

Supreme M 241

Chapter 241 Insights 2

Scarlett too recognized the signs of a world tribulation. It reminded her of Tyris's words, sending a cold shiver down her spine.

'Damn my bad luck. Not only am I forced to face a Guardian, but I also have to undertake a tribulation at the same time. I don't know what the world wants from me, only that my odds of dying just doubled.

Even if Salaark doesn't kill me, the world could if I fail. Bah, too late for hindsight!'

Scarlett set aside her fear of death and charged forward. Her body started to swell and change, doubling its size. Her fur morphed into red scales as thick as a shield and a pair of feathered wings appeared on the Scorpicores back.

The muzzle became a fiery slate, only her eyes remained visible. Scarlett's mane turned into a raging purple flame, hot enough to turn sand into glass.

Salaark's interest was piqued, but she wasn't impressed. The changes occurring during a tribulation were merely cosmetic, pointing out the nature of the potential guardian. Alas, the Scorpicores strength hadn't changed.

Scarlett weaved ten spells at once, unleashing an elemental barrage. The ground was upturned, the sand turned into spikes, attacking the Guardian from all sides. Huge hands erupted from the ground, pushing Salaark down a pit that had opened below her feet.

Scarlett's only hope was for the combined spells to swallow and bury the Guardian long enough for her to take Balkor's life.

A hail of lightning and ice crashed on Salaark from the skies, darkness engulfed her sapping her strength, while molten lava erupted from the trench beneath her. Salaark was unfazed. All of Scarlett's attacks were nullified by a wave of Salaark's hand that turned the spikes and the hands back to harmless sand, closing the pit at the same time.

White flames surrounded her body dispelling the darkness engulfing her, consuming the lightning bolts and sublimating ice.

Despite Scarlett's best efforts, an ant would still remain an ant.

Scarlett focused all the mana she had left in one final attack. Whole dunes floated mid-air, turning into flaming black meteors the size of a two-story house. Each one of them had enough destructive power to turn a medium-sized city into a crater.

They all crushed against the Guardian, who was forced to raise both her arms to block them all. Salaark was astonished by the attacking prowess Scarlett possessed.

'What a cunning opponent. If I miss or deflect even one of these darkness imbued meteors, I bet she will redirect it toward the Forgotten Plume tribe. I can't afford to play anymore, time to get serious!'

Salaark's battle cry sounded like an eagle's screech, her white aura expanded in the form of spreading wings that engulfed the surrounding area with blinding light. Any other people would believe it to be a sign that the goddess of light had descended among them.

However, the Forgotten Plume tribe knew better. They fell to their knees, their foreheads touching the sand while worshipping the Benefactor.

The white flames and the black meteors fought for a long second before the light consumed everything in its path.

Salaark looked at her own palms in surprise. Even under her human guise, she was still a phoenix and yet her arms were covered in third-degree burns, bleeding from several wounds.

"You attacked me despite knowing who I am and managed to hurt me fighting fair and square. You have earned my respect. This time I'll let you go, but if you dare to attack me again, I will end you. Now scram!" Salaark opened a Warp Steps, shoving the exhausted Scorpico through it.

Scarlett had barely the strength to stand, so she offered no resistance. She found herself back in the forest surrounding the White Griffon academy.

'Damn Salaark!' She inwardly cursed. 'How can Guardians be so aloof and self-absorbed? Yet her power is far beyond mine, a second attempt would be suicidal. It's time for me to stop wasting time with humans.'

The Council is useless, the Guardians untrustworthy. If I want justice, I'll need the power to take it with my own hands!'

When Lith returned to the academy, his world was still upside down. The anger stemming from Solus's lie and the bewilderment from the breach of their absolute bond of trust fought on equal ground inside his head.

He didn't know what to think or what to do anymore. He had stopped grieving Protector from the moment he accepted his death, before leaving house Ernas. The trip to his grave served as a mean to deal with Lith's sense of loss and accepting his failure.

Therefore, there was nothing preventing him from resenting his so-called old friend for his manipulation. Yet it had all been so sudden that he needed time to digest the revelation.

Lith went to Phloria's room, to return the bastard sword. She remained shocked seeing his uniform tattered. His left sleeve seemed to have been almost turned to shreds, the uniform's self repairing magic barely managed to prevent it from falling apart.

Phloria noticed that despite all the damage the magical cloth had sustained, Lith seemed to be perfectly fine. He was without a scratch and full of energy, yet his eyes were dead. He wasn't even looking at her but at something past her.

His voice was flat, his mind was elsewhere, in a bad place.

"Thank your father for me. This sword truly is a masterpiece." He handed it to her with both hands.

"I will." She nodded. "Has something happened? Do you need to talk?"

"Many things, but none I'm willing to share, sorry. We'll have to postpone our date. I need some time to think alone."

The following days were the worst Lith had lived since his rebirth in the new world. Before finding Solus, he had been knee-deep in his personal hell.

His new family was alien to him, but he had managed to accept that he was some kind of monster and that he would be forced to spend his whole life pretending. His true identity, his past, weren't something he could share.

He had come to accept that he was destined to be alone even when surrounded by people, a shadow in a world of lights. Yet finding Solus also meant finding hope. During the last eight years, he had never been truly alone.

She had been a constant presence in his life, from the moment he woke up in the morning. She would often even take part in his own dreams. At first, he had been scared by her intrusions in his thoughts, by all her questions about him and why he acted as he did.

However, over time their relationship had grown, becoming deeper than he could have ever expected. Solus was the only one to truly know him, the one he could share all his deepest and darkest secrets without being judged.

Whenever Lith had been struggling, either by accepting his new family or the hardships in his life, she had always been his mental support. With every struggle he overcame, Lith's life had become easier, yet the abyss inside him would also become deeper and hungrier.

In the end, everything he had achieved, he had got it through hard work, deception, and the occasional killing. Mogar, the new world, wasn't much different from Earth. 'Every man for himself' and 'power conquers all' were unwritten rules everyone abided to.

Solus had been his moral compass, often questioning his choices and forcing him to ponder about the consequences of his actions, but in the end, she would always be on his side.

Now they were separated, their mind link remained inactive since both of them were unwilling to make the first move. Solus was still consumed with remorse for her lie, living in constant fear to have forever destroyed their bond.

Cutting herself out of Lith's life was her way to atone for her mistake and give him the time he needed to reflect on what she did without external influences.

As for Lith, he longed every day to hear her voice in his mind again. To feel her warm compassion for all the secrets and the sacrifices he was daily burdened with. Hiding in plain sight, lying even to his own family wasn't so bad as long she was with him.

Solus knew the truth and supported him at every step he had taken so far. Yet he wasn't willing to forgive her, nor to resume their usual routine pretending that nothing had happened.

The situation was tearing him apart, it was like the sun was covered by a permanent eclipse. It was still there, but he wasn't able to experience its warmth and light anymore.

The thing that bothered him the most was being angry at Protector as much as he was at her.

'Damn Protector! How could he do this to me? Or to her? Loving me like a son my a*s. He put us one against the other with his idiotic decision. He left me grieving like an idiot, second guessing everything I've done, to the point of almost revealing my secret to my family!'

During that time, Lith realized how dependent he had become on Solus's influence in his daily activities. Without her constantly soothing his rage and filling the void he felt in his life, Lith became colder and detached.

Outside the lessons, he would spend most of his time alone.

Even his grades started to drop, albeit slowly. It wasn't just the feeling of betrayal putting him off his game. He was too used to brainstorming every problem with Solus, being forced to do everything alone only reinforced his feeling of loss.

After failing to approach him a few times, Friya, Quylla, and Yurial decided it was better to give him some space. They thought he was having a hard time to accept what he had seen at the mining town. Lith would barely speak to them and even when he did, his voice was full of ill concealed annoyance.

'If Solus can't be trusted, then I can trust no one.' Was what Lith repeated to himself more and more often.

Phloria was the only one that held onto him, no matter how many times he pushed her away. She would go visit him in his room, sometimes they would spend hours in silence, each one studying for the following day lessons.

She didn't force him to open up, her hope was that her company would help Lith understand he wasn't alone. If he needed help, he just had to ask.

Lith was grateful to her. Phloria was the first person in the new world that had approached him without a hidden agenda. She was more interested in who he was rather than what he was able to do.

Her care and dedication to him were the only silver lining in his situation. Yet at the same time, it made things worse, forcing him to realize she was just a young girl. No matter how much he wanted to share his burden with her, he simply couldn't.

A week passed, Lith's mood was getting worse by the day. Sometimes he would even dine by himself in his room to avoid being bothered by his companions.

Not only his relationship with Solus was at a stalemate, but he was also so used talking to her about everything that in the past days he often established a mind link out of habit just to shut it down immediately.

That morning, before the gong marking the start of the first lesson resounded, a hologram of Linjos appeared in all the classes and the departments.

"My dear students, I have an announcement to make." The Headmaster's voice was firm, but he appeared to be exhausted. He had black circles under his eyes and despite being in his middle thirties, his hair was already turning grey.

"Many things have happened this year, some good, some bad. All the academies have lost members of their staff because of Balkor's attack, causing a further delay in our activities.

"To allow everyone to mourn their loved ones and in respect of what you have gone through, the Crown has decreed that this year there will be no third exam. Your grades will depend exclusively on your daily evaluation during the third trimester.

"The rankings will be revealed during the last day of academy, but you can already learn your grade in a specific subject by asking the Professor in charge. If for any reason you are not satisfied with your results, you can apply for a practical test to re evaluate your skill.

"Beware that Professors are allowed to raise as well as to lower your grade, in case you decide to take it.

"We have only two weeks left before the winter break. You can schedule your test any time before that deadline. Have a nice day."

Lith's group left the academy for the morning rounds, accompanied by Professor Ironhelm. Lith was happy for the turn of events, he had no desire to babysit his companions again, nor to pretend to care for whatever lesson Linjos meant to teach to the other students.

Every day without Solus was torture, he could feel his rage and hatred grow without limits. It required him sheer willpower to not lash out every time something or someone bothered him.

Lith knew that sooner or later he would have to confront her once and for all. Keeping her at a distance wasn't doing him any good. On the contrary, the void her absence created was a constant reminder of how he needed Solus as a person even more than the abilities their bond granted him.

He was already at the point where he could barely care for Phloria. If the whole academy exploded in front of him, Lith wouldn't bat an eye. He couldn't wait for the winter break to finally have three months only for himself.

Chapter 242 Turn of Events

Their rounds were uneventful. All of their patients were nobles suffering from minor diseases that had exploited their contacts to have healers come to their homes.

"Okay guys, we are almost done." Yurial said once they had checked all but one of the names on their list

"I have saved this patient for last because he is a friend of my family and it could take a while. Is there any problem if we get back a little later than usual, Professor?"

Ironhelm shook his head, he had no reason to refuse. The longer he babysat them, the lesser paperwork he would find at his return. Having someone else doing it for him was the main reason he had volunteered for the task.

"I'm sure you can handle it without me. I have much to do. Have fun with your friend." Lith snorted, opening a Warp Steps right outside the local branch of the Mage Association. He was about to step through when Yurial stopped him.

"I'm really sorry, Lith. I have a favor to ask you." Yurial didn't like being forced to ask for his help, especially since Lith had been giving him the cold shoulder for no apparent reason for days.

"What is it?" Lith glared at Yurial like the first day they met.

"The person we are going to visit is actually a friend of my father. He doesn't have the authority or the status to get an appointment with one of the great healers of the Kingdom.

"So he did all he could to be included in our rounds. I don't know why, but he expressly asked for you. He even pestered my father until he was promised that I would ensure your collaboration."

"Is this person influential?" Lith asked. One thing was adding another name to the list of those that owed him a favor, another was wasting his time with minor nobles.

"Actually, no. House Tanash is a young magical bloodline that didn't produce a magician in the last two generations. They are on the verge of losing their status. There's not much they could do for you, but if you agree to help, my household would be indebted to you."

Yurial understood the meaning behind Lith's words, so instead of playing the friend card, he decided to make a deal.

Lith nodded. House Deirus was on the rise and he was already on good terms with them. Together with the Ernas, Archmage Deirus was someone that could help him greatly, if ever the necessity arose.

Despite being located on the outskirts of the high-end district, House Tanash turned out to be a magnificent mansion. It was a three-story building, each floor about two hundred square meters. Yet despite the pristine white walls and the enchanted fence surrounding it, Lith could clearly see that it belonged to a declining household.

It was much smaller than the Marchioness' house, something more fitting to a rich merchant rather than a magical bloodline. The mansion had no garden at all, there was no insignia along the walls or on the front door.

It seemed like they were trying to hide their identity.

After Yurial knocked, the door was opened almost instantly. The butler wore quite an expensive dress. His white shirt was made of silk while the deep blue blazer and the pants were cashmere. He was a man around 1.65 (5'5") meters high with blue eyes, blond hair, a beard and mustaches of the same color.

The butler was deadly pale and sweating bullets, several stains could be seen on the collar of his shirt. freeωebnovēl.com

"Lord Deirus, thank the gods you are here! I was starting to lose all hope!"

Lith smirked at the bad manners of the man, who was dragging Yurial inside instead of making way to his master.

"You must be Master Lith." The butler said while suddenly grabbing his hand and holding it like it was a treasure. The man's hands were slippery like an eel because of the sweat. Lith wanted to get rid of him but didn't know how to do it without being rude.

"You are exactly as they described you. Tall, calm and with a gaze that would make even a baby stop crying. I hope that everything else about you it's true too. My son is in desperate need of your help."

"Your son?" Lith blurted out.

'They must really be in hot waters if they don't have a butler. Either that or the situation is so desperate that Lord Tanash came to open the door by himself. Yet it doesn't make sense. If his son is so ill, how come they didn't accept him at the White Griffon hospital?' Lith thought.

"Lord Tanash, this is Lith of Lutia." Yurial was truly embarrassed by the lord of the household's behavior, but he kept his cool and performed the proper introductions in their host's stead before Lith changed his mind about helping.

Yurial knew that those days it was really easy for Lith to lose his temper.

"Lith, allow me to introduce you Duke Vinald Tanash." Lith shook his hand, using darkness magic to cleanse it as soon as he managed to get free from the slimy vice.

"Duke Tanash is not himself today because..."

"Yes, yes! Please, excuse my manners, Master Lith!" The Duke cut Yurial short, giving Lith a bow so deep his head almost touched the ground.

'Definitely desperate.' Lith concluded.

It was only thanks to the efforts of Yurial and of the family butler that they managed to calm Vinald enough to let their guests accommodate in the tea room. Lith noticed that after serving the tea for everyone, the butler spiked the Duke's with liquor.

After several cups of liquor diluted with a bit of tea, Vinald managed to calm down enough to explain himself properly.

"I'm really sorry for earlier, but I just received a piece of news that will be the final nail in the coffin of my household if even Master Lith proves to be powerless against the ruin looming over our heads." Duke Tanash turned pale again, his words on the verge of turning back into a rambling.

The butler had lost all hope to preserve the dignity of his master, so he poured liquor instead of tea into the cup.

"Let me explain. House Tanash was founded by my great-great-grandfather, Gillam Tanash. Born as the son of a humble blacksmith, he managed to become an archmage and served the Kingdom with honor.

Before his death, he received the title of Duke for his achievements.

"Alas, after him no one in our family showed the slightest talent for magic. All we have comes from Archmage Tanash's work, but in a single generation, there is only so much one can do. Over time, our contribution to the Kingdom has become less and less.

"We didn't have a mage nor the necessary funds to gain merits enough to increase our status. That was until my son, Zintar, was accepted in the Lightning Griffon academy. He is no genius, but he is very talented and hardworking. During the first three years of the academy, he always was in the top percentile.

"This year, after the second trimester, his grades started to drop. At first, I thought it was all my fault. With the civil war on the brink of exploding, I tasked him to... protect the interests of the family. It forced Zintar to neglect his studies quite a bit."

The truth was that House Tanash had been one of the most active members of the new magical bloodlines party that wanted the civil war to happen. The Duke had tried more than once to escalate the events, aiming to get rid of the ancient households that threatened to take everything away from him.

They constantly reminded the Crown of how useless were the relatively poor and mageless households to the Kingdom.

He had forced Zintar to sabotage the studies of his rivals and engage them in fights outside the academy's walls.

"The lack of practice led him to almost fail his second exam, so he went back to study full time. The problem is that the situation never improved. His grades are still bad enough he is likely to be expelled.

"Now that the Crown has decreed no third exam will take place, he is doomed. If he fails, we'll lose our noble status, our home, everything."

"You want me to tutor him or what?" Lith was exasperated by those ramblings. His fingers almost pierced the armrests of the armchair he was sitting in.

"Gods, no. He already has the best tutors and teachers I could afford. I want you to visit him. Zintar says that something is wrong with his body, that no matter how much he tries he can't focus as well as he did before.

I already had him visited by the best healers I could find, but they found nothing. You are our last hope."

"A mysterious illness that makes you fail in your studies is the oldest excuse in the book." Yurial whispered to Lith's ear.

"Even I used it a lot in the past. Usually the prescribed cure is a good pep talk and a cut on the daily allowance. It sure worked on me."

Lith nodded.

'This man is just sad. He refuses to admit his mistakes and tries to find someone to blame. If his son lost a whole trimester, no matter how talented he is, he cannot catch up.' He thought.

Duke Tanash lead them on the first floor, where his son's study was located. The walls were covered by bookshelves filled with tomes covering all the conceivable magical topics.

Several volumes were missing. Some had been left open on the floor, occupying most of the space, others were piled on a desk behind which a youth was sitting while taking and reviewing notes.

An open door revealed a state of the art Alchemical lab. Just like the study room, the lab was a mess, with shattered components on the floor marking failed experiments and burn marks on the walls.

The Duke introduced the youth as his heir.

Zintar was a fifteen-year-old boy with blond hair like his father and deep set eyes from the lack of sleep. He seemed to be on the verge of exhaustion.

"Nothing, father. No matter how much I study or practice, my results are always mediocre." Judging from his bloodshot eyes, he had no more tears to shed.

"Don't worry, son. Master Lith is here. He is the only White Griffon student that was chosen by his Professors to assist them during the plague. If there is someone that can help you, it's him." Duke Tanash patted Lith's back like he was a long lost brother.

Lith barely escaped Zintar's hug, starting to chant his diagnostic spells and stopping him on his tracks. Lith used everything he had, yet he found that there was nothing wrong.

Even the spell Professor Marth had devised with his help against the parasites gave negative results. Yet the more spells he used, the more Lith was certain that Zintar wasn't making excuses.

After learning Necromancy from Professor Zekell, Lith was now able to follow the mana in his spells even when he used fake magic. Lith could perceive them working properly, but each one would lose a bit of their strength as soon as they reached Zintar.

Even if his mind was still a mess, he hadn't forgotten about the boxes and their content. Lith used Invigoration to check if Zintar was wearing one of those mysterious items or had been poisoned.

As Lith suspected, Zintar's system was plagued by the same toxin he had obtained from the boxes. The layer was thicker than the one he had experienced.

'With so much toxin in his bloodstream, he should barely be able to cast tier four spells. This kind of prolonged exposition is clearly deliberate. Without a parasite, the toxin should wear off in a few weeks.

'Also, despite being poisoned for almost six months, his core doesn't show any sign of discoloration. He has been administered small doses over time. Whoever did this, didn't want to kill him, just to make him fail his exams.' He thought.

Lith was about to give him the good news, but then he froze up.

'If I cure him, the existence of the toxin will become of public knowledge. The responsible will have plenty of time to get rid of the evidence and go into hiding. With the traitor afoot, I can't trust Ironhelm. I must report this to Linjos.

'I have finally found a way to share my knowledge about the boxes or at least about the toxins they contain. Let's hope this is enough to change the future.'

"I'm sorry, there's nothing wrong with you." Lith said with his most professional tone, while father and son both burst into tears.

Yurial, Quylla, and Friya examined Zintar too but to no avail. Lith was annoyed by such a waste of time, but he had to keep the façade and pretend to care about the patient.

After they left the house, they used a Warp Steps to return to the local branch of the Mage Association and from there to the academy.

"Have lunch without me, I have things to do." Lith walked away before they could even register his words.

"He's always in a bad mood recently." Friya pondered. "I'm really starting to worry about him. Maybe something bad happened in the mining town."

"Me too." Yurial nodded. "The question is, what could possibly be so bad to turn him back to how he was nine months ago? And why does he refuse to speak about it even with Phloria? She's going to freak out one of these days."

"I have no clue." Quylla shook her head. "By the way, didn't you feel something was odd with our last patient? I can't put my finger on it, but all my spells gave me a weird feeling."

Quylla, was the only one besides Lith talented enough for necromancy to have developed even more her mana perception thanks to its practice, but unlike him she had no idea what they were against.

Chapter 243 Foresigh

Lith went to the Headmaster's office and because of the queue, he had to wait quite a bit. He couldn't say it was an emergency. Lith knew there was a traitor if not more than one inside the academy, so he couldn't afford to alert them.

When his turn finally arrived, the first thing he did was to close the door behind himself and ask Linjos to activate all of his office protections. Only when the arrays in the room started to hum, their magic so densely packed to be visible to the naked eye, Lith told him about what he had discovered.

"Anti mana toxins at the Lightning Griffon? This is indeed a serious matter." Linjos was about to use his communication amulet, but Lith stopped him.

"Not only there. They are also here at the White Griffon." His words made Linjos turn pale.

"We had no such cases here. Our average of promoted students is better than the previous years..."

"Yet the grades are dropping, remember?" Lith cut him short.

"Tanash is not only suffering from the toxins, but also from wasting three months following his father's agenda. If he kept practicing magic, he would have probably got used to the toxins over time and his grades would have just dropped.

"Have you already forgotten about the box I found a few months ago? How it was delivered from Kandria, where the plague started?"

Linjos's brain was spinning at full gear, reaching Lith's same conclusions and even more.

"By the gods! It would explain a lot. Before Balkor's attack, it would have created the perfect scenario for the old noble households. No matter if the civil war happened or not, they would have crippled the competition anyway.

"Even now, the heirs of their noble rivals and the mages of commoner origin are getting expelled or being deemed as low value assets for the Kingdom. It proves their point that magical legacies beat effort.

"If the civil war starts, they only need to increase the dosage to make all the young mages useless in battle until the problem is discovered. Even worse, the poisoning could have not been exposed until it was too late, if never at all.

The only thing I cannot understand is why they made their own children receive low grades too. Unless..."

"Unless it was part of their plan." Lith continued. "After all, the only thing that really matters is the result of the final exam of the fourth and fifth year. They can afford lowering their grades during the first two trimesters, since it has no consequences.

"During the final exam, they can perform much better and they will likely ask to be re-evaluated. That way, if the results don't match with the daily evaluation, it will prove that your teaching methods are wrong."

"It's worse than that." Linjos pondered. "By affecting the other academies, they managed to make it go unnoticed. Since the same thing happened everywhere, not even the Crown got worried. I can spot only a flaw in their plan.

"If all the students belonging to the old noble households get their grades back up at once, it would arouse suspicion. Unless of course, they either sacrifice the fourth year, using the winter break as a cover, to 'regain' their talent during the last year, or they make only the elite take full marks now while the others gradually recover their performances.

"Anyway, they can't repeat the trick again. Not now that the odds of a civil war are almost zero. My only question is: why did the White Griffon receive the same treatment instead of a worse one? If you are right and I have little doubt about it, I would have expected them to strike harder.

They need to take me out of the picture, their plan ended up helping me instead."

"My hypothesis is that they underestimated you and the control you managed to achieve over the academy. The lack of infighting and the Ballots prevented the worse from happening." Lith replied.

"Maybe." Linjos couldn't stop thinking about how fast Balkor found out their hiding spot. Actually, he found the hiding spots of all those that followed Linjos's protocol so fast that the attacks happened almost at the same time.

It had several implications. First, it meant that every academy had traitors or there was someone close to the Crown that leaked the information to Balkor. Either way, the situation was deadly serious.

Second, the attack had been the perfect opportunity to destroy Linjos's work, if not to kill Linjos himself.

'Why did they let it slip under their nose? Unless...' He thought.

"Lith, be honest with me."

Linjos had turned pale, leaving Lith surprised. The Headmaster looked like a man that had just found a venomous spider resting on his shoulder.

"How did you discover the toxin? Did Professor Marth's diagnostic spell work?"

"I used my own spell. The one we devised during the plague didn't work." Lith shook his head.

"It was aimed to detect parasites rather than toxins since the latter fade away over time."

"Just as I feared." Linjos nodded. "Please, check if I have been infected too."

Lith pretended to chant a spell while actually using Invigoration on the Headmaster, who didn't miss it requiring physical contact. It was the first time Linjos had seen such a spell.

"It doesn't make sense." Lith was flabbergasted.

"You are poisoned too, but the amount of toxin is much lesser than the one I detected in the Tanash kid."

"It makes perfect sense instead." Linjos replied.

"A student may not notice the disruption of their own mana flow, but any competent magician would. That's why they must have started poisoning me only right before Balkor's attack, when my mind was elsewhere. I noticed being weaker than usual, but I thought it was because of the stress.

"Also, with Hatorne disappearance, the traitors have no idea how to adjust the dosage. Balkor's change of plans was unpredictable. I wouldn't be surprised by discovering that poisoning me and likely most of the Professors, was a last minute attempt to get rid of me.

"Since the toxins build up over time, there was only so much they could do. Not to mention it would be hard for me to miss having my powers halved in a few hours. I would contact Manohar and it's unlikely he wouldn't discover the truth, just like you did."

Lith felt relieved, he had convinced Linjos of the presence of a threat to the academy despite having very little proof and without blowing his cover. The Headmaster waved his hand, making four magic crystals appear at the corners of his desk.

He put his communication amulet right in the middle, activating a secure channel with the Crown, relaying the information he had just acquired and requesting the intervention of a royal constable.

"We need to have the staff and the students examined." Lith heard Linjos expressing his immediate worries to the King.

"I can't do it by myself without risking to alert the culprits. It's also necessary to have all those that failed the second semester examined. Some may actually be talentless slackers, but others could as well be innocent victims..."

While the Headmaster was mentioning Lith's contribution, his sight blurred. Lith suddenly felt lightheaded, while images kept rapidly appearing and disappearing.

'Good grief, finally! I managed to change the damn future!'

He watched the old vision from the beginning, the fall of the White Griffon academy, followed by the start of the civil war until his whole family was butchered. Lith didn't feel scared by those images.

They were fading away, getting more blurred by the second until they completely disappeared. Everything went blank and for a long second Lith held his breath waiting for the new future.

What he saw was a quick series of sunrises and sunsets over the academy, the leaves of the forest's trees became red and fell, the snow turned everything into a white landscape.

Then, the sun rose higher and higher, melting the snow while new leaves replaced the fallen ones. Lith could sense something going on inside the academy, despite looking at it from a great distance.

He could hear voices and see flashes of light coming out the windows, but he wasn't able to understand what was going on, the distance made everything muffled.

'Well, at least the academy is not crumbling anymore. This is a good sign.' Lith thought.

Suddenly he was transported inside the castle. He was now able to recognize the voices as screams and explosion while the flashes of light were caused by spells. Lith watched Phloria die, stabbed through the heart by a long knife.

The culprit was unknown, the weapon looked real, but the hand wielding it was just a shadow. Rage and pain ravaged his mind.

'Is that a f*cking Abomination or even this damn vision doesn't know who will do it?' Even if he understood none of it was real, Lith tried to stop the blade with spirit magic first and to heal Phloria later, but to no avail.

No matter how much he struggled, he found impossible to move from the spot he was forced watching from.

The vision moved back to Lutia. The village was quiet, but a shadow fell from the sky. One after the other, the members of the Queen's corps patrolling the zone fell, their bodies dismembered or disintegrated.

The shadow reached Lith's house, killing his family in the blink of an eye. This time they would not suffer, no unnamed soldier would kidnap and r*pe his sisters, but they would die nonetheless.

'No! Why? What did they do to you, you f*cking bastard?' Lith inwardly screamed.

The corpses of his family danced in front of his eyes. Even Rena and his husband wouldn't get spared. The shadow was careful and meticulous, leaving no witness behind.

Panic invaded Lith's heart. According to the new vision, he wasn't collateral damage anymore, his loved ones were now the intended target.

"Lith, what happens? Why are you screaming?" The King asked, his voice worried.

Lith discovered he had fallen on the ground and Linjos was at his side checking his condition.

Lith froze, searching for a proper answer. The Headmaster knew of the dryad's gift that led to his past vision, so Lith could freely share it with him.

Lith stuttered some words while recovering from the shock, not being able to make any sense. He didn't just see things happening, the magic bonded to his soul made everything real and painful. It was like being forced to live those events before time rewinded.

"It's all right, calm down and tell me what's wrong." Linjos helped him to get back on his feet. Lith pondered about the vision, searching for the best way to describe it, when his paranoia cranked up to eleven.

'The future is much better for the Kingdom, but much worse for me. Whatever happens to the academy will surely take top priority. Between the toxins and the traitors, the Kingdom's resources will be stretched thin.

'I can't trust them to protect my family out of the goodness of their heart, nor I want to owe the Crown favor that big. I need to play this smart, but I don't know how.'

Lith was on the verge of panic. Lying about the vision to make it more convenient was easy, the hard part was finding a way to force them to help him without twisting the vision's meaning.

It was the first time that he had to face such a big issue alone.

'I can't afford to make any mistake here. F*ck my pride. Solus, I need your help!'

'Yes?' She answered timidly. Solus was afraid it was once again a butt call that would end shortly. Lith shared with her all the memories of the last 24 hours up to that point.

'By my maker, this is terrible!' Thanks to the mind link the events became part of her memory too in a split second.

'You are right, I too think that without the threat of the civil war we would be stuck in the background. The best way to get their attention is to tell them the truth, but with a few changes.'

Hearing her talk about them still using the "we", helped Lith to regain his cool, soothing his anguish. Solus pondered for a few seconds before answering.

'You must say that after your family dies, you will die too and so will the royal couple.' Solus said.

'What? Why?' Lith wasn't able to understand her reasoning.

'No time, Linjos is already calling for help, you have remained still for too long, please trust me on this.' Their mind link was fast, allowing the whole conversation to last just a couple of seconds, but they would still need the time to think.

"I'm all right, Headmaster." Lith noticed that both Linjos and the King seemed to be extremely worried.

"Good to hear." King Meron replied. "Bring Manohar here anyway. We need him to devise a new diagnostic spell for the infected students. He can also check on Lith while he is at it. Just to be safe."

Lith used those few moments to decide what to do.

'Please, explain your plan to me.' He asked while the King was still talking.

'Adding the death of the Royals after yours it's a double failsafe.

'After all, they know the vision shows what your soul craves the most. Putting the Royals in there while you are still alive would make you a suspect. If you die first, however, they will be forced to protect their investment, you.

'Also, if you are allegedly dead, they can only think that whoever will attempt to kill your family will come for them later, making it their problem too.'

Chapter 244 Bad News

Lith followed Solus's plan, describing the vision in great detail. For the made up part, he described the assailant as a shadow, just like for all the others. Death Vision provided him plenty of material about how the King would look like after having his throat cut.

"Damned dryad magic!" King Meron slammed his fist on the armrest.

"It gives us too little information. At least now we know that the civil war should not happen anymore and that we are safe until next spring."

Lith nodded. Knowing how much time he had left before the events in his vision could happen was at the same time a reason for worry and relief. It gave them a deadline but also an idea about their enemy.

There couldn't be many people capable of getting rid of the Queen's corps. Also, until the attack on the academy happened, Lith had no reason to worry. The problem was if they would be able to prevent it and how the future would change after that step.

When Professor Manohar and Marth arrived, they checked Lith's condition before examining Linjos.

"This is simply unbelievable." Marth said. "None of my diagnostic spells detects anything, but now that I know what to look for, it's easy to recognize the dampening effect of the toxins."

"Agreed." Manohar nodded while extracting the toxins from the Headmaster's body. "It's unbelievable that someone could miss such a blatant effect, be it the patient or the healer."

Linhos and Marth both ignored his remark. They knew that in Manohar's eyes any result but perfection was due to incompetence.

"Usually I wouldn't ask something like this, but are you sure you don't want to share your diagnostic spell, Lith?" Marth asked.

"It helped us greatly during the plague and now it has allowed to unveil a dangerous plot against all the academies. If it's as good as I think it is, you may as well be set for life with the profits you would make by selling it."

Marth needed sheer willpower to not let his frustration transpire, yet Lith was able to perceive it nonetheless. His jaw muscles were slightly tensed and there was an edge in his voice that was hard to miss with his enhanced senses.

'Poor guy, not only he has to deal with Manohar on daily basis, but now he also has to face the fact that despite being younger I'm already a better diagnostician than him thanks to Invigoration.' Lith thought.

'Yeah, you have become for Marth what he is for Vastor.' Lith had yet to cut the mind link off, in case something else happened, allowing Solus to indulge his company.

"Don't. If it's at least half as good as mine, it would be a disaster." Manohar said.

"You know why it's so hard to find a decent healer? Because mages just rote memorize everything without even trying to understand what a spell does and why. Healers are forced to be better than regular mages because illnesses change, new poisons are created, and many things are still unknown about the human body.

"If you share your spell, it will be great in the short term and a nightmare in the long term. Everyone will stop using that stone they call brain and rely on your spell for everything, while others, better paid and motivated, will exploit its limits.

"So, when a new threat will appear, your spell will be 100% useless and the so called healers will be helpless against it because out of practice."

An embarrassed silence befell into the room. It was hard to reply to Manohar's temper tantrums, but it was even harder when he actually said something wise. Lith exploited his help to politely refuse Marth's offer.

"Thanks for your offer, Professor Marth, but I think I will follow Professor Manohar's advice. It took me years to create it, so far it's my opus. It's not only a matter of money, but also prestige.

With it I'm the second best diagnostician in the Griffon Kingdom, without it I'd just be a student like all the others. Unlike Professor Manohar, I'm no genius."

King Meron sighed loudly. He knew Tyriss had sent Farg to look after Lith, but he didn't know why. Yet he was sure there had to be a good reason for it. He really wanted to get his hands on the diagnostic spell, but keeping Lith as an asset was much more important.

According to several witnesses, he had fought against a Valor. It was unknown what had happened, except that despite being alone and just a fourth year student he had survived and brought to safety another four people.

Adding that to all his past endeavors, his ability as Healer, Forgemaster and now Necromancer, he really was too good to be true. Queen Sylpha was even considering if to introduce the sixth and the seventh princesses to him.

They were too low in the hereditary line to be of political importance, so they could be used to ensure his loyalty to the Crown. King Meron didn't put much hope in the idea, though.

None of his daughters was a real beauty nor a seductress. They had taken much from their mother's temper and had yet to understand that their status of princesses would last only until a new King or Queen would be selected.

Their pride blinded them enough for them to find the idea of marrying a commoner disgusting. Another thing that heavily weighted on his mind was the meaning of the vision.

He knew that, albeit vague, a dryad's gift was as rare as trustworthy.

'I wonder how Lith's death will trigger mine and Sylpha's. Also, it's completely unclear if the events at the academy and the death of his family are related or even if they happen at the same time.

'Normally, I would just reinforce the White Griffon's security and wait for the events to play out, but now I have to protect Lutia as well. If his family dies, Lith could commit suicide making the vision come true. We must solve the issue with the toxins fast, so that when spring arrives, I can focus my forces on both tasks!' Meron thought.

"Gentlemen, we have no time for debating the magical research." King Meron said.

"Manohar, I need you to provide a diagnostic spell able to spot the toxins that anyone can use. Marth can help you, but Lith can't and no one else must be informed about today's events.

"We will only use royal healers and royal constables to control the situation. Lith's involvement must be kept hidden or belittled if found out. My hypothesis is that his family will be targeted because he discovered the plot against the academies.

"If I'm right, the attack on the White Griffon and on his family during next spring will happen by the same hand. Lith, you can return to your quarters. There's nothing you can do and it's better if you don't stay too long in the Headmaster's office. It could arouse too many questions."

Lith nodded and promptly left the room. Solus inwardly sighed, she knew what was about to happen.

'Before I go, do you mind if I give you an unsolicited piece of advice?' She asked.

Lith pondered for a while. On one hand he didn't want to cut the mind link, on the other one he was still far from forgiving her. Solus had been brilliant and useful as always, but her company was still bittersweet.

'You should talk to the others about the vision, they have the right to know. Based on what happened in the vision, it's not only Phloria who is going to die, but all of them.'

Lith was flabbergasted by her words.

'Do you remember the dryad's words? The vision shows what your soul cares the most for, so it's natural for it to cover your family and Phloria. She is the only friend you have left.'

Solus had enjoyed their reunion, but she had perceived the fracture between them. Lith needed her, she could sense his longing for her company and help, but it was more like an addict on withdrawal rather than the desire to be back together.

He still didn't trust her and whatever was going to happen to their relationship, Solus didn't want to be treated just like a commodity. She wanted for him to accept her like she did for him, with her flaws and mistakes.

'I think that whoever is behind the attack on the academy, will try to get their revenge on you by exploiting the chaos during the battle. Killing your group is relatively easy, if they get ambushed like you have seen happening to Phloria.'

'They'll attack you too, but you are likely to survive. Otherwise it would make no sense going after your family. You should warn Yurial and the others, because if I'm right, the only reason they didn't appear in your vision is because you don't care enough for them.'

'Thanks, Solus.' Lith nodded, closing the mind link. It was hard for him deciding what to do. If he told them that he had seen them dying in the vision, it would help their relationship, flattering them.

Yet if the King talked about the vision with the royal constables, Jirni was bound to learn about it. She would question why he omitted to tell the King about the threat pending on her other two daughters and would easily discover the lie.

Telling them the truth was his only option.

Lith used the communication amulet to reach them and ask them to come to his room. When they were assembled, he told them the truth about the young Tanash's condition before sharing with them the conversation with the Headmaster and the changes in his vision.

"So, the good news is no civil war and the bad news is that I'm going to die?" Phloria did her best to stay strong, but the thought of having a little more than three months to live was crushing her.

"No, you are wrong about the bad news." Lith corrected her, explaining to them Solus's reasoning about why the others didn't appear in the vision.

"I think all of us are going to die. I'm more likely to survive because of my paranoia. Backstabbing me is not that easy. You guys, on the contrary, are easy targets."

"Wait a minute!" Yurial blurted out.

"Thanks for caring enough to warn us but not enough to include us in your vision." His voice was oozing sarcasm.

"I think you are making a mistake though. No one can die in the academy. Do you remember what Lord Ernas told us? Isn't it more likely that whoever it is, will target only Phloria because of your relationship? Everyone knows about you two."

Yurial was worried about Phloria, but as much as he hated the thought of spending the rest of his life with Libea, he really hoped to live long enough to have children and maybe find love.

"Do you really think that none of us thought about that?" Lith sighed instead of scoffing. Thanks to the little time spent with Solus he was now able be less of a jerk.

"Attacking the academy is madness itself, unless it's an inside job from someone that knows to bypass its power core or forcing the arrays to shut down. Since the attack will happen, I'm pretty sure that Linjos will have the power core triple checked for tampering.

"It doesn't mean that the traitor can't sabotage or destroy it, though. If Balkor's minions managed to do it, then anyone with the proper knowledge can."

After the attack, the Crown had tried to keep the fall of the Crystal and Earth Griffon academies a secret, but it didn't last for long. Balkor had triumphantly spread the news himself.

Everyone refused to believe him until the academies reopened. Forging a new power core was a mammoth task at best, if not impossible at all. When the Crystal and Earth Griffon remained closed and their students transferred to other academies, it became impossible to deny the truth anymore.

Yurial and the girls turned pale, their sliver of hope shattered mercilessly. Phloria felt no joy at the idea that everyone in the room was a walking dead.

"What do we do now? Can we at least tell our parents?" Friya asked.

"I don't think so." Quylla felt her mouth dry. "Our communications can be intercepted. The King is doing his best to keep everything a secret, Lith shouldn't have talked about it even with us."

Quylla felt guilty for having spoken behind Lith's back in the past, questioning his real identity. Even though he suffered from mood swings and with his not so nice character, he would never let them down.

Yurial and Friya felt the same, but their guilt was quickly overruled by the fear of the tomorrow. One after the other, they left the room after thanking Lith and promising they would not talk about it except that in person.

Only Phloria remained behind. Lith had held her hand the whole time. His grip was firm but gentle, letting her understand there was something he needed to talk with her.

'I waited all this time for a chance to know what's going on with him and Lith decides to open up right now? I don't know if to be flattered by his consideration or angry for his horrible timing.'

Phloria thought.

Chapter 245 Clarity

"First of all, let me say that I'm sorry. If it wasn't for me, you and the others wouldn't have a target painted on your back." Lith said while holding her hand and caressing it with his thumb.

"If you want, you guys can escape from this sh*t. Avoid the academy for the first trimester or ask the Headmaster to attend the fifth year after the threat is passed. I don't think he'll have any objections."

"What about you?" Phloria asked.

"I have to stay." He shrugged. "Whether the attack succeeds or not, my family will be the next in line anyway. At least from here I can do my best to help Linjos and maybe take out the traitors before something else happens. I'm the only one that knows when and how the future changes. I need to inform the Headmaster as soon as it happens."

Phloria bit her lower lip, full of uncertainty. Lith was right, she and her sisters had an easy way out of that situation. Until they remained at house Ernas or near their parents, they would be safe.

"Also, you can greatly improve your odds of survival simply by cutting your ties with me."

"What?" Phloria had to fight to prevent herself from slapping him for saying such a thing and herself for seriously considering it, even though for just a second.

"No matter how discreet the King is. My visit to house Tanash is public knowledge and when the investigation starts, it doesn't take a genius to notice the timing of the events. Between the plague and this I have made too many enemies.

It's better if we break up. Possibly in a public place and in front of lots of witnesses."

"Do you want to break up?" The little blood she had left in her face was drained, making her turn even paler, her stomach twisted into a knot.

"I don't want to..." Lith shook his head.

"But it's the best thing for you. Do you remember our talk, that night when I was recovering? I think it's time for us to seriously discuss about this thing between us. I don't plan to marry anytime soon."

Lith had promised Jirni to make things clear with Phloria about their relationship and he decided it was the right moment to do it. It was the only way he could think of for protecting her.

"I have lots of things to do. First the military, then some stuff that I don't want to burden you with. I don't know how long will it take and I can't ask you to wait for me. It would be stupid and unfair. You deserve someone better, someone that can give you what you want, that has your same goals in life."

Lith never stopped looking at her in the eyes. He wanted Phloria to understand how serious he was.

Those words struck her hard enough to make Phloria stop, thinking carefully about what to say next.

'Lith is right, I can easily get away. I asked him out only because I wanted to have at least a boyfriend before joining the Royal Guard and risking my life on a daily basis. It started almost as a joke, yet now I feel terrible at the thought this might be our last month together.

'I don't want to marry either. There are still so many things that I want to experience, so many places I want to visit. Yet I think that will come for me the time to settle down.' She thought.

"I have first to consult with my parents before giving you a definitive answer." Phloria took his hand between hers.

"This much I can tell you for sure: I don't want to break up."

"What?" Lith was flabbergasted. Her devotion was way beyond his expectations.

"You know, when we aren't in a life or death situation and I can think clearly about us, I still don't know exactly what I feel. What I'm certain about, is that I care for you like I never did before for someone outside of my family.

"Be it when I emotionally needed help after the second exam, or when the undead first and the Clackers later could have killed me, you never left my side. Every time we were in danger, you could have run away by yourself.

Instead, you always protected our group. You always protected me." She caressed his cheek, leaving Lith as stunned as outraged.

'Like heck I did! I was simply protecting my investment, otherwise I wouldn't have saved Yurial or the other girls. I never cared for any of them in the past. I took a liking to Phloria only after we started to date. It's only their fault if they have fallen so deep for my deception to picture me like some f*cking hero.' Lith thought.

'Maybe she is right, though. Maybe now I do care for the group. I risked my life for them more often than any "investment" justifies. I simply can't admit with myself that I see them as persons because I'm scared of getting hurt again. The more people I love, the more I have to lose, just like it happened with Protector first and now with Solus.

'If I tell her the truth about the past, she will either despise me and everything I fought for a whole year will be for naught or she will not believe me, thinking I'm just trying to push her away.

'Either way, I'm screwed. It's a lose-lose scenario. Let's hope her parents force her to take a sabbatical. I already have so little, I don't want to risk losing the person I care about the most in the academy.'

"Even now, despite knowing what could happen to you or your family, you are still worrying about me instead of running back home to warn them. I'm truly blessed by the gods." Phloria smile was dazzling, but it only managed to piss Lith off even more.

'How the heck did she manage to make everything about her in less than twenty seconds? Does she think life is some kind of romance fiction?'

"I came to you because you guys are the only ones I can speak to in person. Also, just like for the old vision, there is nothing that my family can do to protect themselves or avoid the predicted outcome." He explained.

"Warning them would only make them live what could be the last months of their lives in fear. I don't plan on telling them anything about the second vision. Whatever it's going to happen, it's my burden, not theirs."

His words fell on deaf ears. Instead of understanding the logic behind his actions, Phloria only focused on how brave and stoic Lith appeared to be. She hugged him tightly, making his annoyance peak.

Yet his irritation lasted only for a moment.

It was how long it took Lith to realize how bad his situation was. Her warmth and affection destroyed the layer of frost surrounding his soul.

"I think you should tell them the truth. All the secrets you keep to yourself, all the burden you refuse to share, sooner or later they will crush you. You don't have to always fight alone. The whole world isn't your enemy.

"I don't know what has happened to you at the mining town and if you don't want to talk about it, I'm okay with that. However, I can see that you are in deep pain. Please, don't shut me out of your life like you did since you came back. Just tell me what can I do for you."

Now that Phloria had got a hold of him, she wasn't willing to let Lith slip away again. Ever since Solus came clean with him, Lith had been confused about his feelings. He needed someone to talk to, but until that moment, he felt like he was alone in the world.

"It was all a lie." Lith blurted out, returning her embrace.

"Protector is alive. He, Kalla, even the Lord of the forest manipulated me to teach me a lesson!" In his rage, he tightened his grip enough to hurt her, making Phloria yelp in pain.

"Please, calm down and tell me everything from the beginning."

Lith told her the truth about that night, how he had failed saving Protector and how they both survived only thanks to the Scorpicores' intervention. He even repeated her word by word Protector's speech before he had left.

Lith let Solus's role out, pretending that his outrage was aimed at Protector and that he had forced Kalla to tell him the truth after discovering Protector's missing corpse in the mass grave.

Phloria went pale more than once, but never interrupted his story, waiting for Lith to calm down.

"Can you believe it? After all we went through, he had the gall to let me suffer like that and calling it an act of love!" He wished to meet Protector again, just to give him the beating of a lifetime.

Phloria remained silent, while he kept cursing Protector's name and expressing his outrage for having been manipulated. After a while, Lith was tired of hearing only his own voice, so he turned towards Phloria noticing her distress.

"Why you say nothing? Don't tell me you agree with him." Lith really wanted to punch the wall, but scaring the only person he had left sounded as a d*ck move even to him.

"I understand you are angry. You have every right to be and I don't want to make you any angrier. I think it's better for me to leave."

She stood up, but Lith grabbed her hand.

"Please, I trusted him with my life. I don't know what to believe anymore, just be honest with me. I don't want to be coddled, I need the truth."

Phloria held his hand, caressing it with hers.

"Promise me not to get angry."

"I promise." Lith gritted his teeth, her words didn't bode well.

"I completely agree with him." Lith took a few deep breaths before calming down. He didn't yell, didn't punch anything, he even managed to keep his hand relaxed.

"Why?" He asked after he was able to speak again.

"Are you serious? In his shoes, I wouldn't have lied to you, I would have strangled you with my own hands as soon as you recovered! At least now you know how he, or anyone else that cares for you, would have felt if you traded your life for theirs."

Lith started to feel like a jerk. He knew how crushing the death of a beloved one could be. His new life started because of the domino effects Carl's demise had triggered.

"Also, it's rich coming from you. Accusing someone to be a liar. You lied to your family over the years for the gods know how many times about almost everything. You lied to me countless times too.

"About your strength, the mysterious brother of yours you fought so hard to protect, about how the heck you come back always in one piece even if your uniform gets wrecked so often that it's scary. I don't know why you do it and I'm still waiting for you to tell me the truth.

"What you are experiencing is how your family felt when they discovered all your lies. How I may feel if and when you decide to be honest with me. Yet they didn't love you any less for it, because you did it to protect them, to give them a better life.

"I think you owe Protector a second chance, he just played a Lith on you. By the way, I don't care if you are a dragon in disguise, I still care for you." She quickly gave him a peck before running away, leaving Lith stunned.

Her speech made a lot of sense, only the last phrase was beyond his understanding.

'If Phloria reacted like that, I'm afraid what mom or Tista would say if they knew the truth.' Lith thought.

'She is right though. Me complaining about being manipulated is like Nana preaching about generosity. Even when I open myself to someone, about half I say is a lie. I wonder what Carl would have said if he ever learned what really happened to our father.

Would he hate me for what I did or would he just resent me for hiding the truth from him and shouldering everything by myself?'

Lith pondered for a while about the whole situation before deciding that moral dilemmas could wait. He needed to study for the following day's lessons and to devise contingency plans for whatever could happen to the academy the next spring.

Soon he found himself wishing to have Solus's input, but his rage was still too strong. Lith couldn't call her for help twice during the same day. It would be like admitting with her and even more importantly with himself that he was ready to forgive her.

From the following day, elite units from the army and the Mage Association covertly examined and cleansed the various academies' staff members and their students. Even without a proper diagnostic spell, the purifying one Marth had devised against the anti-mana parasites would still work.

It turned out that Linjos wasn't the only one that had been poisoned. All the Headmasters that followed his protocol had suffered the same fate and with them many of the Professors that fought against the waves of Balkor's undead.

Even if there was no proof of their involvement, the surviving staff members of the fallen Earth and Crystal Griffon academies were quietly arrested for treason. Royal constables interrogated them only to discover that their only crime was pursuing their own political agenda rather than their students' best interests.

Soon it became clear that the culprit wasn't someone at the top of the food chain, but someone at its very bottom.

Chapter 246 Rankings

Being the last trimester, the students of the White Griffon academy weren't going to receive hidden report cards anymore. They would be ranked according to their grades, letting everyone in the Kingdom know about their performance.

The royal decree that called off the third exam made many youths desperate. Cooperation suddenly had no value. Extra points had unexpectedly become more valuable than platinum, turning friend against friend and brother against sister.

Everyone would walk the extra mile trying to score as many as possible during the last two weeks, hoping to improve their ranking even if by just one position. Classes and corridors turned into battlefields, following the principle that attack is the best form of defense.

During the practical lessons, sabotaging one own's neighbors was elevated to a form of art, while any student walking alone, no matter the time of the day, was bound to be attacked.

Lith barely noticed such inconveniences. While performing the morning rounds for the Healer specialization, his only companions were the members of his group.

During the Magica Crystals classes, Professor Farg proved to have a frightening keen eye and a ruthless personality. She beat the students at their own game.

As soon as she understood what was happening, anyone she caught not working on their gemstone without a good explanation would lose some points. A couple of students attempted a coordinated attack.

One of them would ask for the Professor's help while the other used an almost invisible wind blow to shake their opponent's hands at a critical moment in the cutting process.

The result was for both being busted, losing twenty points each that were given to their victim as compensation.

No one dared to make a move against Lith during the Forgemaster lessons.

He had always been the teacher's pet, but since his visit to house Tanash, Professor Wanemyre had showered him with so much praise and attention that rumor spread the two of them were having an affair.

Unbeknownst to the public, Wanemyre was part of Linjos's inner circle, so she knew about the anti-mana toxin and had also been one of its victims. Like many of her colleagues, she had believed her poor physical condition to be a consequence of Balkor's attack.

She was still grieving many friends and the long-lasting effects from the undead's venom only made her feel worse. Wanemyre had suffered both personally and professionally, most of her latest creations were what she could only grade as "cr*p".

After being cleansed from the anti-mana toxin, her magical prowess and Forgemastering skill returned. Wanemyre knew it was all thanks to Lith. Between the feeling of gratitude and the desire to find the ones that caused her so much suffering, even glaring at her favorite student was enough to make her deduct points.

Between lessons, things would get more up close and personal. Lith being without a Ballot was public knowledge. Several people were desperate and angry enough to give it a shot.

Forty clean fractures, twenty-four comminuted fractures, a dozen concussions, seven punctured lungs, and several ruptured spleens forced Linjos's hand to reveal the rankings ahead of schedule.

Much to the Headmaster's dismay, Lith had long stopped holding back, so his assailants were clogging the wards of the academy's hospital on a daily basis.

Be them Professors or medical staff, after learning how their patients received those injuries, the healers would just stabilize their conditions and give them the lowest priority, forcing them to waste almost a whole day in bed before administering them a sloppy treatment.

Enough to release them but not enough to allow them to perform well in their daily activities. The Light magic department looked after their own and was capable of holding quite a grudge.

One week before the end of the last term, Lith was summoned in the Headmaster's office along with Friya and Yurial. None of them had any idea about what was happening.

When they walked through the door, they found that Archmage Deirus and the Ernas couple were waiting for them together with Linjos. A wave of the Headmaster's hand made three new chairs appear.

Yurial and Friya sat near their parents while Lith was alone. He didn't like it one bit.

"This is highly improper, Linjos." Lady Ernas said.

"Where are Mage Lith's parents? Shouldn't they be present too? I don't know why you requested our presence, but it's easy to assume it must be important."

Lith and Archmage Deirus nodded in unison.

"It is. The reason why you are here is to make your children behave." Linjos explained.

"Lith has proved himself to be reliable and discreet more than once. His parents, however, due to their simple life in the countryside could be more of a liability than helpful. No offense, Lith."

"None taken." He replied while trying to read Linjos. He seemed to be nervous, if not embarrassed. Lith couldn't feel any hostility or bad news incoming, which made him even more curious.

"The situation at hand requires confidentiality. As you all know, the rankings are about to be disclosed. To avoid information leaks, this time I had the Professors report directly to me.

"Each student's grades have been converted into points, allowing to add them to the extra points gained during the daily evaluations and the exams' results." Linjos handed them a piece of paper each.

It was a list of the students in ascending order according to their points value.

Lith was ranked first, with 19,481 points, Friya was second with 10,276 points and Yurial third with 9,742 points. Phloria and Quylla were respectively sixteenth with 8,832 points and fourteenth with 9,156 points.

Lith could feel many eyes on him. Jirni, Yurial, and Friya were grinning, while Orion and Archmage Deirus had their mouths almost touching the floor from the surprise.

"Being second place is not that bad." Friya said. "I don't get it why Lith has almost doubled my score, though. I know he performed better than me, but this much? Does the ranking include the spell he shared?"

"No..." Linjos shook his head. "but it does take into account his contribution as medical staff during the plague and... the most recent events. Every meritorious act a student performs gets properly rewarded. Based on his academic results only, Lith's score would be 12,235 points."

Friya felt a tinge of envy ruining her moment and so did Yurial. They had hoped the gap was due to Lith's services to the Kingdom and the academy rather than skill. Two thousand points were an abyss compared to how close the rest of the scores were.

"It doesn't matter since no one will ever know." A snap of Linjos's fingers and the papers turned into dust.

"I wouldn't have shown you any of it if I wasn't aware of your good relationship and of how you shared your previous grades. To do what it must be done I need your cooperation. This is what will get released to the public in about an hour."

Linjos's desk projected a hologram in the middle of the room, displaying the rankings. There were only two differences with the previous one. Lith's and Yurial's scores were swapped, turning the top three as following: 1) Yurial Deirus: 10,353 2) Friya Ernas: 10,276 3) Lith from Lutia: 10,125.

"What does this mean?" Yurial and Friya blurted out, while Lith's eyes burned with mana out of anger before he understood what was happening.

"Are you doing this for political reasons?" Lith asked.

"Yes." Linjos nodded. "After the Griffon Kingdom went inches from a civil war that spread poison, corruption, and traitors deep inside even the most loyal institutions to the Crown, after Balkor, we cannot afford any more internal strife.

"A grassroot commoner reaching the top spot in any academy is unheard of. It would cause problems to any Headmaster, let alone someone like me that's already a controversial figure. It would raise all the wrong questions and countless suspicions.

"They would say that's just another ploy from the Queen to belittle the ancient noble families and turn the embers of the revolt into a fire once again. This way, instead, we'll strengthen the Queen's new policies.

"Lord Deirus's first place will make the new magical bloodlines happy, Lady Friya's second place so close to the first will make easier for the nobles to accept that you 'ranked' third. Do you have any questions?"

After being cleansed from the toxin, Linjos had regained his incarnate and strength, but he still appeared to be deadly tired. He had deep set eyes, unable to hide the sadness that lied within his heart.

'I never liked Lith much, but this is just bullsh*t.' Linjos thought.

'I became a Headmaster to change things for the better from the inside, not to be forced by politics to strip a student from their achievements just to please some old fogeys. For every battle that I win, there are two more that I lose.'

"Does this mean that I'll lose my points? Also, is there some prize for being first or second that the third doesn't get?" Being third was already bad for Lith's plans. He had hoped to be in the lowest positions of the top ten.

'The higher I get, the more trouble I will find. I don't give a damn about being third, fifth or even twentieth, as long as I keep my points and prizes. It's the only way I have to acquire magical equipment.' Lith thought.

"Of course you will not lose any point!" Linjos raised his voice, outraged by the simple idea of it.

"The total amount is unchanged, but only those present in this room will know the truth. Whatever you need to exchange them for, will be presented as a gift from the Crown for your services. As for the prizes, there is none. The honor of being first it's its own prize, along with the glory and fame it entails."

Lith had a hard time repressing a scoff.

"I'm fine with this decision." Lith said.

"Well, I'm not!" Yurial jumped off his chair, the pride for his achievement already fading away.

"I wanted to be first, but not like this. It's unfair as much as demeaning. How can I watch myself in the mirror knowing that it's only a lie? I refuse to be a puppet! Give the first place to Friya if she wants it and the second to Lith at least."

Linhos sighed deeply before answering.

"Young man, this isn't a request. It's an order from the Crown. I'm not asking for your permission. I wouldn't have told you any of this if not for the fact that by knowing your respective grades you can easily discover the truth.

"You have no idea how mathematically creative I had to get to fix the scores using only the third trimester points. Someone inside the academy leaked all the report cards, otherwise I would have put Lith even lower and have this talk with him only."

"House Ernas has no objection." Orion actually would have liked to say many things, but as a soldier, he knew that orders had to be followed not discussed. He turned towards his wife, who winked at him with a smug expression.

'She clearly knows what the little monster did to get all those points. It must be something important if she isn't allowed to discuss it even with me.'

Archmage Deirus was embarrassed by his son's behavior. He could understand Yurial's outrage, he was the one that had taught him to never take shortcuts and only rely on hard work.

As the heir of House Deirus, though, he had to learn how to play ball, even when it was nasty.

"House Deirus has no objection either." Velan Deirus clenched Yurial's shoulder, preventing him to say any more.

"Excellent." Linjos replied. "Congratulations on your well-earned second place, Lady Friya. Despite you went through a lot this year, your outstanding performance in dimensional magic and healer classes makes us all proud."

The Headmaster shook her hand, his words stabbed Yurial's heart deeply.

"You are the best healer we have got since Manohar enrolled." Linjos shook Lith's hand too, handing him a pristine white pin the size of a button, shaped like a rampant white griffon with the number four etched on its surface.

"The six great academies specialize in one element each. Ours is light magic. This pin identifies you like the top of the fourth year Healer specialization, the crown jewel of our institution.

"No one can take such achievement away from you. I can guarantee you that next year things will be different. If you achieve again the first spot, you'll be allowed to keep it."

Lith nodded, storing the pin away and explaining to Linjos how he intended to invest most of his points. There was something he had set his eyes on for a long time, but with the official ranking alone he wouldn't be able to afford it.

"Don't let this ruse ruin your moment, young Deirus." The Headmaster shook Yurial's hand for last, giving him a pin identical to the one Lith received but made of gold instead of moonstone.

"Your real score surpasses those of most students that ranked first in the past, it's something to be proud of. All your Professors speak fondly of you and expect great things from you in the future."

Yurial smiled, while his hand clenched the gold pin so hard that it would have turned into a crumpled ball if not for its protective enchantment.

'Who the heck cares about my score compared to the past? This pin means nothing. I would have never gotten such a score without Lith's and Quylla's private lessons. Quylla deserves it much more than me. Despite having only one specialization, she achieved an insane number of points.'

Yurial's heart was reduced to shreds, all the insecurities that he had fought so hard to keep at bay overwhelmed him to the point that he could feel the weight of the tranquilizer flask in his pocket burning through his clothes, calling on him like a siren.

Chapter 247 Repor

Once the matter of the rankings was settled, only Jirni Ernas remained inside Linjos's office.

"The results of the investigation on the academies' staff is unsettling. It seems that whoever is behind the anti-mana toxins played both sides. They used the rivalry between the old noble households and the new magical bloodlines to recruit members from both factions and escalate the internal struggle into a civil war.

"As for the poisoning, the method employed was as simple as effective. They administered the toxin in the meals. The targets were only those who belonged to the most vocal families loyal to the Crown but that lacked the resources to request the help of any of the great healers involved in the plague.

"It was likely meant to make the young mages lose their rankings, if not fail completely their exams in order to cripple their opponents' status and political relevance inside the Royal Court."

"How could they achieve such capillary control?" Linjos had already realized by himself most of Jirni's report, but he still couldn't believe it had happened right under his nose.

"Easy, they contacted and corrupted several members of the canteen's staff. They seem to have handpicked them one by one, choosing only those that suffered from financial troubles or had a deep grudge against the Crown.

"You should know that working for one of the six big academies is considered an honour. Yet it doesn't prevent staff members who belong to noble households from treating with disrespect mages of commoner origin, while those of humble origins resent the nobles for treating them like cattle.

"Both get usually very pissed seeing so much power and money passing right under their noses, yet not having access even to the crumbs of the system. I think you should consider changing the work condition of the non magical staff too.

"The information leaks, the poisoning, everything that has happened wouldn't have been possible if the academy system wasn't already rotten from the start."

"Who provided the toxin and when did they start administering it to Professors and Headmasters?" Linjos pondered about Jirni's words. No one had ever stopped considering how much power and knowledge the student secretariat actually held.

Grades, points records, purchases, those people that had always been regarded as low level bureaucrats had complete access to the personal information about every resident of the academy, from their addresses to the security details.

Just the thought of how much work he had ahead of himself was enough to give Linjos a splitting headache.

"That's where our investigation was abruptly stopped. The corrupted officials gave away the names of their recruiters to spare their families from capital punishment, but they turned out to be strawmen. Once we apprehended them, the recruiters had no idea who they were working for.

"As for the toxins, they were delivered through several drop spots that changed every time. All of them were located in trash bins inside common areas, so anyone could put them in place. Students, administrative staff, even Professors.

"Alas, after our investigation started the deliveries stopped. Either someone from the inside leaked the information or more likely they noticed how many people were being detained and interrogated. An operation of this scale can't remain hidden for long."

Jirni didn't like facing smart opponents. She preferred the dumb and self-entitled kind that provided open-and-shut cases. So far, she hadn't spotted a single mistake on their side.

If not for the Kandria's incident triggering the plague, no one would have even thought such wonder of Alchemy was possible. Even after Lith found the box, the authorities wouldn't pay him any attention if not for the dryad's gift.

Last, but not least, without Duke Tanash determination in getting help for his son, everything would have kept going according to the enemy plan. Jirni could not help but think that the small victories they had scored so far were all because of luck and coincidences.

Luck was something she couldn't control or interrogate, hence it was one of the things she hated the most.

"They started poisoning the magical staff only after Balkor's message was revealed and stopped immediately after the situation was resolved. I think it was a long shot plan, hoping to use the god of death to get rid of the academies.

"Officially, such a move would have harmed both factions at the same time, so it doesn't make any sense.

"Off the record, I think that whoever planned these events doesn't care at all about who profits from the struggle. They want to deal as much damage as possible to the Griffon Kingdom. I suspect that even Lukart was just a pawn.

"A narrow-minded idiot is the perfect frontman. Easy to take out of the picture in case of success, easy to pin all the blame on in case of failure."

"Basically we got nothing." Linjos sighed.

"No, quite the contrary." Jirni replied.

"We have discovered a massive corruption system, cleansed the academies from the traitorous scum and foiled at least part of the enemy plan. Not to mention that several good mages will have a second chance at the academy, strengthening the future of the Kingdom.

We haven't won the war, but we aren't losing it either. Considering the amount of time and resources that our opponents invested, even achieving a draw is actually a success for us. Stay on your toes, this is far from over. A cornered enemy is the most dangerous one."

Jirni gave the Headmaster a small bow before leaving the office. Unlike Deirus, since she was already at the White Griffon, she had no hurry to leave. She could as well pay a visit to her daughters and congratulate them for their achievements.

'One achieved second place and the other two reached the top twenty despite having only one specialization. House Ernas is bound to have a bright future, but only if I manage to keep all the girls alive.'

Meanwhile, in Phloria's room Lith and Orion were sharing the good news with the rest of the group. Yurial remained silent most of the time, the golden pin felt to him more like a stigma than something to be proud of.

"This is bullsh*t!" Phloria was enraged enough to yell.

"Since when the academies have to bend the knee to political interests? This is just unfair!"

"Life it's unfair by nature." Lith shrugged. "The key is making it unfair to your advantage."

"How does getting stripped of your rank and title work to your advantage?" She scoffed.

"First, being third means the target on my back gets much smaller. The points gap with the others in the top 20 is low, so they'll think that if instead of bothering me they work harder, they may be able to catch up with me."

"You wouldn't have been attacked so often if you stuck with us like before!" Phloria scolded him, but Lith ignored her words.

"Second, I didn't lose a single point. Yurial gets the glory and fame he always wanted while I can go home a week earlier. Everybody wins. By the way, have you thought about what I said? Will you guys delay attending the fifth year?"

"I wish!" Yurial snorted. "My father never believed in visions and prophecies, so convincing him to push back all of his plans for one more year was already hard. As soon as he saw the rankings, he immediately changed his mind."

"He says that backing down for no reason would make him lose a lot of face and stir too many questions." Yurial still couldn't believe his father would place the pride of the house above his only son's safety.

"Don't be too harsh on your old man, kid." Orion sighed.

"The vision is top secret and has to stay that way. There is no way to justify any of you taking a year break, especially after such outstanding performances. There's no illness that the White Griffon can't cure, so 'getting sick' is off the table."

"A family crisis that needs kids to be resolved would turn any big household into a laughing stock. Many students do not return home even if their parents die, the academy is deemed too important."

"I could ask for Phloria to be transferred into another academy, she is the only one that was clearly harmed in the vision, but again, there is no plausible excuse. It would appear like we are punishing her for her 'low score' or that we disagree with Linjos's methods."

Either way, it would make us look bad in the Court's eyes."

"Are you really going to have them attend?" Lith was genuinely worried.

"It makes no sense, they could die!"

"Thanks for worrying about me." Yurial snorted.

"I do, but I can't argue with your father since he already left. He's an a*s. In his shoes, I would keep you home. You are not only his son, but also the only heir of your house."

"You are damn right I am!" Yurial slammed his fist on Phloria's desk.

"Do you know what he said to me before leaving? Son, I receive death threats on a daily basis. If I had to hide and cower every time I get one, I should never get out of bed."

"What a d*ck!" The girls said as one.

"He is right though." Orion patted Yurial's shoulder, trying to comfort him.

"Jirni and I, but especially Jirni, receive so many death threats we have lost count of them. During winter, we use the old ones to light the fireplace. Also, Phloria wants to join my corps, the Knight's Guard, since she was five."

"I still want to."

"Then you have to get used to such things. At least you have an idea of the when and how it could happen. It's more than I have ever known every time I risked my life during a mission."

"I still think it's stupid making them stay." Lith scoffed. "Losing a year is no big deal, especially for Quylla. She can use that time to learn etiquette, court manners, and everything she needs to live as a noble. As for the others, with all that happened, a break can only do them some good."

"What about you?" Orion retorted. He wasn't happy with that decision either, but defying a direct order from the King was impossible. Not even Jirni's accumulated royal pardons could allow such a thing. It would be considered an act of high treason, something way worse than murder.

So, he had to obey. Lith's words were just salt being spread on his injuries.

"Are you taking a year break? Because what you said about Quylla applies to you as well. You could defend your family, instead of worrying from distance."

"I'm staying because the sequence of events that will lead to the massacre of Lutia will start here. Only by remaining I can make sure that whatever the enemy is planning will fail, or at least timely call for help to prevent things from escalating.

"Also, my death should happen after my family's, while Phloria's should take place during the attack on the academy. I have no reason to hide, not to mention that I too don't plan living behind a desk in the future.

"I faced death enough times that I'm not scared at the idea of facing a mortal threat as much of remaining alone. If I were to lose you guys and my family, there would be nothing left for me in this world. I can already see me turning into a mad beast hungry for revenge and with no future ahead."

Orion sighed, he understood Lith's point of view. It was the same for him. Honour, loyalty to the Crown, his career. Without his family, it would all be meaningless.

"I don't want to get caught in the mess that will ensue when the rankings will be revealed. I'm going to pack my stuff and go home. It will be a busy winter for me. I have a lot of things to practice and even more to Forgemaster.

I hope to see you all for my birthday." Lith said looking at Phloria. He could only hope that Orion would keep his word and give him the Gatekeeper bastard sword as a present.

Chapter 248 Report 2

"I wouldn't miss your birthday for the world." Unbeknownst to her, Phloria was the only one truly happy for the invite.

If not for the enchanted sword, Lith wouldn't care for his own birthday, let alone inviting people to a party he was the first to be happy to avoid.

He had yet to find a way to salvage his relationship with Solus. Between that and Death Vision still haunting him, Lith wanted to be left alone with his family. Not to mention that having guests was a problem for him.

Despite all the renovations it had undergone, Lith's home was too small for hosting a decent birthday party, even by Earth standards. Rena and Trion had already moved out. Whenever he was at Lutia, Lith spent most of the time outside, doing the gods knew what.

Raaz and Elina had no reason to further expand the house, it would only make the maintenance more expensive. It had never been a problem before since Lith had no friends to invite aside from Selia.

Lutia's harsh winters prevented even Nana to reach their home, or at least so she used to say. Lith suspected she hated birthdays even more than him and used old age as an excuse to avoid wasting her time with the risk of missing customers.

Ever since he had helped Count Lark to survive his ex-wife plot, he forced Lith to have two different parties, though. One at home, only for the family and another at Count Lark's manor.

The Larks were his patrons, so Lith had no way to avoid the issue. He had no love for festivities, but he appreciated the Count's company and the support he provided for his family.

That year was already bound to be even more problematic since the Count and Marchioness Distar were his sponsors with the academy.

Lith was certain they would push him to celebrate his third place in the overall ranking and first place among the healers. Thanks to the two nobles providing the location and banquet, Lith deemed there would be no problem adding a few more guests to the list.

Friya and Quylla were still a bit offended with him for his recent rude attitude, but after all, they had gone through together, they were happy for the invite. The girls were also very curious to visit his birthplace.

Yurial nodded, inwardly cursing at his own bad luck. He didn't know how to face Lith's parents and friends without apologizing for having robbed his friend of his rightful status.

He wanted to avoid all the congratulations and niceties his status as first ranked involved as long as possible. In that moment, Yurial was so nauseated by his situation to be on the verge of puking.

Everyone but Orion left the room. They were all eager to leave, but first they needed to return to their respective rooms and pack their stuff.

Phloria wanted to say goodbye to Lith properly, away from her father's eyes, instead.

Jirni entered Phloria's room while she was still absent. Orion used that opportunity to speak with his wife freely.

"Do you think we should force Lith and Phloria to break up? Putting some distance between them could avoid her from taking unnecessary risks. For the same reason it may be better if once the fifth year begins, our girls avoid associating with him.

Lith is not a bad kid, but right now first place or not, he is a liability."

Jirni was already pondering about what to do next since she learned about the dryad's gift. She was aware of how much Lith had done for her family, but Orion's proposal sounded logical. It was the safest option they could take.

"I understand what you mean and I'm glad of your decisiveness, but I don't think it's a good idea. First, we can't give orders to Lith and neither to Phloria. She has consulted us because we are her parents, but remember that in less than six months our little Flower will become an adult.

You know she inherited your stubbornness. Making demands will only make things worse. She could simply refuse, if not even leave house Ernas. Antagonizing her now will only earn us her contempt and the further she gets from us, the harder protecting her will become.

Also, how are you going to make sure they actually break up? Are you going to move into Phloria's room?"

Orion had to inwardly admit his idea wasn't as good as he had initially thought. They had been aware for months of Phloria's intention of leaving her household in case they attempted to force her into an arranged marriage.

That was the reason why a few months prior Orion had threatened Jirni to divorce from her. Their friends had warned them about Phloria's asking for the necessary papers to get emancipated from her parents.

"As for avoiding associating with Lith, I'm afraid that would be another major blunder. He has proven to be an invaluable help for the girls, both academically and as a protector. Not to mention that you too have seen his score.

If next year he gets first again, commoner or not, flocks of nobles will try to earn his favors. If we do as you propose, not only we would be ungrateful but also appear as fair-weather friends. I understand you are worried about our little Flower and so am I, but don't let fear get to your head.

Only by sticking with him when he needs us, we will get his gratitude. Also, there is the possibility that the threat to Phloria's life has nothing to do with him. She could just be collateral damage or the target of a revenge on me or you.

So far Lith did quite a good job keeping her alive, I don't see why this time it should be any different."

"Why do you care so much for him?" Orion still wasn't convinced.

"Because these are chaotic times. Kings and Queens come and go and if we want for house Ernas to outlive them we need power. Why do you think I was so eager to adopt the girls? I wouldn't be surprised if the Court forced the current royals to abdicate. They have made too big of a mess."

Orion nodded with a sigh, recognizing the truth in Jirni's words. He was grateful to Lith for all he had done and respected him deeply. Yet Orion couldn't help but be afraid for his daughters.

Griffon Kingdom, Royal Palace. Inside Tyris's Lair.

Amyla Farg, the newest recruit among the secret unit called the Queen's Corpse, had not reported to her one true master, Lady Tyris until the end of the academy's third trimester. Her undercover role as Professor took away most of her time, plus she still couldn't make sense of what she had witnessed.

Farg kept an eye on Lith for weeks, searching for more clues about his true nature and the threat he could pose, but with no success. If not for what she had witnessed in the forest, Farg would think of him nothing more than what his personal file stated.

Lith was considered a dangerous yet talented individual. The Court was still debating what to do with him. So far, he had proved to be manageable, but his loyalty to the kingdom was shallow at best.

After the help he had provided during the plague outbreak, the unanimous consent was that unless proven otherwise, he was worth the risk of letting him live. The Court hoped that marrying him into a noble household would put him on a leash for good.

After the fight between Awakened Ones, Farg wasn't so sure it was such a good idea.

She had many unanswered questions, so she used that time to mull them over. Getting an audience with Lady Tyris was a rare event even for the King himself. That was the reason why she didn't submit her report until now.

When Tyris imparted orders, they had to be executed at once leaving no space for discussion. Only when one was required to give a report or was granted an audience, they may have the opportunity to ask questions.

'Since I risk getting stuck with brats for a whole year, I better make good use of this chance and try to understand as much as I can about Awakened ones. I don't know when or if I'll get the opportunity to speak with the master again in the near future.

'This might be my only opportunity to learn from her for the gods know how long and I don't know how many questions she'll allow me. I must make them count!' Farg thought.

As soon as she walked through the double stone door, Farg's body froze in fear. Every hair on her neck stood up, her instincts screaming at her to beware of the danger ahead. Something was wrong with the underground throne room.

Instead of being dimly lighted as usual, everything was bright as daylight, allowing Farg to notice black stains of blood on the floor and columns. Near each stain, there was a small crater from which departed several cracks.

Farg needed but a glance to recognize the signs of a struggle. She knew how powerful were the defenses in the lair, yet the invaders had managed to smash some of the stone armors decorating the room, damaging even the thousand years old tapestries.

Before she could understand what had happened, a sudden flash almost blinded her. The light was followed by a shockwave, like thunder after a bolt of lightning.

Farg used earth fusion to protect herself, conjuring a barrier with spirit magic a split second later. Yet the force of the impact was enough to push her several meters back with one knee on the ground, the air squeezed out of her lungs.

A second was all she had before a second flash appeared. Bracing herself for what she knew was about to come, Farg strengthened the barrier. This time she managed to stand her ground, but the effort took a toll on her.

After a third and a fourth shockwave, she finally realized that the flashes had a precise rhythm.

'Could this be just a heartbeat?' The surprise faded away quickly.

Farg brushed off the panic that had paralyzed her until that moment, taking the whole room into account. Right behind the throne, there was a white mass that she had never seen before.

At first glance it looked like a white wall, changing its color at the edges. The left one seemed to end in a gold vein, while the right one was of a clear grey, like a mountain peak.

About once per second, the wall produced a lightning. It was dissipated on the ground by several arrays, so powerful to be visible to the eye, leaving behind only its light and the resulting shockwave, yet producing no sound.

"Lady Tyris, it's me, Farg! Please, cease the attack!"

The next lightning had almost completely formed, but after Farg's words, it disappeared. The white wall opened, revealing a silver circular window as big as the throne itself, one meter and a half (5') high and 1.1 meters (3.6') wide, with a black dot at its center.

The contrast between the gleaming silver reflecting the light and the dark dot, made it appear like a bottomless hole in Farg's mind.

"There's a reason why you should always announce yourself before entering." The voice was soft like a whisper, yet it made the walls and the floor tremble.

"Sometimes I feel the need to stretch myself. Other times, like now, the human form cannot contain my wrath and I need to revert to my original one."

The wall moved backward, towards the center of the massive underground cave. Farg realized it was no wall, it was simply a portion of Lady Tyris's head in her griffon form. The gold vein that Farg had spotted earlier was actually her beak, while the grey belonged to a different shade of feathers near her neck.

Tyris's body was enveloped by a white aura that was the real source of illumination. The griffon had the head and the front legs of an eagle, while the rest of the body was that of a lion. On her back there were three pairs of feathered wings.

"It seems that my enemy does not only know about my existence, but also about my efforts to identify them. Attacking me in my own home is something no one managed to do in millennia. This should teach them a lesson."

The griffon body shrunk, turning into the familiar womanly form Farg was used to.

"Sorry for earlier, but that was no attack. When I'm angry I produce lightning bolts that the arrays in place are supposed to nullify. It seems I was still a little worked up from before, so my power overloaded them and part of the energy ran wild. Your report?"

Tyris smiled apologetically at Farg. Normally she would have her subjects kneeling, but she could see how tired Farg was after withstanding wave after wave of her anger empowered heartbeats.

A nod of Tyris's head wiped out all the traces of the attack, cleaning the black blood and repairing the stone furniture in the throne room. It also made a comfortable armchair appear right behind Farg, allowing her to rest.

"My lady, did someone dare to attack you?" Farg didn't know if to be worried about her master's safety or the enemy's madness.

"Yes. Several Abominations Warped in here and self-detonated. I don't know if they were trying to harm me with the explosion or to make the underground cave collapse, destroying the castle in the process.

"Either way, the only thing they managed to do was annoy me and force me to upgrade my arrays." Tyris sighed sadly. Even if her protections were ancient, one of her oldest and roughest works, she still loved them dearly.

They had been one of her few happy memories of the times when she still had most of her feelings and now they were gone forever.

"It pains me to admit that albeit outdated, their power was supposed to be unmatched. I guess that Arthan's Madness isn't the only thing our enemy has managed to find in the archives. That, or we have a traitor among the Corpse's ranks.

There is no way for beings so weak to bypass my protections unless they had a deep knowledge of my arrays. Now your report, please."

Chapter 249 Burdens

Farg was shocked by the news of the attack, but managed to hold her curiosity. If Lady Tyris was angry, her patience would be very limited. The questions at her disposal were already down by one.

Farg told her everything she had noticed about Lith from her observations during the fight with the Clackers and the academy's lessons. Tyris listened in silence, nodding from time to time.

"Do you have any questions?" Farg's report did nothing but confirm what she already knew. Tyris always allowed some questions because often humans needed help realizing details that they had seen but not noticed.

"Many." Farg replied honestly. She was honored to be allowed to sit while her host was pacing around and listening to her report.

"The kid is barely thirteen years old, yet I saw him go toe to toe with evolved monsters and magical beasts. How is that possible? The members of the Corpse are faster and stronger than normal humans, but not like that. We need enchanted equipment to make up for the difference in physical prowess."

"Quite the contrary." Tyris shook her head.

'During our brief encounter, I was only interested in his mana core and neglected to check his body. This is another important piece of the puzzle. It seems humans aren't the only ones to be slow on the uptake, sometimes.' She thought.

"It is possible. Your Queen, your King, and the veterans of the Corpse are all like that. It may seem incredible to you now, but only because we have just started your refinement process. In time, you'll become like that too. If you live that long, of course."

"What?" Farg was stunned, the words escaped her mouth before she could realize to have wasted another question.

"Doesn't that mean that the kid is a veteran too? Isn't he too young?"

Tyris smiled at her, happy to see the rookie catching up on her own.

"Yes to both. There are only a few possible explanations. Either he is an Awakened from the birth and that would be as incredible as terrifying, or he is a weak Abomination that possessed the body of an infant. That would be even worse.

"The former scenario would mean a natural talent like I have never seen before and hopefully will never see again. Beings Awakened from birth are incredibly rare, almost a myth even to us Guardians.

"I have never met one alive because when they are born from humankind, they start abusing their powers and get killed by their own kin before they can become a real threat.

"On the contrary, true magic comes natural to beasts, but being too much reliant on their instincts, they lack the wisdom and awareness about the risks the refinement process implies, so they die young too.

"The latter scenario would mean that albeit being incredibly weak, an Abomination managed to evolve into a Puppeteer and then stumbled into a highly compatible body that still lacked any sense of self or distinguishing feature.

"It makes it the perfect match. The body grows alongside the user's power, making the rejection of the new soul almost impossible. It would give birth to a Puppeteer that can hide in plain sight and without the need of switching bodies.

Needless to say, such a thing is almost impossible"

"It doesn't make sense!" Farg blurted out again.

"His mana flow is blue, not black. I checked more than once with Life Vision. Yet I saw with my own eyes black tendrils reattach his severed arm. That's something only Abominations can do.

"Also, I think the kid is utterly insane. One moment he puts his life on the line for his companions, the following he treats them like garbage."

"Excellent point." Tyris sat on her throne.

"That's why I suspect him being a hybrid, rather than a pure Abomination. A hybrid is born when something goes wrong during the body's assimilation process. If the Abomination is weaker than the host's body, it gets assimilated instead. It loses its nature and remains trapped inside it.

"It would explain the wisdom beyond his age, but not why he has helped the Kingdom time and time again.

"As for the madness, if he is as strong as you describe him to be, then it's normal. If he is a hybrid, his human and Abomination impulses are constantly at odds. It surprises me he has showed so much self restraint.

"If he is an Awakened from birth, instead, there is the possibility that he is afraid of harming them, hence he tries to keep them at a distance. When you get so powerful while still being so young, many have problems controlling their strength.

Consider that for him normal humans are made of paper. All he needs to do is use a little strength to crush them.

"Whatever is his nature, the attachment towards other humans is a good sign for us, because it means he cares for them. If he does, then if the necessity arises they can be used to shackle him."

"My Lady, why not kill him? His corpse may answer all of your questions and he would no longer pose a threat. Two birds with one stone."

"Killing another living being only because I don't understand them? Who do you take me for? A human?" Tyris scoffed.

"If he was another wannabe tyrant or a monster sucking everything dry on its path, your suggestion would make sense. Yet so far he poses no threat to his kind nor to the beasts, who consider him as one of their own. Even the world has recognized his worth, subjecting him to its cruel tribulations.

"If he fails, he'll die. If he succeeds the balance will have a new Guardian and I another potential mate. It's a win-win situation for me.

"Thanks for your hard work, Amyla. You'll resume your surveillance when the academy reopens. Until then, you'll continue your normal activities as a member of the Corpse.

"Do not tell anyone about Lith being a natural Awakened, not even to the Royals. They are past their prime and surrounded by strife. It would be easy for them being tempted to coerce him into turning them in real Awakened. freewebnovel.com

The Kingdom wouldn't survive if I was forced to have both of them suddenly pass away in an 'accident'."

Tyris's eyes shone with silver light, sending a shiver down Farg's spine. She understood how Lady Tyris was not only testing her loyalty, but also burdening her with the fate of the Griffon Kingdom.

She still had many questions, but now Farg was scared by the answers so she preferred to leave after giving Tyris a deep bow.

Once alone again, the Guardian let her mind ponder about what she had omitted to say to Farg.

'I don't know what this Lith is, but for certain he is no kid. I watched all the recordings available of him, including his exams. His words, actions, and spells do not match a kid. Even geniuses like Manohar couldn't pull the thundercloud spell at that age.

'Not when coming from an uneducated family. At this point, even using a member of the Corpse as middle man has little value. The only way I have to find out the truth is to speak with him in person.' Tyris sighed.

'Too bad that with all that it's happening, this matter is of low priority. First I need to upgrade all the arrays of the castle to prevent further attacks. Then I have to find out how the enemies managed to get down here. As of now, the Griffon Kingdom is a giant with clay feet.

'The noble households are still able to trigger a civil war, we have lost two of the six great academies at once, and most of my attention has to be directed at the Abomination threat.

'I have no idea what this Lith is or wants, but so far he has proved to be harmless to me. His parents are still alive, his village still standing, and he even joined an academy. None of this makes sense, either if he was an Abomination or an Awakened at birth.

'Maybe Salaark is right, the only way to rule humans is with an iron fist. I gave the Griffon Kingdom everything I could without directly intervening. Power, wisdom, inspiration.

'Yet it has stooped so low that now it needs only a gentle push to fall into ruins.'

In the two weeks following the events in the forest, Solus had managed to speak with Lith only once. For eight wonderful years they shared everything. Solus missed all the little things they did together in their daily routine, from their morning walks to choosing what to have for breakfast.

Yet he still refused to talk to her. No matter if it was a serious matter like talking to Linjos about the rankings or something trivial like inviting his friends. Lith kept her confined in the stone marble, making her feel as alone as useless.

Since their mind link was broken, Solus had realized that, despite during the past years she had greatly suffered from all the limitations her stone form had, it was only thanks to their bond that she had been able to keep her own sanity in check.

Even with their mind link shut down, Solus still retained all of her senses.

She could hear and see the world around her, perceive the mana flow of everyone that came in contact with them or the alterations in their emotional spectrum. Yet without Lith, without access to his body, she couldn't feel anything outside her own thoughts.

It was like being locked up inside a panic room, having access to the outside world only through cameras and monitors.

She still received all the nourishment she needed to keep restoring her power, but her life had turned into nothing more than a cage. Solus felt desperate and lonely, but she did her best to not let those feelings transpire.

Their bond was strong enough that they needed the mind link only to talk. If they wanted to avoid sharing a strong emotion or a recurring thought from the other, they had to be careful.

Lith wasn't as good as her, so Solus could feel his yearning for her voice, the desire to contact her along with the sense of betrayal preventing him from opening their mind link.

It would have been easy for her to contact him first and play with his feelings to get what she wanted, but Solus never even considered doing it. The only thing she wanted was for him to accept her as a person just as she did for him.

'Lith didn't even contact me to share the ranking results. We worked so hard for that, spending so many nights awake and yet he still cut me off like that. Like I am nothing.

'I just did to him once what he does to everyone else on a daily basis.

'What I did was wrong, but so is Lith's constantly shutting everyone out every time he has a problem. He needed to realize how his lies can affect his loved ones. Piling lies upon lies, only because it's more convenient than opening himself to others, even a little.

'I understand why he can't talk about his past lives or being an Awakened one, but hiding all the bad things that happen to him and always acting behind the others' backs with the excuse that he does it to "protect them" is bullsh*t.

'Lith never shared with his parents the ostracism he suffered from the other students, the mean words Professors like Rudd addressed him with or the difficulties he faced during the exams.

'By sugar-coating every aspect of his life, maybe he doesn't make his family worry about him, but for sure he ends up alone, incapable of sharing any of his burdens and to rely on his loved ones.

'Lith can't hope for others to help him in times of need. They never know what he is going through, simply because he hides from them even what he had for breakfast! The only good thing that came out of my lie is that at least he opened up with his family.

It did him some good, making him realize that they never wanted anything from him except being happy.'

From the moment their mind link had been severed, Solus's condition kept getting worse by the day. She was a prisoner of her own body, without anyone to talk to or anything she could do. Life around her was a cruel reminder of how the lack of a body made her little more than a slave to whoever was her host.

Solus knew her future was grim, yet she soldiered up and waited patiently.

The bond she shared with Lith was symbiotic, it couldn't be broken unless one of them died. Her only options were for Lith to forgive her or spend the time they had left together as a mindless tool.

Either that or go completely insane. The prolonged isolation and the constant status of fear of being abandoned, losing her life companion, were slowly eating her from the inside.

It was only a matter of time before her condition deteriorated beyond saving, scarring her mind permanently.

Chapter 250 Back Home

Lith's personal possessions still amounted to little enough to be stored in the trunk his dad made for him, leaving space to spare. Most of his clothes were now too small for him, but Lith kept them anyway, moving the trunk in the pocket dimension before departing.

Returning to Lutia took him just a few minutes. His mastery of dimensional magic coupled with his recent breakthrough allowed him to open Warp Steps with a range of dozens of miles.

Lutia was a balm for Lith's heart. It was a small, insignificant village in the middle of nowhere, but it was his kingdom. The only place where he could not care for the appearances nor constantly watch his back.

He needed some quiet to decide what to do with Solus. Lith still had conflicting feelings about her, but she was a too important part of his life to keep avoiding the issue for long.

He needed her for his experiments, since Lith was unable to operate the tower or to Forgemaster with true magic without her help. Also, she had always been his best friend, confidant, and his moral compass.

Her absence left a dreadful silence in his mind and a void in his heart that was only getting worse by the day. Even more importantly, when he had fused their minds, Lith had understood how deep was the feeling of isolation haunting her.

The pain that Solus shared with him had turned out to be just the tip of the iceberg. Lith had never forgotten about it and was worried about her well being.

Lith could have arrived directly at home, but he preferred to appear in the sky above Lutia's plaza instead. He wanted to make sure that everyone knew of his return.

With all that had happened to him, he had no desire of wasting his time dealing with small fries.

Lith landed softly, drawing the gazes of many. Most of the villagers flinched at his sight. The memory of Lith's last homecoming was still deeply etched in their minds. Of how he killed Renkin, the richest man of the village, and his son.

After he almost killed many of them for not having helped his sister when Garth harassed her, their despise towards him had turned into blind fear. Money and authority were a paper shield against his wrath.

If before the villagers considered him as someone that didn't deserve his magical talent, that robbed them of their wealth and hopes for their children, now they saw him like a hungry monster.

His presence defended them from bandits and foreigners, but at their least mistake, he had no qualms turning against them too. The thought that one day he could be the lord of the land scared them to death.

Lith noticed their behavior and couldn't help but scoff.

'Morons. If we wanted to take revenge on you, we would have done it years ago. As long as you behave, no one gets hurt. Right, Solus?' The mind link was closed, so only silence ensued.

Lith inwardly cursed at himself before going to Nana's home office. It was still midmorning, giving him the opportunity to visit his old mentor and pick up Tista before returning home.

Phloria's words were still echoing in his mind and without Solus, he needed someone to talk to. His mind was a mess, Lith still couldn't decide if to tell his family about the vision or not.

'Maybe I should warn at least Tista. She is the only other magic user in the family, she could make a difference in case something happens. Scratch that. The shadow made a short work of the Queen's corps. If they are helpless, I doubt she can do any better.'

Lith shook his head. The more he thought about it, the more confused he felt.

He opened the door of Nana's home office. The waiting room was filled with people, there was not a single chair or bench free.

Most parents forced their children to sit on their lap. Between the screams of the babies and the loud chatting of the adults, Lith felt like his eardrums were going to pop. When he entered the room, the conversations immediately stopped.

The place was familiar to him, yet it felt alien, like waking up from a long good dream. He had spent the last year in the academy, where everything was clean, everyone was properly dressed and fed.

Compared to the academy's hospital, Nana's office was dirty, noisy, and chaotic. Looking at those people, with their cheap clothes and weathered faces, Lith remembered how hard was life in Lutia.

'They are here to get a check up before winter arrives. Once it starts snowing, reaching the village becomes almost impossible. Many farmers die every year because of the flu or because a simple cold turns into pneumonia.' He thought.

"Young spirit, you are back already!" Nana walked towards him as soon as her latest patient paid her.

"Yes, master. This year the academy ended early. How are you?"

"Good as always." Nana replied hugging him.

Death Vision kept showing him the waiting room as the set of a slasher movie, but unlike the others, Nana had only one possible outcome.

The light in her eyes would go out, her corpse quickly invaded by maggots and larvae.

Lith was upset, he still had no idea what Death Vision was, so he used Invigoration on his old mentor. He discovered that her life force was weaker than the last time he examined her.

Her whole body was filled with impurities that were clogging her bloodstream and weakening her organs. Old age was consuming her. Lith felt a sting in his heart, realizing that Nana had five years left to live at most.

"You don't look so well. Let me see what I can do for you."

"Bah, I'm just old. Stop wasting my time, there are people waiting!" Nana rebuked. She was aware of her condition. Waking up early was getting more difficult every day and if it wasn't for Tista, she would be able to work only for half a day.

'Can't allow myself to show any weakness. As soon as word of my condition gets out, who knows what kind of criminals could get attracted to Lutia. Now the Queen's corps are defending us, but once Lith gets out of the academy they'll leave.'

Lith didn't move, stopping the queue. Yet no one dared to ask him to move aside. Nana was about to scold him, but Tista was looking at her with puppy eyes, making her feel guilty.

"Fine, hot shot. Show me what a real professional can do." Nana pulled the curtain behind her, sitting in the patient seat. Lith pretended to cast a diagnostic spell first and a healing one after that.

What he was actually doing was using darkness magic to destroy most of the impurities in her bloodstream, cleansing Nana's arteries while enhancing her kidneys and liver metabolism with light magic.

With his current level of mana perception and control, Lith didn't need anymore to force impurities out of a body, he was able to destroy them while they were still inside.

The treatment lasted a few minutes, during which Nana felt hot, sweating bullets despite the weather was already quite cold. When Lith finished, she felt at least five years younger.

"By the gods, whatever you did, you just put me in a pinch, young spirit. I suddenly feel the need to take a bath, eat the biggest lunch I ever had, and take a massive dump at the same time!" A loud and stinky fart emphasized the last part of the sentence.

"I'll start with the dump." Nana nodded as she had just made a life or death decision. Tista cleared the smell with a touch of darkness magic while addressing a disgusted expression at her mentor.

"Don't look at me like that. I'm old!" She rebuked like it explained everything.

"Young spirit, cover for me until I get back. Since this is all your fault, whatever you earn is mine for compensation. Got it?"

Lith nodded, barely holding a chuckle at her words. Nana's health had slightly improved and making her rest had been his plan all along. Originally Lith meant to ask her letting Tista leave work early and go home together, but Death Vision changed his mind.

He watched Nana walking away. This time she was stabbed in the heart and then had her throat slit before leaving the room. Death Vision was usually disturbing, but this time he found it reassuring.

Using the cover of the curtain, Tista hugged Lith.

"Welcome back, lil brother. It's good to see you again."

"It's good to see you too. Now it really feels like home." He returned the embrace checking her condition, just to be safe.

"Was that a tier four spell?" Tista's professional curiosity was piqued.

"Yeah. There is no cure to old age, but at least it will relieve her symptoms for a while." Lith's treatment was just a band aid. Only Awakening Nana could prolong her life.

"It's still better than nothing." Tista nodded.

"I'm so envious of you. I hate being forced to watch her get weaker by the day, to see so many people suffer and not being able to do anything for helping them." She sniffed, laying her head on his shoulder.

"Better if we get to work, or people will get angry." She said letting him go.

Lith and Tista worked together, talking between patients.

Identifying a villager from a farmer was painfully easy. Villagers were well dressed, clean, and looked around the waiting room like they owned the place. Farmers instead wore layers of thin clothes to protect themselves from the cold and looked like they could use a warm meal.

If the patient was a farmer, Lith would listen to their request and then heal every ailment they had, making them pay only for one spell. Thanks to the curtain, the other patients couldn't see the deep bows they would give him before leaving.

Before winter money was always short, so farmers resorted to Nana's help only in case of an emergency.

If it was a villager instead, Lith would examine them and list all the conditions he found before asking them what they wanted for him to heal.

"You have a slight cold, a strained back, and a thrombus." His patient was Ilna, the jeweler. She was a nice looking woman in her forties, with chestnut hair and a dress that was probably more expensive than Nana's house.

"What does that mean?" She had a quiet voice. Usually she preferred being served by Tista, since she was easy to push around. Lith had the same caring gaze of a wolf mulling if to rip your throat first or go straight for the gutting.

"A blood clot in the brain." Lith explained. "If it moves, you die. Simple as that."

"What are you waiting for? Heal it immediately!"

"You came for the backache and paid only for that." Lith pointed at the sign stating "Payment in advance".

Ilna was about to rebuke that she didn't trust him, but there was something in Lith's eyes that stopped her. Years in the business had taught her how to read people. She could see from his smirk that he hoped she would walk away.

Ilna quickly paid and after receiving the treatment, she rushed home to bring her whole family back for a check up.

'I hate that b*stard, but even I know that Nana is not a professional healer. Who knows when or if I'll get someone from the White Griffon to visit my family? I have no time to lose!'

Tista was amazed by how fast her brother was working. Not only did his spells seem to be more effective than hers, but also he didn't need to take any break. Lith had a stronger core than Tista and wasn't as old as Nana.

That, coupled with all his training, gave him a mana capacity a few times bigger than theirs. Not to mention that compared to the academy's daily exercises, casting one spell at the time was almost relaxing for him.

Lith had just finished with his latest patient when Tista pulled his arm. He turned around, noticing that she was holding a petite girl about her age by the arm. The girl was well dressed and had a healthy incarnate.

Despite the sunny day, she was already wearing a long sleeved sweater with heavy gloves on both hands.

"Lith, do you remember Brina?" She asked him.

"No." Lith sighed. That was one of those moments when Solus would chime in and remind him about who's who. The silence in his mind was deafening. Despite Tista's presence, Lith felt alone and sad again.

"She is the baker's daughter and like me is part of the shut-in club." Tista was referring to a group of youths that for some reason had spent most of their life in isolation, just like her.

"I was wondering if you could do something for her." Brina became pale and tried to sneak away, but Tista was on guard stopping her in her tracks.