheeks turn red. Not about her father finding her on the bed, but at the thought of what had almost happened.

"How do you feel, son?" Raaz caressed Lith's grey hair. The refining process had boosted Lith's magical and physical abilities, but it had left him even more exhausted than the day before.

"Much better, thanks." Raaz didn't believe him, Lith was barely able to remain conscious. Yet he wasn't lying, his mental condition had greatly improved.

'What almost happened last night made me understand that dad is right. Protector's death isn't anyone's fault. I would have done anything to save Carl's life, even if it meant losing my own. I can't stop others from fighting for those they love.

'It would be as cruel as hypocritical of me. He sacrificed himself doing what he believed right, just like I almost did. Protecting someone is much harder than killing, too many things can go wrong. That's why I need power, much more than I already have!'

Lith smiled softly to his father, his mind was at peace. His body was a mess though. Right after a breakthrough, until the body naturally recovered its strength, Invigoration was useless.

In another couple of days, Lith was able to walk without help. His hair was returning to its natural color and most of the wrinkles were gone.

"Remarkable, simply outstanding." Manohar was enthusiast of his progress.

"Your recovery speed is unheard of. I had patients in a condition far less severe than yours and it took them weeks to get where you are now." He had become Lith's personal healer since the first day he had been bedridden.

Manohar was very fond of Lith, considering him one of the few people with enough brain it was worth talking to. Also, he was too scared of Lady Ernas to refuse her request.

She had even befriended his mother, the second person Manohar feared the most in the three great countries, right after Queen Sylpha. Unless he decided to disappear again, Jirni would always know where to find him.

Yet if he did, the Queen had promised him that she would make sure it be the last. She had already prepared the official document ordering his execution, it would only take a signature to make it effective.

Lith and Jirni spent quite some time together. She would often accompany him during his walks, discussing with him about many different topics. Thanks to Soluspedia, he rarely found himself at loss for words.

'I don't know if by meeting her expectations I'm improving our relationship or I'm digging my own grave.' Lith thought.

He continued to experience visions of the death of whoever he watched for too long. It required a lot of willpower to stop the phenomenon, leading him to believe it was all in his head.

He couldn't care for maids or butlers, but every time he saw a member of his family or Phloria die horribly, his heart would cringe. Even if he knew it was just an illusion, it didn't make it any less painful.

It was a mild form of torture that put his mind under serious stress while his body kept getting better by the day. A few days after the breakthrough, Lith had regained his old appearance, even getting a little taller.

'There are only two possibilities. This Death Vision thingy is caused by my mental trauma or it's a consequence of my attempt to save Protector. Either way, I can't wait for it to be gone.'

Lith had just seen Jirni die by poison, her face was blue and swollen in his eyes, bleeding from all her orifices. Talking to living corpses was too much even for someone as cynical as him.

"I'm pleased to see how knowledgeable you are." Jirni sat down on a wicker chair near a small table, prompting him to do the same. They had been walking in the park surrounding the mansion until they found a dining area.

"That's not enough though. I'm sorry for being so blunt while you are still recovering, but I couldn't help but notice how much my daughter cares for you. I want only the best for her and I need to know that we are on the same page about it.

"What are your intentions towards her? I know you are still young, but she is not. I have no problem if what's going between you it's just a fling. Phloria is completely inexperienced about love. She has to start somewhere and sooner is better than later.

"However, I want you to be completely honest with me and of course with her too. If you are not serious about this relationship, she has the right to know it." Lith recognized how Jirni was looking at him.

It was the same way he did at everyone he met. She was trying to determine if he was someone valuable or just a disposable tool. Despite her tone was calm and her manners impeccable, Lith had never felt so pressured before.

Not even when Marchioness Distar had taken him prisoner in her house until he had cured her daughter. Lith pinched his nose, he needed to think without being haunted by ghastly visions.

"I really like your daughter, Lady Ernas. Both as a friend and as an invaluable companion. Yet I can't promise you or her anything. I have planned my future way ahead of time and I can tell you that marriage it's not part of the plan.

"Once I become an adult, I'll join the army. It will only be the beginning of my journey. There are things that I must do before settling down and I have no idea how long it will take. I can't ask Phloria, or anyone for that matters, to wait for me."

Jirni nodded, pleased by his honesty.

'At his age, most teenagers confuse daydreaming with planning, but if he's like me, then he is dead serious. I can't force him into marriage, it would mean making an enemy out of him and most importantly, it would make Phloria miserable.

'However, it is not over yet. There's no telling how their feelings can evolve, especially since they have yet to experience real intimacy.'

"Just make sure she is well aware of your intentions. The rest is up to her, Phloria is her own woman. Here, this is a token of my goodwill, in case you should change your mind." Jirni took out of her dimensional amulet a white hardcovered book, handing it to Lith with both her hands.

There was no title nor illustration on the front cover, making Lith curious about its nature. He only needed to open it to a random page to realize it was the new world equivalent of the Kamasutra for beginners.

"Well, well, well." Lady Ernas said with a surprised tone.

"You didn't become beet red nor I can see any sign of arousal after you watched at those pictures. This means that you are not a virgin or at least you are devoid of emotions. Remember my words: if you make my little Flower suffer and I will return everything in kind."

'Now I'm sure of it. I'm definitely digging my own grave.' Lith thought.

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Another week passed, Lith had completely recovered from his condition. The only traces left of his trauma were the grey streaks between his hair and the Death Vision still plaguing every moment of his life he shared with others.

He seemed to have finally hit his growth spurt. His hunger was through the roof and he could feel his muscles and joints aching.

The White Griffon academy had reopened, allowing the students to go back for the last month of the last trimester. It had been a long year, no one was really in the mood for more studying, not even Lith.

Yet he was happy to be finally out of house Ernas. Lith was tired of Phloria's parents constantly staring at him, even though with completely different mindsets. Jirni had worked hard to give them some alone time whenever it was possible, while Orion had put as much effort to foil his wife's plans.

Also, he was eager to go back to his all-nighters to work on the boxes remaining in his pocket dimension. There was something scratching at the back of his head, telling him that something was wrong. He hadn't experienced any more visions, but it meant nothing.

'It could mean that I have succeeded in avoiding that future or that it's still pending. Whatever it is, I need to find out the truth and fast!'

Since his recovery, Lith had used all the alone time he had, including the bathroom breaks, to study with Invigoration the shotel Orion had borrowed to him. His heart bled when he had been forced to separate himself from that masterpiece, but he had no choice.

The sword had been specifically designed to counter Balkor's undead and Orion had no reason to gift him something so precious. He had managed to gather enough data about the pseudo cores and the magic crystals embedded in an item to be confident about opening the sealed boxes.

The first person he met on the fourth year floor was Yurial. Lith was so shocked by his appearance that he had to blink several times to make sure Death Vision wasn't responsible for what he was seeing.

Yurial had lost several kilograms, his eyes were bloodshot and dilated.

"Yurial, what the heck happened to you?" Lith asked.

"Nice to meet you too, old friend." Yurial hugged him, leaving Lith flabbergasted.

"Are you high or something?"

"Or something. Please, come to my room. I really need someone to talk to."

Lith had recognized the symptoms of drug abuse, so he followed him without asking any more questions.

Yurial told to Lith everything that had happened to him since his return home, from his efforts to change his father's mind to his tranquilizer addiction. His story was highlighted by many attempts to take a sip from a vial which Lith foiled every time.

"This is different from the second exam. Back then, I just had to get over my trauma and I had my father by my side. You have no idea how much it meant to me that for once he took some time to take care of me instead of give me lectures.

"Not to mention I had the girls to keep me company, I was never alone." Yurial half laughed and half cried the whole time.

"I can't get over my future. I'm scared sh\*tless of it, I feel trapped like a mouse. I'm so sorry for never visiting you, but I didn't know what to say. I was too afraid you would have blamed me for your friend's death."

"Sadly, I would have probably done it." Lith sighed.

"I spent my first day awake trying to find a scapegoat. I'm still having a hard time accepting what happened." Lith shared with him the details about his Death Vision and how it was driving him insane.

"You see dead people?" Yurial offered Lith his potion.

"No. I don't see ghosts. I see how people may die according to my paranoia. In the last few minutes, I watched you die by poisoning, decapitation and an odd illness that covered your corpse with moss." Lith refused the tranquilizer.

If it actually worked, they would share the same addiction.

## Chapter 230 Body Swap

"Does Phloria know about this Death Vision thingy?" Yurial asked.

"No, she has spent too much time worrying about me night and day. I'm going to give her a little respite before breaking the news to her. She deserves it."



"Man, that's exactly what I am talking about." Yurial sighed.

"Before Balkor, everything was so easy for me. I had my future set in stone. I thought I had my whole life in front of me. That my sh\*tty wife would give me a few heirs before I started searching for happiness somewhere else.

"I didn't give a damn about love. All that I cared about was to take my father's place as the head of the family and make my Grand Duchy a better place for everyone to live in.

"Now I feel completely lost. I can't stop thinking about all the things that I will miss because of my role and my marriage. To make things worse, if something happened to me tomorrow, nobody would care.

"My mother barely remembers my name, while my father is always so busy that I rarely see him. Is it wrong for me to want to go away and have a life? To forget about duty and think only about myself for more than five minutes?

"I want to have something similar to what you have with Phloria, even once, before duty hog-ties me like a prime roast. What do you think I should do?"

"I'm sorry Yurial, but this is something only you can decide." Lith shook his head.

"There are only a few things I can tell you. First, give yourself some time to recover. Maybe you need to re-evaluate your life's long term priorities or maybe this is just your anxiety talking. We both need some quiet to get things straight, right now we are a mess.

"Second, you can't go to class in that state. Unless our Professors and colleagues have gone blind, they'll notice how high you are. You could get in serious trouble, maybe even get suspended."

Yurial sighed before using a few healing spells on himself. Cleansing his system was the easy part, in just a few minutes his appearance became that of someone that just had skipped too many meals and a few nights of sleep.

The problem was that now he could only resort to sheer willpower to keep his inner demons at bay. When they met the rest of the group in the compulsory courses' class for the Necromancy lessons, their mood only got worse.

While most of the class was moping in silence, the girls were smiling and laughing, like they had no care in the world. Yurial was so envious of house Ernas that he was about to pop a vein.

Phloria's older brother was already married, ensuring the future of the family and relieving his sibling from any kind of pressure.

Based on what Quylla had told him, she was walking on air. Orion was the father she had always wished for, and once she got used to Jirni's attempts to manipulate her, Quylla couldn't get angry with her.

Not after what she had heard from Friya and Yurial about their respective biological mothers. Yurial couldn't agree more with her.

'Lady Ernas may be nuttier than a fruitcake, but whatever she does to her daughters, she only does it because she thinks it's for their sake, not for her own.' Yurial thought.

Also, while Yurial's trauma was only getting worse over time, Friya was slowly overcoming her own. Losing her family after her mother's escape had been the lowest point of her life, but she was now certain that being adopted by the Ernas couple was the best thing that could happen to her.

She had finally a place where she belonged, loving relatives, and no more worries outside graduating from the academy. Since the fall of house Solivar, her arranged marriage had been called off. She was now free to do as she liked.

The boys faked a smile and sat in their chairs, waiting for the second gong to sound.

Professor Zeneff entered the room, giving a sad smile to the class. The students were so used to her cheerfulness that the change of attitude drawn on her drew even the gazes of those that usually wouldn't pay attention until the start of the lesson.

She had lost several kilograms too fast, making her appear much older than she actually was. Professor Zeneff seemed to be dreadfully tired, her movements were unsteady.

"Good morning, dear students. I know I look terrible, just like I know that after all you went through, you probably don't want to study Necromancy one more minute than absolutely necessary.

"Luckily, we are on the same page. The Black Griffon academy has suffered many casualties. I have lost many dear friends and assistants that were like family to me. So I'm eager to get over our lessons as much as you do and go back home.

"Today I'll teach you how to possess the body of one of your undead and use it as it was your own. This is the last thing you need to learn to complete this subject. I told you at the beginning that my course would be quick and easy. I kept my word."

Her voice lacked the enthusiasm they had become used to. The gloomy atmosphere of the class became even worse.

"The principle behind it is relatively simple." She made appear a rat skeleton, turning it into an undead, and imprinting it with her mark in a few seconds.

Death Vision made Lith see the undead's eyes turn off once the spell had lost its effectiveness and then after its body was crushed under something heavy.

'What the heck? Do I care for undead too or is this some kind of curse?' Lith thought.

"When I taught you how to move them and impart them simple commands, I explained to you how to perceive the mana that you have transferred within the corpse and move it with your will.

"Even if detached from your body, it's still a part of you."

Professor Zeneff placed her hand on the undead. Its eyes turned blue and it continued the explanation using Zeneff's voice.

"The last step requires for you to transfer your consciousness along with the mana. You have to find that sliver of your essence and establish a connection with it. I always suggest imagining it like creating a tunnel between the sliver and your consciousness.

"Then, imagine opening a door that leads outside your body and into the tunnel. Push your will through that door not to enforce a single thought, but your whole being. It can be done at any moment after creating an undead.

It will allow you to see, hear, and speak as if you were there.

"The process doesn't consume your mana, but the longer you use this technique and the farther you get from your real body, the greater is the focus required. Always remember that as long as you possess an undead, you can't use any magic and your own body is helpless.

"Also, if the corpse gets destroyed while you are still inhabiting it, your mind could experience mild damage. Not enough to suffer from long lasting consequences, but enough to knock you out for a few minutes.

"In the event of danger, the best course of action is always to get out of the undead, animate a new one and take a different route."

Professor Zeneff returned to her body. Then, with a clap of her hands, she made a rat skeleton appear on each student's desk and a small metal bucket at their side. While some like Lith had no idea what the purpose of the bucket was, many others soon had a dire need of it.

Even if the rats and Balkor's creations were worlds apart in all respects, the feeling that the darkness magic animating them gave off was similar. Most of the students still had nightmares about those three days.

Darkness magic made them remember the fear of death they had experienced and the comrades they had lost. A series of dry heaving was quickly followed by puking sounds.

"I'm really sorry guys, but if you don't complete the task, I'll have to fail you." Professor Zeneff sniffed, empathizing with their feelings.

"Be strong and consider this lesson as shock therapy. If you manage to succeed today, you will not be forced to raise another undead until you graduate from the academy. There are no Necromancy lessons during the fifth year, you have my word for it."

The desire to get rid of the undead once and for all was motivation enough for most students to overcome their fear and start practicing.

Lith was already used to control multiple lesser undead at will, also he had decided to stop holding back. Merging with the undead's blood core wasn't much different from entering the mind space he shared with Solus.

Once he identified the part of him residing inside the creature, all he had to do was to force the sliver of his life force to take over the entire blood core.

Lith could feel his creation weakly rejecting him. Even with the mark forcing it into submission, the creature instinctively resisted the possession. The gap in willpower was abysmal, so it took him only a few seconds to complete the process.

The sensation he experienced though the rat's corpse was terrible. The world around him had turned black and white, all colors had disappeared. He couldn't smell anything and all of his new body was insensitive.

Either Lith touched the wooden desk or his originals' body hand, he couldn't feel any difference between the two. Even moving was awkward. Not only was Lith not used to moving on all four with such a different center of gravity, but also he could feel the body trying to expel him.

Even a mindless creature like an undead rat had enough hatred for the living to reject its creator's mind. It took Lith only a few minutes to get accustomed to the new body, but he could feel the resistance the creature offered increasing over time.

It was like keeping a spring compressed and preventing it to return to its natural shape.

The Lith rat jumped down from his desk, landing with the grace of a rock. Luckily, he felt no pain from the impact.

'If this is what it feels like being an undead, then it's simply appalling. The only bright side is that I don't have Death Vision in this form.' He thought.

"Professor Zeneff, is this enough for a passing grade?" Lith approached the teacher's desk, while Zeneff and a few students clapped at his performance.

"No, but it's a great result. Do it again another nine times and you will pass the basic Necromancy course with flying colors."

Abandoning the corpse turned out to be easy. As soon Lith let his concentration slip, he found himself back in his own body. He waited for a few seconds before trying again, hoping to be finally free from Death Vision.

Yet when he saw some invisible beast bite Professor Zeneff's head off, Lith understood that things weren't so simple. He repeated the process ten times without a hitch, obtaining a round of applause from the whole class and thirty points from Professor Zeneff.

Lith spent the rest of the lesson helping the Professor in teaching to his classmates, giving them hints and tips. Soon everyone became able to possess the undead, but despite all the support provided to them, some weren't able to keep the creatures under control for more than a few seconds.

The shock from the past fight against the undead was still strong enough for their minds to reject the corpse as strongly as it rejected them. Yurial was among them and even by the end of the lesson he hadn't been able to achieve a single success.

Things went smoothly during the following dimensional magic lesson instead. Lith, Phloria, and Yurial were already capable of successfully perform Switch, however they would still fail from time to time.

Succeeding eight times out of ten was a great result, but if it happened during a real battle it could prove to be fatal, so they kept striving for perfection under Professor Rudd's strict supervision.

He seemed to have changed too, albeit not physically. He gave them actual pointers instead of sarcastic remarks or riddles. Rudd would also explain to them what their recurring mistakes were and how to fix them.

With his help, they estimated that in another couple of lessons they would completely master the Switch spell and obtain more free time along with Friya and Quylla.

After dinner, Lith made up an excuse and went straight to his room. Seeing Phloria so happy had made him change his mind.

'I'll tell her about Death Vision another time. She's finally getting along with her sisters. I don't want to spoil Phloria's happiness with my problems. Her smile means too much to me.'

Thanks to Invigoration, he quickly returned to his peak condition and then started to work on the boxes.

Now that he was finally aware that multiple pseudo cores could exist within the same magical item and knew how they would interact with magic crystals, Lith was certain he would succeed opening at least one.