

Supreme M 521

Chapter 521 House Ernas Part 2

"Great Mage Lith Verhen and First Lieutenant Kamila Yehval." The head butler announced with a magically amplified voice.

Just like Kamila had feared, all eyes were on her. Lith had stopped being a novelty after the King himself had bestowed upon him his family name. With each achievement he acquired, the old noble households despised him more while the new magical bloodlines considered him a leading figure for their cause.

Half the room watched him walking down the small staircase leading to the Main Hall with admiration while the other half just wished that he would fall and break his neck. Both kinds of gaze only lasted for a split second before moving to his date.

Many noble dames had a cruel smirk on their faces, their mouths already opened and ready to badmouth the dirty poor social climber who in their minds had no place among them.

They had learned the hard way that Lith had no weak spot. Both his clothes and manners were always impeccable. Belittling his powers was akin to suicide, since not one of their heirs would qualify as his equal even when he had just graduated from the Academy.

Now that he was a Great Mage and was about to be appointed as a Spellbreaker, many families had to go way down their family tree to be able to name a relative they could compare to him.

The nameless civil servant accompanying him, though, was bound to be an easy target. Or so they thought, until their peers started to laugh at them, mistaking their expression for awe.

Even after a long look, they couldn't find anything wrong with her looks. Quite the contrary, more than one dame stared at her in envy.

Kamila wore a silk-satin red evening dress with a v neckline which left her arms and shoulders exposed plus it emphasized her bosom. Lith had made her a golden circlet that appeared to be made out of small camellias woven together.

The gold of the circlet brought out her black hair and vice versa, while both shone under the magical lighting of the room. She also wore one of Lith's forgedmastered camellias on her right wrist as corsage.

Looking at her adamant gaze, the nobles thought she was treating them with contempt, whereas she was just focused on not tripping over her dress and hiding the terror she felt.

She listened with relief as the butler announced the rest of the Verhen family, making many gazes move to the top of the stairs again. Every female member of Lith's family wore a circlet and an enchanted corsage, each one projecting the image of a different flower from Earth made from a different element.

A fiery rose for Elina, an icy orchid for Rena, and a black lotus for Tista. They all had pestered Lith to forgedmaster something for them too. Tista wore a skin tight ballgown that made many of the male guests stare in hatred at her date, while their female companions clenched their glasses so hard that they nearly shattered.

'I've spent over one hundred gold coins in cosmetic magic and I'm still an ugly duckling!' They thought in unison.

"Lith! It's so good to see you again." Several people began to crowd around him, yet he had no idea who they were.

'By my maker, they are your academy mates. How can you not remember even one of them?' Solus helped him to put a name to each face.

'I only had four academy mates, the others were only rivals or bystanders. Their fair weather friendship is as pointless now as it was back then.' He coldly replied.

"Professor Verhen! I don't know how to thank you." Said one of Lith's students.

"Back when I was at the academy, I hated your classes. Thank the gods you were so strict with me. Your teachings saved my life more than once."

"Glad to hear that, Qinyu. How are you doing?" Lith replied while shaking his hand. He remembered all the names of his students. In a way, he considered them to be his creations.

"Well enough to afford an invitation for this Gala. My company could use your help sometimes. Does the army allow you to perform freelance jobs?"

"You're asking the wrong person." Lith smiled as he took a wine glass for him and one for Kamila. "As long as I'm a Ranger, she's my boss."

"Oh gods! When are you going to stop growing?" Said a familiar voice resounding with fake anger.

"Little one! You have no idea how I've missed you." Lith lifted Quylla like she was a small child.

She would have loved to protest the embarrassing treatment, but her feet were dangling 20 centimeters (8') above the ground and she feared that a sudden movement could make the slit in her dress reveal far more than was proper.

"I'm almost as tall as Friya, now. Why don't you ever call her 'little one'?"

"Because when I met her, she was taller than me. In my heart, you will always be this tall." He released her from the embrace and gestured with his hand at her former diminutive stature.

"Are you still conducting your crazy research?" She asked.

"Indeed, but so far lady luck has turned her back on me. What about you?"

"Same. Body sculpting is a nightmare. Every small advancement seems to require years of study, but I don't want to wait for years! I want to become a Professor, make my own schedule, and not work like a mule until my hair turns white.

"I might have a lead on something, but I can't do it on my own and there's no one I trust enough to not steal my research. Academies are a dog eat dog world. Do you think you can help me?" She said looking at him with her trademark puppy eyes.

"Thanks for thinking about me, but what about your sisters? Also, Kamila, this is Quylla, one of my dearest friends. Quylla, this is Kamila, my girlfriend who also happens to be my handler in the army. You might want to speak to her about your problem."

Quylla gave Kamila a curtsy, which she promptly returned. While they were exchanging their greetings, Quylla couldn't avoid noticing how much her guest was different from her older sister, and found it ominous how Kamila's jewelry matched the rest of the family's.

"We would love to have a chat with her. A long chat." Friya glared at Kamila for a second before hugging Lith. Kamila chuckled at her fake hostility, yet Friya's words and hourglass figure stung at her pride.

"I offered to accompany Quylla more than once, but she doesn't trust my underlings!"

"Mercenaries only follow money." Quylla shook her head.

"I would have no problem if the mission involved collecting materials, but trusting them with something they can sell to the highest bidder? Thanks, but no thanks."

Friya bit her lower lip not having a witty retort at the ready. Adventurers were mostly grassroots mages who hoped to make a quick buck.

As soon as they realized how dangerous slaying monsters was and that the only treasures they found inside dungeons had once belonged to other adventurers, they would usually change their line of work.

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Creatures smart enough to distinguish trash from gold were also so dangerous that it wasn't worth facing them unless there was a rich bounty on their heads. In such cases, one had to be as wary of the competition as they were their target.

More than one group of mercenaries had been slain by another waiting in ambush for them to soften the prized creature. What idiots called 'adventure' was actually a high risk, unknown reward business, yet it was the only path to wealth unless one was willing to submit to a noble.

Friya had invested time and effort into her personal guild, but its revenue was still far from ensuring that its members would put their honor and friendship above a mountain of gold.

"Hi, Lith. How long has it been? Three years?" Even if the crowd didn't make way for her, Lith could notice Phloria from a mile away, and not because of her height. Her scent and the sound of her footsteps were so deeply ingrained in his memory that he could recognize them anywhere.

She was wearing a silk satin sky blue evening gown, with a v neckline. Part of her hair was down, like a silky black waterfall that reached her waist, while the rest formed a tress resembling a wreath over her head.

Nostalgia put a sad smile on Lith's face, which was quickly replaced by a raised eyebrow when he noticed that, together with sapphire parure, she was still wearing the gold lily shaped pendant he had gifted her years ago.

"Almost four." Only after giving her a small bow did he realize that she wasn't alone. A handsome man in his early twenties was walking arm in arm by her side. He was almost as tall as Lith, with pitch black hair and grey eyes.

His tuxedo emphasized his lean but muscular build. If not for Jirni's words about him, Lith would have been happy for her.

'Phloria deserves someone better than I was. It's the reason why I let her go. How strong is this jerk, Solus?' He thought.

'A clean cyan mana core and trained soldier level of physical prowess. Kallion seems to be a perfectly normal human. Phloria, on the other hand...'

'What about her?' Lith suddenly remembered about her impurities moving, just like it happened to Yurial before his untimely death. He had sent Tista to check on her from time to time and according to his sister, Phloria wasn't supposed to Awaken.

'Her mana core has gone from cyan to bright cyan and her mana flow is abnormal. Maybe we should check her with Invigoration.'

Lith cursed his bad luck. He had no reason to touch Phloria without making Kamila jealous, nor could he ask to speak privately about her health in the middle of the gala. Lith was renowned to be a great diagnostician but spotting an asymptomatic illness with a single glance was something not even Manohar was capable of.

An awkward silence befell to the group after they had introduced their respective dates. Neither of them knew what to say, at least in front of all those people. Small talk was cheap, but speaking their minds would make things even more awkward.

"What a lovely corsage you have, Kamila. I'd never seen anything like that. Did Lith forgemaster it for you?" Phloria unconsciously touched the dimensional amulet he had gifted her at the academy.

It didn't have just sentimental value to her. Phloria had yet to find a better dimensional storage. Orion had studied it for several hours, yet not even he had proven capable of such a feat since Lith had used true magic to make it.

"Yes. It's called a Camellia." Kamila replied with a radiant smile as she marked her territory. She didn't feel threatened by Phloria, the two of them were too different to make any kind of comparison.

Yet she didn't miss the tension Phloria's arrival had caused and she wanted to make things clear with her without being rude.

"It's wonderful." Phloria tried and failed to hide how those words stung at her, betrayed by a twitching smile.

"Would you be terribly jealous if I stole your date for a couple of minutes? A wound from my last mission has left me with phantom pain the army Healers cannot explain. I'm in dire need of a second opinion."

"Well, to be perfectly frank, yes." Kamila giggled to make it sound like she was joking. "However, I know how seriously Lith takes his oath as a Healer and as fellow army members, we have to support each other. I'll wait for you here."

The atmosphere tensed up to the point that the bystanders held their breath hoping things to escalate, but neither of the two women said anything nor stopped smiling.

"We'll be right back." Phloria gave her guest a curtsy before turning her back to them and walking toward a side room while Lith tried to keep up with her pace.

"That was... intense." Kallion laughed as soon as Phloria walked away, to make sure she couldn't hear him above the noise of the small crowd around them.

"Maybe a little too intense. You've gone overboard miss Yehval, I think you should apologize for your behavior when they get back." His cold smile didn't extend to his eyes as his words triggered whispers and chuckles among the bystanders.

"You're overthinking, mister Nuragor." Kamila disrespected his title just like he had done to hers. She was still afraid of the crowd, but not enough to let a pompous jerk order her around while she was an honored guest in her mentor's house.

"Some gestures come naturally when you really care about your partner. I hope you'll find someone like that soon." The whispers and chuckles intensified. None had missed how quickly Phloria had dropped Kallion's arm, nor that she hadn't talked to her date before leaving.

"I'm sorry to say..." Yet his stone cold voice didn't sound sorry at all. "but it's not a matter of caring, so much as of upbringing. Flaunting that small trinket of yours was unbecoming of an army officer, even for one with a shady family like yours.

Also, it's Mage Nuragor to you."

"I guess you're right. Not even my disowned father would use such double standards. If you're going to flaunt your title, then it's Lieutenant Yehval to you." Her rebuke made him turn red from anger, but he didn't dare to continue.

Most of the nobles were on his side, but Phloria's sisters were not.

"I'm sorry if I've offended you, that wasn't my intention. I just wanted to warn you that the other guests may find your 'gestures' rude. I understand you are new to environments such as this, but your behavior could embarrass Great Mage Verhen."

He gave her a small bow as an apology. Between his words and manners, Kallion had put Kamila between a rock and a hard place.

She could either refuse his apology and risk appearing petty, or accept them and be forced to in turn apologize to Phloria even though she had done nothing wrong.

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Meanwhile, after checking if a side room was empty, Lith and Phloria entered it and she locked the door behind them.

"Don't worry." She said in reply to his silent question. "The room is sound proof, no one can hear us from the outside."

Lith used Life Vision to check his surroundings while Solus did the same, replying only when their magical senses confirmed her words.

"Are you really hurt or is there something you need to tell me?" Lith knew that Quylla was a Healer almost as good as he was and that the phantom pain was likely an excuse.

Lith would have loved to tell her about he too had needed to speak with her in private, but seeing her with his amulet and between the arms of someone else had left him more confused than he had expected.

Everything that came to his mind would either make a fool out of himself or make the situation even more awkward than it already was.

Phloria was experiencing almost the same emotions. She had avoided Lith until that day because time had helped smother her feelings, so that their relationship felt like it could be a thing of the past.

But everything seemed to be coming back after seeing him again. Phloria's mind felt so fuzzy that she didn't even remember the reason why she had brought him there.

"Kamila seems nice. You two must be happy together."

"Kallion doesn't seem bad. I hope he treats you right." Lith had so many things to say to her, yet only the most idiotic ones seemed to be willing to pop out of his mouth.

"He doesn't seem bad?" Phloria chuckled, making him realize how much he had missed that smile and the sound of her voice. "So he doesn't seem good to you either."

"I don't know him. I can only say what I see." Lith shrugged.

"Why are we here?" His question came out much colder than he intended. His brain and his mouth seemed to be disconnected.

"I just wanted to know how are you. I mean the real you, not the mask you wear in front of everyone else. Have you mastered Death Vision yet?" She took a step closer, realizing it was the first time she had to look up to meet eyes with him.

Their past was so distant, yet it felt like it was yesterday.

"It's not a power, more like a curse." He replied.

"I have learned how to keep it under control under normal circumstances, but that's it. To make matters worse, there's no trace of something similar in any book I've consulted. You have no idea how does it feels to watch everything and everyone you love die over and over again."

"I remember it almost drove you insane." She sighed.

"Did you tell your family about that thing with you and the shadows?"

"No. I have never told anyone else, but I got better." It pained him to admit that she was still the only one he had ever shared that secret with. In his mind, Solus didn't count because they didn't share anything, they were one and the same.

Lith flexed his shoulders as his second form swallowed his tuxedo. He stood slightly over two meters tall, covered in thick curved black scales with hands and feet that ended in razor sharp claws.

It still lacked the horns, the wings, and the tail which only appeared during tribulations. His face was a black slate with no nose or ears. Two yellow eyes were open, while the slits for the other five, although visible, were shut closed.

'Why did you do that?' Solus was shocked.

'I don't know.' He honestly replied. Just like when he had fought the Abomination lurking near his house, it simply felt like the right thing to do. Yet while back then it was a response to his fury, now it was to his fear.

The part of Lith which had never stopped hurting ever since Carl had died, which was so full of hatred that it only wanted the entire Mogar to burn, was trying to prove its point.

It wanted to show him that he had done the right thing by letting her go. That there was no one he could really trust. A cruel grin appeared on his face, revealing a mouth full of fangs and fire as he expected her to scream in terror.

"Good gods." Phloria turned a little pale in surprise, but she didn't flinch.

"All those years ago I was right. You do really have dragon blood in your veins."

"Since when do dragons look like this?" His voice was a low growl as he waved at his demonic appearance.

"Dragons look however they want." She shrugged in reply.

"If you had feathers, I would have thought of a phoenix or a griffon, but scales yell dragon to me." Phloria stepped forward instead of back, just like that night in her room. This time she needed to stand on her tiptoes to touch his scaly cheek.

"Does it hurt?" Even the question remained the same.

"No. Not since I've accepted what- no, who I am. Thanks to you." He placed his scaly hand over her soft one, unable to hold his words anymore.

"As I told you after the second exam, I'm a broken man, shattered into so many pieces that my original form is unrecognizable. Yet you managed to turn the metal I've spent my whole life steeling myself to be, into soft fabric.

"Then, you spent almost two years of your life mending me. No matter how many times I pushed you away, either with my rude actions or my endless secrets, you were always there for me.

"You picked up all those pieces that I had given up on and sewed them back together. You've seen me at my worst, yet you never gave up on me, not even when I showed you this ugly self of mine.

"You taught me that even in this cruel world there can actually be someone who's worth trusting, someone that can accept and love me beyond what shallow words can express."

His thumb caressed the back of her hand as smoke and flames came out of his seven eyes in small bursts. It was supposed to scare her, but it made her cry instead. Unbeknownst even to Lith, his second life force had no blood nor tears, only fire and shadows dwelled in his body.

"You made me want to try and be more than powerful, to be better. For all that, I'm grateful to you and I always will be. I don't care who you marry or what kind of person you'll become, I will always be there for you.

"If you ever need my help, just call my name and I will come. I will discard my duty and my honor, I will pierce through the gates of the heavens and the netherworld if they stand in my path.

"Not even death could prevent me from coming to fight by your side, because that's the only way I could ever repay you for what you did for me."

Lith turned around, assuming his human form again.

"Now it's better if we return to the Main Hall, otherwise people will start gossiping about us. More than usual I mean."

Phloria stupidly nodded at his back, despite knowing he couldn't see her. She and Solus were both crying from the bottom of their hearts, because those words were the closest thing to a love confession Lith had ever done.

'Fuck me sideways! Solus, why didn't you stop me? That was the closest thing to a love confession I have ever done!' He thought.

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'First, I had no idea what you were about to say. That wasn't one of your usual rehearsed speeches. Second, even if I knew, I would have never stopped you. I've been trying for years to stop you from bottling up your feelings.' Solus replied.

'I'm happy that you finally admitted how this cruel world is worth living for, yet your words hurt me deeply. I know that I have never held your hand nor hugged you when your- no, our existence seemed hopeless, but I was always there for you.

'I have told you many times the same things that Phloria, Tista, and now Kamila have said, yet you never listened. I'm part of you, but I'm not you. After all this time, and after all that we have gone through together, I should deserve your trust.'

'I trust you, Solus. I always have.' Lith tried to defend himself.

'No, you don't trust me. It's just that you can't hide anything from me, there's a big difference. After I lied to you, only once, to protect your life, you said terrible things to me, you kept me at arm's length for weeks.

'You never stopped to think how hard it had been for me nor why I did it. You never have any idea how many sacrifices I make for you until we trigger a mind fusion and then you apologize just to start over again.

'Back when we reconciled, you gave me permission to kick your ass if I ever disagreed with you, but only now have I found the strength to do it. I never get angry at you because unlike Phloria, unlike every single goddamn soul on this planet, I know the real you.

'Derek McCoy, Lith Verhen, whatever the name, I don't care. Where your family sees an iron willed man, where Kamila sees a hero, where you see a monster, I see a man that no matter how much he had to crawl, no matter how much shit he had to swallow to move forward, he never stopped fighting.

'I always respected you for that and I didn't want to become another burden for you to carry. After the wargs, after spending some time with my friends rather than yours, I've finally realized what being a person really means.

'I deserve from you the same respect I give to you and if sometimes my feelings are a burden, well, deal with it. Because I'm as real as Phloria is, I'm not just a voice in your head.'

Lith was still recovering from his own moment of weakness with Phloria, so taking in Solus's, all of her pent up feelings, left him completely speechless. He returned to his friends not knowing

whether to feel like a jerk for what he had just done to Phloria, or for what he had done to Solus for all those years.

Because she was right about everything.

'By the way, while you played Romeo, I checked your Juliet with Invigoration. Her impurities are way closer to her mana core compared to the last time we checked, but she's still safe.

'You don't need to worry about her Awakening any soon. You and I still have a bit of time to find a way to make her survive her Awakening.'

Lith had been so engrossed by his emotions that he had completely forgotten about the issue with Phloria's mana core. Yet, once again Solus had covered for him, because she cared.

'Thanks, Solus. I'll never say it enough. Thank you for being my only true friend. If Phloria has been my tailor, sewing me back together, you are my mold. You kept me from losing myself over and over and you still do.'

Solus telepathically nodded, accepting the compliment. She thought about sharing with him the news about her humanoid form, but in the end, she decided against it.

'It would be a low blow. A cry for attention now that he's still emotional. As I just said, I'm not Lith. I do things my way. The right way. I don't manipulate those I love to get what I want.' She thought.

As they returned to their friends, Lith heard several whispers. Even though he couldn't piece enough of them together to get the whole story, he got the gist of it.

Luckily, Phloria and he hadn't been gone for long and Kamila had yet to give her reply. Lith and Jirni had warned both his family and his girlfriend about the risks of the gala. Messing directly with Lith was suicidal, but they were much easier targets.

In front of such an audience, losing their temper could seriously harm Lith, even if he wasn't there. Kamila and Elina were cut from the same cloth. They would have likely slapped Kallion into oblivion for his contemptuous words, yet aside from clenching their hands they smiled and didn't do anything.

'Since both the options he left me with put me in the wrong, I can only pick the third one: remain silent and hope that Lith returns quickly.'

"What's going on here?" Lith asked Friya while taking Kamila's hand. Not only was she his friend, but Friya was also a Lady of the family. No one could question her judgment without disrespecting the whole Ernas Household.

She told him everything, feeling a bit embarrassed for not having intervened. Quylla and she hadn't liked Kamila marking her territory since they were rooting for their sister.

"Let me get this straight." Lith stood straight as an arrow, so that he could look down on Kallion while staring at him in the eyes.

"First, you treated my date as a servant, demanding apologies only based on your assumptions. Then, you belittled my work, my magic, in front of my entire family and the rest of the guests. Lastly, by questioning her upbringing you also questioned my judgment."

"Not at all. You are oversimplifying things." Kallion said with an aggrieved expression. "I was simply trying to help your girlfriend and defend mine."

'Come on, you idiot. Challenge me, attack me or something. No one expects me to win and the harder you beat me, the worse it will be for you. It'll prove you're nothing but a bloodthirsty barbarian.' He thought.

"Am I?" Lith shrugged. "Phloria, did Kamila insult you in any way?"

"No. I asked her about her corsage and she simply replied. It's beautiful, by the way, calling it a trinket..." She glared at Kallion for a second before regaining her composure.

"So, no apology was required and you did belittle my work." Lith repeated while staring at him in contempt.

"I'm really sorry." Phloria gave Kamila a bow first and then Lith. She felt terrible since she was not only one of the hosts, but also Kallion's date.

"No need to apologize, Phloria." Lith picked her up by the shoulders and made her stand tall.

"You're one of my best friends, I could never get offended with you." Those words weighed more heavily than any reproach could, especially after the moment they had just shared in the side room.

Phloria felt stupid and miserable. She clenched the sides of her dress as her eyes turned watery from the rage and embarrassment, exactly like Lith had planned.

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'These are the moments when you really act like a monster. How could you do that to Phloria?' Solus felt bad for her.

'If I met him in the wilds, I would have killed him. If I were in the middle of the street, I would have challenged him. Here I could only take the sugar out of his venom to reveal the snake he is. A pretty face and pretty words mean nothing.

'Phloria needs to learn her lesson and a burned hand teaches best.' Lith replied.

The moment people noticed Phloria's distress, all whispers disappeared. Quylla and Friya were glaring at Kallion like they could murder him without a second thought, and so did their brothers, their relatives, and even the members of their staff.

Kallion's plan fell into shambles as the ancient noble households left his side the moment they understood who the Ernas were siding with. There was no point in backing a dead horse and no sense in beating it.

Kallion had managed to embarrass his date, his hosts, and his entire household in one fell swoop. It was a social blunder juicy enough to liven up the evening but not enough to last more than one day. Unless of course, things escalated.

"Phloria, would you like to take a little stroll around the park? We could use some air." Kallion had played his cards well by avoiding being rude and using Kamila's low social status to justify his words.

'It didn't go as well as I hoped, but everything is still fine. I only need to make sure that Phloria isn't upset and blames the little wench for the mishap.' He thought.

"You've taken the words right out of my mouth." She finally raised her eyes from the floor. A warm smile appeared on her face, yet her eyes were cold.

"We need to talk."

Chuckles and whispers spread throughout the Main Hall as soon as the couple walked through the glass doors leading outside.

"Do you think she will kick him out?" Kamila whispered to Lith's ear.

"That's unlikely. He was subtle and I couldn't make a scene. The Ernas will lose a lot of face if she ends up without a date right off the bat." He replied while listening to the other guests betting about the possible outcomes.

Kallion being kicked out was given 100-1, just like their relationship lasting more than a week.

"She treated you like crap! Someone had to say something. Why are you mad at me?" Kallion said after all of his attempts at sweet talk were met with Phloria's cold shoulder.

"If I thought she did, I would have put her in her place myself. You didn't do it to defend me, you did it to embarrass Lith. Or do you think I'm that stupid? Scratch that, I am that stupid, otherwise I would've never dated you." She was walking double time, clenching and releasing her hands to suppress her most violent urges.

"How can you say that? I'm not completely at fault here. You could have told me you wanted to speak with him privately. You took me by surprise, asking your ex to talk, what was I supposed to do?" Kallion tried to shift the blame again, hoping a bit of guilt would make his reasons more believable.

"Are you saying that I am supposed to ask for your permission before talking to a friend?" His move resulted in throwing jet fuel on the flames of her outrage.

"No, I..."

"To answer your other question, you could have taken it out on Lith, like she did with me. Or, if you were that insecure about us, you could have asked me to talk about it in private before embarrassing me in front of the entire Verhen family.

"You took it out on the most vulnerable link of the chain, instead. It seems deliberate, if not planned to me."

"How can you say that?" He managed to sound aggrieved, even though only his pride was hurt because she seemed to see through his scheme too easily.

"How could you do that if you ever cared even one bit about me?" Phloria rebuked.

"We're done. You can remain for the gala, but I don't want to see you ever again."

Kallion tried to object, before Phloria's right hand closed on his throat lifting him off from the ground and reminding him that she was even stronger than she looked.

"That's not up to debate. You can either say yes and act like a true gentleman for the rest of the evening or get escorted out of my house. Your choice."

Kallion nodded like a parrot, his lungs screaming for air.

'This is not over, you bitch. There is more than one way I can use you against that peasant. Bringing down the Ernas and the Verhen is like killing a flock of birds with just one stone.'

Meanwhile, inside the Main Hall, the butler announced the Ernas couple and then the Royal couple right after them.

"King Meron Griffon and Queen Sylpha Griffon." Despite the cosmetic magic treatment, the Royals couldn't compare with the Ernas. Despite her character, Jirni had an oval face with delicate features and big eyes, whereas the Queen had sharp features and a square jaw.

After both of them had their impurities removed, the best comparison that could be drawn between them was that they respectively looked like a newlywed maiden and a drill sergeant.

"I'm so sorry, dear." Jirni said to both Kamila and Lith.

"I didn't expect Phloria to take you away. You handled things well, Kamila."

"There's no need to apologize, Lady Ernas. I should have been more careful." Kamila was embarrassed by all the attention from the lords of the house. Too many eyes were staring at her in envy.

"No matter how careful you were, he would have struck at the first opportunity. It's not your fault."

"I apologize on behalf of my daughters." Orion gave Kamila a small bow, making her and the Ernas girls blush in embarrassment.

"I'm disappointed in you. Kamila is your mother's apprentice and your friend's betrothed. You should have been more considerate toward her."

At those words, Lith, his relatives, and Jirni almost choked on their wine.

"We're not betrothed." Kamila managed to say with a squeaky voice.

"You're not?" Orion looked flabbergasted.

"I mean, he crafted the Camellia for you, which is the most romantic forgemastered piece I've ever seen. He even made you a tiara like those Elina and his sisters are wearing. I thought you were already part of the Verhen family."

"I'm a one trick pony, okay?" Lith was beet red in embarrassment.

"Circlets are the most elaborate pieces I can make. I'm a Forgemaster, not a goldsmith. I practiced hard to make Jirni's present and I thought it would be a waste to only use that knowledge to create a single piece."

"But you made Camellias for the rest of your family too!" Orion objected.

"How many times do you want me to say that I'm a one trick pony? There's no hidden meaning behind them, they are not some kind of family trademark!"

"What's a Camellia?" Queen Sylpha asked. After finishing her rounds among the most important nobles, she had gotten curious about the fuss between the Ernas and the Verhen.

Chapter 526 Unexpected Gift Part 1

While inwardly cursing his bad luck, Lith explained to her how he had devised the mystical flower so that it needed to be repeatedly imprinted to not wither.

"Marvellous! A magical item that needs to be tended, making the person who receives it think about the gift giver every time they recharge it. That's the most romantic betrothal gift I have ever seen."

Sylpha said staring at Kamila's wrist in admiration, making both her and Lith wish the ground would swallow them whole.

"It's not a betrothal gift. I made it as a spur of the moment gift for our second date."

'I told you it was too much for a second date!' Solus interrupted his inner swearing monologue.

'I never expected to be discussing my love life with the Queen! Why doesn't everyone mind their own business?' He replied.

"You are a very lucky woman to inspire such deep feelings after only one date." Sylpha kept stirring it, making the matter become worse by the second.

"My thoughts exactly, Your Majesty. I couldn't believe it when Kallion Nuragor dared to call it a 'trinket'." Jirni was unaware that the ship she was attempting to sink already rested on the bottom of the ocean.

"His heart must be as rotten as his eyes to say such a thing. Isn't that right, dear?" The King obviously agreed, and as soon as the guest learned about the Royals' opinion on the Camellia, it became unanimous that Lith was a sensitive soul and Kallion the scum of the earth.

Sylpha and Jirni were happy to introduce Kamila to some of their most notable supporters. They boasted both her lovely appearance and the Camellia, making her wish a sudden meteor could put her out of her misery.

"Don't worry, Jirni will take good care of her." Orion said while dragging Lith to the Ball Room with the excuse that he needed his help to finish the final preparations before making the guests move there and commence the gala.

"I know we have never been exactly on the best terms." Orion sighed.

"I'm too jealous of my daughters and I've often acted like a jerk to you. For that, I'm deeply sorry." Orion gave Lith a deep bow, making his eyes open wide in surprise.

"The past is in the past. It's no big deal." Lith's paranoia got knocked into twelfth gear, expecting Orion's next move to be asking him to dump Kamila and get back with Phloria.

"No, it is a big deal. You saved my wife's life in Othre more than once and now you have rejuvenated us both. I suck with words almost as much as you do, so I've prepared a gift for you, Spellbreaker Verhen."

Lith inwardly smiled at those words. Like any manipulator, he liked to be underestimated. Also, receiving a gift from a Forgemaster as powerful and skilled as Orion was twice the treasure.

He had learned more about forgemastering from Orion's weapons than from most books. Orion took out a ring from his pocket dimension and handed it to Lith.

"What does it do?" Lith used Invigoration on it, discovering he had never seen a pseudo core like it had. The ring was shaped like a coiling dragon and it was made of electrum, an amber colored alloy of gold and silver.

It had a small purple crystal embedded in a socket between the dragon's folded wings. Invigoration revealed that the ring's surface was covered by unknown runes of power making Lith's curiosity kick up a notch.

"It's a cloaking device for your ring. Or should I say your secret artifact?" Orion pointed at Solus's ring. Lith didn't even attempt to deny his allegation.

His mind was running all the possible scenarios from how Orion discovered their secret to his chances of killing the man if push came to shove.

'If he knows, Jirni knows. There's no telling what contingency plans she has prepared or what kind of arrays are surrounding us.' He thought.

"We noticed it the first time when we were fighting Nalear, but we thought it was just something you kept in your dimensional amulet. At least until Jirni saw it shapeshift before you fought Thrud."

Orion pretended not to notice Lith's shock and his cornered animal gaze, talking like everything was normal.

'I'm sorry.' Solus thought. 'Back then my priority was our survival, yet I shapeshifted only when I thought everyone was too busy staring at Thrud to notice.'

'You did nothing wrong, Solus. We wouldn't even be alive if not for your choice. Besides, it doesn't seem like they want to blackmail us. Months have passed since that day and Orion is giving us a gift instead.' Lith replied.

"I don't know where you found it, but since according to my daughters you have always had it with you, I must assume you have found some legacy hidden in the Trawn woods when you were still a nameless hunter."

It was the only possible theory he had could think of which explained both Lith's mastery of magic and him possessing a mysterious artifact. Orion waited for a second, giving Lith the opportunity to answer, yet he was only met with silence.

"Whatever the answer, you can't just go around with that thing on your finger. If someone finds out about its existence, best case scenario they'll steal it from you. Artifacts capable of changing their size to such a degree usually hold great powers.

"It could tempt many to the point that they would be willing to face the wrath of the Royals to have it. Also, you're not a shut in, there are beings out there that don't care about the Association or the army, like the undead Courts."

"Why are you doing this?" Lith moved his eyes from the ring to Orion non stop, like he expected one if not both of them to sucker punch him.

"Kid, you really are a piece of work." Orion sighed.

"I told you, you saved my daughters and my wife more than once. That means the world for someone like me, even for Jirni. Maybe we'll never be in-laws, but you earned your place in this family and the Ernas protect their own."

Lith imprinted the ring to make sure it was really without a master and not some kind of slave item.

"How does it work?" Lith asked.

"It's standard black ops equipment for those who carry weapons which are not supposed to exist. It suppresses the magical aura of an item, making it undetectable to most creatures and artifacts capable of sensing magic.

"Silver is great for forgemastering, gold is terrible, but if you mix them together the resulting alloy is capable of conducting magic like silver but prevents it from leaking outside thanks to the gold's disrupting nature."

"Do all alloys have special effects?" Lith slipped the ring on right in front of Solus's.

"You wish. Only some of them and only if used in the right proportions. This kind of knowledge is imparted only from master to apprentice, you'll not find any of this in any book unless is part of a mage's legacy."

'By my maker!' Solus's mana sense confirmed Orion words and revealed more.

'It's actually even better than he says. My aura has disappeared and you now you appear to have a yellow mana core, a static one at that.'

'Do you mean that..?'

'Yes. The hairpin Marchioness Distar wears is not meant to hide her mana core. That's logical if you consider fake mages can't see mana cores, or they wouldn't even perform the academy's entrance test.

'She hides some kind of weapon on herself. The cloaking of her mana core is just a side effect.'

Chapter 527 Unexpected Gift Part 2

'Okay, it can hide your magical aura. What about your life force?' Lith couldn't believe his own ears. So far everything was too good to be true.

'That's what you have to tell me.' Solus sneered. 'We must see if it shields me from outside detection, my Invigoration is bound to work on myself.'

Lith focused on his breathing technique and discovered that just like Solus had predicted, his mana core still appeared to be deep blue to him, while Solus's had disappeared.

Her life force, however, was still there. Tiny, almost invisible, but still there.

'Dammit! Almost only works with nukes and grenades, but at least it's a start.' Lith thought.

'I never thought the day would come where you would see the glass as half full.' Solus chuckled.

'Now I'm curious about what kind of weapon the Marchioness always carries with herself.'

Yet that was a question for another day.

"Thanks, Orion. Does it have any other properties I should know about?" Lith was truly grateful, but he kept looking around like a trapped animal.

"Stop looking around like a trapped animal, dammit! I'm offering you my sincere gratitude and I'm also violating several laws by giving you such a magical treasure without official authorization.

"If anyone finds out, they would take away your ring and I would be executed. The least you could do is trust me a little bit." Orion blurted out in exasperation.

"Also, no. It doesn't have any other purpose. Gold is such a pain in the ass that even with the purple mana crystal and a whole network of runes, one spell is all it can hold without crumbling."

Lith looked at the coiled dragon at his finger. He was so moved by Orion's gesture that he almost set aside his paranoia.

Almost.

"Why are you doing so much for me? Binding your fate to mine is too much. You never liked me and our relationship is shallow at best."

"You're right. Our relationship is shallow. Jirni, however, almost cares for you like a son and my little flower..."

"Well, that's not up to me to tell. I know she would lose a big piece of her heart if something happened to you, and another one if she discovers that I could have prevented it yet I didn't do anything."

Orion's big heart baffled Lith more than his reincarnations did.

He couldn't understand how someone like Jirni could love such a softie. Lith loved his mother, yet he wouldn't hesitate to kill Orpal or Trion if they ever posed a threat to his family, no matter how important they still were to her.

How he could risk so much to protect his family's feelings rather than just their safety was beyond Lith.

"I gladly accept your gift and your gratitude." Lith replied.

"There's not much I can offer you, but if there's anything I can do to return the favor, you just need to ask."

"Good gods, you're the spitting image of my wife back when we first met. It's not a gift if you pay for it. Anyway, while we are at it, Jirni is about to ask you to become our family's Healer. It would be nice of you to say yes."

"Are you kidding me? Quylla is almost as good as I am and Friya is an excellent Healer too. What do you guys need me for?"

"Sadly, almost only works for fireballs and meteors." Orion replied.

"Manohar is unreliable, while you are the next best thing and you are always just a call away. As our Healer, no matter if you're in the army or the Association, your patients come first.

"We get priority in case of emergency and you get a perfect excuse to visit whenever you want. It's a win-win. Think about it while I let my guests in."

Lith inwardly cursed as he remembered he had yet to set up the Ballroom. The place was as big as a football field.

Its floor was made of cream colored marble. Together with the light brown walls, it gave warmth to the room and gave the light coming from the enchanted crystal chandeliers illuminating the room the same tinges real fire would.

A small bandstand with a low wooden fence to separate it from the dancers had been prepared for the musicians near the east wall. Refreshment tables were lined up along all the other walls.

Food and beverages were kept warm and cold by their magical containers.

On the four corners of the room, there was a flight of stairs which lead to a balcony on the first floor, where sofas and armchairs were arranged around small tables for those who needed a place to rest, eat, watch others dance or simply wanted to spend their time in conversation.

"All this waiting and you have yet to start? I hope a major disappointment wasn't what you had in mind when you promised me a memorable evening." Jirni's expression while pouting was cute. Too cute, to the point that it gave Lith the creeps.

'Is this the effect I have on people when I go from friendly to homicidal in a heartbeat?' Lith thought.

"Perfection requires time. Also, I thought you would enjoy the show." Lith lied through his teeth, fooling everyone but Jirni.

"How thoughtful of you! Phloria, Kallion, come here. Lith says we're in a for a real treat." Her fake enthusiasm held a tinge of cruelty while she called the couple and forced Lith to go beyond what he had originally planned.

Phloria was still holding Kallion's arm, but her fingers were barely touching him. The coldness her plastered smile emanated could have easily turned Mogar into a frozen wasteland.

Jirni had just served him an opportunity to pay back Kallion for his words and guaranteed herself that Lith would not spare any effort. Two birds with one stone.

Lith accepted her challenge, raising his open hands while he took a deep breath. His shadow spread from his feet in every direction, like a black sun that engulfed the entire Ballroom turning it into twilight.

A few millimeters thick layer of water covered the floor, quickly followed by a fine mist. Mogar had no underwear, Lith didn't want people to look under the ladies' ballgown thanks to the reflection.

"That's it?" Kallion sneered. "First magic can hardly be considered a treat. It's a cheap trick just like that corsage..." He was unaware his words were not only demeaning Lith's skills but also the Queen's opinion.

Rushes made of light sprouted from the floor as six different kind of flowers, one for each element, bloomed above the water. A silvery sphere enveloped each one of the chandeliers, turning them into small moons while small wisps appeared on the blackened ceiling like starlight.

"Oh gods! If I didn't know we were inside my own home, I'd really think we're under the moon." Jirni walked above the water, discovering it wasn't slippery at all. She tried to touch the rushes and the flowers, but they were all ethereal.

"I'm not done yet." A wave of Lith's hand made some of the flowers turn into small fairies that moved around the room as shooting stars darted across the fake night sky.

Together they formed a path of lights, leading the Ernas couple to the center of the stage where a giant reflection of the moon waited like a spotlight for them to open the dances.

"Well said, Mage Nuragor. It's just a cheap trick." Sylpha's voice expressed all the joy she felt for being openly contradicted in front of such a large audience.

"I'm sure you can do much better."

Chapter 528 Failure Part 1

Despite being calm and composed, the Queen's voice echoed throughout the whole Ballroom thanks to both its perfect acoustics and a little air magic spell she added to make sure all eyes were on her victim.

"Her Majesty is right, Kallion." Phloria smiled warmly while hugging his arm, pretending that as his girlfriend she believed in his skills and words.

"You always tell me that back when you graduated from the academy, people called you 'the Lith of the Fire Griffon'. This is the perfect occasion to show both my family and the Royals what you are capable of."

Cold sweat ran down Kallion's spine as cruel remarks filled the room.

"What an idiot to blatantly slander the Camellia again after the Queen praised it." Said a Duchess well aware that the fan she was using to cover her mouth couldn't muffle her voice at all.

"He's worse than an idiot." Said another noble dame that despite her human appearance Solus recognized as an undead from her blood core.

"There's no glory being called 'the Lith of the Fire Griffon'. It means he is still considered inferior to the original, otherwise they would call Lith 'the Kallion of the White Griffon'. In his shoes, I wouldn't flaunt such a title."

Lith dissipated the illusion he had created with a snap of his finger, turning the fairy tale lake back into a luxurious but ordinary ballroom.

"How many first magic spells did you weave together, Great Mage Verhen?" Queen Sylpha emphasized every syllable of Lith's title.

"Fifteen, Your Majesty." His words caused a small uproar among the guests, but Sylpha only needed to raise her hand to make the room silent again.

"The Crown praises your skill and relentless practice. A mage's worth can be measured by the number of spells they can cast. Anything else is just empty air."

She turned towards Kallion, her gaze lost any trace of benevolence.

"Mage Nuragor, prove your worth."

Kallion barely held in the hatred he felt when he noticed that Phloria was still smiling despite his evident distress.

'I hoped she had changed her mind about me, but that witch was only digging me a deeper grave!' He thought while taking a few deep breaths to calm down and focus his mind.

He hadn't lied about his title back at the academy, Kallion simply had never understood the implications of being compared to someone rather than being the benchmark.

Darkness spread from his body, making the room become pitch black. Only after several attempts did he manage to make the shadows fade enough to see further than his own nose.

He then conjured a thin layer of water that drenched everyone's shoes and gowns, making many curse his incompetence. After that, a thick fog appeared, which made the air humid and sticky.

"This seems more like a marsh than a lake." King Meron grunted as he used air magic to find some relief.

The laughs following his remark made Kallion lose focus, so that when he tried to imitate starlight, his light and darkness spells canceled each other.

"I'm not going to judge until I see the final result. I counted four spells, so you still have eleven to go." Sylpha never averted her gaze, making him feel the full weight of her disdain.

Kallion did his best, but like most mages, he had always considered first magic irrelevant compared to tier five spells. His attempt to use a fifth spell while he still had to keep active and balance the other four made them all disappear at once.

A second and third attempt only resulted in more blatant failures and further humiliation. At every iteration, he was more tired and angry, until he couldn't take it anymore.

"I can't do it, Your Majesty. Four is my limit." Kallion fell to his knees incapable of looking the Royals or his peers in the eyes.

"Four?" The Queen echoed the word like it was an insult.

"Isn't first magic just a cheap trick? Isn't Great Mage Verhen just a maker of trinkets? How dare you belittle others when you're not even able to wield more than four spells at once?"

"I can wield far more than four!" Kallion raised his head and hands, conjuring eight different elemental effects on his fingers.

"Eight would be great if those were not unlinked spells and all the size of a pinhole. Can you at least do this?" A Silverwing's Hexagram the size of a handkerchief appeared above Sylpha's palm.

It was the impossible array that had earned Lith his admission with honors at the White Griffon academy when he was still twelve. Kallion and all of those presents understood the question underlying the Queen's words.

"No." Kallion shook his head without even giving it a try. His spirit was already broken. Since another humiliation was unavoidable, he decided to make it last as little as possible.

"So much for the 'Lith of the Fire Griffon'." Sylpha turned her back to him.

"We've already lost too much time. Great Mage Verhen, it's your turn again."

Lith had devised many ways to humiliate Kallion further, but since everyone was already kicking him while he was down, any more could have turned the spite into pity, so Lith only did as instructed.

While Orion and Jirni opened the ball by dancing the first waltz alone, Solus warned Lith about her discoveries.

'I've detected four undead and one Awakened among the guests.'

'Is Kaelan among them?' The vampire from Othre was the first one who came to Lith's mind. He discarded the idea immediately, since attacking him in front of so many powerful mages was worse than suicidal.

Both the King and the Queen had purple mana cores and many members of the house staff were actually elite warriors in disguise.

'No.' Solus replied. 'I don't think they are here together, nor that they have an agenda. All they've done so far is mingle and gossip. I think they are just here to enjoy the gala.'

'Any idea what kind of undead we're talking about?' Lith asked while the Royals joined the dance, quickly followed by the others.

'None. All I can say is that the undead duchess from earlier is the strongest among the four. The other three are nothing compared to her.'

'What about the Awakened?' Lith and Kamila joined the dance too, forcing him to add his own feet to the already long list of things he had to focus on.

'A woman in her mid twenties, but she could actually be much older. Blue mana core, so her magic should be a bit stronger than yours, but her physical prowess is inferior to yours.'

'I wonder why all the Awakened we meet have this trait in common.' Solus pondered.

'Probably because I Awakened at birth. Even if they were born with better mana cores than mine, my body has been refined while it developed whereas theirs need to slowly adapt.'

"Are you sure you can afford to dance?" Kamila's worried voice interrupted their mind link.

"Keeping so many spells active at once must be excruciating. I've never seen you with such a stern expression." She wasn't far from the truth. Lith could either speak with Solus or with her, he didn't have the strength to do both.

Chapter 529 Failure Part 2

"I don't care what we do. As long as we are together it's a date to me." Kamila moved her right hand from Lith's shoulder to his cheek, caressing it gently. That simple gesture filled him with joy.

"Thanks, but there's no need for that. I was just thinking about how lucky I am to have you in my life." His smile and words made Kamila's heart pound. Lith wasn't one for sweet talk, he would only say such things when he meant them.

Lith took a deep breath, using Invigoration to replenish part of his mana and release Death Vision from its fetters. In his eyes, the entire Ballroom turned into a grotesque nightmare where rotten corpses danced amid blood spatters.

He tried not to look around, focusing only on Kamila's smile. As long as she was between his arms, she was safe from Death Vision's effects. A beacon of life in a sea of dead bodies.

'If I don't suppress Death Vision, I've more than enough mental strength to do everything at once. Kamila deserves to enjoy her first gala without having to constantly worry about me.' He thought.

'She's so sweet and unaware of all the bad things which happened to me in the past. When I'm with her, I can forget about everything but the present. Kamila is my second chance, my opportunity to start from scratch.'

The only silver lining of Death Vision was that it allowed Lith to immediately spot the undead among the crowd. They were the only ones that would not age nor die of poison or illness.

They weren't paying any attention to him, so he was careful not to stare while using their deaths to discern their nature.

One of them would oddly always die in the same way. Her disguise reverted into a desiccated corpse before it turned to dust. Yet there was no sign of spells or injury, her body would simply collapse as if the magic animating it was gone.

As if a switch had been flipped.

Another would only die when his head was destroyed or his heart pierced. After that, his body would turn into ashes. The other two seemed to be much easier to kill. No matter if by weapon or spell, when their bodies sustained enough damage they would respectively turn into a pool of water and be set ablaze.

Lith was wondering why the bestiary stored inside Soluspedia didn't include the details about what happened after destroying an undead when the music ended.

'That information would allow me to use Death Vision to identify them. Without it I can only get a faint idea about their weak points.' He inwardly griped.

"Between facing that Kallion jerk, meeting the Royals, and being introduced to all those nobles like I'm some sort of a princess, I've really had too much excitement for one evening. I need a little rest."

Kamila's cheeks were flushed red from the dancing but she wasn't tired. She was just worried about Lith and was giving him an excuse to relax a bit. Lith understood her intentions immediately and accompanied her to the first floor, where they were offered food and drinks by the waiters.

"How do you feel?" She prompted after asking the staff to move a chair near the balcony for him, so that he wouldn't lose visual contact with his spells and with it the surgical control he had been exerting on them.

"Much better, thanks." Her care moved Lith so deeply that he would have kissed her if the rules of etiquette didn't strictly forbid public displays of affection.

"You were right. I let my anger get the better of me. Maintaining fifteen spells that interact with each other and the guests is a bit too much, even for me." He sighed as he moved the spotlight on the Royal couple for the next dance.

"Why did you do it? That jerk isn't worth this much effort." Kamila switched his glass of wine with grape juice. Lith needed focus and energy, not to get drunk.

"But you are." He replied while taking a sip. "After what he did to you, Mage Nuragor needed a royal beating."

Lith had a hard time keeping the edge off his voice and his murderous impulses under control. His instinct had marked Kallion as an enemy, and he wasn't used to giving them a second chance.

Killing him was out of the question. Too many witnesses and too many arrays. More importantly, he didn't want to scare Kamila or his family. Some aspects of his life had to remain hidden.

In the opposite corner of the room, the Ernas siblings were resting their feet. Between handling the preparations and welcoming their guests, it was their first opportunity in hours to sit.

Phloria was in no mood to dance. After a single dance as a formality, Kallion had left the gala with the excuse of feeling ill. She had lost her date and her source of entertainment. Misery loves company and Phloria was no exception.

Seeing his anguish at every snarky remark he was the target of whenever they met another couple on the dance floor was the only relief for her wounded pride. They had yet to get to the point where she started to plan their future together, but she had fallen for Kallion's ruse enough that she had hoped there could be one.

Friya had no date and was happier that way. Quylla was brooding because her boyfriend, Anathor, had not attended the gala, making her suspicion that he was just playing with her feelings even stronger.

They also felt guilty for not defending Kamila when Kallion had tried to embarrass her. Orion's words had stung and even though Lith didn't add anything, his disappointed look spoke volumes.

"Usually, I wouldn't approve of that guy." Gunyin, the eldest brother, pointed at Lith with his glass, tired of his sister stealing glances at the couple and sighing.

"He's shorter than me and seems weaker than dad, but compared to that other guy at least he has talent. I think you made a mistake letting so much time pass."

"Is this your opinion, or are you borrowing mom's as usual?" Phloria rebuked.

"For once, I'm with the beanpole." Tulion, the profligate brother, was shorter than Phloria. He was 1.73 meters tall with blonde hair and blue eyes. He had taken his looks from his mother's side, yet where his attitude came from was still a mystery.

"Of all the boyfriends you've had, I've never seen you as happy as when you and the little monster were together. You know I like people staying out of my personal life just like I stay out of theirs, but I have to ask.

"What went so wrong that you decided on such a clean break? I mean, even Gunyin can tell you still have feelings for him." Gunyin nodded, not taking his brother's words as an insult so much as truth.

He had been raised as the future Lord, betrothed before he was ten years old and married right after he came of age. His skills lay in numbers, business, and politics. Everything else was just a means to an end: the glory of House Ernas.

Chapter 530 Leaving Part 1

"During my fourth year at the White Griffon, I only approached him because I needed a friend. I was tired of everyone around me, even my family, trying to turn me into the person they believed I was meant to be." Phloria cast a Hush spell, to make sure no one would eavesdrop.

"Over time, I came to like Lith more and more not because he was powerful or talented, but because he was the only one that saw me for who I was and accepted me anyway. He never cared if I always had a sword with me or if I wore pants instead of a dress.

"It was liberating after being weighed, measured, and found wanting all my life, no matter how much effort I put in."

Aside from Quylla, they could all relate to her words. Belonging to a noble family meant a life of duty, and competing with everyone from birth, no matter if they were peers or family members.

That was the reason why during the academy both Friya and Phloria were considering running away from their respective families. Why Gunyin's whole existence was devoted to ensuring their bloodline would thrive and continue.

Tulion had chosen to become the Ernas's black sheep to escape from such a destiny.

"Our relationship wasn't all sunshine and rainbows. There were too many silences, too many secrets between us. I waited for him to open up and tell me, but he never did. Breaking up with him was painful, but it was the right thing to do. We both needed space to grow and we did."

"Do you think Lith has opened up to Kamila?" Quylla asked.

"No." Phloria shook her head.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I asked him. After all the things mom told us about them, I hoped that Lith had finally found someone capable of cracking his shell, or at least someone he is able to show his weaknesses to.

"I can only pray that Kamila is stronger than I was, otherwise she's destined to follow the same path as I did." Phloria sighed.

"Let me get this straight." Tulion looked her in the eyes.

"After scoping out the competition, you went straight to him to see how solid their relationship is. I don't know what you two talked about, but it's pretty clear that Lith must have shared something with you that he didn't with Kamila.

"So now you're waiting for them to break up to catch him on the rebound and make him open up when he's at his weakest. Your plan is vicious, cruel, and cunning. Mom will be proud of you."

"Agreed." Gunyin nodded, making Phloria facepalm.

'I simply meant that, even though Lith has changed for the better during the past four years, it's still not enough. At least for me. Without trust and friendship, love is too fragile a feeling to last.

The more you love someone, the more painful it is when you realize they have always kept you at the fringes of their heart.' She thought.

After several dances, the King had the musicians stop. Everyone on the first floor came down to the Ballroom, leaving a circular space around the Royals.

"My dear subjects, I'm glad to see that even the most reclusive among us have accepted my invitation and took part in the gala. I hope you've been enjoying the evening."

Lith didn't miss how the King had looked directly at the undead during the first part of his speech.

"Tonight, we haven't assembled only to enjoy each other's company, but also to honor and pay our respects to those who have loyally served the Kingdom, even at great personal cost.

Lady Jirni Ernas, step forward."

Jirni did as instructed, kneeling in front of the Royals with her head down.

"House Ernas has always been one of the pillars of our Kingdom, but your meritorious acts as a Royal Constable have exceeded what any of your forefathers have ever done. For that, you are promoted to the rank of Archon."

The crowd was left astounded. Archons were the supreme magistrates in charge of supervising the work of Royal Constables. It was a role usually reserved for members of the Royal family because the authority it granted was second only to the Crown itself.

"Stand up, Archon Ernas, and take the insignia of your new role." Jirni obeyed, her face was a mask of joy and respect. Yet Lith could see she wasn't happy. Being an Archon meant more work, more danger, more enemies.

'I was expecting to be promoted to Head Constable, not this.' Jirni thought. 'There must be internal strife within the Royal family, and the King needs someone he can trust.'

"Great Mage Verhen, step forward." The King said as soon as Jirni left the center stage.

"House Verhen is young and you are its very foundation. For freeing the Kingdom of the eternal threat of the Black Star, for protecting the city of Othre, and for your contributions in vanquishing the monster outbreaks, I bestow upon you the title of Spellbreaker.

"You are hereby recognized as one of the Kingdom's most trusted elite in dealing with rogue mages and as such your help will be required in times of need. The title grants you the title of Baron and the annuities it deserves even though it comes with no fief."

'Money for my research and no new responsibilities.' Lith inwardly sighed in relief. After what had just happened to Jirni, he was afraid that his reward was going to be bittersweet too.

After the gala, Kamila exchanged communication runes with Quylla and Friya. They were truly sorry for what had happened with Kallion and were willing to make it up to her.

'They seem to be sincere, but even if they are not, they are still part of Lady Ernas's family and most importantly a part of Lith's life. He's very fond of them, so they deserve a chance. Besides, it would be nice to hear something about their days at the academy.

'Lith has never talked about his past except after I explained to him why I'm estranged from my family. I guess he's the kind of man who opens up only if I do it first. Or maybe I should just ask him instead on walking on eggshells.

'Gods, now that he's a Baron, my colleagues will never let me hear the end of it!' Kamila thought.

Jirni and Lith congratulated each other, and so did their respective families.

To Kamila Jirni said: "Be ready to assume your role as field assistant Constable. Now that I'm an Archon and Lith is a Spellbreaker, I'm sure that your application will coincidentally take priority."

Her voice oozed sarcasm.

"I hope I don't have to wait four more years to see you again." Phloria said with a sad smile.

"I'm only half responsible for that. You have my contact rune and I doubt it would be hard for a Captain to locate a Lieutenant." Lith stressed his point by giving her a salute.

"Even if you choose to avoid Spellbreaker Smartass here, feel free to visit us anytime. We missed you a lot and so did the kids." Rena hugged Phloria, making her feel guilty for her prolonged absence.

"I'll visit you when I get my next leave. Unless it's a sick leave, I should have enough time."

"Don't worry, dear." Jirni chuckled. "I've asked Lith to become our family Healer and he accepted. The next time you get injured in action, I'll make sure you receive proper care."