

Supreme M 411

Chapter 411 Birds of Prey Part 2

Lith exploited the moment she was walking in front of him to check her out. Kamila wore a light blue shirt over a knee-length black pencil skirt.

She had her long black hair down which together with her black eyeliner and light red lipstick emphasized her pale skin.

'For cute Kamila is cute. She could use some weight, though. Her arms are so thin that either she has skipped one meal too many or she has not lifted anything heavier than a fork in a long time.'

Their table was located along the east wall, right under one of the magical lamps which illuminated the room. The layout of the restaurant allowed the clients to have enough space to guarantee their privacy.

"How are you liking Belius?" Kamila asked while a blonde waitress handed them the menus.

"It's a lovely city. I like how it prevents me from flying, Warping, or even moving around without someone tracking my movements. It's a pity there are no bars at every window. It completely ruins the feeling of being held in a prison."

"It's not a bad place, it's just an acquired taste." She chuckled at the joke. Lith liked her smile a lot. It was warm and sincere, not like the pretentious giggle most girls did to hook up.

"I've always wanted to try the Hogese. It's a new recipe from the Gorgon Empire that only comes in two portions. Do you feel brave enough to venture into the unknown?"

Lith knew what it was, just like he knew he wouldn't like it.

"Of course. Mystery is the spice of life." He lied through his teeth. According to Xilo, the Hogese was a bread dough stuffed with a mix of boiled vegetables and minced animal organs cooked in the oven.

'I'm glad she wants to share a new experience with me, I only wish this dish isn't as disgusting as it sounds.'

"So, how did you end up a Lieutenant in the army? Is it something you always wanted to do or did you somehow stumble into it?" Lith asked.

"I'm the third child of a merchant household. My eldest brother inherited the family business by birthright while my sister was forced to marry. I have no magical talent, so it was either joining the army or working as an accountant for my brother.

"I always liked to study, but my family didn't care much about our education. So I joined the army, failed miserably my boot camp..." Kamila rolled up her sleeve in a body builder pose which emphasized the lack of muscles in her slender arm.

"... and when they offered me a desk job, I took the offer. I started as a clerk, but the army provided me the resources to study on my own. A few years later I proved myself smart enough to obtain a scholarship for the Officer's academy and here I am."

"What do you mean with 'forced to marry'?"

"My sister is blind from birth." The light in Kamila's eyes dimmed at those memories, making her smile disappears. Lith felt like the room had turned several degrees colder.

"Let's not talk about sad stuff." She shrugged off her frown and looked at Lith straight in the eyes. "Now it's my turn to ask a personal question. How does it feel being a mage?"

"I beg your pardon?" Lith was expecting inquiries about his skills, income, noble status, or maybe a plea to heal the blind sister. The usual routine when someone tried to suck up to him.

"I mean, normal people have just enough magic to make themselves a hot tea, while you can fly, Warp around the world, kill with a word. All things us humble mortals can only dream or have nightmares about."

She made a dramatic gesture, raising her arms in the air before bending forward, like she was worshipping an idol. Lith had no idea how to answer. To him, magic was a mean to an end. He considered it like a hammer, a pincer, or any other tool.

It took him a while to find something that sounded like a proper answer.

"I don't know if it makes sense, but to me it feels like I'm able to share Mogar's breath. A mage doesn't really command the elements, we just learn through study how to communicate with them.

"Sometimes, I even feel like I'm just a mirror of the world. I can reflect or alter what it's in front of me, but I can't do anything by myself." Kamila was staring at Lith with eyes so wide open that one could think her eyelids had been glued to her eyebrows.

A waiter looked at the couple with a puzzled expression.

'I know that look, but there's no way the tall guy is the one pregnant.' He placed the steaming Hogese in the middle of the table and left without a word.

"Do I sound that crazy? What's the answer you usually get?" Lith asked while cutting the meal and taking a bite.

"I wouldn't know. It's the first time I date a mage." Kamila followed suit.

"Gods, it's disgusting." She chuckled after swallowing it whole and drinking a big sip of wine to wash her mouth. "No wonder I never saw anyone ordering it."

"I think it's just an acquired taste." Lith replied taking another bite and pretending to chew it while he actually sent it to his pocket dimension.

"Do you really like it?" Kamila wondered if the horrors Lith had witnessed as a student had somehow damaged his taste buds.

"No, I was messing with you. It's disgusting."

"Now I understand why people from the Gorgon Empire are always so cranky. Fancy a steak?" She raised her arm to call the waiter back.

"With pleasure." Lith was really hungry. He hadn't eaten anything from breakfast.

"I can't believe I'm your first mage, though. Are all guys in Belius blind or what?" Lith knitted his eyebrows in disbelief. His honest surprise flattered her quite a bit.

"In case you haven't noticed it, I'm a bit old for marriage. I have no family background, nor I'm rich. Mages can easily achieve a noble title, so they usually aim higher than a grassroots civil servant."

Lith had a thousand things to comment on the subject, but all of them would sound like an attempt to butter her up.

"I'll take it as a yes." He shrugged and moved to a different topic.

Lith appreciated her not asking him anything about the academy. In his experience, everyone seemed to think that being a survivor was something cool to talk about. Like Balkor and Nalear were just notches on his belt instead of people who stole something precious from him.

Albeit in different ways, losing Protector and Yurial had left a scar on him. He missed them both dearly.

Lith and Kamila kept talking until the head waiter kindly pointed out it was closing time. Lith walked her to the nearest Warp Gate while hoping for the best.

"Thanks for the evening. I can't believe it's already this late. My supervisor will skin me alive if I'm late. Call me." She stood on her tiptoe, giving him a quick goodnight kiss before Warping away.

'Funny, thoughtful, and he didn't brag even once about his achievements at the academy or the King bestowing him a family name. The best part is his eyes. They look so mature one would never think he's so young. Stinginess aside, it's almost too good to be true.'

Lieutenant Yehval smiled all the way back home.

Chapter 412 Puzzled Part 1

'Rise and shine, sleepyhead.' Solus woke up Lith after sunrise, to make sure he had a full eight hours of sleep. It would reset the effects of Invigoration and bring his body back to his natural peak condition.

The fight with Treius had been demanding. Solus had no idea what a world tribulation was, but she knew that whenever Lith assumed that monstrous form, his mind had undergone heavy stress.

'What a shitty date.' Lith griped for the umpteenth time. 'The only silver lining is that she insisted to split the bill.'

'By my maker, just because you didn't get laid doesn't make it a bad date!'

'I beg to differ. The food was just okay, the kiss was so fast I barely noticed it, and the "I've to wake up early tomorrow" is the lamest excuse in the book. Kamila might as well claimed she had a migraine.' Lith sighed.

He was in such a bad mood he had returned to the house on Royal Road only because Belius's security measures made it a hassle getting in and out of the city. Lith had to give his detailed report in person in the afternoon, otherwise he would have already gone back to Lutia to spend there the rest of his leave.

'Stop being a sourpuss. If Kamila really didn't enjoy herself, she wouldn't have spent three hours talking with you. She even took into account you being a cheapskate and split the bill.' Solus pointed out.

'Why do you think that?'

'How many tall mages wearing a Ranger uniform do you think walked into the Velorian yesterday? It doesn't take a Constable to do the math.' Her thoughts oozed sarcasm. 'The next time, bring her a nice present, Scrooge.'

'For the record, I'm thrifty, not stingy.' His paper thin excuse only managed to make Solus cry from laughing. Lith went to the kitchen on the first floor to have breakfast. Lith ruminated on both Solus's words and the food before giving Kamila a call.

She sounded really happy to hear from him and she kept the conversation going until she had to leave for work. This time it was her inviting him to dinner the next day.

'Told you so. Don't forget the present.' Solus projected in his mind a smug grin.

Lith spent the morning practicing Accumulation to further refine his mana core and rehearsing his report with Solus. He arrived at the army Headquarters well in advance the appointed time.

Sergeant Tepper had drilled his "If you are five minutes early, you are already ten minutes late" creed into all of his recruits. Lith was immediately brought by the Desk Sergeant through a series of corridors until they reached the destination.

Despite the woman walked double time, Lith had the time to appreciate the rustic furniture decorating the place and the padded reinforced doors along the way. All in all, he had the impression of being inside an asylum for the criminally insane.

"They are waiting for you." The Sergeant, a sturdy woman in her forties, pointed him to a door with a "Briefing Room" tag attached to it. She gave him a salute before extending her hand. "Thanks for your hard work, Sir. Belius is a safer place now."

Lith shook it while cold sweat ran down his spine.

'Damn, first the custom officer and now the Sergeant? This is worse than I thought. No good deed goes unpunished, we have some serious damage control to do.' Lith thought.

'Stop whining, I'm sure that- Oh, shit!' Solus choked on her optimism when Lith opened the door. A single uncomfortable looking chair was in front of a rectangular table, behind which there were three armchairs.

King Meron was sitting in the middle. A golden crown rested on his head as he was wearing his red uniform of Commander-in-Chief of the army. The King was a lean man in his mid fifties, yet he didn't look a day past thirty.

He had thick red hair and the silver eyes typical of the descendants of Valeron, the first King. On his right, there was a man bearing a striking resemblance with the King who wore the red uniform of a General of the Army.

He had brown reddish hair and silver eyes. Just like Meron, he was in his fifties, but time hadn't been very kind to him. He looked old and tired, but mostly worried. To the King's left, there was the most stunning woman Lith had ever seen.

She wore the uniform of a Royal Constable and was 1.76 (5'9") meters tall. She was in her mid twenties, or so it seemed. There was something about her that made her look timeless yet ancient at once.

She had shining gold hair braided into a tress long enough to be twisted and knotted above her head resembling a crown. Her silver eyes sparkled like stars under the sunlight.

Lith's mood was sour yet it took him just a second to feel something was off. He gave them a salute and stood at attention while waiting for instructions.

'Solus, how strong are these guys?'

'The General has a cyan core, while the King has a violet one and a body slightly more powerful than yours despite his age. The woman has a blue core and an inhuman physique. By my maker, compared to her Tista is nothing special.'

'This is wrong. No one can be this beautiful.' Lith's paranoia kicked in, quickly followed by his survival instinct. He took a deep breath and activated Death Vision. It was the only still lingering side effect of Lith's attempt to repair Protector's mana core at the cost of his own life force.

Lith had yet to understand if it was an ability, a curse, or simply a symptom of his shaky sanity. It made every living being in front of him look like they were about to die. It had taken him years of training to learn how to keep it in check.

In the next few seconds, Lith saw the King die of old age, poisoned, or because a spell turned him to dust. The General would die of old age, or after being poisoned, stabbed, beheaded, or simply because he tumbled and fell.

The Constable remained unchanged instead.

'It's already abnormal for the King to have only three ways to die, but maybe is because of his magical protections. Why Death Vision doesn't work on the Constable? So far only Phloria was immune to it.' Lith thought.

"At ease, Lieutenant Verhen. Please, have a seat" The King said with a small smile.

"This is the General of the Army Morn Griffon, my cousin, while she is Royal Constable Tyris Griffon, my niece."

The General suppressed the desire to curl his lip in disgust, replying to Lith's salute with a mere nod of the head. The Constable returned the salute and even offered him her hand.

Lith shook it, discovering that her skin was soft and silky, yet her grip was as firm as a mountain.

'This is bad.' Lith thought. 'They want to either promote or demote me. Both events can screw up my plans. Worst case scenario, they want to force me into marriage with Barbie. First the house, now this? Why would a royal be so kind with me?'

Solus wanted to give him a more rational and less paranoid explanation. Unluckily, she was unable to find one.

Chapter 413 Puzzled Part 2

After witnessing the events leading to the destruction of the Black Star, Tyris decided that her meeting with the anomaly was long overdue. She had pondered if to wait for him outside Kaduria, but she decided against it.

Explaining how she had got there and how much she had witnessed would require a long-winded explanation about her role as a Guardian to avoid a useless struggle. She knew enough about Lith to

predict that he would attempt to silence her forever if he thought she had discovered his nature as Awakened.

Guardians didn't hide their existence. Everyone in the Gorgon Empire knew about the massive dragon sleeping in the throne room and Salaark was an even lesser example of discretion.

Her rampages against the enemies of the Blood Desert were legendary. She would change to one form to another, leaving any witness awestruck. Yet Tyris preferred a subtler approach, to prevent Lith's paranoia from destroying any chance of a friendly relationship.

She had joined the King to introduce herself as a member of the Royal family and not arouse Lith's suspicions. Even the handshake was a probe. Soul Vision, the Guardians' version of Life Vision, had its limits.

She exploited the physical contact to employ Mother Earth, her Invigoration technique, to better understand the nature of the anomaly. The results piqued Tyris's interest for several reasons.

She was mildly surprised by Lith's distant behavior. Tyris was used to make quite an impression at the first meeting. The real shocker was the readings from Mother Earth, though.

Right where his heart was supposed to be, Lith's life force was cracked. To a casual observer, it would look like the aftermath of his foolish attempt to repair a mana core. Yet she knew better.

Lith's efforts to save Protector had cost him almost half of his lifespan yet it had simply brought to the surface something that was already there. The crack ran deep underneath his life force like an invisible bloodstream.

It was made of deep-seated pain and grieving, which poisoned his very being. Tyris had met countless broken men, so it wasn't a surprise to her.

The fact that the crack oozed death puzzled her quite a bit and so did noticing how the permanent loss of life force had extended the damage up to his eyes through rifts as small as hairlines.

How energies typical of death could surge from a living being made no sense even to her. The second and most astounding revelation was the presence of a second life force well hidden in the background.

It looked like a black sphere that sealed at its core a small star. The star, in turn, emitted violent waves of energy that harmlessly crashed against the sphere. Tyris had never seen anything like that.

'I guess it's better to consult an expert.' She thought.

"I wanted to personally congratulate you on your latest success, Ranger Verhen." She said with a smile that made the two high ranked officials wish they were young again.

"Yet, this committee has been assembled to review your work and determine if your actions brought more harm than benefit to the Griffon Kingdom."

"Exactly." Morn said with a reprimanding tone. "You were given a simple task: to preserve a centuries-long equilibrium that has kept the country safe from unspeakable horrors. Thank the gods your hero stunt ended well, but luck is a fickle mistress.

"Your lack of judgment endangered us all." Lith didn't miss how the General sneaked a look at the Constable, looking for her approval.

'What a pig. He is old enough to be her father.' Solus thought in disgust.

'Agreed. What matters is that so far everything is within our expectations.' Lith inwardly sighed in relief.

To Lith, the King said : "Let's not rush our judgment. Ranger Verhen, tell us everything that happened during your stay in Kaduria."

Lith told them about his arrival in front of the barrier surrounding the city and how he had witnessed the horrors of the shadow phase. He avoided dramatic descriptions, sticking to the facts instead.

Lith explained how he had followed the procedure of slaughtering the Kadurians during the light phase and then decided to experiment on the Shadows during the next cycle. The recount of how he learned the lost Kadurian language left those present speechless.

"That's what I was talking about." Morn grunted. "You are not a mage of the academy anymore, you are a Ranger in the army. You were supposed to follow orders, not conduct some crazy research."

"I'm a mage and a Ranger." Lith rebuked pretending to be indignant. "You can't have one without the other. As you know, if I was interested in blindly following orders, I would have accepted your other proposal."

Lith had been offered a job as a black ops soldier, which he had turned down. The King nodded, prompting him to continue.

"I became a Ranger to further my studies. The lost cities hold priceless knowledge that can be used for good. I bet you are aware of the tomes I have been consulting. I need the army's resources as much as the army needs me to clean up messes like Kaduria."

"Since you are the one who introduced the topic, let's talk about your readings." The General leaned forward with a menacing expression. "Why are you researching forbidden magic? It could be considered an act of treason by itself."

"Because I'm a Healer. As such, my aim is to find a cure for all diseases. Including the one afflicting me." Lith lowered his gaze, as if he was haunted by a painful memory.

"You have attended the White Griffon for four years. Are you saying you suffer from a condition not even Manohar could fix?" Morn was surprised by the revelation, yet he was unwilling to believe in such a convenient turn of events.

"Yes. Your Majesty, do you know the Scanner spell?" When the King nodded, Lith offered him his arm to examine it. The King cast the spell and found the same crack Tyrus had noticed earlier.

"Good gods." The King turned pale. "How did it happen?"

"It's the price I had to pay to defend my friends from the Valor during Balkor's attack." Lith lied through his teeth. If they wanted a tragic hero, he would give them one.

"My life force is crippled. I don't regret what I did, yet I also refuse to give up on a normal life. My goal is to find a cure for all those who fell victims of forbidden magic, and only by studying the disease you can learn how to fight it."

"Please, continue your report." The King was worried about all the plans the Crown still had in store for Lith. Suddenly there was less time than he had hoped for.

Lith then told them how by learning the Kadurian he was able to communicate with the cleric of the High Sun who had helped him to defeat both the Black Star and the foreigner that had come to free the cursed object from its cage.

"You see, this is the part of your report that I find really hard to believe and I'm not the only one in the army." The General tapped the table with his forefinger to emphasize his lack of trust.

"A mysterious stranger forced your hand. Do you have any proof to back your claim?"

"Is this proof enough for you?" Lith took out Treius's head from his pocket dimension, placing it on the table while it was still dripping fresh blood.

Chapter 414 The Idiot Part 1

The moment he had entered the chamber, Lith had noticed a signboard informing that it was possible to use dimensional items inside the briefing room. He decided to exploit it to achieve the most dramatic effect possible.

"Did you carry that thing all along?" All those in the room had seen their share of dead people. What shocked General Morn was the ease with which Lith performed his stunt.

"Yes. I have the rest of the body too if you are interested in examining it. It bears some unknown runes as tattoos which I was planning to study in the near future." He had already copied them before the meeting, just to be safe.

"If you read the report I presented to Lieutenant Yehval right after the events, it matches the description of my assailant. Also, I have this." Lith provided them copies of the spells he had learned from the clerics of the High Sun, in both Kadurian and common language.

With the Black Star destroyed, they were just a relic from the past.

King Meron used his communication amulet to summon Brigadier General Vorgh and the resident Forgemaster. It was a bulky woman in her sixties, with eyes cynical enough to remind Lith of Nana.

Lith had to repeat the last part of his story to them and show them the evidence he presented to the committee.

"I can confirm that the parasite array's design originates from the Blood Desert." Vorgh stated while looking at Treius's corpse. "Also, these runes share a similarity with the array. It's my opinion that they were made by the same hand."

"These are indeed powerful spells." The Forgemaster was also a Major General. "They are designed to sabotage their host's enchantments, making the energies coursing through the artifact destroy it from the inside.

"Too bad that without the original blueprints they are useless. We could have learned a lot from them. As it is, they belong in a museum."

After the King dismissed the experts, Lith continued his story. He omitted the part where Treius fused with the Black Star and most of the fight.

"So, without my 'crazy research' I would have never been able to understand the clerics. If I 'just followed orders', once I left Kaduria the enemy would have claimed the artifact and now there would be not one, but two power hungry monsters knocking on the Kingdom's door." His words were filled with sarcasm and contempt as he stared at the General.

Morn wanted to admonish Lith that his behavior was bordering insubordination, but King Meron's cold gaze stopped him.

"I did what was necessary to protect our country and save those poor souls. Neither the Kadurians nor Belius deserved to live in constant fear of each other." After Lith had finished his speech, the three Royals retired in an adjacent room to deliberate.

"Lady Tyris, you have heard him." The General was aware of the Guardian's true identity and longed for both her affection and a long life.

"By destroying the Black Star, he mercilessly killed all those people. He let an entire civilization be destroyed because of his incompetence. He should be dishonorably discharged."

"Please! You couldn't care less about the Kadurians. You are simply scared at the idea that a grassroots mage is now considered a hero both in the north and in the south." Tyris stared at Morn until he lowered his eyes in shame.

"It's because of those like you that we went so close to a civil war. If you so called pureblood mages want to be respected, you should do more than flapping your gums or sabotage your betters. I wish that thirty years ago you tried becoming King instead of Meron."

"Really?" Those words made him too happy to notice the trap lying ahead.

"Of course." Tyris nodded. "So I would have you for dinner, like you dream about for years, and I wouldn't be forced to hear your nonsense anymore. It would have been a win-win situation. Now shut up. I have a call to make."

Meron chuckled at the idea of his arrogant cousin devoured in a single gulp. Morn, instead, suddenly realized why the King had brought him along. Not because Meron valued his opinion, but to humble him.

Tyris opened her mind link with Leegaain, sharing with him what she had discovered about Lith with Mother Earth, her Invigoration technique.

'Fascinating.' Was his reply.

'Tell me something I don't know.' Tyris said with impatience. It was her country the anomaly lived in. Charm and danger could only go hand in hand when talking about someone else's problem.

'Death energy usually lingers around those who somehow escaped their final hour, but the amount you describe is overwhelming. It would require for him to have died multiple times, but we know it's impossible.' Leegaain explained.

'It should make the anomaly more sensitive toward sensing impending death, but nothing more. It's a nasty curse. I'm surprised he hasn't gone insane already.'

'What about the two life forces?' Tyris asked.

'Ah, so you are finally interested in Menadion's Desperation. Well, it all started...'

'Okay, three life forces. Save your anecdote for later. I'm not interested in that ring of his. Whatever it is, is harmless.' Tyris cut him short, making Leegaain sigh.

'It just proves we're right about him. He's a hybrid, but only Mogar knows how. The first life force is the common human one. The second one, though, it's actually two other life forces mixed together.' The dragon's words made her deeply frown.

'The black sphere is typical of Abominations, but usually it's empty. That's why they constantly need to assume world energy to keep themselves alive. The small star is the mark of powerful Evolved Monsters instead.

'It allows them to easily shapeshift because most of their energy it's not stuck in a fixed form. I have no idea how they can coexist, nor why he has them. He's too old for that.'

'What do you mean with too old?' Tyris was perplexed.

'Let's say I had a child with a human. The child would be a hybrid, bearing both our life forces. When they come of age, they would be forced to choose between one nature.

'The children you had with Valeron perceived themselves as humans, that's why none of them ever turned into a griffon. The opposite happened to the anomaly. According to Scarlett, when he had a cyan mana core, there was no second life force.

'It means that its appearance is related to his now blue mana core, as if before he couldn't bear its power. I wish he lived here. This Lith would make so fine an apprentice. You know, when Milea was younger...'

Tyris closed the communication at the last second, dodging the surely long and boring story by a hair's breadth.

"Meron, you have my blessing." She said before the three returned to the other room.

Lith was still sitting, his mind wondering what he could possibly gift to Kamila without wasting too much money nor flexing his forgemastering skills.

"Ranger Verhen." King Meron said while Lith stood up at attention in a sign of respect.

Chapter 415 The Idiot Part 2

"After hearing your report and evaluating all the elements you have provided us, this committee unanimously praise you for your endeavor. Words are cheap, though, so I would like to reward you properly. Are you sure you don't want a higher rank or a noble title?"

"Thanks, your Majesty, but I'm no leader. A higher rank would only hinder me, while a noble title would chain me. I would be forced to spend what's left of my life caring for the people living in my lands. They deserve better than a reluctant lord."

Meron sighed, but he had anticipated Lith's reply.

"I'm deeply worried about your health. I won't ask you to stop searching for a cure. Magic is all about research and hard work. If someone can find a solution to such a cruel fate, that's you.

"I believe that with your talent, you can perform another miracle. I watched you grow and I hope to have the privilege of seeing you grow old. That said, would you be interested in marriage? I could introduce you to many noble dames.

"It would be a pity if your bloodline were to die with you. Also, I think that having someone to return to would give you even more strength."

"Thanks again, your Majesty, but no. I know myself. If I raise a family of my own, I will not be able to leave them. That's why I made sure to teach my sister Tista everything I know. Even if I were to die tomorrow, my legacy will live through her."

"Please, take care of her in my absence." Lith said with a rueful voice while making his eyes watery with magic.

He had no intention of having children and was well aware that being an Awakened, even a crippled life force was enough to last more than one hundred years. There was no reason for the King to know it, of course.

For the first time in centuries, Tyris had a hard time suppressing a chuckle.

'By Mogar, Lith sure has his way with words. Everything he's said since he stepped inside the room is neither entirely true or false. He is playing Meron like a fiddle. Aside from being a cynical, manipulative, stingy, compulsive liar of a hybrid, he reminds me of Valeron.' She thought.

"You have my word." Meron said with watery eyes while considering that Tista was unmarried too. If he could secure her trust, whatever Lith left behind it would be hers. There was no harm in nurturing someone so beautiful and talented.

"Until I draw breath, I'll protect your family like it's my own."

Lith's face seemed to be moved, but Tyris could see his other scaly face grinning from ear to ear like a predator in front of a dumb animal. It took her sheer willpower to not laugh at the scene.

A ceremonial sword made of silver appeared in the King's right hand.

"I wanted to avoid this, since it will surely kick a hornet nest, but you leave me no choice. No amount of money is worth your sacrifices for the Kingdom. Please, kneel."

Lith had no idea what was happening but he obeyed nonetheless.

'Solus?' He asked.

'No clue.' She replied after checking all the books inside Soluspedia.

"Lith Verhen, I bestow upon you the title of Great Mage of the Griffon Kingdom." The King said while patting with the flat side of the sword Lith's left shoulder, then the right one, and lastly the top of his head.

'Oh, fuck me sideways! I forgot about the Mage ranking system.' Lith thought. 'What's the average age for a Great Mage?'

'For a new magical bloodline with no noble title, around fifty.' Solus replied.

'I knew it! No good deed goes unpunished. Now I have another target painted behind my back.'

'It's not that bad.' Solus tried to cheer him up. 'The King just promised his protection and now you'll have access to more tomes. The glass is half full, okay?'

Lith's inner expression finally matched the one he was showing on the outside. The General and the King left the room after congratulating him, leaving only Tyris behind.

"It's been a pleasure finally meeting you." She took his hands as a cold shiver ran down his spine. "I hope to see you again in happier circumstances."

After she walked out the door, Lith felt so drained he had to sit down again.

'See? Half full. Seems you are on a roll with the ladies.' Solus giggled.

'On a roll my pale ass. Why do you think I avoided Brinja like a disease? The entrance fee for that kind of fair is marriage. A fling with a Royal would be like putting a slave collar around my neck. Speaking of flings...'

Lith took his communication amulet out of his pocket and called Kamila.

"Sorry, but I'm really busy. Is it important?" For the first time she had activated the hologram projector. He could see her nervously turning around while watching out for her supervisor.

"Yes. I want you to hear it from me before it comes out on the interlink." The pain in his voice was tangible. Kamila stopped abruptly and focused on him.

"Oh, gods! Don't tell me you got demoted? Or relocated? I was afraid some envious noble might try to get back at you. Now that Belius is safe, the trade routes will change and someone will lose a lot of money. Did they send you to a suicide mission?" She bit her nails out of stress.

"Not even I'm that paranoid! Don't kill me off like that. It's complicated. Bottom line, I'm screwed. The King made me a Great Mage."

"What!" She jumped off her chair, drawing the attention of all her colleagues.

"Yeah, I know. It means a lot of trouble. General Morn Griffon is already out for my blood. Between him and the ancient noble households I'm walking on eggshells here. I think it's better if..."

"It's wonderful news! What did your parents say?" She cut him short.

"Nothing because they still don't know. I'm going straight home now. I need to warn them of..."

"Wait, are you saying I'm the only one who knows about it?"

"You, me, the King, General Morn, and some Royal Constable. Why?" Lith's headache was getting worse.

"It's wonderful news!" She repeated with a radiant smile. "Call me when you arrive home. See you." The hologram disappeared as the call ended.

'I swear, this is just like with Phloria. Even if you keep talking women stop listening and start giggling. It's not like I...'

Lith stopped drowning in self-pity and replayed the conversation in his head, walking a mile in Kamila's shoes.

'I'm an idiot.' Was the final judgment.

'Worse. You are self-centered.' Solus scolded him. 'You are always focused against your enemies yet you overlook the feelings of those close to you. You're lucky you two only had one date, otherwise that poor girl would probably think you are in love with her.'

'Keep acting like this and one day, someone is going to get hurt.'

Lith could only agree with her. When he reached the Warp Gate for the capitol of the Distar Marquisate, Derios, he was still cursing at himself.

Meanwhile, in the Control Room where analysts and handlers worked, the supervisor had an important announcement to make.

"In case someone missed it, Lieutenant Kamila Yehval is dating a Great Mage. Today the first round is on her."

A booming applause was followed by congratulations as all of her colleagues wished Kamila all the best, yet all she wanted was to disappear.

Chapter 416 Family Reunion Part 1

For the first time since he had started wearing uniforms, Lith shapeshifted the Skinwalker armor into normal clothes even though he had no social event to attend to. With a beige overcoat, white shirt, and black pants, he looked like a small time noble.

'Too many people here know my face and I can't afford being recognized.' He thought while nervously looking at the communication amulet in his breast pocket. 'I have no time to lose being polite and exchanging niceties. I expect the news of me becoming a Great Mage to spread like wildfire.'

The moment he stepped outside Derios's branch of the Mage Association, Lith took off toward Lutia. He was now powerful enough that a single Warp Steps allowed him to cross dozens of kilometers.

Six Warps and less than a minute later, he reached his home. He appeared in the sky and landed slowly to not scare his parents' farmhands. He had learned from experience that sharp tools and fear made people accident prone.

"Hey, kid. Do yourself a favor and bug off." Said a harsh voice coming from behind him.

"Our young Lady isn't home, and even if she was, she chews and spits guys way better looking than you for breakfast."

Lith laughed out loud hearing Tista being referred to as a noble dame. Being mistaken for a suitor of his own sister was also quite funny to him.

"Do what you want." The man laughed too. "There's a reason that Lutia is called the Graveyard. Hot shots like you, be them criminals or nobles, always get out of here feet first. I've warned you, so don't blame me when I'll spit on your grave."

"I'd like to see you trying, Bromann." Lith turned around with a cruel smile.

"Oh gods! I'm so sorry, Lith." Bromann wasn't scared, mostly embarrassed. He knew Lith since his son, Rizel, had ambushed him at Selia's house years ago. When Raaz had started to expand his farmlands, he had been one of the first farmers to sell his own.

The pay was good, he would have to pay fewer taxes, and the free healthcare made the offer hard to refuse.

"I didn't expect you would return so soon plus I'm not used to seeing you all dressed up. Usually, you either wear your uniform or dress like one of us. What's the fancy suit for? Are you finally bringing home a fine lady or what?"

"It's a long story." Lith dodged all the questions. "Why the double standard? You refer to Tista as 'your young Lady' yet you call me by my first name."

"That's just for show, Lith. If a farmer speaks like that to a noble, they could easily get whipped. Harassing a servant of the Verhen family is bad for business, instead. Especially if they want to suck up on you." Bromann replied while tapping at his temple with a forefinger.

Lith couldn't refute that logic, so he waved a quick goodbye and entered his house.

"Daddy!" A shrill voice yelled as a small boy clung to Lith's leg.

"Not even close, little brother." Lith said while lifting Aran off the ground and making him sit on his shoulder. The child was almost a meter (3'2") tall but to Lith's frame, he was weightless.

"Mom! Big brother is back!"

"Welcome home, sweetie." Elina came out of the kitchen and embraced Lith tightly.

"What happened to your uniform? Is everything all right?" She took his face between her hands, checking for signs of malnutrition as if she hadn't seen him in months instead of four days

"Kind of. Let's just say the glass is half full." He sighed. "As soon as everyone gets home, I'll give you great news. Where's Tista?"

"Where do you think she can possibly be?" Elina replied with a soft smile.

"She's at the White Griffon academy to plan her own journey. She wants to follow her little brother's footsteps and travel the world. Your sister looks up to you, sometimes a bit too much."

"What does that mean?"

"She turned nineteen this year, yet she refuses to attend to parties, rejects all of her suitors, and only thinks about practicing magic. Does this behavior ring you any bells?" Elina said while pouting.

Lith feigned ignorance and called both his sisters. Tista was glad to hear from him, but couldn't come back before an hour. Rena asked him to pick her up instead.

"Don't play dumb with me, young man." Elina had her hands on her hips while tapping nervously on the floor with her foot.

"Is it too much to ask for a grandchild or two? I'm not getting any younger and neither are you. When will you bring a girl home?"

"Mom, I'm still young!" Lith tried to defend himself while casting the fastest Warp Steps in Mogar's history. "At least I date. It's not my fault if I can't find someone special."

"That's not dating, it's fooling around." Elina rebuked. She wasn't willing to let it slide this time.

"You didn't have these clothes four days ago and their style is not from the Marquisate. Did you buy them because of a girl? That would be a miracle."

Elina's observation skills stunned Lith.

The Warp Steps opened and Rena joined the fray.

"Looking good, little brother. Tailor made foreign clothes, and made of high-end fabric at that." She said while rubbing her fingers over his suit.

Just when he believed he was doomed, help arrived from an unexpected ally.

"Uncle Lith, you're back! Tell me a story." Leria, his niece crossed the dimensional door and tugged at his leg demanding her due. She was the same age as Aran and resembled her mother more with each passing year.

Her blond hair had shades of black just like Rena's.

Aran promptly joined the plea. The duo was noisy and stubborn enough to force their mothers to back down to have some quiet. Lith used light and air magic to stage every single fairy tale he knew until all the family was assembled.

'There's no way dad backs me up, but as long as Tista is here I can play the "she's older than me" card and throw her in the lion's den to save my hide.' He thought.

He then told them everything that had happened after he left home, using the Hush spell to cover the kids' ears whenever the story wasn't family friendly. When he arrived at the part where the King had made him a Great Mage, everyone but Tista rejoiced.

"Damn, this is bad. I must leave Lutia before the news spread, otherwise the White Griffon and the Marchioness will force me to attend to every single social event until this blows over. Not the mention all the drones that will swarm at our door." She said with a sigh.

"It's not just that." Lith explained. "The ancient noble households will try to get back at me, which makes every one of you a target. My stunt made them lose a lot of money and face."

"Don't you dare call it a stunt." Raaz stared at his son and grabbed his shoulder.

"You saved countless lives. I couldn't be prouder of you. As for General Morn and all those petty nobles they can go f...." Raaz managed to stop in the nick of time, noticing both the children's curious look and their mothers' deadly gaze.

Chapter 417 Family Reunion Part 2

"Farm a plot of land for all I care."

"There's no need to worry, dear." Elina stood up and hugged Lith from behind.

"We know our lives are in danger since the day you were admitted into the academy, yet I never regretted that decision"

"Wait, did you know?" Lith was shocked.

"Of course we did, son." Raaz nodded.

"We aren't stupid. Also, Nana and Count Lark warned us multiple times when they asked for our help to convince you to take the entrance exams. We unanimously decided you deserved a chance at a better life. Me, your mother, and your sisters."

Lith didn't miss how his father had not mentioned Trion, even though he was still part of the family at the time. He inwardly sent Trion to farm a plot of land before forgetting about his existence again.

"You can't let your fears ruin a moment like this, dear." Elina kissed his head.

"A lot of bad things could have happened, yet we are still here. We're not rich, powerful, or influential, but it doesn't mean we can't fight by your side. I'm your mother, I'm ready to put my life on the line for you since the day you were born."

"We all do." Raaz said standing up to join the embrace, soon followed by Rena, Tista and the kids, who had no idea what was happening but still wanted to express their love for Lith.

"I'm sorry, I need some air." Lith ran away from his home and through the Trawn woods like he had a dragon on his heels. There were few things that scared him, and losing control over his own feelings was among them.

The thought that all of his lies about how safe he was at the academy, of how despite his schemes and underhanded deals his family had lived in fear for all those years, filled him with enough rage to topple a mountain.

'Please, calm down.' Solus tried to comfort him. 'You should be happy knowing they love you so much. That they fought for your happiness as hard as you did for theirs.'

'Why should I be happy?' Lith inwardly screamed. 'All of my sacrifices, all of my pain. It was all for nothing! What good is my power if I can't even protect what I hold in my hand? Why do I bother with this rotten Kingdom? They should all die!'

'What about Nana? Count Lark?' Solus objected. 'What about Phloria, Friya, Yurial or Quylla? Did Yurial deserve to die? Didn't the Marchioness and the Crown keep their word so far? They are the reason why Lutia is called 'The Graveyard'.

'All of your efforts gave your family a better life. Tista is alive and well because of you. Aran was born because of you. Leria was born because of you. Nothing that's worth having comes easy, remember? Your words, not mine.'

Lith's ragged breath slowly returned to normal.

'I'm sorry, you are right. It's just that killing is so much easier than protecting. I wish Protector was still here. I wish...'

"Lith Verhen, you're not an easy man to find."

Lith turned toward the source of the husky voice. One of the Shadows of Kaduria seemed to have escaped from the destruction of the Black Star. Despite its human shape, the thing was made of living darkness that writhed at its every step.

Only when it came closer Lith noticed that it wasn't one of the cursed object's thralls. Instead of eyes, the thing had two small vortexes that sucked every particle of light around its head, making it a blur despite the sun had yet to set below the horizon.

"An Abomination. It's the first time I meet someone of your race capable of speaking before attacking." Lith was in a really bad mood and finding the creature so close to his home made it even worse.

"I'm not here to fight you." The Abomination raised its hands in a universal gesture of peace. "I only wish to reclaim what you stole. Give it to me and then I'll be on my way."

"First, I never stole anything. What I have I earned it through either fight or hard work. Second, why should I trust you?" Lith used that empty talk to weave all of his best spells.

"You're lying. The orc's crystal wasn't yours to take. I've worked hard for it. Give it back, now!" The creature's voice was so low it sounded like a cough when it tried to yell.

'Watch out. Without a colored core I don't know exactly how strong it is, but judging from its mana flow and life force the Abomination should be quite powerful. We never met an intelligent Abomination before, so be ready for anything.' Solus warned him.

"And you are the so called 'Master'?" Lith sneered. "Disappointing."

"How do you know about the Master?" The creature stopped in its tracks.

"Gremus. That big mouthed worm. It didn't fail the mission, you killed it!"

"What if I did?" Lith grinned. He had almost finished preparing the field.

"You should watch your mouth. Your family..."

Truth to be told, the Abomination was about to warn Lith that, in case they fought, his family could get caught in the crossfire since they were relatively close. It had no intention of threatening him.

The next thing the Abomination knew was that its body seemed to have been struck by a meteor. It flew deep inside the Trawn woods, crashing through trees too young or thin to withstand the impact before it tumbled in the dirt.

"What about my family?" Unluckily, Lith didn't know, nor did he care about its intentions. A blue aura surrounded him, growing in intensity with each passing second.

The Abomination shook its head to clear its blurred vision just in time to see the Gatekeeper appear in Lith's right hand amid a burst of emerald flames.

"I..." Before the creature could speak, Lith darted forward in an overhead slash. The attack was too fast to dodge it from such an unstable stance. The Abomination's arms shapeshifted into two blades made of shadows, with which it intercepted the blade in the nick of time by crossing them above its head.

The impact made the creature kneel, allowing Lith to execute a front kick with all of his strength. The Abomination was sent even deeper inside the woods, its body bounced on the thick trees like a pinball.

'What's happening? According to the Master's data, he should be weaker than a Valor. I'm way stronger than a filthy undead.' It thought.

The creature saw Lith's eyes brimming with blue mana as he moved through the darkness of the forest. Then, his eyes turned yellow and another pair opened on his forehead.

"What about my family?" His voice was reduced to a snarl as two more eyes opened and his skin turned into scales. The blade flashed, but this time the Abomination was ready.

It rolled to the side while extending its right arm, still in the form of a blade, to counterattack while Lith was out of balance. The attempt failed miserably since the creature was out of balance too. Its left arm and part of its shoulder fell on the ground with a thud sound.

A seventh eye opened in the middle of Lith's forehead.

"What. About. My. Family?"

Chapter 418 Message Part 1

Lith repeated his question for the third time, but after almost dying twice to the assault that followed its attempts to answer, the creature understood the human had no interest in talking. His words were just a way to distract it, to vent his anger, or both.

The Empowered Abomination was one of the Master's loyal servants and had been bestowed a name from them: Jarok. Normal Abominations lived alone, never interacting with someone unless they fed on them.

They had no need for names, only power. After joining the Master's cause, names had become their status symbol, akin to a noble title. Receiving one meant the Master trusted them enough to need their help.

Jarok cursed at its bad luck. What was supposed to be a simple investigation and retrieval mission had turned into a huge mess. Jarok was indeed stronger than a Valor, but the reason the Master had sent it wasn't its combat prowess, but its stealth capabilities.

Just like Lutia was called "the Graveyard", Lith's house was better known as "the Death's Door". Usually one would find a single Evolved Monster in an area as big as the Trawn woods, yet there were three and all of them stalked the Verhen Household.

Also, since Tista joined the academy, another two squads of the Queen's corps had been added to the protection detail. The Queen feared that a grassroots magical bloodline in the middle of nowhere was too much of an easy target, so she had taken precautions.

With all the arrays in place, the four elite squads, and the Evolved Monsters standing watch from the shadows, touching a member of the Verhen family was only slightly easier than stealing a phoenix's egg.

The Master suspected Lith was behind the crystal's disappearance because he was the only one present when the orc shaman died. They needed him alive to know if he had the crystal and where it was stored.

A Forgemaster like Lith could turn anything into a dimensional item, making the search for the crystal harder than finding a needle in a haystack. Kidnapping a family member was out of question.

It would require a couple of Eldritch Abominations to get past the wards, but by the time they succeeded, the family would have been relocated and the security increased.

Also, the Master didn't want to antagonize Lith. They had followed the nameless commoner's career and deemed him as one of the chosen, one of the few people the Master was willing to share the results of their research with.

The Master was biding their time before offering Lith the opportunity to join them. The youth was talented and brilliant. With his assistance, the Master could save years if not decades of research.

Jarok had waited for his return for months and this was the first opportunity it had to speak with him alone. Lith's habit of Warping around made it impossible to follow him.

'What kind of monster is he?' Jarok thought.

'When Lith was twelve, he needed his companions to defeat a newborn and incomplete Puppeteer Abomination. Then he almost died fighting a Valor. There's no way he got this strong in just a few years. Unless...' The revelation struck Jarok like a lightning and so did the Gatekeeper, cutting away its remaining arm.

'Unless he is an Awakened one and all the intel we have on him is dead wrong.' Jarok kept moving as tendrils of darkness came out of the severed limbs and reattached them to the main body.

Neither Jarok nor Lith was scared of their opponent. It wasn't their first rodeo. They both believed the situation was under control. The Abomination conjured three waves of air blades all at once.

One was aimed at Lith while the other two invaded the space on his sides, making it impossible for him to dodge.

'Interesting.' Solus thought. 'It can reason and cast spells. This Abomination could teach us a lot.' She studied the creature like it was their newest science project. Solus had no sympathy for Abominations nor she was worried for Lith.

His mind was in a fit of rage, but not the kind that makes a man act recklessly without care for the consequences. It was focused and amplified like a light turned into a laser, and it had only one aim: to kill.

Lith was forced to Blink away, just as Jarok predicted. It contracted the shadows that composed its body and infused them with mana until they burst out in all directions. The space in a five meters (16') radius around it was now filled by countless spikes protruding from a black core.

It was both the perfect attack and perfect defense, with no blind spot nor target left to attack.

Before the creature which now resembled a sea urchin could return to its original shape, a pillar of blue flames descended from the sky causing it blinding agony. Contrary to Jarok's expectations, instead of pressing forward Lith had moved upwards.

Lith had no idea if his opponent had access to Life Vision, dimensional magic, or both. By taking the high ground he could safely observe its reaction to a Blink. That way, even if the Abomination possessed the same skills of an Awakened one and Blinked forward, he would still be out of reach.

If not, the creature would leave itself open to an attack.

'No Life Vision.' Solus pondered while Lith made the pillar follow Jarok's every movement to prevent it from escaping the fiery trap. The creature roared with fury and Blinked to safety, or so it thought.

Lith's tier four true spell Burning Prison encased the dimensional door's exit point. Six fireballs appeared at the same time around Jarok, one above, one below and the others in a square shape. The fireballs exploded simultaneously, each reinforcing the effect of the others.

"Enough!" The Abomination screamed while unleashing its trump card. A black sphere enveloped the creature and ripped apart Lith's mana from the world elemental energy.

Burning Prison disappeared in a puff of smoke without inflicting any damage.

Jarok extended its left arm which emitted the tier four Chaos magic spell Howling Void. A spear made of darkness as thick as an arm crossed the space between them too fast to be dodged.

Lith Blinked away in a random direction, his eyes glued to the opponent while Solus stared in awe at the unknown spell's aftermath. Everything on Howling Void's path had simply disappeared.

'It's impossible! Darkness magic is supposed to be slow.' Solus was flabbergasted. 'Not only did that thing move fast, but it also made matter decay in an instant.'

Chaos magic was a twisted version of darkness magic, something that only Abominations could use. Light and darkness were two faces of the same coin, yet Abomination could forcefully sever the connection between them.

Nature abhorred the void. Whatever was hit by Chaos magic wouldn't just rot, it would also transfer its innate light energy to restore the balance, leaving the victim with no protection against the invading darkness.

Chaos magic moved fast because its energies were attracted by light magic like magnets of opposite poles.

"Last chance. Give me the purple crystal or die!" Jarok was tired of being Lith's punching bag. It preferred to defy the Master's orders and kill one of the chosen rather than die.

Chapter 419 Message Part 2

Lith's answer came in the form of maniacal laughter. There was no joy in it, only mockery and spite. The seven eyes blinked and so did Lith. This time Jarok quickly turned around and looked for its opponent while weaving dimensional and Chaos spells.

The Abomination cursed when it discovered that Lith wasn't behind nor above. Jarok knew that even a split second could be fatal. A movement on its right made the creature turn its head just to see the Gatekeeper sword fly on its own with a stone gauntlet on its hilt.

The Abomination cast the Chaos magic tier five Hollow Mist spell, conjuring around itself a corrupted space that would destroy the blade on contact.

'Moving the sword with spirit magic is just a diversion, he must be coming from the opposite direction.' Jarok thought while turning around. Its mouthless face deformed in what would have otherwise been a grin when its reasoning proved to be true.

It raised its left hand and released another Howling Void aimed at Lith's head. The Abomination chocked on its own triumphant shout when Lith dodged the spell by steering right and instead of approaching he kept his distance.

Only then Jarok noticed that both Lith and his sword were moving in synch, like sharks circling around their prey. It took the Abomination a second to understand what was happening.

'An array! I need to get out of here.' It thought.

Yet the realization was a second too late. Lith and Solus were casting it together, reducing the time required to materialize the magical formation. Jarok attempted to Blink away and failed. Darkness was one of the elements necessary to cast such a spell and it was now sealed.

Jarok then took off, but another Burning Prison cut off all the possible escape routes. The explosion sent it back to the middle of the array as a Checkmate Spears materialized and pierced it from every direction.

The Abomination tanked the damage and managed to escape from the array. Its body shapeshifted into a smaller form to offer a more difficult target while it darted toward the forest.

Jarok needed to feed. Unlike Awakened ones, Abominations had no access to Invigoration. Mogar had turned its back on them, the only way they had to gain world energy was stealing it.

Trees also meant shadows, and once Jarok reached one its powers would make it almost impossible to find it. Stealth was its specialty, after all. It was how he had escaped the detection of the Evolved Monsters.

The downside was that it had no value as an offensive maneuver. Once fused with them through Chaos magic, Jarok would be unable to attack or cast spells and it could only move from one shadow to another if they made contact.

Thanks to the setting sun, most of the forest was now enveloped in darkness. Jarok had lost any fighting spirit, its priority was to get away from Lith enough to have the time to Warp itself to safety.

The scales on Lith's face opened, revealing a mouth full of fangs. During the fight with Treius, he had understood why his throat felt weird while transformed and how to use it.

Lith breathed a jet of blue flames that set the closest patch of trees ablaze. Jarok couldn't afford to take a detour. Abominations had no vitals, their whole bodies were made of mana, which meant that with every spell they cast, with every wound they sustained they would grow weaker.

Using so many dimensional and Chaos spells was taking its toll. Jarok finally understood why Lith had laughed at its threats.

'That accursed Awakened must have noticed my energies dwindling after the first Howling Void. If only the Master had made me an Eldritch, I would never lose to a human.' Its train of thoughts derailed when it noticed that the blue flames wouldn't stop burning.

With its body invaded by the flames, all shadows would disappear as soon as Jarok came close. Lith understood the enemy's intentions and conjured a sphere of light that crushed all hopes the Abomination had of escaping.

Jarok had nothing to lose anymore. Its only wish was to not die alone.

Lith slashed with the Gatekeeper aiming for the head, the blade infused to the brim with darkness magic. Jarok willingly took the hit and managed to catch Lith unprepared.

Its two arms fused, forming a single blade with which the Abomination performed a riposte. As the Gatekeeper sliced Jarok in half, the shadow sword cut Lith's arm off at the shoulder level.

Yet not a single drop of blood was spilled. Black tendrils came out from both the arm and the shoulder, reconnecting them while the amputated limb was still in mid air. Jarok couldn't believe its own senses. Its dying mind refused to accept such an insane reality.

In a last ditch effort, it grabbed Lith's scaly shoulders and tried to suck away his vitality prolong its existence of an hour, a minute, or maybe just a second more. What it found was an unyielding hunger, that sucked Jarok's vitality as fast as the Abomination sucked Lith's.

Lith infused even more darkness inside the blade, wondering why the creature looked for affection during its final moments.

"What-what are you?" Jarok asked while its body slowly faded away.

Lith answered with a final burst of energy that turned the enemy into dust.

'Why did you shapeshift?' Solus asked.

'I don't know. It just felt right.' Was the only answer Lith could think of.

'Do you think this "Master" will get the message or will they bother my family again?'

'I think that they already got the message. That's why that thing tried to talk you into returning the crystal. Just like with the orcs, they can't afford to alert the Crown. Attacking your family would mean revealing their existence.' Solus replied.

Lith nodded and Warped home. The fight with Jarok had helped him to clear his mind and vent his rage. He was now able to look past his wounded pride and realize how lucky he was to be born into such a loving family.

'Maybe the third time really is the charm.' Lith thought.

'Speaking of charms, remember to call Kamila. You promised to do so once you reached home.' Solus pointed out.

'I promised nothing, she asked me to. Yet I would have done it anyway. After what I did to her, I owe her that much.'

"Where have you been? It's almost dinner time." Elina said as soon as Lith walked through the door. She was clearly worried about his earlier outburst, yet she pretended everything was fine.

"I'm sorry mom. I'm okay now." Lith hugged her tightly, hoping that one day he would be able to make her feel as special as she made him feel.

"Uncle!" "Big brother!" The kids yelled as one while tugging at his legs.

"You have to tell us a story!"

"Yes, he does!" To Lith's surprise, Rena joined them in their plea.

"The story of the Ranger's new clothes and the princess waiting for him in the north."

Chapter 420 Agenda Part 1

With Elina hugging him, the kids at his legs, and the whole family staring at him with an expectant gaze, not even Blink could save Lith from his predicament. He decided it was time to address the elephant in the room.

'Even if they do it in an annoying, nosy way, they are just looking out for me. There are so many things I keep hidden from them already. I'm not going to lie about something trivial like a fling.' Lith thought.

He had no need to explain to them how the Ranger system worked. Ever since he had expressed the intention of joining the military, his family members had performed thorough research about it.

If not for Soluspedia, they would know more about the army than Lith. He told them about the hidden village. To keep the story family-friendly, he changed the slavers into monsters and their victims into scared but healthy prisoners.

The kids enjoyed it while the adults shuddered. They knew that the more fable-like the story was, the more atrocities he was omitting. Then he explained how he met his handler, Kamila, and asked her out.

"I didn't buy new clothes because of her." Lith was adamant about it.

"Between the border warfare and the lost cities, the inhabitants of Belius are afraid of uniforms. I needed clothes, otherwise I would be an unwelcome guest in any establishment of the city."

"He said 'clothes' twice, so he bought more than a single set." Elina spoke like he wasn't even there.

"Yeah, also since when does he care what other people think? Not to mention that my son isn't the kind of man who would spend money just to be able to spend more on food. Not when he can get free meals at the canteen and sleep in the barracks."

Raaz shook his head. Lith's cover story was hard to believe.

Lith didn't know whether to be happy for how well they knew him or ashamed for being universally considered a cheapskate.

"Is she really a princess?" Leria asked full of curiosity. Having a King for an uncle was still among her childish dreams.

"Gods, no!" Lith shuddered at the idea. During his work as Assistant Professor he had met the Queen's daughters more than once. They were even less beautiful than Phloria and so stuck up that they were unbearable.

Lith would consider dating them only if they were the last women on Mogar.

"Is she pretty?" Aran asked.

Lith cupped his hands and conjured a 3D hologram of Kamila with light magic. It was a full-body image as big as a doll and in greyscale, representing her as she was dressed during their first date.

"She is to me. Kamila has a beautiful smile and seems to be a very caring woman."

"She is really cute. How old is she?" Rena was trying to make her tone sound as casual as possible. She even threw in a compliment before asking the only question those present really cared about.

"Twenty-six." The answer was welcomed with a barrage of snorts and sighs.

"Another one older than me! What do you have against girls your age?" Rena rolled her eyes, not even attempting to hide her displeasure.

"Nothing, besides them usually being shallow and childish." Lith replied with a snarl.

"I have to back him up on this." Tista's voice was sad. "All the mages I met were arrogant pricks, nobles are only interested in marriage, and commoners are terrified by us." She had summarized her whole love life in a single phrase.

Even after joining the Mage Association and having asked for Jirni's help, she never got past the first date.

"Besides, Lith is very mature and sophisticated for his age. He has even decided to travel the world to expand his horizons. Pressuring him like this is unfair. Love doesn't come with a deadline. This kind of things needs time."

No one missed that her heartfelt defense applied to her too.

"Another dud. A woman that age doesn't have the luxury of time." Elina sighed.

"Speaking of time, Jirni has invited us all to her birthday party. It would be really nice of you to attend." Her tone was casual, but Lith knew his mother enough to know how eager she was at the idea.

Even after Phloria and he broke up, their families had remained friends, especially their mothers. Friya and Quylla were among Tista's best friends, which kept the families even closer.

"I'll do my best to obtain leave for that day." The whole family rejoiced as Lith threw them a bone to get them off his back.

"Lil brother, after dinner I'd like to discuss magic with you." It was their code word for when Tista wanted to spend time with Solus or needed help with true magic.

"Sure. I need your advice too."

Gorgon Empire, in a secret location.

In an underground great hall, sitting around a humungous round table, were assembled most of the human Awakened ones living in the Garlen continent. Raagu, their current ruler and human representative in the Guiding Hand had urgent news to discuss.

Everyone was really curious to learn what could have possibly caused the assembly. Raagu was old enough to only have two cares in the world. Choosing a successor and searching for a way to prolong her life.

"Since I have no time to waste on niceties, I'll get straight to the point." She was a middle-aged woman that looked around fifty years old despite her real age being over five hundred years.

"There are only two items on our agenda. The first and more relevant is the murder of two Awakened members of our order." All those present gasped in surprise, fearing someone was hunting them down.

"Glamus and Treius Klein are no more." Two-thirds of the hall sighed in relief. Both the victims were from the Blood Desert, which made the issue irrelevant for them.

"How did it happen?" Asked a man that lived in the Desert, afraid he would be the next in line.

"Glamus was found guilty of being an accessory to breaking the peace treaties between the Griffon and the Phoenix. He has been executed by the latter. Treius was murdered during his attempt to merge with the Black Star." Raagu replied.

"What a couple of idiots." The man guffawed. All of his worries faded away like fog under the sun.

"The Klein's territory is now no man's land. Those of you interested in taking control of the area can raise their hand." Raagu ignored him and continued.

"I will not allow for senseless battles that could expose our existence. Everything will be settled here and now through a Spirit Duel."

Many wanted to seize the opportunity and hastily raised their arm, yet when they saw that none of the Awakened from the Blood Desert would take part in the competition, their greed turned into worry.

"Is there anything we should know?" A young-looking Awakened who lived in the Gorgon Empire asked one of her peers from the Desert. Before answering, the man stared at Raagu, who nodded.

"The Desert it's not like the Kingdom or the Empire." All those from the Desert sighed in embarrassment. "Overlord Salaark owns the land, literally. She grants us our territory in exchange for our services. The more you take, the more she is entitled to ask."

"What if you refuse her demands?" She asked.

The young man stared her in the eyes and said:

"How do you think I got a territory of my own at barely 200 years of age? The idiot before me got herself killed by the Overlord."