

## Supreme M 231

### Chapter 231 Mystery Box

Back in his room, Lith used Invigoration on one of the few boxes he had left, carefully studying its pseudo cores, mana pathways, and the mana crystals that sealed it.

He had taken notes on everything he learned so far about them, and thanks to Soluspedia he could remember everything with but a thought.

He started simultaneously attacking the mana pathways and the mana crystals, letting the energy they contained leak at the same rate. While both were draining, Lith also had to prevent the three pseudo cores desynchronizing.

The last time he attempted opening the boxes, he failed because he had never wielded a crystal embedded item. Therefore he didn't know that the only way to prevent the prevent destructive desynchronization was to imitate the mana signature of the crystals and inject mana in the pseudo cores every time they would go out of phase.

The process was long and required surgical precision. Lith had already learned that if he damaged the mana pathways too much, making the energy leak happen too fast, the box would just explode.

He had to bide his time, slowly eroding the pathways and corrupting the crystal with darkness magic while using spirit magic to keep the pseudo cores stable.

'Damn, how can normal Forgemasters open these frigging things without Invigoration? I already consumed thrice my whole mana reserve and I have a lot of it.' Lith thought.

When the box was finally opened, Lith was drenched in sweat.

'Don't push yourself so hard! You have yet to recover completely. Remember there's only so much Invigoration can do until you are back to your peak condition.' Solus was still worried about him.

After the breakthrough, Lith's body had quickly returned to its old appearance, except for the grey streaks in his hair. She had no idea how having lost so much life force would affect him in the long term, but Solus was certain there would be a price to pay.

At the moment, Lith was around 80% of his full strength and was getting better by the day. Yet because of his injuries, using his full focus would make Lith tire faster than usual and Invigoration could only restore his mana up to his current limit.

Lith nodded. He couldn't wait to take a hot bath and relax. A long time had passed since he had a vision of the future, he had yet to understand if the boxes still held any significance.

He pressed the blue crystal in the center of the briefcase-looking box and watched it unfold. The box grew bigger and bigger until it became the size and shape of a huge wardrobe. When Lith opened it, he remained flabbergasted.

Inside there was the closest thing to an Earth portable chemical lab he had ever seen. To make things even weirder, it seemed to be completely automated. Mechanical hands opened and mixed the content of several glass containers.

There were even a few Bunsen burners that the hands would light with a flintstone and use them to briefly warm up some of the liquids. In a few minutes the process was complete and one of the hands placed a small flask containing a transparent liquid at the center of the cabinet.

Chemistry and Alchemy were too different for Lith to understand what he had just seen. Also, most of the ingredients were magical in nature and had no counterpart on Earth.

'Solus, you are the one following the Alchemy lessons. Any idea of what has just happened?' Lith asked.

'Beats me. I only have fourth year knowledge.' She mentally shrugged. 'I can prepare fire seeds, low tier potions, and some basic wands but that's all. This stuff is advanced Alchemy, to the point where I have seen this machine perform at least five reactions that Professor Ryner told us were impossible.

In theory, everything should have been blown up to pieces. Whoever did this is a true genius!'

Lith took the flask, examining it with Invigoration while it was still sealed with a stopper. Whatever it was, it didn't seem to be magical in nature. With no other option, Lith conjured a small but strong barrier around the flask, fearing it would explode.

Then, he opened it from a distance with spirit magic. Once again, nothing happened.

'Damn, I hate riddles. Couldn't they add a warning label or an instruction manual? There is only one way to understand what the heck this is.'

Lith removed the stopper, taking a single droplet of the silver liquid it contained with water magic and put it on his own tongue. It was tasteless and odorless too, making it impossible to understand its nature with an external examination.

Lith was forced to swallow it and keep an eye on it with Invigoration. Everything that followed didn't make sense to him.

The droplet didn't disperse nor did it mix with his saliva. It went straight for his stomach, remaining unaffected by the acids, then it entered the bloodstream via his intestine and then spread out evenly through all of his body.

Lith didn't feel any better or worse for it, but he wasn't willing to ingest another droplet blindly. He used Invigoration to cleanse it from his system, instantly recognizing the unpleasant feeling that followed.

The liquid was resisting his efforts, nullifying part of the mana he employed as soon as they made contact. Yet he had cleansed so much of that toxin that the procedure was second nature to him, easily purging it out of his body.

'F\*ck me sideways! This is the anti magic parasite toxin! In an even more powerful and effective form at that. Why the heck did they send it to the White Griffon academy? Poisoning someone with this thing makes no sense.

'As soon as a mage loses their powers, the scheme would be revealed. Killing someone with this stuff takes weeks. Also, why send all this terrible contraption? Why didn't they just give their accomplices the flask?'

Lith received the answer to his question a few minutes later, while he was still remembering the details about his vision. Both the droplet he had extracted from his body and the liquid in the flask became cloudy before turning into a fine dust.

'That's some first rate paranoia!' Solus blurted out.

'That's why. Once the stopper is removed, the toxin must be used quickly or it self destructs, leaving no proof behind. Still, it doesn't make sense. You, Marth, Manohar, there are a lot of people in the White Griffon that would immediately recognize it.

What's the point of making the students or the Professor lose their powers?'

'Maybe they were planning to use the toxin to make them helpless during an assault?' Lith realized how idiotic the idea was as soon as he thought it out loud.

Even without their magic, the Professors could still rely on the arrays. Fueled by the power core, they were the academy's greatest weapon and defense at the same time. Also, even if completely powerless, Linjos could still use the communication amulet and the Warp Gate in his office to call for help.

Lith searched the rest of the cabinet for clues. Aside from the magical ingredients, all heavily protected by thick enchanted glass, there was just a single drawer. Inside, Lith found three envelopes.

Each one contained a different item and several pills of unknown purpose. The quality of the items varied greatly. One was a plain ring, identical to the magical ones students would exchange points for.

Another was a precious necklace with several diamonds embedded and the last one looked like a cheap bracelet, something that only someone of humble origins would wear. No matter if their design was elaborate or plain, they all had the same enchantment.

When he used Invigoration for the first time on one of them, he was amazed by the complexity of the forgedmastered spell matrix. It held five pseudo cores that required so many mana pathways that there was not an inch of the item that wasn't filled with runes.

He also discovered several small magic crystals embedded in each one of them, crafted so masterfully to be almost invisible unless one knew where to look.

Lith had no idea what could require such a complex enchantment, so he imprinted the ring with his mana and then he wore it. After several attempts, Lith realized that, whatever was its purpose, it wasn't something as simple as point and shoot.

After taking the ring off, Lith opened two more boxes. Each one contained the portable lab and had its own drawer with a different set of accessories. No two were alike. Each magical item was accompanied by several pills. It was the only thing they had in common aside from the enchantment.

'All this time and effort and I've just moved from square one to square two. I need to understand the reason they smuggled the toxin inside the academy and what the heck these things are.

'I wish I could ask the Marchioness or Lady Ernas for help, but I have no way to explain to them why I have more boxes nor how I managed to open them. Damn, I could really use a vision right now.

Useless dryads and their half baked gifts.'

After a long hot bath, Lith went to sleep. He was exhausted, only rest could help him recover from the damage his body had sustained. It took him some time to fall asleep. It wasn't just that he couldn't stop thinking about the boxes, but he also really missed Phloria.

He had got so used to her presence that, ever since he left house Ernas, he had trouble sleeping. His rest would be disturbed by nightmares about Protector's death and by the recurring visions of his loved ones dying over and over again.

'From tomorrow onward, I'll train myself to stop Death Vision whenever my focus is not required for something important. I'm starting to get tired of this sh\*t. I still have too many things to do before I can allow myself to waste time on self pity.

'No matter what the future holds. As long as my strength keeps increasing, the number of threats to whoever I hold dear will become less and less. We're in this together, right Solus?' Lith thought.

'Always.' She replied, giving him hope.

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The next morning, the first lesson was the Magic Crystals class. However, the Professor that entered the room after the second gong wasn't Nalear. The students were curious and worried at the same time.

No one had seen Professor Nalear since the attack, so they were naturally concerned something may have happened to her. On the other hand, there was something majestic in the newcomer's appearance that piqued everyone's curiosity.

The new Professor was a woman, around thirty years old with chin length red hair. She was very tall, almost 1.8 meter (5'11") high with a muscular build that was more suited to a front line soldier than a Professor.

There was something noble about the grace of her movements. Each one of them seemed to be full of strength yet incredibly delicate. She exuded an aura of power that Lith had never experienced before, completely different from the killing intent he usually employed.

He felt like he was staring to a natural born leader, someone that people would gladly give their life for, even if they had only known her for a few hours. They were polar opposites, if she was the sun then he was the moon.

"Good morning, students. I'm Professor Amyla Farg. I will replace Professor Nalear until she makes a full recovery. During the three days of siege, she was tainted by a Valor's life force while attempting to protect you.

"She didn't receive proper care until the undead was disposed of, so she fell into a coma and has yet to recover." Many students became pale while remembering that night, Lith included.

"Don't worry, the worst is over. Her condition is stable and slowly improving. If she has managed to survive until now, I'm sure she will overcome the hurdle and awaken soon. Very few among those tainted managed to survive, she is one of the lucky ones."

She looked for a moment at Lith's group and many students did the same. Yurial's and Phloria's miraculous survival was a well known fact, so they couldn't help but wonder how they managed to come out unscathed.

Farg tried not to stare for too long at Lith. Professor Farg was actually a member of the Queen's Corpse, the secret unit of Awakened ones at the service of the Crown.

Tyris had sent her to keep an eye on the hybrid and make sure he wasn't a threat. Her orders were clear: "Observe him without interfering and kill him at the first sign of danger."

"Today's lesson is a little special. It's something that you were supposed to learn during your trip to the mines, but I doubt any of you want to go back to the mining town again. Hence, the Headmaster was kind enough to reinforce the protections of the classroom and transport high tier crystals here."

She clapped her hands, making a mana blade required for crystalsmithing and a deep blue crystal the size of a coconut appear on each student's desk.

"Before we start, I want to warn each one of you of the risks this exercise involves. The array surrounding the class will keep you perfectly safe, but the same cannot be said for your academic career."

## Chapter 232 Mana Breath

"Even if they are just deep blue crystals, they are still very expensive. If you fail the following procedure, the gemstone will be destroyed and you will receive another one. There are only three crystals for each one of you.

"Destroying them all will mark the end of the lesson, of the need of attend this subject as well as of any chance of becoming a Crystalsmith."

"Since you have come so far, you will still get a passing grade, but no Master Crystalsmith will take an apprentice incapable of handling a blue crystal after three months of practice." Professor Farg explained.

"What's required from you it's the same thing you have already done countless times, but with a major difference. When you'll use the Crystalsmith spell Scope on the gemstone, you'll notice there are no lines inside.

You will only see a dot moving at a speed that will change from time to time. That's because, unlike the mid tier crystals, high tier ones are able to replenish their mana quickly. This property gives them a unique mana flow that is called Mana Breath.

A true Crystalsmith must be able to perceive the Breath clearly enough to follow its movements and cut the gemstone accordingly. Remember, the density of the mana blade must be kept constant.

If you focus too much on the Breath, the blade will damage the crystal. If the crystal receives too much damage, it will explode. Like everything in life, the key is to find balance in what you do. Good luck to everyone."

The Magic Crystal course was the reason why Lith's mana sensibility had improved so much during the last months.

Scope was a spell that relied entirely on the caster's perception and he had always used it instead of Invigoration during the exercises. It was the first opportunity he had to train his mana sensibility without endangering anyone.

Unlike healing magic, there was no life on the line, wasting a crystal scrap meant nothing to him. Also, it was much simpler than dimensional magic, since he didn't have to feel and manipulate multiple flows at a time, but only a static one.

Lith cast Scope, becoming able to see the dot Farg talked about. It moved with an irregular pattern and speed. Lith studied it for a while before understanding that the Breath had no fixed route. He was forced to rotate the crystal from time to time to follow its movements.

'Let's see what Invigoration reveals.' He thought.

Lith discovered that even the size of the dot changed with time, but most importantly, he was now able to see the circulatory system of the breath. It was like a maze, the branches of which crossed over several times.

It was still a chaotic mess that allowed the Breath to change direction most of the time, but Invigoration would still give him a great edge compared to the Scope spell. With Invigoration, Lith would know when the Breath could change direction and when it would be forced to move in a straight line instead.

'My mana sensibility still needs some work. I'll use Scope on the first two crystals and save Invigoration for the last. I don't aim to become a Crystalsmith, so I better use this opportunity to practice at the academy's expense rather than mine.'

No matter how much pain or grief Lith was going through, he was still stingy beyond belief.

After conjuring Scope once again, Lith began cutting the crystal. The more progress he made, the more the gemstone shrunk, increasing in power and quality. The problem was that the smaller it became, the more sudden the turns the Breath would take.

It was like an Earth roguelike game. At each new level, the difficulty would go up and what he learned from the previous run was useless. It was all a matter of focus and precision, never letting the mana blade stray too much from the dot.

Lith almost managed to refine the first crystal, but one error too many made it crumble and he had to start over. At the second attempt, his efforts were rewarded with success. He took a short break to relax, discovering that even Quylla had failed once.

"I got too cocky and paid for it." She explained while shrugging. Lith used Scope on the third Crystal too. He had already passed the exercise, but he needed all the training he could get to sharpen his senses.

By the end of the lesson, Lith's group had successfully cut all of their crystals. Only Lith and Quylla had lost one.

The second lesson of the day was the Healer specialization. The group performed the house calls under Professor Ironhelm's escort. Professor Trasque was dead and Ironhelm had been assigned to replace him.

Lukart had long fled the Griffon Kingdom thanks to the traitor's help, so no one was making attempts on Yurial's life anymore. Their rounds were peaceful, traveling from town to town and seeing many different cities bustling with the daily activities helped them to relax.

It also gave Yurial an idea that he shared with the others during dinner back at the academy.

"Why don't you all come to my house after we graduate from the fourth year? In my Duchy, the weather is nice even during winter. We could travel together and I would show you the best places my lands have to offer.

"If I go back home alone, I'll be forced to spend all the winter break before the fifth year studying magic and so would you. I say we deserve a couple of weeks of vacation."

The girls unanimously agreed. When Orion was home with them, he was a great father, but also a strict teacher. He left them little time for slacking off. When he was away for work, Jirni would turn everything into a competition.

She wouldn't force them to do anything, but she always seemed to know which buttons to push to make them dance in her hands. Compared to her, the academy was a relaxing environment.

Lith was the only one still on the fence. Two weeks was a lot of time for him. He had yet to inform Selia of her loss and had no idea how to give her the bad news. In his experience, no matter what he said, it would break her heart.

With the baby coming, she would need all the help she could get. Even if Lith had never agreed with Protector's request, he was determined to fulfill his friend's last wish.

No matter what the others said to convince him, the best they could get was a hollow:

"I'll think about it."

Later, after much thinking, he went to Phloria's room.

When she opened the door, her hair was arranged in a strange updo, held in place by hairpins and curlers Lith had never seen before.

"Nice hair." He said, failing to suppress a chuckle. "What's that stuff?"

"Something you were never supposed to see. Having long hair is a hassle. Or did you think they are naturally that wavy?" She replied with an annoyed tone.

"I never saw you using them at the mining town or when I was a guest in your home."

"Well, duh! I had more important things to care about at the moment. In fact, I was always a mess."

"So you say, I never noticed any mess." His words turned Phloria's mood upside down, making her smile from ear to ear.

"Well, come in. Sorry for the mess, I have just finished bathing. Your visit caught me by surprise." She let him inside her room, but aside from a bathrobe on the bed and more curlers on the nightstand, there was nothing out of place.

"Yeah, sorry. We need to talk." Phloria froze in place. In her mind, those words still meant: "We have to break up."

"Please, it's better for you to sit down. Some of the things I have to say aren't exactly good news."

Phloria did as requested, followed by Lith that sat right next to her.

'This should be a good sign. If he was going to dump me, he would keep his distance. Or so my brother says at least.' She thought.

Lith took a deep breath to calm down and then told her about everything that was troubling him. He explained to her how Death Vision was torturing him, how nightmares still haunted him, and how his body was still recovering.

"I didn't tell you any of this before because I wanted to leave you some space. You deserved a break from the drama that is my life. If you want..."

Lith was going to say that he would understand if she wanted to take a break from their relationship or find someone less complicated when he realized that, after he had spoken of his nightmares, she had stopped listening to him.

She had stars in her eyes and a big smile on her face.

"Let me get this straight." She said once she noticed he wasn't talking anymore.

"Death Vision stops when you are with me, like right now?"

"Yes." Lith had noticed that if they were close enough, Death Vision's effects disappeared. That was the reason he sat close to her. He lacked the willpower to dump her and hold Death Vision back at the same time.

"Also, you have no bad dreams when I sleep beside you."

"Correct again." Phloria closed in, her face was now centimeters from his own.

"Doesn't that mean that I'm special to you? As in really special?"

"You are, but that's not the point. You..." He tried to make her listen to reason, but she put her index finger on his mouth, stopping him.

"Just answer one question. Do you like me? Even with this contraption on my head?"

"That's two questions, but yes to both."

"That's all that matters to me." She gave him a deep kiss, making all his fears and worries fade away like a dense fog in front of the rising sun. Her warmth and her gentle touch over his skin were all Lith could think about.

"One more thing." He said as soon as she gave him a second to breathe.

"I can't take you out on a date during the weekend. I plan to go back to the mining town and visit Protector's grave. I can't keep being chained to the failures of my past. I need to face them and have my closure. That's the only way I can move on."

"Great idea. When do we leave?" Lith's surprised expression made her giggle.



"Did you really think I would let you go there alone? Then you are crazier than you think." She kissed him again, this time just a peck, before accompanying him to the door.

"Sorry, but you can't stay. Let me know when you decide about the trip. We could ask the others to come with us. They need some closure too, especially Yurial."

After another goodnight kiss, Phloria closed the door behind her. Now that she was alone, she couldn't stop to giggling and smiling like a little girl.

'I still can't believe Lith told me I'm special to him, nor that I'm the only one that makes Death Vision stop.'

Lith returned to his room. When he opened the door, his mind was still arguing with his body about lost chances. He spent half the night using Accumulation, to further refine his mana core and improve his abilities.

The other half he slept to help his body recover. Even alone, he managed to sleep peacefully.

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The rest of the week passed quickly. Aside from home calls during the morning, Lith only had the Magic Crystal and Forgemaster classes to attend.

He had already completed the Necromancy and Dimensional magic courses. It left him with a lot of free time that he used to practice Forgemastering under Wanemyre's supervision, rest, and use Accumulation.

He was now also able to keep Death Vision in check with minimum effort unless something unexpected broke his concentration. The only side effect was that he always had a serious expression on his face, since he couldn't allow himself to relax.

The others would mock him to no end for this, saying that he had his glare back. Lith was so annoyed by their childish behavior that he ended up explaining to them about Death Vision and his plans for the weekend.

Yurial followed his lead, sharing with the others his worries about the future and the relapse in his addiction, against which he was currently struggling. The mood in the room turned gloomy for the first time since they had returned to the academy, but Yurial and Lith both felt better for not having to hide their burden anymore.

"Mind if I join you? My fiancée is coming to my house for a visit and I have no desire to waste my time with her." Yurial kept playing with a tranquilizer vial, taking the stopper on and off, fighting the temptation of taking a sip.

"Helping a friend is a much better excuse than remaining at the academy to cram. Also, it may help me with my problems too. If I manage to beat Balkor's shadow out of my head, tolerating Libea will be child's play in comparison."

Lith had never meant for the trip to be romantic, but before answering he looked at Phloria. Albeit their relationship was mostly platonic, he couldn't ignore her feelings since they had planned the trip together.

"Sure, you can come with us." Phloria nodded. "I have prepared two dimensional tents anyway. You can share Lith's."

"Tents?" Lith furrowed his brow.

"What for? I'm not planning on spending the night there. It would be creepy and depressing."

'Yeah, especially now that you know you would have to spend it alone' Solus mocked him. She was happy seeing the old cranky Lith back in action.

"Me neither." Phloria shrugged. "The forest is a magical place though. With everything that has happened this year, we never managed to have the trip to the forest we had planned after the mock exam."

I thought we may as well spend the whole weekend there. At our level, magical beasts are not a threat."

"It sounds like a plan." Quylla nodded. "We all need some rest and relaxation."

"Yeah, it will also be the first time we are all together outside the academy without something or someone trying to kill us." Friya said.

### Chapter 233 Field Trip

The clerk at the academy's entrance looked at Lith's group like they were a bunch of lunatics.

"Normally, a group of five would be perfect, but the academy advises against going into the forest. We lack staff, so in case anything happens rescue teams might come late, as in very late."

"Also, a lot of magical beasts have been hurt or died, so they may hold a grudge against humans. Are you sure you aren't willing to reconsider? Remember that you can't open Warp Steps in the academy's proximity without a special pass."

The group nodded in unison. Even if they couldn't get inside the academy, they could still escape from whatever danger they met. They paid the required merit points and left through the front gate.

"Do we walk or fly?" Lith asked. The trip was already different from what he had planned, so he had no haste.

"Walk. The mining town is only twenty kilometers from the academy." Phloria replied after checking on a map.

"It should take us only five or six hours to get there. We can use that time to enjoy the scenery while we search for magical plants or natural treasures. Nothing prevents us from flying in case we get tired of walking."

Phloria took the lead of the group and Lith asked her to teach him how to read a map. He was still a city man. He wasn't able to understand where he was without looking at the sun. Over the years, he had explored the Trawn woods until he knew it like the back of his hand.

The forest surrounding the academy had denser vegetation, making it hard to walk in a straight line. Having packed provisions from the canteen, they had no need to hunt, yet Lith would use Life Vision from time to time to check his surroundings.

The more they got deep in the forest, the more his hunter instinct told him there was something wrong. There was little wildlife around, too little considering that during the attack, Balkor's undead had no reason to bother normal animals.

Even if some of them had run away from their dens, after so much time they were supposed to have returned. Unless something had happened.

Despite Lith's group was very conscious of their surroundings, they didn't find any magical treasure during the first two hours. On the other hand, they would often get lost forcing someone to fly and take note of the respective positions of the sun and the academy.

Phloria knew how to read a map, at least in theory. It was her first time putting her knowledge to use, hence she was prone to mistakes.

"I still can't use dimensional magic." Lith informed the rest of the group after another failed attempt.

"You can." Quylla lectured him, taking something out of her dimensional amulet.

"It's just that the academy arrays prevent any kind of long range spell aside from the flying ones. We can still Blink or Switch, but any dimensional corridor that stretches for more than ten meters gets disrupted."

"How do you know so much about the academy?" Lith checked the books in Soluspedia and there was only vague information about the nature of the arrays. Also, unlike him, Quylla hadn't performed experiments along the way.

It was hard to miss someone chanting.

"I'd like to tell you that I discovered it while we were walking, but the truth is that after I completed dimensional magic and Necromancy both, I've got too much free time on my hands.

"So, when you guys have your specialization classes I spend a lot of time in the library. Professor Rudd is often there and he loves talking about dimensional magic. He taught me a lot during our conversations.

He isn't so bad once you know him better."

Lith nodded. He actually had his reservations about the Professor, but he didn't have the time or will to talk about him. His instincts kept telling him that something was wrong, but neither Life Vision nor mana sense perceived a threat.

Unbeknownst to the group, Professor Farg had been following them ever since they had left the academy. She kept her distance, using an artifact to not lose their traces.

'According to Lady Tyris, the target is an Awakened one. If I get too close, he'll spot me with Life Vision.' She thought.

'I don't know what their goal is, but their behavior is definitely suspicious. The group keeps moving erratically, if it wasn't for the artifact I would have lost them already. The girl leading them is a master of misdirection, worthy of her mother.'

"You have no idea where we are, am I right?" Friya asked.

"No, you are not." Phloria flew above the trees, returning a few seconds later.

"I'm getting the hang of this, don't worry."

"Stay on your toes, guys." Lith warned them, sniffing the air and recognizing a familiar smell.

"Clackers incoming." They were now close enough to allow him to distinguish their pseudo chirping from the real birds sounds.

Everyone readied their weapon, but no one was worried. They all had improved by leaps and bounds since the mock exam and Clackers were a threat only if they managed to catch their victim by surprise.

When the monsters swarmed them from all directions, including from above, they didn't feel so confident anymore. What made them worry wasn't their numbers, but their size.

Clackers were spider type magical beasts, they had black bodies covered in long bristles that served as sensory organs, with red dots all over. They were supposed to be as big as a Labrador retriever, but the ones attacking them were the size of a human being.

Yurial would have liked to curse at their bad luck, but he was too busy casting a barrier to deflect the acidic spit he was sure their enemies would employ.

Yet instead of using their webs and long range attacks, the Clackers on the trees cut their threads, falling through the air barrier while even bigger specimens were charging head on.

Phloria and Friya had already activated Full Guard, a Mage Knight spell that gave them complete combat awareness of their surroundings in a radius of 1.5 metres (5 feet). Phloria quickly reached Yurial, while Friya did the same for Quylla.

The two quickly killed all the spiders that had landed close to their friends. Their swords could easily cut through the enemies, while their flaming shields conjured out of fire and earth would intercept the incoming attacks and inflict painful burns.

The role of a Mage Knight was to buy enough time for their allies to cast their spells.

Lith dodged a falling Clacker squashing its head with a single hand before it could even land. After facing a Valor, he could hardly consider those oversized arachnids a threat.

Lith took out from his pocket dimension the daggers he had enchanted during his Forgemaster classes.

It was a good occasion to put them to test, since their blades were short enough to perfectly integrate with his hand to hand techniques. Lith darted forward, intercepting the bigger ones that were charging at them.

He infused his body with both air and fire magic, boosting his strength and speed.

A single fist was enough to crush the head of a Clacker bold enough to try biting him. Being Lith alone against dozens, the spiders thought they would make short work of him, realizing their mistake only when it was too late.

Lith moved so fast that their sensory organs could barely determine his position. Whenever he approached an enemy, a gaping wound would appear. Between his talent in locating vital spots and his weapons, every one of his strikes was crippling if not lethal.

Despite the daggers' average quality, Lith's strength coupled with their enchantments was more than enough to pierce the monsters' exoskeleton and then open them up like they were made of paper.

The weapons he was wielding were one enchanted with air magic and the other with fire magic. The former was enveloped by air currents enhancing its edge to the point it could cut through stone.

The latter's blade was so hot that it would make its victims' blood and innards boil at every strike. Even if they managed to survive, the wounded Clackers were in so much pain they could only curl up on the ground writhing uncontrollably.

Lith had chosen those daggers because he wanted to see if evolved arachnids would feel fear for their lives or compassion for their kin. Judging from their reactions to their fallen brethren's screams of agony the answer was yes to both.

The Clackers in front of Lith stopped advancing, using the acid spit to keep him away from their wounded companions. Lith grinned, while with a twist of his fists he took control of the incoming attacks with water magic and sent them back to where they came from.

The spiders were caught by surprise. Most of them were still spitting while their bodies started to suffer from the effects of their own acid. Lith then stomped his left foot on the ground, transmitting his mana and will, making rock spears erupt from the ground that impaled his enemies.

All the Clackers around him were dead or agonizing, so he threw a glance over his shoulder to check the others.

Despite their best efforts, his four companions were already surrounded.

"Rings!" Yurial shouted, releasing the spells he had stored to repel the waves of Clackers without wasting time to chant. The girls followed his lead, using the barrage of spells to break free from the encirclement and turn their enemies into mincemeat.

Lith rushed back to help them, only to discover his teammates had the situation under control.

Quylla was using quick tier three spells to kill the Clackers above their heads while Yurial used a mix of first magic and tier one spells to block all kind of long ranged attacks directed against the four of them.

Each one of his spells was too weak to harm the enemies, but he could cast them fast enough to deflect the acidic spits and burn the webs the Clackers were throwing at them before they could do any damage.

Friya and Phloria were swinging their swords non stop, cutting apart those that came too close. Unlike Lith's daggers, their swords would penetrate deeply into the enemy and then release a dark magic pulse that made their organs collapse.

Mage Knights' specialty was the ability to summon an elemental tower shield that would float in the air according to their will, always leaving them a free hand to use potions or cast Mage Knight spells.

The one they were using at the moment was called Phantom Blade. Their weapons were engulfed in mystical energies that using their blades as a template, could temporarily extend them tripling their attack range.

Phantom Blades were made of light, hence they were weightless, giving the Mage Knight complete freedom of movement. The downside was that extending the blade would require focus and mana

They couldn't keep it always active, but only use it in short bursts whenever the situation allowed for it. Even if the spell's effects only lasted for the duration of a single slash, it was enough for them to mow down small groups of enemies at once, making their numerical advantage useless.

It was only a matter of time before all the Clackers were killed, yet they refused to retreat.

'It's amazing how much we have all progressed in these few months. During the mock exam, a much smaller group of Clackers almost wiped out my team. It was more balanced in term of talents, but there was no teamwork or coordination.

No matter how many spiders come at them, they will not break through. Time to finish this!' Lith thought.

He put the daggers away in the pocket dimension, to have his hands free to cast his strongest air spell. Ever since the last breakthrough, his attunement with the world energy had greatly increased, but some Clackers were still too close to his companions for comfort.

Manipulating a spell with his mind alone was too risky. Lith's hands glowed with a yellow energy, that he used to draw several circles that floated in the air while he was mouthing gibberish in case someone was watching him.

Then, he joined his palms before moving them toward the battlefield. From each circle erupted a bolt of lightning aimed at the nearest enemy. The spiders from the trees screeched to warn their companions on the ground about the impending danger.

The lightning bolts moved in a zig zag pattern, slower than normal ones, but they were still very fast. Most thunderbolts struck their target, leaving behind a pungent smell of ozone and burnt flesh.

Some Clackers managed to dodge them at the last second, yet the result remained the same. The thunderbolts simply chased after them, moving on the next target as soon as the first one was no more.

Farg and Lith's companions alike remained amazed noticing that each lightning resembled a snake in both motions and appearance. Lith had conjured ten of them, controlling one with each finger, as he had learned during the necromancy classes.

Be them undead or energy masses, they were all puppets dancing in his hand. He never stopped advancing during the assault, to have a better view of his allies and enemies alike.

His legs never left the ground, he simply slid one foot in front of the other, using his whole body to control the mana flow of the spell with surgical precision until only the five youths were left standing.

## Chapter 234 Eyes

From her vantage point above the trees, Professor Farg was burning with envy.

'How the heck can someone so young already be an Awakened one? I dedicated my whole life to the Crown before I was chosen to be turned into a member of the Corpse. Still, I don't understand why Lady Tyris is so worried about him.

He is just a stupid kid with more power than brain.'

Lith's companions didn't share her outlook. On the contrary, they were amazed.

"That was Chasing Lightning!" Yurial couldn't believe his own eyes.

"It's a War Mage spell! Where the heck did you learn it?"

"From the library." During the past months, Lith had studied many different spells from the various specializations, searching for those that were the easiest for him to imitate.

He didn't have the time to understand the fake magic principles underlying each magic class, so he had focused on the spells that had something in common with his personal ones.

Chasing Lightning was simply the tier four air magic version of his Checkmate Spears spell. The real War Mage's spell allowed one to mark their targets during the casting of the spell, something that Lith hadn't been able to do reproduce.

However, being a true mage and making use of his heightened reflexes, he was able to alter the course of each thunderbolt at will.

"Dude, how did you find the time to learn another specialization? Self taught at that? You are crushing my self esteem!" Yurial was only half joking.

Sometimes being so close to someone two years younger than him who was stronger, apparently more talented, and had a bottomless supply of surprises made him feel quite insecure.

"Less yapping and more spellcasting." Phloria scolded them both.

"You know the saying: 'where there is a Clacker, expect to find a hundred more.' We need to recharge our rings before they return."

Lith had not used any of his rings, so he just pretended to recharge them.

He used that time to think about the spiders' behavior.

"You are right. This doesn't make sense. While fighting against me, I noticed they were able to think for themselves. They should have understood their strategy was pointless. Unless they were just buying time!" Lith said.

"Damn me and this stupid walk!" Phloria cursed at their bad luck.

"Let's fly out of here." She had yet to finish talking when the ground below them turned into quicksand and tendrils made of earth wrapped around their limbs, pulling them into the ground.

The five reacted in unison, Blinking out of the quicksand. The tendrils were bisected as they passed through the remnants of the dimensional spells. The detached tendrils turned back into mud as the spell animating them failed.

"Keep your distance!" Phloria ordered.

"If we group up before finding the enemy position, we will only offer them an easier target. Get ready to Blink again."

Lith activated Life Vision, turning his head around, above, and below before finding their answer. While the group was fighting the wave of small Clackers, a few fully developed monsters the size of bulls had burrowed underground their feet and turned the clearing into a death trap.

The Hatchlings' strength lied only in numbers, but Soldier Clackers were fully developed magical beasts and could use water and earth magic. Not only were they physically much stronger than a Hatchling, but they were also smart enough to not underestimate such dangerous enemies.

They had forced their underlings to act as cannon fodder while they prepared the field to ensure their victory. Even if reluctant to throw away their lives, the Hatchlings had no choice but to obey.

The Soldiers had received their authority from the Brood Mother and she was an absolute being to them. Defying her will meant becoming their brethren's dinner along with the intruders

"It's a trap!" Lith was unaware of the Soldiers' plan, but he could see them moving right below their feet.

"They are hiding underground. We need to get out of here!" Before Lith could finish warning his companions, new tendrils of earth erupted from the ground and seized him, Yurial, and Phloria. At the same time, Quylla and Friya fell into holes that opened up right below them.

Quylla screamed in surprise, but Friya had learned her lesson after the failed attempt on Yurial's life. She kept her cool, Blinking to Quylla's rescue and bringing her to safety on a nearby tree.

'There are four Clackers capable of using magic below the ground' Solus warned Lith that was still struggling to free his hands to Blink away.

'Their mana cores are only bright green, but their physical strength is on par with Protector when he was still a Ry. They only need one hit to kill a normal human.'

Lith nodded, using brute strength to break free from the constraints. He used water magic to freeze the tendrils restricting his companions. The spell wasn't powerful enough to completely block them, Lith couldn't risk freezing his allies to death in the process.

Yet he managed to slow the tendrils enough for Phloria to cut them down, freeing herself and Yurial, allowing them to Blink away. Lith followed their lead, but the trees they had taken cover on started to tilt.

Two Soldiers were uprooting them with earth magic, while the other two generated a hail of ice shards as thick and long as an arm to prevent their prey from running away.

The group Blinked again to safety, but their mana was about to run out. They had gone all out during the previous fight and Blink was a very mana expensive spell.

"Damn! If we try to fly away the shards will skewer us, but if we keep hiding behind the trees, they'll just uproot them again. How the heck can they see us from below the ground and how do you manage to do the same?"

Quylla was racking her brain to find a solution to their predicament, but there wasn't much they could do while the enemy remained hidden. She used an earth spell, opening a hole in the ground and partially revealing one of the Clackers.

"On my mark attack my position with everything you have." Lith yelled jumping down the tree, near the now visible Soldier. His companions immediately understood his intentions and would have liked to curse at his madness or at least try to stop him.

However, their situation was desperate enough to force them to save their breath for chanting their spells.



"Mark!" Lith used Switch as soon as he touched the ground and was replaced by a stupefied Clacker.

The Soldier was still trying to make heads or tails of its situation when two lightning bolts struck it. Thanks to his natural affinity with earth magic, the creature had instinctively protected itself by using fusion magic, so it wasn't fatally wounded.

Yet the shock had been strong enough to debilitate it, leaving the Soldier paralyzed. Phloria and Friya exploited the opening to jump on its back swords first, piercing the Clacker's head and body with their blades until the hilts bounced on its keratinous exoskeleton.

The Soldier fell on its side, its long legs scratched the air in agony until the creature stilled.

Meanwhile underground, Lith could see the nearest Soldier's eyes glow in the dark, all eight of them.

'It's channeling earth magic, so it must have achieved some kind of Earth Vision. Maybe they can track their prey by following the vibrations produced when they move along the ground.' Solus pondered.

'I don't know and don't care!' Lith replied. He could finally go all out, making Solus turn into her glove form. Her stone claws boosted by fusion magic allowed him to easily pierce through the Soldiers' magically hardened bodies.

The Clacker barely had the time to notice its companion's disappearance when it spotted a small figure bolting at it in the darkness. His eyes were glowing with the yellow energy characteristic of air magic, all seven of them.

Lith's head had become a black slate with seven eyes burning with rage and mana. Two new pairs of eyes had appeared, one above and the other below where humans' eyes were supposed to be.

The seventh was a vertical slit opened in the middle of his forehead.

The Clacker was forced to change the target of its spell. It had been conjuring a stone pillar to uproot the tree its prey was hiding behind, but now he used it to try and stop its attacker. Lith sneered in the dark. He could see the spell's mana flow and only needed a side step to avoid it.

The stone pillar crashed into the ceiling of the cave, filling the air with dust.

The Clacker was shocked, but it kept the presence of mind to avoid casting another spell, Lith was already too close. It spat acid in front of itself instead. The enemy was too close to dodge it, so the Soldier charged forward infusing itself with earth magic to exploit the opening that was about to be created.

However, Lith had seen that trick countless times and was ready for it. He froze the acid while it was still in mid air, making it harmless before slapping it aside. Lith shoved his right hand into the Clacker's still opened maw, releasing a fireball.

The explosion emitted only a muffled sound. The Soldier's exoskeleton buffed by earth magic was strong enough to withstand the hit. Alas, its internal organs were not.

The creature collapsed without making a sound, leaving the last two Soldiers standing almost scared witless. One decided to run away to alert the rest of the Brood of the impending menace, while the other stood its ground, to buy as much time as it could against the incoming monstrosity.

It decided to make use of the confined space combined with its superior physical prowess to charge at the enemy with its own body hardened to the extreme, giving him no space to dodge.

Lith did the same, leaving spells aside and willing to test his body against a magical beast. The two clashed at full speed, Lith's arms against the Soldier's frontal legs. The spider was bigger and heavier, but Lith was empowered by more than one element.

The Clacker found itself sliding backward, using the remaining six legs to hold on the ground to avoid tumbling while the frontal ones cracked. Its exoskeleton shattered in multiple points.

Lith was forced to stop and his arms cracked too, but they started to heal the same moment they were damaged. He gritted his teeth and ignored the pain, charging again with renewed fury.

Lith grabbed the injured frontal legs, ripping them off and driving the creature insane with pain. Its head was now exposed, so the Clacker used earth magic to conjure tendrils of earth to protect itself.

Before they were fully formed, Lith had already grabbed the Soldier's head with both hands, flooding it with darkness magic that weakened it until it popped like a balloon. Lith threw the carcass aside, chasing after the last enemy.

Once outside, he saw that the Soldier hadn't gone far. Even if they were running on fumes, his companions knew that if the magical beast managed to escape it was likely to come back with reinforcements.

They had surrounded the Clacker and were slowly wearing it down with their teamwork. None of their attacks were strong enough to kill it, but they prevented it from escaping or focusing on a single target.

Whenever the Soldier attempted to attack, those at its back and sides would strike it with spells or swords, interrupting its spellcasting or making it stumble. The creature was already mad with fury. Its retreat was cut off and all of its attacks were mercilessly foiled one after the other.

When the Clacker perceived Lith closing in via Earth Vision, desperation forced its hand. The Soldier infused itself with earth magic to the brim and charged forward disregarding its safety.

Phloria chopped off one of its legs, Friya opened a gaping wound on its back, while Yurial released all the spells left in his rings blowing away two of its legs and making the Clacker lose momentum.

Only thanks to the combined assault did Quylla manage to avoid being pierced through her heart and instead took a front leg through her shoulder. The Clacker was mortally wounded, but it refused to surrender.

It threw away Quylla's body and tried to recover its balance to continue escaping. A bestial roar resounded, shaking the forest.

"Not another one!" Phloria cursed. "Is our bad luck never going to end?"

She turned towards the source of the sound, discovering that there was no new enemy incoming, only a blur that she managed to identify as Lith thanks to her training.

The sight of blood, seeing one of his companions apparently mortally injured had brought him back to the night Protector had died. The sun was still high, so the shadows surrounding his body were reduced to a thin fog.

Lith was surrounded by a red glow, like there was a fire inside him ready to set everything ablaze. Despite his killing intent wasn't aimed at his companions, it was strong enough to make them feel a cold shiver running down their spines.

Yurial and Friya ignored the feeling, rushing to Quylla's side. The former checked she wasn't poisoned while the latter treated the wound.

Phloria realized that despite having fought side by side several times, this was her first time witnessing a truly enraged Lith. During the second exam or the ambush, he had always remained calm and collected.

Between the fog, the red glow and his eyes brimming with unknown power, Lith looked scarier than anything she had ever fought.

## Chapter 235 You Again?

The Soldier could feel the shadow of death from the moment most of its body had been cut apart or blown away. When Lith reached its back, grabbing it by its legs, the last Clacker could only hope that its dying screech would manage to reach its brood.

Lith used the Float spell to make his enemy weightless before throwing it up in the air and immediately conjuring another spell. Away from its natural elements, water and earth, the Clacker was a sitting duck.

Six fireballs appeared at the same time around the Soldier, one above, one below and the others in a square shape. It was Lith's tier four personal spell, Burning Prison. The fireballs exploded simultaneously, each reinforcing the effect of the others

Their combined shockwaves ripped the Clacker to shreds while the extreme heat turned it into ashes.

After making sure there were no more threats lurking around them, Lith could allow himself to use Life Vision on Quylla. The wound was already closed. She was a bit pale because of exhaustion, but aside from that, she seemed fine.

Professor Farg had witnessed the whole fight. Thanks to the artifact Tyris had given to her, she had been able to follow the one that took place above and the one below at the same time.

'Now I understand why Lady Tyris sent me here. Whatever that thing is, it's no kid. I've seen my share of weird stuff, but nothing like that. His shapeshifting abilities make no sense. His strength didn't improve at all.' She thought.

'Damn! I can use Invigoration to restore myself, but if I do that, I could blow my cover. Yet if I don't and another enemy appears, I'm as good as dead. I'll choose the lesser evil.'

Lith was panting and wheezing like everyone else, but soon his breathing became steady. To avoid making things too weird, he recovered only about half his strength. Enough to defend in case something happened and at the same time leaving himself tired enough to not arouse too much suspicion.

Maybe.

Then, he checked Quylla's condition with Invigoration before doing the same with everyone else. Lith had seen enough poisons, toxins, and undead to last three lifetimes.

'Better safe than sorry.' He thought.

Aside from small injuries and fatigue, his companions were as healthy as horses.

"Okay, this road trip ends now." Lith said.

"Take Quylla and go back to the academy. I'll go on alone, it's much safer that way."

"Are you insane?" Phloria was still mulling over what she had just seen, refusing to believe her own eyes. Yet when she heard Lith's words all her worries disappeared, replaced by outrage.

"First of all, we are all exhausted. There are too many dangers lurking in this forest aside from those f\*cking Clackers. If they attack us on our way back, we are basically a free meal."

"Use the academy's emergency button. They'll send someone here in a half an hour tops." Lith suggested.

"Second, and I speak for myself, I'm not letting you walk into this nightmare alone again!" She ignored his words, as she vented her frustration.

"Why are you acting like that? Have you already forgotten your father's words? You are no god! You could die out here." Lith's reckless indifference for his own life made Phloria seethe with anger, to the point she wanted to strangle him on the spot.

Therefore, she followed Raaz's lead and flicked her middle finger against his forehead.

"Consider yourself slapped, young man."

Lith didn't find it funny at all.

'I'm not a god indeed, but compared to you I might as well be. If only I could trust them enough to tell them the whole truth...' Lith gritted his teeth to hold his tongue.

'That's just mean!' Solus scolded him. 'Being weaker than you is not a sin. Phloria simply worries about you. Do you remember your big lesson? Do not ask others to do what you wouldn't?'

"You don't understand, it's too dangerous!" Lith tried to make her listen to reason.

"That's my line, you idiot!"

"Oh, my. You humans sure are funny. Screaming like you are the only ones in the world."

The unknown voice made Phloria turn around in a split second, her estoc ready in her hand. Lith recognized the intruder and weaved a couple of spells, just to be safe. It was the dryad he had rescued from a Puppeteer Abomination months before, Lyta.

Yet he had no idea of what a Puppeteer was or how she was called.

"Yet I can understand why this ugly female is so worked up." She looked at Lith, licking her scarlet lips seductively.

"I usually don't like humans, especially after one really bad experience, but power is the most powerful aphrodisiac known to both women and dryads alike. Do you want to have some fun, handsome?"

Phloria hated the dryad for her cruel words and shameful act. Yet she had to admit she was the most gorgeous woman she had ever seen. Lyta had big red eyes that sparkled under the sunlight like rubies.

Her visage was simply stunning, from her delicate features to her full lips.

She had feet length red hair, the same color of maple leaves during autumn. Everything about her exuded a wild and unrestrained allure that made even Phloria ponder whether to kick her a\*s or ask her out.

The dryad wore what on Earth would have been considered a skin tight cocktail dress made of vines and leaves. It exposed her shoulders, her arms, and her long legs up to the thigh.

The only thing that betrayed her non-human nature was the light green skin.

"You again?" Was Lith's only reply. After their last encounter, he had read all he could find about dryads. They were a shady bunch that sometimes would mate with humans simply to have some fun.

Most of the times they would just rob them blind. Dryads loved precious things, especially jewels.

"So she's the dryad you saved?" Much to everyone surprise, Yurial was looking at her with indifference. Yurial himself was amazed. It was the first time he managed to be aloof in front of such a beauty.

'Maybe it's because she is green, or maybe I'm finally starting to think with the right head.' He thought.

Lyta was deeply offended by their reaction. It was only the second time in her life that humans didn't throw themselves at her feet while swearing their eternal love for her. Suddenly, Yurial's word rung some bells.

"He saved me?" The dryad stopped looking at Lith's mana flow, focusing on his eyes and smell instead. Lith had grown more than five centimeters since their last encounter and his smell had changed after his breakthrough in Kalla's cave.

Yet Lyta couldn't forget that cold gaze devoid of mercy, nor the inhuman smell he exuded.

"You!" She suddenly lost all her self confidence. She ran back to the nearest tree, ready to flee in case something went wrong.

"Yeah, me. Since you have already bothered us, the least you could do is answer a few questions. Why are there Clackers here? This isn't their turf."

The dryad didn't like being ignored. An ugly short lived human being indifferent to her beauty was unacceptable. She would have never wasted her time if the two males were alone. They seemed to have a few loose screws. The reason why she chose to remain was that the females were just perfect.

They were staring at her with the perfect mix of envy, self pity, and desire that made Lyta feel alive.

"The Brood Mother's turf goes as far as she can get. She's exploiting the academy's and the forest's current weakened state to lay as many eggs as she can. Also, the Lord of the forest is absent for a while. It's the perfect opportunity for her."

She laid on a tree branch high enough to give her room for escape if the battle crazed maniac attempted something funny, but low enough to let the girls 'enjoy' her full figure. Lyta used a soft, languid tone like she was having pillow talk with her lover.

"We are going to the mining town. Is it safe there?" Lith had just noticed that Phloria was staring at them. She hated the dryad's guts for looking at him like a slab of meat, seductively playing with her dress and hair.

Yet the coldness in Lith's tone warmed her heart.

"Gods, no. It's full of corpses there, I wouldn't be surprised if she has turned it into her new nest. Even if I doubt it with all the protections and the alarms set in that place, I doubt it. Humans would run to protect their precious mine and slaughter her colony."

"What does she need the corpses for?" Lith was shocked by her words. He had an idea about what was happening, but he had to be sure.

"How do you think she managed to expand her territory so much? With all those corpses of powerful beasts and humans, the Brood Mother has greatly improved the quality of her underlings.

"That's the reason why they wanted to capture you five alive so badly. Each of you can become the breeding ground for a small legion of Soldiers. Corpses are second rate hosts, but they still provide a lot of nutrients. Especially those belonging to powerful beings like Kalla or M'Rook."

"When did Kalla die?" Lith had met her only twice, yet he cared for her. Not to mention he had to keep his promise to her too.

"A long time ago." Lyta laughed cruelly, losing most of her glamour.

"Kalla died the day she became a Wraith. Undead should stay away from the living."

"That's not what I meant! What happened to her? What about Protector's corpse?"

"Beats me." She shrugged, going higher on the tree, just to be safe.

"I've never been there and I don't plan to. I don't get involved in humans' squabbles. As long the Clackers stay out of my turf, it's none of my business. Thanks for getting rid of them for me. I'd say we are even now."

Lyta had enough of his rude behavior. She disappeared in the tree bark while Lith could only watch her dart away through the forest with Life Vision.

"Did you hear her? You guys have to go back." Lith now felt even more motivated to continue his mission. He had to find out what had happened to Kalla and prevent the Clackers from defiling Protector's corpse.

"We all have to go back! The Headmaster and the Professors can take care of the Clackers by themselves." Phloria said.

"She is right. This isn't a place for students anymore. We have to retreat to fight another day." Yurial patted his shoulder. He knew how deep the scar in Lith's heart was and how the decision he had to make would only worsen it.

"Heck, no!" Lith angrily pushed Yurial's hand away.

"I don't plan to fight, only to recover my friend's body. I can make it as long as I avoid direct confrontation. I don't have the luxury of time. It could already be too late. If you were Linjos, what priority would you give to retrieving a corpse?"

Would you really risk the members of the staff you have left just to humor a grieving student?"

No one could deny those words. An awkward silence fell between them.

"Let's calm down and rest first." Yurial said.

"We can't remain here, it's not safe. There could be more Clackers around."

The group used darkness magic to destroy the corpses and erase all traces of their passage. They moved in a random direction, picking the first clearing they found to rest.

Yurial used what mana he had left to cast the best defensive arrays in his arsenal before entering the dimensional tent Phloria had arranged for them. On the outside, it closely resembled a pup tent.

On the inside, it looked like a three star hotel room. There was a fully furnished bedroom with three king sized beds, a liquor cabinet, and a single door leading to a bathroom.

It had no running water since any mage could easily conjure as much as they wanted, but there were a pot and a bathtub. Lith went straight for the liquor cabinet, removing stoppers until he found a familiar smell.

"Do you drink?" Yurial was surprised.

"Usually no." Lith poured himself a glass of something he hoped would taste like whiskey.

"Right now I really need one though. Do you want to join me?"

His father had never allowed him to drink alcohol. The ban had become especially severe ever since he had developed his nerve problems. So it was natural for Yurial to accept.

"Take small sips and watch out for the burn." Lith warned him after handing Yurial his glass. Back on Earth, Lith would have finished his drink in two gulps. Now, instead, he was forced to follow his own advice.

The taste was terrible but at least it was alcohol. Lith embraced the familiar warm sensation spreading from his stomach. It was only after the second glass that they talked.

"Are you sure you want to do it?" Yurial asked.

"I mean, risking your life for Protector's dead body is beyond stupid. No offense."

"None taken." Lith replied emptying his glass.

"He died to save us all, the only way we have to honor his sacrifice is to live our lives to the fullest, don't you think?" Yurial was surprised by Lith's meek attitude and by how at peace he was feeling after drinking the amber colored liquid.

"I agree with you. That's why I'm going to do it."

Chapter 236 Gatekeeper

Lith took the bottle away and locked the cabinet. He didn't want to risk for Yurial to go from one addiction to another.

"At this point, you should have realized the meaning of what I told you after the second exam. Life is like a crucible. It pushes us until we break apart and then it melts the pieces to forge something new.

"The mold is always the same, but the person that comes out it's not. Our beliefs and our convictions are put to the test every day. Some we keep, others we discard. When it happens, a part of us dies, never to return.

"You are not the same person you were when the academy started, just like you are not even the same person you were after passing the second exam. It's the same for everyone.

"My only choice is to embrace the change or keep mourning my past self as much as I mourn Protector. I need my closure. If I back away without even trying, I will regret it my whole life and sooner or later that weight is going to kill me."

"I understand." Yurial replied.

"I'm the same. I know that things can't go back to the way they were, but I can't accept my current situation either. Unlike you, I have yet to find an answer. I won't try to stop you anymore. Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"Actually, there are two things you can do. The first is to stay the heck away from the liquor cabinet, the second is to not tell the girls that I'm gone." Lith was back to his peak condition and had made up his mind.

'I can't risk their lives for something like this. I don't want to lose anyone else.' He thought.

Lith was about to leave when Yurial stopped him by standing in front of the door.

"I know that you could knock me down with a single punch, just like I know that you believe you are doing the right thing, but you are not. This isn't protecting us. This is casting us aside because you think of us as a weakness.

"I'm aware our friendship isn't that deep, we started talking for real only recently, but your relationship with Phloria should matter something to you. If you run away behind her back, you'll betray her trust. At least have the guts to tell her the truth."

Lith sighed, Yurial was right.

"Man, bad habits die hard. I was about to make the same mistake I always do. Treating people like they are too weak or stupid for their will to matter. Please, come with me outside. Otherwise Phloria will kill me."

Lith let Yurial out of the dimensional tent first. As he expected, Phloria was waiting for him outside. When she saw the door opening, she was about to give Lith a piece of her mind. Yet Yurial came out of it instead, leaving her surprised and relieved at the same time.

"You know me well, don't you?" Lith said.



"Let me guess. You were about to sneak out and leave us in the dark. Just like you did to your family for all those years." Phloria's calm didn't last long. Not when she saw the determined look on his face.

"Yes, I was. Yurial already talked me out of it. There is no need to scold me again."

"Are you saying you are going back to the academy with us?" Phloria couldn't believe her ears.

"No. I'm sending you guys back, but only after explaining the situation to you. Please, come inside. Yurial, please, leave us alone."

Back into the boys' tent, Lith cast the Hush spell. He had no idea how the magic distorting the tent's space worked. Lith wanted to be sure what he was about to say would remain between the two of them.

"Spit it out, let me hear your excuse." Phloria refused to sit, leaning against the wall with her arms folded.

Lith saw her die many times in a short period of time. Her face melted after being splashed by Clacker's poison, her head was bitten off by something, and lastly, her chest was pierced in multiple points while blood drenched her clothes.

All those visions didn't make him waver, they only strengthened his conviction.

"No excuses, only the truth. You have heard the dryad. The mining town has probably been taken over by the Clackers. Even remaining here it's too dangerous for you guys. Use the emergency device and go back to the academy. You'll be safe there."

"Why should it be any different for you? Why don't you come back with us? There's no reason to risk your life for a corpse. If the dryad is right, the Clackers have probably feasted on it already."

Lith felt his rage seethe at the thought, but he managed to suppress it.

"It's different because I am different from you guys. You have seen me in action. I am faster and stronger than any of you. While I was underground, I killed two of those giant Clackers, while you only took care of the one I served you on a silver platter."

"Since when is this a contest?" Phloria retorted. She was determined to not back down.

"It's not. I'm only saying that it's much easier for me to go in and out of the mining town alone. I promise you I'm not going to risk my life meaninglessly. If the place is infested with Clackers and the situation turns out to be too dangerous, I'll run away.

"I have to at least try. I need to see Protector one last time, even if it's just an empty grave or an egg infested corpse. He is... was my best friend, my mentor, my partner. When he died, I was so conceited and self absorbed I never got to tell him goodbye. I owe him that much."

Phloria saw Lith blink too often for it to be normal. She knew he had still a hard time fighting off Death Vision and how painful it was for him seeing his loved ones dying again and again.

'I don't want him to go, I want him to be safe. Yet maybe going there can help Lith overcoming his trauma. I can't live with the thought of being even partially responsible for his continuous suffering. I hope that Raaz is right and letting him go is the right thing to do.'

"Fine, but I can't let you leave just like this." She took out a bastard sword from her dimensional amulet.

It resembled a longsword with a blade 110 centimeters (3,6 feet) long, but the hilt was longer, allowing the wielder to use it with one hand or both according to the circumstances.

It had four blue magical crystals embedded, one on each side of the blade and the other two on each side of the hilt.

"This was supposed to be your birthday present. I asked my father to forge something for you as a thank you gift for saving my life time and time again. You should have seen his face back then." She chuckled.

"He reacted like I was asking him to cut his own right hand. After I told him all that happened during Balkor's attack and when my mom and sisters backed me, he gave in.

"I explained to him that you are not very skilled yet incredibly strong, so he made this sword. It's the first and for now the only piece of his Gatekeeper series of blades.

"Not only it can shrink, just like mine, allowing the wielder to fight in enclosed spaces, but it also can enhance the strength of all elements channeled into the sword. Each element produces a different effect." She handed it to Lith, who immediately imprinted it with his mana while performing a few practice swings.

'Does it mean this weapon has fusion magic too?' Lith was amazed by how light the sword was. It was the first time for him to see a weapon made by Orion with a double edge instead of a single one.

"Since you refuse to listen to reason, I'll borrow it to you. You have to give it back, though. It's not yours until your thirteenth birthday, am I clear?"

Lith nodded, putting the sword away.

"Look at the bright side." He smiled softly, caressing her cheek.

"I'll return to the academy in less than an hour. After that, since we are not going to stay in this stinking forest one minute longer, I can take you out to a proper date."

Lith flew out of the door and into the sky, without waiting for her reply. Once he was high enough, he didn't need the map to find the way. Yet he didn't rush forward. He took his time to conjure and manipulate a low altitude cloud to hide his approach.

'This Brood Mother is likely to be an Awakened one. Otherwise it shouldn't be able to order around Clackers capable of using magic. If she keeps an eye at the sky with Life Vision or something similar, my disguise is useless. Luckily, there's more than one way to kill a spider.' Lith thought.

He hoped that no Clacker would mind a small cloud two kilometers high in the sky that moved along the wind.

When he was right above the mining town, he looked below with Life Vision. Lith discovered that all the houses had lost their enchantments, whatever the Headmaster had done to them, was only temporary.

There were multiple life forms, but judging from their numbers and strength there was nothing that could worry him much. He kept moving the cloud until he arrived at a point where, if he moved fast enough, he could descend to the ground without being noticed.

Lith plunged down like a meteor, using the slipstream effect to accelerate his movements and a thin layer of darkness magic to hide his presence. Before leaving the academy, he had asked Linjos what had happened to the corpses of the fallen beasts.

Contrary to his expectations, instead of punishing or reprimanding him for his behavior while they were at Protector's deathbed, the Headmaster simply informed him that Scarlett had buried them in a mass grave near the forest.

Linjos never intended to punish Lith for his words. He too had lost many friends that day, so he could understand Lith's feelings. Also, when Linjos saw his condition after the failed attempt to save Protector's life, he considered the case closed.

In Linjos's eyes, losing a dear friend and almost his own life on the same day was the worse punishment someone could ever deserve.

Lith stopped his fall just a few meters from the ground. Then, he moved while floating mid air, to not make any noise. Thanks to air and darkness magic, he was like a ghost, moving unnoticed behind the enemy lines.

He also made sure to always keep a house between himself and the nearest Clacker.

'After the last time, I learned my lesson. These creatures do not rely much on their eyes as much as on their bristles. Air magic cannot hide my movements. I can only stay as far as possible from them and hope it's enough.'

Thanks to Life Vision, he could soon make sure that only Hatchling Clackers were inside the mining town. He found no sign of the presence of Soldiers or of the Brood Mother.

The closer he got to the mass grave, the greater the number of Clackers he met, until he reached a point where moving forward while remaining undetected became impossible.

Lith took out the bastard sword, infusing it with darkness magic. Instead of butchering his way to the grave, he proceeded slowly, ambushing the nearest Clacker and hiding its corpse in the pocket dimension to not leave traces behind.

Lith repeated the process until he had a clear path ahead. Before moving forward, he weaved several spells, preparing for the worse. Soon he was close enough to notice that the mass grave had been unearthed and enlarged.

While looking at it with Life Vision, it appeared like a huge pool of life forces, too close and numerous to distinguish one from the other.

'If the dryad is right and the Brood Mother turned the corpses into incubators, it's unlikely she has left such a precious asset unprotected.' Lith sprinted the last hundred meters, flying to the destination.

He had no idea how sensitive Clackers' perception was, but he was pretty sure they would notice him as soon as he got too close. He was right.

Lith was nearing the edge of the grave when he saw the front legs of two Soldier Clackers climbing out of the pit to check on the approaching anomaly they perceived.

Lith was too fast for them. He managed to close in before their heads emerged completely and attacked them while they were still defenseless. Lith cut them down with a single slash each, jumping over the edge and taking by surprise the two remaining Soldiers.

The first one died before realizing what had happened. Lith cleaved its head while unleashing several ice spears against the last enemy. Despite the shock, the Soldier managed to deflect most of the spears with true magic.

The Clacker was pierced multiple times, losing half of its legs in the process, but before the intruder could strike him down, it managed to sound the alarm.

By disregarding its own safety, the creature used the last strand of mana it had to strike the ground in a precise sequence, to alert his goddess of the impending threat to the colony.

### Chapter 237 Outmatched

Lith was no Clacker, but his mana perception was high enough to allow him to perceive the earth magic traveling under his feet.

'Damn, I'd better be quick. I am sure that Clacker didn't waste its last moments of life to improvise dance moves. It has called for reinforcements.' Lith thought.

The mass grave had been enlarged so that the various carcasses could be separated based on their quality. In the leftmost corner of the pit, there was a giant cocoon made out of webs and covered in eggs.

Solus's mana sense could see that the eggs yielded an orange core, while the hatchlings that were taking cover inside the cocoon had already reached a yellow core. Tufts of flaming red hair were scattered around the floor.

Lith gritted his teeth, realizing that his worst fears had come true. Protector's body was lost.

'Damn Clackers! I can't resurrect the dead, but that doesn't mean I'm willing to let them go away with it.' Lith jumped out of the pit, releasing a stream of fire on the cocoons until the incubator was turned into a funeral pyre.

The dying screeches of the hatchlings filled him with joy, so he kept pouring fire while watching the eggs boil from within until the pressure made them burst. Hatchling Clackers tried to stop him. Now that he was alone, Lith only needed a glance to unleash several wind blades and turn them into mincemeat.

The Hatchlings were all the size of a basketball, like those he had faced during the mock exam. They were too small and afraid of the fire to be a threat. The only reason why they were attacking him was that they didn't dare to disobey the Brood Mother.

'Lith, on your right!' Solus warned him. Lith turned just in time to see a huge stone disc crash land right beside the pit, from which descended a human like female figure with razor sharp claws aiming for his head.

The creature was incredibly fast since it could exploit the Clackers' natural speed and boost it with air fusion magic.

"How dare you harm my babies?" She hissed with a voice full of hatred.

The Brood Mother current form resembled a woman of breath-taking beauty with long black hair that reached the ground. She wore a black evening dress similar to those Lith had seen the noble dames wear during social events.

Aside from the claws, many things revealed her inhuman nature. Four spider legs came out of her back and she had eight eyes instead of two. Two on the forehead, two on her cheeks and the last two beside her chin.

Thanks to Solus's warning, Lith managed to dodge just in the nick of time. He had been checking the surroundings with Life Vision, but the rocket like disc had been an unpleasant surprise.

"My army!" She cried in outrage, watching all her careful plans to take over the forest turn into ashes.

Lith took a few steps back, watching four gargantuan Clackers approach from the site of the crash. Each one of them was three meters (9'10") tall, with legs as thick as young trees.

'Beware, those four all have a deep cyan core.' Solus warned him.

'It seems this Brood Mother has really found a way to use corpses and living prey to hasten her offspring growth. If it keeps like this, all the members of her personal guard could evolve within a few months!'

Lith didn't care much about the future, he was concerned enough about the present.

He had never expected to face an evolved monster capable of using all elements, let alone that it would have so many powerful bodyguards.

According to the dryad's words, the Brood Mother was supposed to have only recently evolved. He had assumed she would have at her disposal a very limited amount of skills.

Otherwise, Lith would have never wasted so much time burning the eggs. Yet she was already able to shapeshift and nurture very powerful warriors.

It was a fight where he had nothing to gain and very much to lose.

'How strong is she, Solus?'

'More than you. Her core is light cyan and very close to become deep blue. There is a piece of good news, though. Now that I look better at them, despite their cores being already this powerful, they have only a limited amount of mana.

'I think their evolution was too fast, their bodies have yet to develop enough to employ so much power. They will probably break if you push them strong enough.'

The Brood Mother's body shapeshifted. The dress disappeared under her skin. Her lower body turned into the abdomen of a giant spider with eight long legs. The front legs were different from the others, shining under the sunlight like they were made out of obsidian.

It was like someone had attached a human to the spider body, starting from the thighs. Her upper body still looked the same, but her skin had turned from pink to a chitinous grey and her hands had unnaturally long fingers ending in razor-sharp claws.

"You owe me, human!" Her rage subsided when she looked at Lith with Life Vision.

"Your body will do just fine! A living host is much better than maggots infested corpses. Surrender and I promise you won't suffer. Much."

Despite her threats, the Brood Mother was reluctant to attack first. She could tell that the intruder was quite strong and she needed him alive to recover from the massive loss of the incubator chamber.

She had two of her Praetorians position behind her back and the other two on her sides.

"I'm sorry, but I already have a girlfriend." Lith sneered.

"You defiled my friend's body and dare to ask for compensation? Here is my offer. Let me go and I will not kill you." His tone was stone cold. He wanted nothing more than kill her in the slowest, more gruesome way possible, but he was outnumbered and outmatched.

Also, charging blindly was something the old Lith would have done, taking unnecessary risks just to quench his rage.

'Wrath without a purpose is just acting without thinking of the consequences. I can leave the Scorpicores to deal with these vermin, there's no need to dirty my hands.' He tried to convince himself.

The Brood Mother reacted by spreading her fingers and releasing a stream of lightning toward Lith, who blinked out of the harm's way opening the exit point on her right side. Yet the Brood Mother was well aware of that.

She had never stopped using Life Vision, even though it consumed a lot of mana. She knew that if her opponent was capable of using dimensional magic, he could have appeared behind her back and kill her in one fell swoop.

That was the reason why she had made her Praetorians remain close to her, to block his line of sight. Her front legs not only were harder than steel, but they were also razor sharp, capable to pierce through stone.

She lunged them towards the Blink exit she had seen appearing only to have them hit thin air. Lith had yet to learn true dimensional magic, but he had taken to heart Kalla's words. He knew how dangerous it was to Blink in front of someone capable of using Life Vision.

When the Talons had ambushed him on his way to Kandria, he had managed to beat them because they were too reliant on the spell. Lith had learned from their mistake, so he had used Switch alongside Blink.

The gate on her right was just a really mana expensive feint. His real target was one of the Praetorians on her back. With their position swapped Lith now had almost a clear strike.

Almost.

The Praetorian beside him moved as fast as it could to intercept the enemy lunge aimed at its goddess' heart. Lith was holding the sword with both hands, channelling fire magic through the hilt.

The enchantment Orion had infused the sword with amplified the strength of the spell, turning the yellow flames into an emerald storm that engulfed Lith's whole body, turning him into a human comet.

Praetorians were bigger and stronger than Soldier Clackers, but their magic abilities were still limited to the water and earth elements. It unleashed the defensive spells it had prepared, raising a wall of frozen stone in front of Lith to block his charge.

Lith realized that his original plan had been foiled. Crashing head on might allow him to destroy the makeshift barrier, but he would be blind against what was waiting for him behind it. So he changed his target.

Lith ran horizontally along the wall at high speed, his sword aimed at the defenceless Praetorian. The creature raised its front leg like a shield, trying to infuse itself with earth magic. Lith was too close and too fast, when the first strands of magic started to harden the exoskeleton, it was already dead.

The Praetorian was cleaved in half, both parts of its body were being devoured by emerald flames scorching the earth below.

"No!" The Brood Mother screeched. Not only was the human stronger than she had predicted, but also losing a Praetorian was a huge blow to her army, second only to losing the incubator.

Even using the corpses of powerful beasts or magicians, there was only a small chance for a Praetorian to be born instead of a simple Soldier. She emitted a gargling sound, calling all her minions to help in battle.

Lith was amazed by how even a sword Forgemasterd with fake magic could be so powerful, yet he had no time to waste. He was still one against three and according to Solus, Hatchling Clackers were incoming from all directions.

'Thanks to Invigoration I was back at my peak condition when the fight started and aside from Switch I have yet to use a strong spell. If I let them combine their attacks, I'm done for.' Lith thought.

The Mother and here Praetorians stepped back to safety. Once the caster died, the frozen wall crumbled leaving a hole in their formation.

"Curse you, human! I don't care anymore of taking you alive. I'll make sure you suffer like the inferior being you are!"

If it wasn't for Lith's "No speeches while fighting" policy, he would have liked to tell her that she had just taken the words out of his mouth. Lith Blinked again instead of bantering, sending the Brood Mother into a panic.

"He's behind us!" She yelled noticing no exit point had opened in front or above them. The four turned around at unison, unleashing several spells that turned the ground in front of them into what looked like an earthquake aftermath.

Yet aside from some Hatchlings that had managed to arrive faster than his brethren, the natural forces they unleashed only hit the air. Lith had actually Blinked into the pit. The exit point had escaped her detection thanks to the magical flames that were still burning the cocoons with enough strength to overwhelm the dimensional magic signature.

Being generated from Lith's own mana, those flames were harmless to him.

'She must be scared witless to keep using Life Vision like that.' Solus pointed out.

'If you manage to keep her on her toes and prevent her from using Invigoration, she won't last long.'

'Yeah, the problem is that the same goes for me. I can't Blink around too much without using Invigoration. Time to use my ace in the hole.' Lith thought. He hadn't created the small cloud just to use it as a cover.

It was also his contingency plan in case something went horribly wrong.

Before descending to the ground, he had separated with air magic the positive and the negative charges, turning it into a thundercloud. While his enemies were still attacking the ground, he used air magic on them.

He charged them positively and turned them into living lightning rods.

Real thunderbolts were much stronger than their magical counterparts, but it also made them much more dangerous. Lith wasn't immune to their fury, so he kept channelling his spell from his hiding spot.

Suddenly, the Brood Mother noticed that her and her Praetorians were glowing like a Christmas tree, yet she couldn't feel any negative effect.

"What treachery is this?" She said looking at her palms trying to understand what was happening. The answer came in the form of a rumbling sound from above.

The evolved Clackers looked up in the sky with a confused look, while their Queen went into a panic again.

"No, no, no!" She screamed trying to think of a solution.

"Infuse yourselves with earth magic and shield us with rocks! Quick, or we are all dead."

Lith inwardly cursed at his bad luck. It was the first time he had attempted that trick, so he had no idea it would be that slow. He started weaving several earth spells, while helplessly watching his enemies build a makeshift fortress.

When the first lightning bolt came down, the Clackers' protection held it at bay. The rock barrier had taken the brunt of the attack and most of the electricity that managed to reach them had been nullified by their earth fusion.

The flash had blinded them, the thunder almost deafened them and the resulting shockwave had killed many Hatchlings that were still trying to reach their queen to protect her. Yet the Brood Mother rejoiced.

"Yes! We will survive. Not even lightning can beat our combined spells!"

'What do you think I was waiting for?' Lith inwardly replied.

When the following thunderbolts came, he unleashed all of his spells at once, turning the fortress they had spent so much mana to build in a pile of dust.

Chapter 238 Outmatched 2



While Thunderbolts quickly rained down from the sky one after the other, a spellcasting speed race for survival was taking place on the ground. The evolved Clackers were trying to keep their defenses in place, while Lith was putting just as much effort to make them crumble.

Despite Lith being alone, the fight was on equal footing. Lightning wasn't the only threat, there was also the shockwaves it produced. The Praetorians were now blind, deaf, and badly injured.

Unlike their queen, they were unable to use light magic to heal themselves. Also, by following their instinct, they shielded her to the best of their abilities. Lith exploited the situation, focusing on one of them at the time, leaving a different enemy unprotected each time a bolt of lightning struck.

The cloud Lith had conjured was small, it managed to produce only a dozen lightning bolts before returning to normal. Yet its effects were devastating. One of the Praetorians was dead, another was in agony, and the last one was severely injured.

Exploiting their blind loyalty, Lith had also exterminated the Hatchling Clackers that answered their queen's call by throwing them in the eye of the storm. Once the lightning bolts stopped, Lith jumped out of the pit, rushing at full speed toward his enemies.

His body was infused with air magic, making him appear like a blur. The magic crystals embedded into the bastard sword harnessed part of the spell, making a small vortex cracking with lightning envelope the blade.

The Brood Mother was triggered by the noise, summoning an earth shield all around her. The Clackers' sensory organs were still muddled by the thunderstorm, their reaction was disorganized.

When the last Praetorian still standing understood what was happening, Lith had already chopped off the head of his agonizing teammate, to prevent the Brood Mother from rejuvenating it.

The Praetorian screeched for help, fighting with all the strength it could muster. All the rocks and debris that had been created by keeping the thunderstorm at bay, flew against Lith following his every movement.

Lith was starting to run out of steam. His muscles were sore from the continuous bursts and his mind was losing focus. Using so many high level spells at the same time had taken quite a toll on him.

To make things worse, the closer he got to the Praetorian, the more accurate its control over the debris became, making it impossible for Lith to dodge all the incoming attacks. He could only deflect those aimed at his vitals and tank the others.

He used earth fusion to limit the injuries and light fusion to start regenerating them as soon as they opened.

When Lith was close enough, the Clacker interrupted the spell releasing a second one. Eight giant spider legs made of rock erupted from the ground, attacked him from all directions. Each one ended with a spike and was aimed at his heart to impale him.

'Damn my stupidity! I should have known the previous spell was just a diversion. I've no time to Blink.' Lith infused himself and the sword with air magic, charging against the incoming spike in front of him.

He slashed horizontally, aiming to use the force of the impact to alter his course at the last second and avoid being turned into a shish kebab.

Much to his surprise, the sword didn't bounce off the spike, it cut through the stone like it was paper instead. The Praetorian was suddenly as scared as Lith was jubilant.

'This isn't a sword. This is a masterpiece!' Lith rejoiced from the sudden turn of the events. The Clacker was defenseless. Weaving and controlling his spell with such precision had required all of its focus, leaving it no time for a contingency plan.

With one last burst of speed, Lith arrived in front of the Praetorian, performing a series of quick slashes. The first cut off the front legs that were trying to protect the Praetorian's head. The second and the third split the head in two and removed it from the body respectively.

Lith kept dashing forward, putting some distance between him and the Brood Mother, activating Invigoration as soon as he stopped. It took only a couple of seconds for the Brood Mother to realize there were no more lightning bolts incoming, but when she lowered her barrier everything was already over.

She used Invigoration to heal her many wounds and replenish her mana. Once she spotted him, the Brood Mother was ready to counter any attack the human could be plotting. Yet Lith remained still, his grin grew wider by the second.

"You really are dumb." He laughed at her with a cruel voice.

"Absorbing the world energy is a great idea. Too bad it's a game that two can play and I started before you."

The Brood Mother cursed at her own stupidity, it was her first time facing an Awakened one. Through Life Vision, she checked that Lith had told the truth. He was recovering faster than she was capable of.

The head start he got would allow Lith to attack before she was back at her peak condition.

"Great idea!" He kept mocking her after noticing her glowing eyes. Words didn't waste mana, so they were the only attack he could perform without hindering his recovery.

"I'm sure that wasting mana non stop will not slow you down even more."

The Brood Mother was outraged by Lith's defiant attitude, but she was even more scared of what could happen if she stopped watching his every movement.

Unlike him, she wasn't able to Blink. She also had noticed how the piece of metal in his hands could easily cut apart even her strongest minion. She only needed one strike to cut him down, but Lith was capable of doing the same.

The Brood Mother rushed forward, forcing him to stop using Invigoration too and playing straight into his hand. Life Vision gave her only a vague idea of Lith's core power. After all, he had almost killed her multiple times. The Brood Mother was certain that he had to be at least as strong as her.

Thanks to Solus's mana sense, Lith knew that she was stronger than him even at his peak condition, something that was still lost to him. His body had yet to recover from the attempt to save Protector's life.

Lith had manipulated her fears so that she would start recovering later than him and stop before him, forcing her to fight on equal footing. The Brood Mother was physically superior, but Lith was much more experienced in using all the elements.

Her front legs clashed many times with his sword, keeping it at bay. Their strength, speed, and stamina were on the same level since the Brood Mother was too scared to stop using Life Vision.

Yet Lith was forced to play on the defensive. While his opponent could block with the front legs and attack with her claws, he had only one sword. His daggers had a smaller range than her fingers. Also, he needed both hands to stop her heavy blows.

They were too close to use spells. If one of them stopped even for a second, the other would have the time to strike at least three times. Soon Lith was covered by shallow wounds on the head, shoulders, and arms.

The Brood Mother was starting to get used to his poor swordsmanship, attacking with her claws every time her front legs clashed with the sword. The impact would stun him just for a split second, but it was enough for her.

Lith changed his strategy, infusing the bastard sword with darkness magic instead of air.

The blade turned pitch black and small vortexes appeared on its surface. Lith didn't need to use Life Vision to know that Orion's masterpiece was sapping his enemy's strength by the second.

He only needed to watch at her terrified expression. Every time the dark blade clashed with the Brood Mother's stone like legs, they would crack and a bit of her life force would be transferred to Lith.

The tables were now slowly getting turned. She knew that the longer it lasted, the weaker she would get. She went into a frenzy, attacking faster and faster, hoping he would make a mistake not being able to keep up the pace with her many limbs.

Lith was soon forced to focus only on the defense again, the Brood Mother's attacks were too fast and well coordinated for his skill level. New and deeper cuts appeared on his flesh, but he couldn't stop grinning.

"Not even a monstrosity like you could laugh at his own death!" During the fight, the queen of the Clackers had noticed Lith's unusual smell. It was part human, part beast, part Abomination and completely unnatural.

'I'm laughing at yours!' He inwardly replied before releasing all the nine spells stored inside his rings. Fireballs, lightning bolts, Plague Arrows, and a fully charged Checkmate Spears were fired against her at point blank range while she was lunging her left arm toward Lith's right one.

The thunderbolts stunned her while the darkness missiles drained her life force and the icicles ravaged her body. The explosions from the fireballs pushed her away, but not before her claws severed Lith's dominant arm at the shoulder.

The Brood Mother was severely injured but not dead. Now that Lith had lost the sword she was certain she would get the upper hand as soon as her body started to move again.

Then she saw it. Together with spurts of red blood, black tendrils came out of Lith's severed arm and from his shoulder, pulling it back into place. The flesh merged like the wound had never existed.

Lith was shocked as much as the Brood Mother. He had already seen Balkor's Valors reattach their limbs in a very similar manner. Unlike them, he needed light fusion to close the wound and stop the bleeding.

The arm was in place, but it was useless. The bones, nerves, and blood vessels were still repairing themselves. Lith had no sensibility whatsoever, his arm was no more than dead weight. The Brood Mother didn't know it and hope abandoned her.

It was only then that she realized that her body was already beyond saving. The electricity from the lightning bolts had temporarily stunned her, but not prevented her from moving. Otherwise the previous thunderstorm would have managed to kill her.

The numbing effect had simply prevented her from noticing that several spears of ice had pierced both her human and spider body, puncturing her lungs and several organs. She started coughing blood, while her life was slowly slipping away.

"Please, have mercy." She pleaded him, shedding tears from all her eight eyes.

"You are a powerful magician. You can heal me. You know how rare we Awakened are, we shouldn't kill each other."

Lith clicked his tongue in disgust, moving the sword from the right to the left hand. The Brood Mother recognized him as someone similar to her. He didn't want allies, only servants.

"If you spare my life, I swear to devote all my life to you. I can take on any form you want, be every day the woman of your dreams. I'll be your lover, your slave, whatever you want. Just don't kill me!"

Lith plunged the sword into her head, using darkness magic to destroy the last spark of life force she had left.

'I can't believe she had the gall to ask me to spare her life. Slave my a\*s, she would have killed me as soon as she recovered her strength.' Lith thought, storing the corpse in the pocket dimension.

'What are you planning to do with her remains?' Solus asked.

'Use them as ingredients, sell it, or reanimate it as a greater undead. I have yet to decide.'

Professor Farg had witnessed the whole fight from the beginning. The resourcefulness of both sides had left her speechless more than once.

'By the gods, even with all my equipment, I don't know if I could defeat either of them without reinforcements. The Brood Mother was cunning and the four Praetorians covered her blind spots, leaving no openings.

'Lith's swordsmanship is amateurish at best, but he is a vicious, scheming opportunist. He clearly has a lot of experience using true magic, that trick with the thundercloud isn't something you can improvise.

'Once again, Lady Tyris was right. Lith from Lutia isn't human. I must show her the fight, especially the part where the arm reattached itself. His existence goes beyond my understanding.'

Lith used Invigoration again, checking his surrounding from time to time. The few Clackers that had survived were all Hatchlings and with their queen dead, they had lost the will to fight.

He collected the corpses of the Praetorians too, hoping they were still worth something as trophies or ingredients. Then, he returned to the pit. The flames had destroyed everything, leaving behind only ashes.

Lith wasn't a believer, but he silently prayed for his lost friend. He couldn't avenge Protector's death nor could he bring him back to life. The feeling of helplessness heavily weighted on his heart.

"Goodbye, old friend. Thank you for everything you did for me and for all you taught me. I promise I will take care of your family like it's my own."

"Well, well, well. Look who's here. I should feel offended. I heard from more than one reliable source that you shed a lot of tears for Protector, but none for me."

Lith turned around, welcoming Kalla with a warm smile.

#### Chapter 239 Worries

"Kalla, you're alive!" Lith regretted those words as soon as he pronounced them. Kalla looked almost the same way when they met during Balkor's attack.

Almost.

The shadows surrounding her were deeper, the red light in her eyes was stone cold, and the presence she exuded was that of an undead.

"Not quite. I barely survived that night and only thanks to the experiments I had previously performed on my own body. After I recovered, I decided to push things to the next level. I'm currently in the process of turning myself into a true undead.

Is that a problem for you?"

"Not at all. What are you doing here?" He asked.

"I could ask you the same thing. I was minding my own business when I recognized your mana signature. I would have liked to rush here to help you, but I was in the middle of a delicate procedure. I arrived here just a few seconds ago. How are you doing, Scourge?"

Lith told her everything he had gone through from the last time they had seen each other, sparing no details about Death Vision.

"Fascinating." She replied. "Does it work on me too?"

"No." Oddly, Kalla remained the same, no matter how long he looked at her.

"Maybe it's because of my ongoing transformation, or maybe because you know I'm stronger than you. We should try asking Scarlett when she comes back."

Kalla looked at Lith first and then to Solus's ring. She didn't agree with their decision, but since they knew him better, Kalla decided not to interfere.

"Kalla, why have you decided to turn into an undead? You have evolved only recently, isn't this rushing things too much?" Lith was as happy to see her as worried for her mental health.

Since he had developed Death Vision, he had revised all the old conversations he had with his psychologist, to understand how much of a nutjob he was.

If before Protector's death his heart felt like it had been turned to stone, since he had developed Death Vision he could feel a void in his chest. Like a hole through which a cold wind blew non stop, freezing his body.

He was afraid that Kalla had been suffering from a similar trauma and had taken the easiest way out from her feelings. It was the same thing he had planned to do for a while, before his family's and Phloria's affection had convinced him otherwise.

"I'm not rushing anything. I have been mulling over the possibility ever since I was still a Byk. Why do you think I was so interested in greater undead, even when we met for the first time?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't understand. Based on what I read, evolved monsters have a very long lifespan. Can't you wait for a bit before taking such an irreversible decision?"

Kalla sighed, realizing how little Scarlett trusted Lith to keep him in the dark even about basic knowledge.

"I'm sorry to be forced to break it to you like this, but there is no easy way to do it. It's not just evolved monsters, all Awakened ones live for centuries. That means that you too will sooner or later face the same problem."

"What?" Lith and Solus were both flabbergasted.

"In your attempt of saving Protector, you have lost decades of life span. That means that you'll live a few hundred years less than the average Awakened ones, but you will still live on for centuries."

"How... how is it possible?"

Lith suddenly felt lightheaded, the world was spinning all around him to the point he had to use the bastard sword to support himself.

"People's lives depend on the amount of life force they possess. An Awakened one is capable of constantly absorbing the world energy, so instead of burning their own life force, they consume mostly world energy.

"That prolongs our lives for a very long time. I knew it from the moment I evolved into an Awakened one that it would mean to watch everyone of my kin die. To witness the world as I know it changes until I would become unable to recognize it anymore.

"In my Wight form, I could still have cubs, but what of them? They would live shunned by animals and humans alike, just to die of old age way before me. Know this, the offspring of an Awakened it's almost never an Awakened, just like having a mage for a parent doesn't mean having a great talent for magic.

"That's why there are monsters roaming this world. Scarlett's offspring are Scorpicores capable of using all the elements, they live around three hundred years, but they are not Awakened ones.

Also, your case is even more special."

"What do you mean?" All those sudden revelations had forced Lith to sit down. He felt like he was going to puke.

"You can live as long as an Awakened, but you might as well live forever. There are immortals in this world, creatures that can live until someone kills them and Abominations are among them, just like the undead."

"This means that my family, my friends..." Lith was stuttering for the shock.

"They will all die, in time. Even if you cage them all, even if you personally stand guard to them, sooner or later they will die in front of your eyes. Time is our ally as much as our enemy." Kalla completed the sentence for him.

"That's why what you did for Protector was stupid and childish. He had seen so many of his kin age and pass away in front of him after becoming a Ry. After becoming a Skoll, he was bound to witness all of his pack, her new mate and even his cubs wither away in front of his eyes.

"Also, your idea of undead is flawed. Greater undead not only can live forever, but also have all the same range of feelings that the living has. Human undead give us a bad name because once they get used to killing, they stop thinking of others as living beings, belittling them like cattle.

"A magical beast is different, though. We need to kill since the moment our parents abandon us, life is a constant struggle for survival. For me turning into an undead will change nothing.

"Unlike Nok, I wasn't born a Byk. First, I was just a bear, then a Byk, and lastly a Wight. No matter how much my appearance changes, I will always be myself. Can you say the same?"

"Maybe, I don't know." It was the first time that Lith was forced to lie to Kalla, but he had no way to explain to her how he had been reborn twice already and had changed very little so far.

"So, the good news is that you don't have to worry about my family. I will take care of them myself. I free you from your promise. The bad news is, well, everything else. There is something you have to ask me before we part ways again?"

Kalla rubbed her muzzle softly against Lith's cheek. Contrary to his expectations she was warm. Caressing her head helped him to regain his cool a bit.

"Let me get this straight. If I remain just an Awakened one I will live for a couple of centuries, while if I turn into an undead or an Abomination, I would live forever?"

"Yes." She nodded. "Beware that both conditions come at a price. Normal greater undead cannot use light magic freely, it only worsens their hunger. Some can't stand the light of the day, others get driven mad by their new instincts.

They are all unacceptable limits that would hinder my research, that's why I'm trying to turn myself into a lich."

"You what?" Lith froze.

"Liches are one of the few exceptions. The process requires to split your core into two. One part remains in your body and the other needs a special vessel, to seal it from all external influences, even the passing of time.

"That way, even if your body gets destroyed and your core shattered, you can always regenerate a new one from the vessel. The process is long and risky. One single mistake and I'll be dead for good.

As for Abominations, they can freely use all elements, but because of their parasitic nature, they are constantly hunted down. They care for nothing but their own survival.

"They don't even have a body unless they steal one. Even if they find a suitable one, their destructive energies consume it over time until they need to find a replacement.

So be careful about what you choose. Remain an Awakened until you are entirely sure of your decision. One day I might find a cure for undeath, but I doubt there is one for being an Abomination."

"What do you think I should do?"

Lith was completely lost, he didn't want Kalla to leave him. He had never felt so alone in his life. The moment he had learned that he was bound to live for so long, he couldn't stop considering everyone he knew just a little more than walking corpses.

"Stop living in the past." Kalla snorted.

"Enjoy your present, because it will change soon. Stop mulling over death and worry about the living. You have only a few years to spend with them, make them count. Also, try to learn from Nok about how to face changes.

"Do you know what's the first thing he asked me when I told him about my plans for the future? He said: 'Okay, mom. What have you caught for dinner?'

"I will remain in this forest for a few years, I don't know how long will it take to complete my transformation nor if it will succeed. Look for me only if you are in dire need of help, since I will be busy. We will resume our lessons when we both have more free time."

After saying goodbye to Protector's grave, Lith had found his closure. He was finally at peace with himself, but after hearing Kalla's words, he felt bewildered.

"Well, this is great. I needed some good news." Lith sneered.

"I was already considering to become an immortal, an undead, whatever. It would have liked for it to be my choice though, the last resort in case I didn't manage to find a way to have a proper death." He pondered.

"Until I understand what the heck I am becoming, my life span is the last of my problems. Even my arm acts on its own. I knew I would outlive my parents, but now it seems I will survive my sisters and even my nephews."

"There is no solution. Even if I find a way to turn them into Awakened, then what? Should I also turn Rena's husband and his family? Their children when they have them?

"It would destroy their lives."

Lith remained pensive for several minutes. The truth he had just learned was overturning his plans for the future. His age had become completely irrelevant. Judging by Scarlett's appearance he was likely to remain young looking even once he became a century old.

"I obsessed so much over controlling every aspect of my life, only to discover that I have no voice in the matter. I'm bound to have a long and lonely life, unless I befriend undead like Kalla, or Awakened ones." He bitterly laughed.



'By my maker, did you listen to a single word Kalla said? She told you to enjoy the present, to treasure those who you love and instead you are acting like they are already dead.

'Did you hear her plan to turn Nok into an undead or an Awakened? No. She is even willing to find a cure for her vampire adoptive daughter, to give her a mortal life. She worries about them and their happiness, not about herself.

'Think about Protector. He knew he would outlive his pack. Did he consider it reason enough for not evolving? No, he became a Ry first and a Skoll later. When he met Selia he didn't avoid her just because she is weak and short lived, he started a family!

'Why are you so bad at following your own advice? Do you remember what you told Yurial? Your only choice is to embrace the changes or remain forever chained by the failures of your past.'

She projected in his mind their last encounter with Protector before Lith had lost consciousness, quickly followed by Kalla's words. Lith had to accept that she was right.

Both of them had encouraged him to move forward without letting his fears control his life, yet he was there doing the opposite.

'Damn, I hate you being always right, Solus. This is exactly why Protector tried to stop me. All this time, I faced this existence like an enemy to beat or a problem to solve. My fear of losing those precious to me made me lose focus on what is really important.

'I wasted so much time preparing for the worse that I've probably spent more time with my comrades during the last year than with my own family until now.'

Solus could feel that Lith's mind was finally relaxing. After more than a decade of grieving and blind rage, he seemed to be able to rise beyond his limits and live his life to the fullest.

It made her incredibly happy and scared at the same time. Because in the end, Protector had made a huge mistake. Lying to Lith to protect him had been the wrong thing to do. It was up to her to make things right.

## Chapter 240 Insights

The truth could hurt him, but lies had hurt him even more.

The trauma, the grieving had never stopped until he had been forced to face his own mistakes through the eyes of the others. She couldn't let him start his life anew based on a convenient lie.

It was time to come clean with Lith, even if that meant destroying their relationship. Every day she hid the truth had been torture for Solus, but she endured it because she cared too much for him.

She was even willing to bear his grudge if it meant for Lith to change for the better.

'Lith, do you trust me?' She asked.

'I'd trust you with my life. Beside Protector, you are my only true friend. Despite witnessing every single and most despicable flaw of mine, you have always accepted me for who I am. I wouldn't be the person I am now without you, Solus.' He replied.

'Then I hope that one day you'll forgive me.'

'Forgive you for what?' Lith had yet to complete his question when Solus projected in his mind everything that had happened after he had lost consciousness. How Protector had survived, his last words for Lith, and his plea to Solus to keep it a secret.

Lith couldn't believe his own mind.

'How could you do this to me?' There was no trace of rage in his thoughts, only the deep pain coming from the breach of their trust. Until that day, Lith had always considered it the only certainty in his life.

Solus was a part of him as much as he was a part of her. In his eyes, she back being an untrustworthy piece of stone, just like the first day they met.

She could feel his pain and silent accusations. They both deeply hurt her, but she kept being honest without hiding anything from him.

'How? I'll tell you how. I simply did exactly what you have done time and time again over the years to everyone you love and care for. I followed your teachings and lied to you to keep you safe from a truth that I was afraid could kill you.'

Lith wanted to rebuke, but everything that came to his mind would sound incredibly hypocritical of him. He still remembered how Scarlett had accused him of corrupting Solus's nature, but he only now understood the meaning of her words.

'How can I trust you from now on? How can you ask me to forgive you? You are the only one I never lied to, never!'

'It's actually easy.' She replied with a firm voice, even though Lith could feel her pain and tears. 'Just read my mind like you always did when we first met. Dig up all my memories and feelings until your paranoia it's satisfied!

'Do it right now, if it makes you feel better. I know that I made a mistake by lying to you, but I did it only out of love. Maybe you don't realize it yet, but you are my everything just like Carl was for you, if not even more.

'I was scared of losing you forever, scared of being alone again. I chose to keep you safe and sound, even if it meant losing your trust. I prefer a world where you hate me for my actions rather than to keep living without you.

It would be worse than death, even worse than slowly starving.'

Lith would have loved to believe her, but at that point, he believed in no one. He followed Solus's suggestion, fusing their minds completely for the first time in years. Lith could see everything that she had ever thought and felt since the day they bonded.

The pain from not having a body, how her feelings for him had grown and changed over the years. At some point, it was impossible to understand if it was the kind of love a daughter had for a father or rather the one a woman felt toward a man.

Everything she had told him was nothing but the truth, from the reasons why she had lied to him to all the sacrifices she had made to keep him alive until that moment. He learned about all the times that she had risked her life to protect him, belittling herself like she wasn't even a person.

He experienced the guilt and suffering that derived from hiding the truth from him. Lith was shocked by all those revelations, even more so because fusing their minds meant violating her privacy, rummaging through her most private thoughts.

'I knew you would do it, but it hurts nevertheless.' She sobbed.

'Please, throw me away if you must, but leave me alone.' The old pouch reappeared around his neck and Solus left his finger to hide inside it. Suddenly, he couldn't feel her presence inside his mind.

The door between them could be opened with a simple thought, but then what?

Lith felt lost, he couldn't think about anything that he could do to make either of them feel better. Everything that Solus did, was only because she followed his teachings. He had no one to blame but himself.

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White Griffon Academy, Yurial's apartments.

"Girls, I can't believe I'm going to say it out loud, but the more I know Lith, the more I think he isn't a human being." Yurial said.

"I mean let's set aside his terrible attitude when we met, since we well deserved it. How can he possibly be that strong? It's not natural. Also, how could he be okay without resting not even for one hour? It doesn't make any sense."

"Yeah, not to mention that somehow he spotted the Clackers despite them being underground. Did he ever explain to you how he managed to do it?" Quylla pointed out.

"No." Phloria replied.

'There's also the issue with his beloved brother that he let slip while giving us the pep talk. I have triple checked it, his relationship with his brothers is terrible. Either he has a third secret brother or I don't know what to think.

'Yet if they didn't notice it, I'm not going to add coal to the fire. I don't like where this conversation is going already.' She thought.

"Honestly, I never understood how any of you could overlook his ever changing persona. First, he was very rude to us. Then he became our mentor despite being three years younger than us and lastly our 'good friend'.

"We all have seen how he kills people without remorse, how easily he lies to everyone, even to us. I'm grateful for everything Lith did for me, but he still creeps me out." Friya shrugged.

"I suspect Lith actually is a bastard member of the royal family." Yurial's words left the others speechless.

"My father says that the Royal couple is known for having physical abilities on par with magical beasts. It would also explain how he is so knowledgeable and why Linjos keeps him in such high regard."

"Guys, I can't believe I'm going to say it out loud, but the more I hear you talking about Lith like this, the more you disgust me." Phloria's gaze was filled with contempt.

"I don't know about you, but I approached him after the first exam, not the other way around. So, he definitely didn't try to exploit me for personal gain. Also, yeah he has a lot of secrets, but so what?"

"He could have hidden his strength and let the assassin kill you, Yurial. Just like during Balkor's attack or against the Clackers just a few hours ago, he could have run away and leave us for dead. Instead, he fought by our side, saving our lives.

"He helped us countless times, but never asked us anything in return. Yet here you are, talking behind his back because he never explained how he did manage to beat those Clackers or cleanse us from Balkor's toxins while many others died.

"I don't care how he did it. What matters to me is that he cared more about our safety than about his own secrets. I don't care if he is the King's bastard son or if he has dragon blood in his veins."

According to the legends, the offspring of a human and a dragon would carry a hidden strength that could manifest in the form of physical prowess, magic talent, or beauty.

"It would explain why the female members of his family are so pretty and why he is so different from the rest of us. Whatever his secret is, I'm certain he will tell us in time. What really matters to me, is that his actions speak loud about his character, just like your ungratefulness does about yours.

"If you really think about questioning him after all the times he saved our lives, after all we have faced together, you don't deserve being his friends and neither mine!"

Phloria slammed the door behind her, incapable to listen to their ramblings any more.

"Do you think that her feelings for him are clouding her judgment?"

Phloria's words struck several nerves, making Friya regret to have spoken so harshly.

"No, I think we have let our fear of the unknown get the better of us." Yurial replied.

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It took a while to find out Balkor's whereabouts, but Scarlett discovered his location thanks to her communication network with all the magical beasts she had worked with in the past.

The various Lords of the different regions had helped greatly in collecting the necessary intel. She knew that Balkor would require a constant supply of dead bodies to build each year such a massive army.

Also, by examining the captured undead with her artifact, she had managed to identify Balkor's energy signature. At that point, all she had to do was to use her enchanted pince-nez as a scanner.

She started her investigation from the locations where big battles had taken place. Balkor's undead required more than just bones, so he needed fresh corpses. From there she had interrogated the magical beasts that lived nearby.

All that work would have been useless without her artifact, though. Balkor was aware of the flaws in his supply chain. Over the years he had used countless middlemen to store what he needed in dimensional amulets and have everything delivered at his doorstep.

The only thing he was unable to predict was the existence of an artifact capable of recognizing an individual's life force from a great distance.

Scarlett had almost been on the verge of giving up before finding his trail. Like the countless pursuers that preceded her, the Scorpicores had remained trapped in the web of false leads and deception Balkor had laid.

Too much time had passed from the attack. The trail was cold and the Forgotten Plume tribe was nomadic. However, one of the Lords of the oasis reported to her about how a small mound of rock that had decorated his fief for centuries collapsed right after the attacks on the academies had ended.

The Lord had no idea what could have happened, but for Scarlett was more than enough. Once she reached the location the mound occupied, the artifact was able to detect Balkor's energy signature.

It took Scarlett just a few hours to follow the lead to her destination. She was already tasting Balkor's blood and fear, when her chase came to an abrupt end.

Salaark, the ruler of the Blood Desert blocked her way, staring at Scarlett with annoyance.

"What are you doing here? This isn't your turf. You are not welcome here."

Scarlett recognized Salaark for what she was. Her body instinctively trembled in fear.

"Lady Salaark, I'm here to exact vengeance for all the loyal subjects and dear friends that the fiend hiding in that encampment killed." She said pointing at the Forgotten Plume tribe visible at the horizon.

"Fiend? Do you mean Ilyum Balkor? If that's so, you better go home. He's one of my subjects now. Tell Tyris that she had her opportunity and wasted it. Now it's my turn."

"What?" Scarlett was flabbergasted. "You know who he is and what he does, yet you let him live?"

"Of course, I do. Who would be so stupid to let such a rare talent unattended? Over the years, Balkor has helped the Forgotten Plume tribe to prosper. He not only protected them from all kind of threats, but he also taught them advanced magic and took care of the sick.

"You should know that light and darkness magic go hand in hand. When people think of Balkor they only see the necromancer, but he is also a great healer. I offered him many times to become one of my underlings.

"Yet he always refused, because it would mean to swear his loyalty to me and relinquish his foolish plans of revenge. Now that he has only a few years left to live, Balkor finally listened to reason and submitted to me.

So bug off, Scorpicores. Tell your master he is under my protection."

"I respect Lady Tyris as I respect you, Lady Salaark." Scarlett roared.

"However, I have no master. I'm here of my own will and I will not back down just because you say so!"

Salaark laughed heartily at Scarlett's daring words.

"Kid, I have a soft spot for arrogant youths, but that doesn't mean I will go easy on you. Take another step forward and the two of us will fight as enemies."

"So be it!" Scarlett roar made the earth tremble and the skies cry. Despite the dry climate of the desert, black clouds appeared out of nowhere and covered the sun. Salaark's smile grew even wider.

'A world tribulation? This sure makes things more interesting!' She thought.

AN: Dear readers, I'm sorry to tell you that Supreme Magus will go on hiatus for some time. My health is slipping and I can't postpone things anymore. I'll be hospitalized for a while, but if everything goes well I should be back in 3-4 weeks. Thanks for your support and understanding.