

Legion lich 21

Chapter 21:

The next day, people woke up to two shocking news. A new fire had started in the house of the captain of the city guard and he was missing, as was his wife.

A full-scale investigation was carried out, mobilizing almost every force in the city, from the barracks, the adventurers' guild, and even the baron's guard. Investigations showed that the culprit had used the sewers to move around.

Investigations were made throughout the sewer, but the captain's whereabouts remained unknown. The only thing they found was some smuggling bases from favela gangs.

Drip, drip.

Gavin slowly regained consciousness. His vision was blurry and his senses dulled.

"Where I am?" He muttered slowly, finding it difficult to speak. Her body was still numb and her mind was confused. Gavin tried to move but felt his body restrained by something.

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He looked down and even though his vision blurred, he saw his body bound in chains. He was sitting on a wooden chair with his limbs chained together. Gavin panicked and started swaying wildly trying to free himself, but he was stuck tight.

The only thing he was able to move was his head, but he couldn't see anything because of the darkness. He also tried to circulate mana, but it flowed wildly through his body.

"Are you awake yet? You aren't the captain of the guard for no reason. Wait a minute, I'll give you some attention." A surprised voice came from somewhere.

As his vision adjusted and adapted to the dark environment, Gavin was able to see his surroundings.

He looked like he was in a natural cave or something built by subterranean monsters. He could see narrow tunnels in the ceiling, walls, and floor, an obvious creation of monsters, due to the total lack of order.

The place was approximately 10 meters wide and 2 meters high, with random items littering the floor. They were mostly miscellaneous items like clothes, tools, weapons, food, and jars with unknown contents.

A child in his early teens was sitting with his back to him, brewing some kind of potion. He looked concentrated as he mixed unknown liquids in a flask of water. A flame floated beneath the vial, fueled only by magic.

"You shit! What did you do to me? Where's my wife?" Gavin screamed, trying to jump at Athos, but all he could do was fall flat on his face. Athos didn't bother to turn around and continued to concentrate on his work.

“...blergh!” Gavin choked on the dirt and had trouble breathing, but Athos just smiled at him. For the next ten minutes, Athos ignored Gavin’s grumbles and curses as he enjoyed every second he was choking.

After Athos finished his potion, he turned around and enjoyed it for a few more moments while he suffered. Athos only lifted Gavin when seeing him suffer from his face on the floor lost its fun.

“I’ll pick you up, but you’d better not fall again, otherwise I’ll interrogate you face down.” Athos said, amused by the captain’s irritated face.

“When I get loose, I’m going to smash your face, until it’s like your mother cogh’s bitch!” Gavin tried to threaten him, but a punch to the neck shut him up. Gavin gasped mid-speech as Athos pulled his face closer.

“Captain, I’m not a patient person, so you better not test me.” Gavin was forced to look him in the eye and all he saw was intense, barely contained hatred. Athos looked like he would jump down his throat and kill him at any moment, but he was able to stop himself.

“Cough...cough...where is my wife? What did you do to her?” Gavin asked after coughing.

Athos just smiled at him as he walked away and picked up one of the jars in the corner of the room. He placed it in front of him and opened it without saying anything.

Gavin felt a chill as he looked at the smile on Athos’ face. His expression was that of a demon, amused at seeing her suffering. The same expression he wore when he tortured Agatha.

Gavin looked at the contents of the jar, even though he knew he shouldn’t, and felt his mind freeze at what he saw. There was a severed hand inside, floating in an unknown yellow liquid. Gavin recognized the ring on their hand. It was the wedding ring he had given her.

“You motherfucker!!! I’m going to kill you!!! I swear I’m going to kill you!!!” Gavin started screaming with all his might. He released the mana contained in the core, not caring about the damage it would do to himself.

His muscles swelled but immediately began to tear. blood ran from his nose as he cried blood and tears at the same time. The chains creaked to hold him, while Gavin roared like a rabid animal.

“Hey captain, do you want to see what’s in the other jars?” Athos asked the captain, a crooked smile on his face. He was delighted to see the mixture of hate and despair in Gavin’s expression.

Athos took the jars one by one and spread the contents at Gavin’s feet. Feet, ankles, thighs, pelvis, forearm, shoulders, and organs were randomly scattered on the floor. It was like a macabre puzzle, created by a psychopath.

Gavin watched in desperation as Athos brought the last jug to him. He had already bruised his throat from the uncontrolled mana, but he kept cursing anyway.

“Captain, play a game with me. If you can guess what’s in that jar, I’ll let you go.” Athos said playfully.

“I’ll kill you... I swear it.” Gavin exclaimed, spitting blood in Athos’ face.

“Wrong answer! The correct answer is...” Athos said as if he were putting on a show. He kicked the jar and it shattered onto the floor, spilling the yellow liquid and the last piece of the puzzle.

A completely bandaged and bloodstained object rolled across the floor. As he rolled, the cloth slowly unfurled, until it came to rest at Gavin’s feet. It was a human head. He couldn’t see her face because it was facing the floor, but the hair color and even the size were the same as he remembered.

“Honey...I’m sorry.” He cried, looking sadly at the head at his feet.

“Wow, you got it wrong twice! You sure as hell didn’t become the captain because of intelligence.” Athos scoffed at him as if disappointed.

“You shit...” Gavin glared at Athos until he understood what he’d said. “What do you mean I messed up?”

“That’s exactly what you heard captain, you got it wrong. The correct answer is...” Athos kicked his head, revealing his face to the captain. “Some nun!”

“More specifically, the nun who tried to arrest me when I woke up in church.”

“Who?” Gavin took time to remember who she was, but he failed. “It doesn’t matter. More importantly, where is my wife??”

“She’s safe, captain.” Athos entered one of the narrow passages and brought up a fully gagged body. She was sleeping, even though Athos moved her roughly.

“What did you do to her? Is she okay?” Hope returned to the captain’s eyes as he realized she was breathing.

“Of course she’s fine, I don’t hurt anyone who hasn’t done anything to me. After all, even though she is your wife, I, in all my benevolence, judged that she didn’t deserve to go through the pain of being dismembered and wore a poison to keep her asleep and allow her to die a painless death.

You may disagree with my decision, but please allow this poor woman to die a painless death.” Athos made a miserable face for exactly 3 seconds, before bursting out laughing.

“Did you dismember someone just for that? For a joke?” Gavin was in disbelief at Athos’ cruelty. He felt that he was in the lair not of a monster, but a demon.

“Yeah, wasn’t it hilarious? At least for me, it was.” Athos mocked him. “Captain, how about we play a new game? One with your wife’s life as the prize.”

Chapter 22:

Gavin was furious at the ridiculous proposal. “A game? You think I’m going to bet my wife’s life on a fucking game??”

Compared to him, Athos was much calmer. So far everything has been as he thought. The captain was already severely injured and emotionally shaken, without Athos torturing him.

Athos wanted him to suffer, not only physically, but psychologically as well.

“Yes, I think you will, captain. Because if you don’t play with me, I’ll kill your wife right now.” Athos did not wait for his answer and drew his sword. He impaled the sword through her stomach to the hilt.

“ARGHHHHHHH!” She woke with shock and pain, screaming at the top of her lungs. She writhed in pain on the floor, not understanding what was happening.

“No! What did you do, you bastard? You said you didn’t hurt anyone outside of your revenge!” Gavin squirmed in the chains, watching helplessly as she suffered.

“Did I forget to say? I’m a hypocrite.” Athos said with a shrug as he poked at the hilt of his sword. He laughed every time she moaned in pain.

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“Captain, I have healing potions that can save her, you know? If you play with me, I can save her.” Athos said, knowing the captain would be unable to refuse him.

The captain ground his teeth and nodded. “Please save her. I’ll play with you.”

“Great! I thought you’d be a little more stubborn. I’m glad you’re opening up to me just like your wife opened up.” Athos laughed at his joke, as he removed the sword from her stomach. He took hold of the sword’s hilt and pulled it all out at once, making the wound spurt blood.

The captain’s wife began to spasm, while blood was foaming at the mouth. Athos didn’t mind this, picking up healing potions of different ranks and randomly pouring them over the wounds.

The wounds began to heal, but it was done irregularly. The cut skin regenerated first, closing the wound, but the hole in her stomach remained open, causing internal bleeding.

Acid and bile leaked out of the stomach and without having any outlet, accumulated inside the body and spread throughout the body through the bloodstream. Athos had not done this on purpose, but unintentionally, he sentenced her to a slow and painful death.

“Did you heal her?” Not knowing any of this, Gavin asked worried about his wife’s condition. He was relieved to see how quickly the wound had closed and hoped she could live another day.

“Now that she’s healed, shall we start our game?” Said Athos, crushing his hopes.

Athos knew she was not cured, but he said nothing. That would be the icing on the cake, the final blow to break the captain.

“The game is simple. I ask a question and you answer, then you ask a question and I answer. You must be full of questions, right? It’s your chance to get the answers you want.” Athos smiled brightly at him.

“What’s the trick?” Gavin didn’t buy that smile, looking suspicious.

“You’re very suspicious, you know? It’s very simple. Every time I feel like you’re lying, I’m going to dismember your wife.” Athos’s smile went from brilliant to devilish in an instant. He pointed at the shredded nun on the floor, to emphasize his point.

“You crazy bastard-” Gavin started to curse, but Athos interrupted. “Understand one thing, captain. You will die here. Regardless of what you do or say, I will kill you.

But your wife may still survive. I don't give a damn if she dies or not, my business is with you. She was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. If you cooperate with me, she can live." Athos said seriously, as he looked into the captain's eyes. His face became an emotionless stone mask, no trace of his brilliant or devilish smile.

"..." Gavin closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths. He opened his eyes a while later, determined to at least save his wife from this horrible situation.

"Glad you made up your mind." Athos nodded, before returning to his playful expression. "As the guy holding the sword, I start. Captain, who are the guards that carried my mother to the guillotine?"

"Mark and Leonel. They both live in the barracks dormitory." Gavin already imagined what Athos wanted when he suggested that game. He was willing to sell his friends if it could save his wife.

The shock and dread of seeing his wife's limbs in a jar were still fresh in his mind. Mainly because the nun's pieces were still at her feet.

Athos nodded, saving the information. "Your time."

"Where are we? I know we're underground, but I've never seen this place in town."

"We are below the sewers. I found this place by accident, to be honest. There are monsters called rock worms and they created these tunnels. They feed on the slimes that live in the sewers and use their abilities towards the earth to erase their tracks, so it's very difficult to detect them."

"I understood." That was all Gavin could say, his expression grim. This place only existed because of your neglect to patrol the sewers.

"My turn. How is the baron's security?"

"The baron's guard is made up of former e~d-class adventurers and their leader is a c-class, comparable to me in combat."

"That won't be a problem." Athos said with scorn.

"-But the strongest is that mage named Ricley. I never saw him fighting seriously. but when he was hired by the baron, the leader of the personal guard challenged him and Ricley mopped the floor with it, with no elemental magic. After that, no one dared to challenge him again."

"...this could be a problem," Athos said with a troubled expression.

"My turn, brat. Did you burn the church down?" Gavin asked with a stern expression.

"Yes, it was me. I needed a distraction." Athos shrugged, treating the matter as irrelevant.

They continued with the questions and answers for a while, Gavin never daring to lie. Athos asked about the guards, the church, and anything else he thought he might need.

After approximately 1 hour, Athos finally had all his questions answered. He now knew the guards' patrol route, the secret deals with favela gangs, the baron's corruption, and even the church's child trafficking deals.

“Man, the whole town sucks! Is everyone involved in some crime?” Athos asked, half puzzled and half angry. He cared about the townspeople as much as he cared about a rock in the middle of the road, but the idea that every influential person in town was involved in some crime irritated him.

“What do you expect from a small backwater town, halfway across the border with a country of demihumans, two weeks away from any other town? Small towns like ours are ruled by crime.” Gavin lifted one corner of his lips in disgust.

“Well, our little game is over, captain. It was fun while it lasted, your honesty surprised me.” Athos smiled at him, taking a toolbox from the corner of the room. There were pliers, blades, hammers, needles, etc...

“Are you going to let my wife live as you promised?” Gavin asked anxiously.

“I promise. Now is the time for OUR fun.” Athos smiled as Gavin straightened his posture, bracing himself for whatever Athos might do.

Chapter 23:

“Do your worst, brat. I was a prison interrogator for over 10 years. I’ve seen things and done things you can’t even imagine.” Gavin mocked him. In his mind, there was nothing a child could do that he hadn’t already done. No matter how cruel Athos had been up until now, he was still an inexperienced child.

“Captain, I think you’re a little mistaken about me. My father taught me how to dissect monsters and how to find nerves and sensitive areas in the body. My mother taught me the exact points to attack, to do the most damage possible. And I practiced my skills on that nun at your feet. I’m sure I can surprise you.”

Athos walked around the captain as he spoke. Gavin expected Athos to attack his back, but to his surprise, all he heard was a click. The chains came free all at once, falling to the ground with a screeching sound.

Gavin was startled for a moment but recovered soon after. He jumped out of his chair and spun around still in the air, trying to crush Athos’ head with a punch. Or at least that’s what he tried.

In reality, his muscles were in tatters and his calf couldn’t take the sudden strain, tearing at the muscles. Gavin dropped midway through the spin, adding even more ridiculousness to his situation.

“Arghh!!” Gavin screamed in pain as he grabbed his calf. He knew he wasn’t well, but the damage to his body was much more severe than he’d expected.

“I repeat again: you’re not very smart, are you? Trying to move with your body in that state is really stupid.” Athos laughed at him as he stomped on his injured calf.

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“Urk!” Gavin groaned in pain and tried to defend himself, but he was too hurt for that. Athos took the potion he was brewing when Gavin woke up and forced him to drink it.

“Blergg!” Gavin tried to vomit, but Athos clamped his mouth shut. With no other choice, Gavin was forced to swallow the unfamiliar contents or choke. He felt awkward immediately.

His senses were heightened, but his motor skills failed. He could feel everything around him, but his body seemed unable to respond.

“What did you do to me?” Gavin spoke, starting to get scared. He might have experience as a torturer and was confident not to give in during torture, but doing it drugged was another story.

“This is a drug sold in the slums, able to better the sensations of the body for a short period of time and dark snake venom. Did you know that dark snakes poison their prey and devour them alive? Your victims agonize for weeks.” Athos smiled cruelly as he explained.

“I mixed the two together and created a poison capable of paralyzing, while enhancing the body’s sensations. Original recipe. I tested it on that nun and she begged to die in less than 15 minutes. How long do you think it lasts?” Athos pointed to the pieces of the nun behind the captain while putting on an hourglass.

Athos stopped stalling and began the torture. He took a few needles from the toolbox, before reaching for Gavin’s right hand. He used his skill to heat the needles and inserted them between the flesh and the nail and pushed down to the first knuckle of the finger. The heat cauterized the wound preventing the blood from leaking out.

Gavin shuddered through clenched teeth, fighting not to scream. The sensation was three times more painful than usual and explained why that nun was begging to die.

After the needle had penetrated all the flesh, Athos plucked it up as if it were a lever, lifting the needle. He repeated the process on every fingernail, while Gavin shook with pain and anger each time.

“Huf, huf, you’re going to have to do worse than that.” Gavin said in defiance.

Athos didn’t answer, instead, he took a hammer and nails this time. He placed Gavin’s palms against the floor before driving a nail into the tip of his nailless finger. He lifted the hammer and drove the nail through the bone in one fell swoop.

Puck!

“AARGHHH!!” Gavin couldn’t resist this time, screaming and writhing in pain. Athos didn’t give him time to think and continued hammering his other fingers. The wounds were cauterized the moment they were opened, stopping the bleeding and prolonging her pain.

After hammering, Athos grabbed both of Gavin’s hands and pulled, ripping his fingers and causing blood to spurt everywhere. Athos took a knife and heated it, rubbing the boiling blade over the wounds to close them.

As Gavin struggled with the pain in his hands, Athos grabbed a pair of pliers and held his feet. He pinched one of his fingers and twisted it violently.

“AAHHH!”

Athos continued, enjoying the screams of pain. He put the pliers on his ankle and squeezed, crushing him.

The torture continued for a while, with Athos slowly ripping and crushing pieces of the captain. Gavin tried to hold back, but as the torture continued and the pain only got worse, he started screaming more and more.

The more Gavin screamed, the more pain he showed, the more violent Athos became. A feeling of satisfaction filled her mind every time she heard Gavin scream. The helpless feeling he'd felt when he'd watched his mother die and had tormented him ever since faded, replaced by a bloodthirsty euphoria that only increased with Gavin's screams.

His vision began to redden and Athos dropped the tools, using his bare hands to knock. He punched the face, chest, belly and any part of the captain he could see. He broke his ribs and all his teeth.

Gavin couldn't scream as he drowned in his own blood.

Athos broke his nose against his face and pressed his fingers against the captain's eyes until he heard the eyes pop. He kept hitting until his fists bled, until he felt his knuckles crack.

When Athos finally regained control, Gavin's body was completely crushed into a paste of flesh. The arms were missing from the elbow down, the legs were completely broken, the chest was completely crushed and the head was open like a watermelon.

"Hunf...hunf...shit, I lost control. I forgot to tell him about his wife to break him mentally, not just physically." Athos felt a little disappointed in himself as he panted heavily for air. He looked down at his aching wrists and started to laugh.

"Mom, the first motherfucker who hurt you is already dead. I'll kill the others soon, ok? But for now, let me get some rest..." Athos said, letting exhaustion take over him and fell asleep.

He hadn't slept well in days, thinking about how to kill the captain and now that he did, all the accumulated tension was gone, causing him to pass out. For the first time since the fire, Athos was able to sleep peacefully without the memories of the execution haunting his dreams.

Athos woke up 14 hours later when the thick smell of blood became too much even for him. He felt refreshed, the flame of hatred that had burned his mind and made him out of control temporarily faded, allowing him to think clearly again.

He felt light and laughed like an idiot every time he looked at Gavin's meat paste.

"I think I should lure a slime over here and clean up this mess. A mop won't do it." Athos laughed at his own joke as he got up to eat something.

'I should also take a shower and change my clothes. I stink worse than corpses.' That's what Athos thought, as he took a herb of water and directed the world energy that his body naturally absorbed, towards the herb.

The herb absorbed the world's energy and began to produce water, which Athos accumulated in a pot.

This was one of the tricks Athos learned, testing his innate ability to absorb energy. Normally, the herb couldn't absorb Athos' energy because it would be poison for it, but Athos could use the pure world energy getting special effects depending on the ingredient used.

The effects were simple, but they helped in the daily life of someone like Athos, who couldn't show himself without being hunted.

Chapter 24:

After cleaning himself and changing clothes, Athos left and headed towards the slums. He needed to replenish his stash of drugs and supplies, but more importantly, he needed a break to think.

'I was an idiot yesterday. I just attacked without thinking. If the captain's wife hadn't been there, I would have died. If the captain hadn't just exhausted, I would have died. If the captain had ignored the woman and focused on me, I would have died.' Athos goes on to list everything that could have gone wrong while walking through the slums.

The situation looked tense, with armed bandits all over the place, but no one seemed to be after him. They were focused on preventing guards from entering the favelas. In less than 5 minutes that Athos entered the favela, he had already encountered more than 3 skirmishes between guards and bandits.

Unbeknownst to Athos, a war had broken out between the city guards and the slum gangs. The guards were not silent about the captain's kidnapping and continued to investigate the sewers.

They followed the tracks and found that they led to the favelas. In fact, they had lost track of Athos after entering his own hideout and had stumbled across his tracks as he headed towards the slums.

After that, it was easy to imagine what happened. Guards raided the favelas in an attempt to find the captain and the gangs responded aggressively, impeding what they considered an invasion of their territory.

Small fights broke out throughout the favela while Athos was torturing the captain. The situation had not yet calmed down and all the forces in the city were tense, fearing a war throughout the city.

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Most businesses in the favelas were closed for fear of becoming involved in the conflict. The only stores that were still open were the stores that were away from the slums, therefore, away from the danger zone.

The bounty on Athos' head was still active, but there was no one to care about him, with the city on the brink of possible war. Something really convenient for him.

Athos heard all this from the conversations of favela residents.

'Hilarious. People are killing each other over that garbage and I didn't even have to do anything.' Athos had to work hard not to laugh at the townspeople as he bought a meat skewer at one of the few stalls still functioning in the slums.

"A skewer, old man." Athos said.

“...” The elderly man didn’t answer and just handed over the skewer silently after receiving the money.

Athos ate the skewer while walking through the favela. ‘Getting drugs is going to be hard that way. Security will be tight around drugs and contraband. What should I do?’ Athos agonized over what to do.

“Could you make a donation to someone in need, young man?” A homeless man asked Athos in a hoarse voice as he passed.

“Sorry, no money, man.” Athos replied quickly, without looking back.

“You’re not kind at all, you know? I expected more from Robert’s son Athos.” The homeless man said, his voice changing to a more jovial one as he scolded Athos.

Athos froze and turned stiffly, like a poorly oiled machine. He dropped the skewer to the ground and placed his hand on the hilt of his sword, preparing to strike at any moment.

He looked at the homeless man in front of him using mana vision and saw the strongest mana core he had ever seen. The core had three layers, getting brighter the closer to the center.

“Who are you?” Athos asked cautiously. He knew he didn’t stand a chance against the stranger, but he didn’t let his guard down anyway.

“No need to be so cautious. If I wanted to kill you, I wouldn’t talk to you like that, would I?” The unknown man said, indifferent to the murderous look Athos was giving him.

“How do you know me?” Athos changed his question, realizing that the stranger had changed the subject.

“I’d love to talk to you here, but I’m kind of a shy guy. Mind if we go somewhere else?” The stranger didn’t wait for Athos to answer and got up, walking towards the alley. He was wearing a ragged overcoat and walking bent over, leaning on a wooden cane.

“I met your father when I moved to this town, Athos. Robert was a brilliant man when it came to alchemy and we became fast friends. He always talked about you when he was drunk. He always boasted of what a genius son he had. It’s a shame what happened to him and his mother.” The stranger said, with a bit of longing and regret in his voice.

“I was out of town when it all happened, but now that I’m back, I’ve decided to help what’s left of his family. You, Athos.” The stranger spoke, showing unexpected kindness to Athos.

“Athos?” He turned around, surprised by his silence, but there was no one there.

Athos hadn’t followed him from the start, running the moment the stranger turned his back.

“You little shit...” The stranger felt a vein pop in his forehead, while an icy aura froze the puddles of water around him.

Athos fled, but could not go far. Less than 5 minutes later, the stranger had caught up with him.

"You've gone far boy, but it's the end of the line." The stranger said annoyed. He has cornered Athos in a dead end.

"Man, I don't know you. Why should I follow you?" Athos asked, trying to find a way out of this situation.

'How did he find me so fast?' That's what he thought.

"You would have known if you'd listened to me! I just want to help you, but I can't give you details in public. Can we go somewhere more private, please?" he asked, as he stepped to the side, making sure Athos was always in sight, just in case.

"Can you at least tell me your name?" Athos asked, still wary.

"Sorry for not introducing myself. I'm Khali hill. Robert's friend." Khali gave him a small bow.

Athos sighed in defeat and followed the man. They walked in silence for a while, Khali glancing back every now and then to make sure Athos didn't run away. They walked to an abandoned house.

"Is that it? I expected more." Athos was disappointed when he entered and saw that the house was completely empty.

"Don't be impatient, Athos. You'll like what you see." Khali said anxiously for his reaction. He took a pendant from his neck and lifted it.

The pendant had an orange gem that began to glow the moment khali flowed mana into it. Suddenly the ground began to sink and form a ladder of earth. He descended without hesitation, but Athos felt a little cornered.

"Don't worry, it's safe. I created this place." Khali said, trying to reassure him.

Athos nodded wordlessly and followed. After Athos descended, Khali flowed mana into the pendant once more and the tunnel closed behind him. He took a wand from his pocket and created a glowing sphere to light the way.

They continued in silence as the tunnel got tighter and tighter. The stairs disappeared, replaced by uneven ground, as if a monster had dug it up.

"Wait, this place is..." Athos muttered in surprise.

"It's the tunnels you use to hide in. I'm the one who created this place and I'm the one who allowed you to find it. Or do you think you found this place by accident?" Khali smiled smugly at him.

"Why did you only reveal yourself now?" Athos asked confused.

"Because if a stranger comes into your secret hideout to say hi, you'd find it suspicious, wouldn't you?"

"Not that you've done much better." Athos said sarcastically.

"Kheum, it doesn't matter. The important thing is to talk about the future. And as proof of my goodwill I brought you a gift." Khali said as they exited the tunnels and entered a spacious area.

There wasn't much in the room except for torches on the walls and two men chained to the walls. They were injured, but it didn't look like anything serious. Their armor was broken, but Athos recognized them as the guards' uniforms.

"Are they?" Athos didn't need to think long to guess who they were. Suddenly, the identity of the stranger became irrelevant, while a boiling anger took over his mind.

"They're yours, do what you want." Khali said leaning against the wall as he crossed his arms, looking forward to what would happen. He had seen what happened to the captain and was curious if such a small child was really capable of such brutality.

Chapter 25:

Athos walked slowly towards the guards with the sword in his hands, the point dragging against the ground and creating sparks. The sparks engulfed the sword, turning into flames that covered the blade, shocking the khali and horrifying the guards.

'Is he able to control fire without training? The fire element affinity and mana control must be excellent.' Khali thought, changing his plans. Originally, he planned to take Athos somewhere else and start life anew, but his talent was too good to pass up.

He must be brought into the organization.

The guards on the other hand were in a panic. They were just patrolling, when everything around them turned completely white and they felt intense cold, before passing out. When they woke up, they were already trapped and unarmed, but at least their captor didn't hurt them.

The boy on the other hand, looked furious and ready to kill them.

"Hey, you got the wrong guy! I swear I don't know you guys!" The 2nd guard or Lionel yelled at the Khali but never stopped looking at the flaming sword.

"No, I'm sure you're the right guy. You were the ones who carried the alchemist's wife to execution, right?" Khali replied without looking away from his sword, focused on analyzing Athos' skill level.

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"Yes, it was us, but what does that have to do with-" The 1st guard or Mark tried to counter-argue but realized the situation. "Shit. It's you."

"Right." Athos nodded, slowly running the flaming sword through Mark's arm. He put the blade against his forearm and went down to his shoulder, burning the skin.

"What do you mean 'it's you', what the fuck are you talking about??" Leonel was a little less intelligent and still didn't understand what was happening.

"It's the alchemist's son, the boy the captain was hunting." Mark said between groans of pain as realization hit him. "It was you who kidnapped the captain."

"Right." Athos changed targets, now burning Leonel's ribs. He wasn't as tough as Mark and he screamed in pain at the slightest touch of the sword.

"I asked the captain that and I'll ask you too. Do you remember what you did to her? How many times did she scream?" Athos' eyes regained the glint of madness he'd had when he'd tortured the captain.

"Boy, you're mixing things up. We took your mother to the stage, but she was already dead. We didn't torture her the day before either. The captain did everything himself, forbidding everyone to enter the prison." Mark tried to save himself, putting all the blame on the captain.

"He's right! We have nothing to do with this. We are innocent!" Leonel screamed, shivering every time the hot iron touched his skin.

"Do you want me to believe that? That you conveniently weren't in the place? That you just did what you were told and it's not your fault?" Athos said sarcastically. He looked directly at Mark, recognizing the one with a brain of the pair.

"When you say it like that, it sounds like a lie. But it's true boy. We didn't hurt your mother." Mark looked into her eyes as he spoke, conveying his sincerity.

Athos looked into his eyes, looking for any hint of a lie or guilt, but found only truth. He felt his will waver for a moment, the flame of hatred burning in his mind fading, making Athos hesitate and his sword tremble.

He wouldn't hesitate to kill innocents if it were to complete his revenge, but torturing people just for carrying his mother's corpse was beyond him.

"Boy, you don't have to do this. If you let us go, I swear my friend and I won't talk about you. We can help you escape the city if you want." Mark sensed the hesitation in him and hammered the iron while it was hot.

Mark wasn't the only one to notice the hesitation on Athos. Khali noticed it too and was glad of it. It gave him hope that, deep down, Athos wasn't just a raging beast. That he still had a reason or at least a line he wasn't willing to cross.

But Athos's next action destroyed that thought. Athos decapitated both guards in a single move, using the flaming sword to cauterize the cut the moment it was made, preventing a single drop of blood from spilling.

Both heads rolled to the ends of the room as Athos checked his sword, making sure it wasn't smeared with blood.

"Why did you do that? I thought you were undecided whether to kill them or not." Khali asked in disbelief, unable to understand his thought process.

"I hesitated for a second and decided to show mercy to them. They're not to blame and don't deserve to be tortured." Athos said coldly, as the hatred burning in his mind calmed down.

"You call that mercy?" Khali sneered at Athos.

"I was merciful, not stupid. I couldn't let them go after they knew my identity, so I gave them a quick and painless death. That was mercy." Athos explained his train of thought, making Khali realize how disturbed Athos' mind was, but he found order amidst the chaos that was his mind.

'He may have lost his cool the moment he saw the guards, but he didn't lose his rationality. He still listened to what they had to say and killed them for a reason, not for fun.' Khali felt relieved when he realized that fact. He could not take Athos under his wing if he were just a mindless monster. Being a ruthless killer is one thing, being a complete psychopath is another.

"I originally wanted to help you get out of town, start over somewhere else, but I've changed my mind. I want you to be my apprentice, Athos." Khali said, freezing the corpses with a wave of his hand.

"I refuse." Athos didn't think twice before saying;

"EH?" Khali thought he had misheard, but Athos's expression of disinterest proved otherwise.

"You refuse? Do you understand that I'm offering you the chance to learn magic? To use the great talent you possess and not let it go to waste in this small town?" Khali spoke up, offended by the immediate refusal.

"I don't care about any of that. If I become your apprentice, I'll have to leave the city, right? I won't be able to complete my revenge if that happens." Athos said resolutely.

"Athos, I understand your desire for revenge, but this is not what your parents would want for you." Khali calmed down as he understood the reason for Athos' refusal.

"I don't do it just for them, I do it for myself. I would never forgive myself if I let any of those motherfuckers live." Athos' mind relived the trauma, renewing his hatred and making his eyes glow with elemental energy.

His eyes glowed crimson red, but Khali noticed a dark glint in the back of his pupil. A flicker of darkness, something almost imperceptible was awakening.

"Haah...let's make a deal then." Khali placed his left hand on his shoulder in solidarity, but covertly activated a magic ring with a symbol of light.

The ring glows faintly and the nearly awakening darkness is gone. 'The element of darkness is too dangerous for someone with mental problems.' That's what he thought when he sealed his affinity.

"What was this?" Athos questioned him, pulling away.

"An item that will help you think more clearly. You're more focused now, aren't you?" Khali didn't lie, the ring sealed the darkness in him and kept her from clouding his judgment.

Athos noticed that his mind felt clearer and the urge to kick Khali in the balls and run away from that place had lessened.

"I appreciate it, but I'm still going after my revenge." Athos was polite but firm in his refusal.

Chapter 26:

Khali agonized over what to do for a while. He couldn't leave Athos alone, not only because of his friendship with Robert but also because of the talent he saw in Athos.

He wanted to train Athos personally and take him under his wing, but he couldn't get involved in something as scandalous as the murder of a noble, no matter how low his title.

His mission in this city was to monitor the movement of the demihuman empire for the next 5 years; while avoiding the eyes of the order of magic, Eishin's church and adventurer's guild. That meant staying as far away from Ricley and the priest as possible.

"So how about instead of abandoning your revenge, you just postpone it?" Khali spoke after a while.

"And let them live a day longer than necessary? No thanks." Athos dismissed the possibility with a wave of his hand.

"But you know you won't be able to use the same tactics you used against the captain, don't you? The baron has more than 50 men as guard, apart from the captain of the personal guard and the wizard Ricley himself.

The priest may not have any guards, but since the church fire, people have been holding a vigil around the church to prevent further attacks. He can also use light magic or 'divine magic' as the church calls it, to cure himself of your poison and kill you before you can get close to him. He also won't hesitate to kill people if it's to save his own life." Khali spat on the ground at the mention of divine magic.

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"I can use acid against the priest to make healing difficult and against the baron I... err..." Athos avoided mentioning the corrupted root powder as it was a family secret, but he really didn't know what to do to attack the baron.

"You will die if you attack either of them. But if you agree to be my apprentice, I can give you the power you need to exact revenge." Khali saw that Athos didn't have a concrete plan and offered a solution.

"I will stay in this city for another 5 years. During that time, I will teach you skills, spells and fighting techniques; everything you will need to take revenge on your own." Khali tried to make the offer as attractive as possible to Athos.

"AND?" Athos waited for the bad news after Khali sweetened the deal.

"And after you finish your revenge, I want you to come with me to my organization, the word keepers." Khali emphasized his organization's name, showing how proud he was of it.

"The word keepers? My mother told me bedtime stories about them. They were a charitable organization, bringing food and knowledge to those most in need. I don't understand why a charitable organization needs talented warriors?" Athos did not understand what he was getting at.

"You are only half right. We are an organization that helps the needy and we fight for the people against injustice. The problem is that almost all organizations have their share of the problem and they don't like it when someone exposes their crimes.

On the surface, they supported us and encouraged our actions, but our members began to be murdered and our bases continually destroyed, forcing us to hide to avoid being exterminated." Khali looked at the ground sadly, as he clenched his fists tightly until the knuckles turn white.

He was just a kid when it all happened, but he vividly remembered when it all started. When assassins broke into his home and killed his father, when his mother was forced to flee with him, how they had to live in poverty and squalor until the organization was rebuilt.

"Are you okay?" Athos noticed the anguish in him and asked.

"It's all past now. The word keepers were almost destroyed, but we're still alive and we've learned our lesson. We've become nomads, but we still maintain long-distance contact with each other to coordinate our actions. We've started training warriors and wizards to fortify ourselves and instead of bringing our enemies to justice, we bring them to death."

He extended his hand to Athos before continuing. "And that's why we need people like you, Athos. People with talent, who can reach great heights and understood our pain. Someone who lost people they loved and found the strength to stand up and fight. Someone who understands that corrupt organizations must be punished. Someone like you, Athos. What do you say, will join the guardians of the word?"

"I refuse." Athos' answer didn't change, causing Khali to almost have a seizure.

"Why do you refuse? I thought you understood our cause and wanted revenge for the injustice done to your mother!" Khali was too shocked to be angry.

"I'm not angry because I think what they did to my mother is unfair. On the contrary, I believe that her execution is in accordance with the law. When people get married, they accept to share everything, including their crimes and sins. It is a fact that my father killed innocent people, accident or not, and by law my mother should bear the consequences of that with him." Athos said calmly.

"Then why did you kill the captain?" The more he listened, the less Khali understood. He was already reconsidering his offer of apprenticeship, judging that Athos was too crazy to get his hands on something as dangerous as magic.

"Because I don't give a damn about the law. She was my mother and I'm going to kill everyone who took her from me." Athos smiled cruelly, as if he could already taste the blood of his enemies.

"Okay, I understand that you're crazy. But how are you going to get revenge? You don't have the power to do that." Khali gave up trying to understand him.

"Let's make a different deal. Instead of me joining you, I'm going to work with you." Athos said.

"Isn't that worse?" Khali tilted his head in confusion.

"From your point of view it might be. But I want to live a good life after my revenge is over and joining you seems like something for a lifetime. I'd rather work with you as an outside helper until I pay off my debt and then each one goes his own way."

"And why do you think I would accept that deal?" Khali asked with a raised eyebrow.

"First, because I'm a badass. I'm a talent you can't pass up. Second, because it's your dogma to bring knowledge to those who need it. Third, if you refuse to teach me I could join an adventurer's guild or the order of magic and ask them to teach me." Athos said confidently.

"The order won't give you freedom once discover your talent. You're down to being their puppy until you die." Khali tried to scare him away, but it didn't work.

“What if I join you will it be different? I’ll be forced to go places I don’t want to, to kill people I don’t know or help people I don’t care about.” Athos said.

Khali weighed his options for a while and realized he didn’t have much of a choice. His organization was still recovering from the damage it took and desperately needed help, borrowed or not.

“How long are you willing to work with us?” Khali held out his hand, showing that he accepted the deal.

“Depends on how much you’re willing to teach me.” Athos smiled and shook his hand.

It was the moment when his apprenticeship of magic began.

Chapter 27:

Khali wasted no time and proceeded to introduce the underground base where they would spend the next 5 years together. The underground base was smaller than Athos had expected, covering only the slums and a few small emergency escape tunnels.

The place Athos used as a base was just one of the emergency exits. There were few rooms, most were made up of irregular tunnels like a labyrinth. They were built this way to delay the enemy in case they are discovered.

Khali also explained why the tunnels have not been found so far. He had tamed rock worms to create the tunnels and one of the worms’ racial abilities was to mask their caves.

They could secrete a liquid that not only hardened the tunnels they created, preventing them from collapsing, but could also make magical detection difficult.

“You can take any chamber you want and use it as a bedroom, we’ll start your training as soon as you settle in.” Khali informed him.

“I’d rather keep using the emergency tunnels as a base, if you don’t mind. Everything I have is already there and we can start our class right away.” Athos was in a hurry to start training. He didn’t like the idea of spending the next 5 years trapped inside underground tunnels, but he needed to get stronger if he wanted revenge.

Athos didn’t want to admit it, but he knew Khali was right. He didn’t have enough power to kill any of his enemies.

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“In that case, let’s start our lessons then. I’ll start by teaching you the basics of mana manipulation.” Khali began his lecture, but Athos interrupted him.

“You can skip that part. My mom already taught me how to manipulate mana, look.” Athos used mana vision to prove it.

“You can see the mana when you do that, can’t you?” Khali just smiled at him, ignoring his interruption.

“Yes I can. But what does that have to do with it?” Athos did not understand what he was getting at.

“What you just did was temporarily turn your eyes into a magical organ, allowing you to see the mana of other living beings. If you strengthen your sword instead, you will temporarily turn it into a magic weapon.”

“Is it possible to permanently turn an organ into a magic organ?” Athos asked, trying to find a way to strengthen himself quickly.

“That’s impossible. Our bodies can’t handle large amounts of mana for a long time, that’s why our core has a finite amount of mana. As we train and strengthen our bodies, they become able to support more energy and for a longer period, which allows the core to absorb more energy and develop further.”

“About that, I have a question. What happened to your core? It’s unlike anything I’ve ever seen.” Athos asked something that was bothering him.

“Didn’t your father teach you not to interrupt others?” Khali asked irritated by the interruptions.

“No, he died before that.” Athos replied with a shrug. Unlike Agatha, Robert’s death was accidental and Athos had locked any thoughts of him into a box in his mind and thrown away the key.

“As we train, our cores accumulate more and more energy, until there comes a point where the core can’t hold any more energy and naturally forms a new layer to retain even more mana. The magical community calls this the layer of life.” Khali quickly changed the subject, somewhat embarrassed by her callous question.

“When this happens, mana becomes thicker and spells and abilities are doubled in power and life expectancy increases as well. Each core is unique and the amount of mana each one can hold to form a layer of life varies person to person, but all mages know that the more and more energy it takes to form the layer of life, the stronger it is.”

“How many layers are there? How long did it take you to form your first, just out of curiosity?” Athos asked trying to use Khali as a reference.

“The maximum number of existing layers is still unknown, but the highest recorded is from the Emperor of the ancient Makima empire, who reached 22 layers of life. It is said that at his peak, the weakest of his spells could devastate entire cities. And I It took me 12 years to form my first layer.” Khali said.

“That’s why you’re special, Athos. Your body is capable of absorbing energy and passively strengthening itself. If you train, you should be able to strengthen yourself twice as fast as normal. But that’s only half of what you’re capable of.” Khali tried and failed to hide his envy.

He took out his wand before continuing his explanation. “You may not know this, but we humans are disconnected from world energy and we need to use items like wands to be able to access world energy and cast spells.” He cast an ice spell as an example, shooting a 2 meter long ice spear.

Afterwards, he tried to do the same without his wand, but all he managed to do was accumulate a cool breeze in his palms.

“See? It’s impossible to use magic without a wand, but you are an exception. You were born naturally attuned to the world’s energy and can cast magic without needing a crutch like a wand. You have a trait called a mana body.”

“Wait, I’ve seen the priest use divine magic without a wand. Is he like me too?” Athos asked worriedly. If the priest were able to strengthen himself twice as fast as he does, no matter how hard he trains, the distance between them would never change.

“The church considers light magic superior to all other elements, pretending to the masses that it is a miracle from God, so they don’t like using items like wands or anything other than light.

Instead, they wear rings or necklaces in order to use their spells. It’s an idiotic idea, as rings don’t tune into the world’s energy as well as a wand, but the very idea that the light element is better than the other elements is idiotic.”

Athos breathed a sigh of relief at this information.

“Now about using magic it’s pretty simple, but I need to know your elemental affinities first. I already know that you have a high affinity for fire, to the point that you can partially control flames even without using magic, but I need know if you have other affinities.” Khali tried to sound kind, but what he really wanted was to make sure the darkness was sealed.

‘He’s too insane to deal with the darkness. The last thing this town needs is a psychopath capable of dealing with necromancy.’ That’s what he really thought.

He took a glass of water and placed an unknown magic leaf.

“What is it?” Athos prided himself on his knowledge of botany, but he had never seen such a leaf.

“It’s a magic sheet of assimilation. It will absorb your mana and dye the water according to your affinities. Red for fire, blue for water, yellow for wind, orange for earth, white for light and black for darkness. Now use it mana in the leaf.” Khali ordered and Athos promptly complied.

He flowed the mana to the leaf and it released a yellowish red liquid into the water. In a matter of a few seconds the water was completely colored red, with a few hints of yellow.

“A high affinity for fire and a medium affinity for wind. Two elements out of three, well done Athos.” Khali congratulated Athos.

‘It would be three elements if I hadn’t sealed the darkness.’ He thought.

“Wait, two out of three? Wouldn’t that be two out of six?” Athos asked, doubting his teacher’s ability to calculate.

“No, the maximum affinities one can have is three. The elements are opposite to each other and work like a balance. The greater your affinity with one element, the less your affinity with another will be.”

“What about light and dark? Why don’t I have an affinity for either of them?” Athos asked.

“Most people don’t have any affinity, you know? Having two is amazing enough. I only have an affinity for water myself.” Khali couldn’t explain to Athos that he had sealed his affinity with darkness, so he hid the fact that anyone with a mana body had an affinity for three elements, no matter how small that affinity was.

Chapter 28:

Athos was glad to hear this. He was eager to start training.

“When did we start training magic?” Athos asked impatiently.

One thing at a time, Athos. First I’ll teach you the basics of magic, then I’ll teach you about non-elemental magic, something any mage can use regardless of affinity, and only then will we practice elemental magic.” Khali explained, cutting off the anxious Athos.

“Magic is a difficult art to use and even more difficult to master. It is divided into three stages: Perceiving and accumulating world energy, manipulating mana and visualizing the spell. As I have already explained, human beings do not are able to sense at world’s energy, so we use tools like wands to access it, but you can do it naturally.

After a little practice, you should also be able to manipulate the world’s energy as easily as you move mana through your body. And lastly, you must imagine the spell you want to cast. The clearer the image of your spell, the faster you will cast it. ” Khali explained.

“Are you talking about this?” Athos drew world energy into the fist, strengthening beyond its limits.

“That’s almost it. You need to manipulate the mana outside your body to use spells. Like this.” Khali formed a sphere of pure mana in his palm as an example.

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Athos tried to imitate him, finding it incredibly difficult. Inside the body, the mana moved at will, but outside the body, just preventing the mana from dispersing into the environment required Athos’ full focus.

“Shit...fuck.” Athos began to curse, sweating cold with the effort. He tried to make a sphere, but the slightest distraction warped it or dispersed into the air, forcing him to start over from scratch.

“Good try.” Khali laughed at his efforts, popping Athos’ mana sphere with one finger.

“Why did you do that? I was almost getting!” Athos shouted indignantly.

“Why should you wait for me to finish talking before you start practicing. You would have avoided making silly mistakes like this and not wasted mana.” Khali scolded him.

“What you were doing was trying to use your mana as a cocoon and keep the world energy inside. The problem is that any distraction warps the sphere and leaks the world energy. Also, pure world mana wouldn’t do any damage to enemies , rendering your spell useless.

What you should have done instead was mix your mana with the world energy until it becomes a single energy, that way you can control it as your own mana.” Khali explained.

“There’s one thing I still don’t understand. I’m already able to control fire, how is that different from magic?” Athos slammed the sword to generate sparks and feed it with mana until the sword ignites.

“What you’re doing is using non-elemental mana to control the flames, it’s not real magic. It’s the same thing as me just controlling water. To use real elemental magic, you need to separate the world energy

and use just the element you want to cast your spells. Controlling fire using pure mana is incredibly inefficient in terms of energy, as you have to expend six times more energy than normal fire magic.”

“Oh.” Athos exclaimed in surprise and immediately began to practice as instructed.

“I have a task for you. Over the next week, you will practice your mana manipulation and visualization. Once you learn to control mana externally, we will practice simple non-elemental spells. Then I will teach you elemental magic and how to create your own spells. Sorry Athos, but we don’t have any elements in common, so it’s impossible for me to teach you my spells.” Khali felt a little bad that he couldn’t teach Athos elemental magic.

“OK.” Athos didn’t pay much attention to her excuses, totally focused on the task at hand. At first, he couldn’t mix his mana with the world’s energy, wasting energy, but as he practiced, it became easier and easier to control the energy.

He was still struggling to mold mana, but he no longer had to worry about scattering.

“I’ll leave you to practice in peace. Let me know if you need anything.” khali left the chamber and let Athos practice uninterrupted.

2 years later.

Time passed quickly while Athos was on his magic apprenticeship. Athos has developed rapidly in the meantime. He learned new skills and how to cast and create his own spells.

He learned only basic spells of both elements, but he did not neglect his physical training. Athos ded himself to improving his skill with the sword and shield, as well as his skill as an alchemist. He constantly trained against Khali and constantly took a beating.

Whether physical or magical combat, Athos took a beating no matter what he did. Even so, the experience gained from fighting a seasoned combatant like Khali was very useful to Athos, who improved by leaps and bounds with each training session.

Their relationship also developed a lot during this time. The conviviality and isolation naturally broke the distrust that existed between them, transforming their relationship from teacher and student into good friends in a short time.

Although the situation Athos had improved, the same could not be said for the city. The conflict between the guards and the gangs only got worse over time, evolving from small skirmishes to full-scale fights. The guards still believed that the captain had been captured and as time passed, they became increasingly impatient and violent in their attacks.

The gangs didn’t know the captain’s whereabouts, but no matter how many times they declared they weren’t with him, the guards didn’t listen, thinking of it only as a ruse.

The gangs were angered by the constant attacks and responded with violent attacks and ambushes against any guards they saw. The number of deaths rose rapidly, denigrating the city’s public safety.

The gangs went further in their retaliation against the city, attacking peddlers and any merchant caravans that tried to enter the city. The situation in the city only got worse from there, with the prices of goods increasing because of the stagnant market, hunger was once again a problem in the city. The number of homeless people only increased and countless people turned to crime as a way to survive, increasing the power and influence of gangs over the entire city.

The city was isolated and the guild was forced to intervene for the good of the city. Quests about hunting bandits and escorting caravans were continually posted on the quest board, all funded by the baron in an attempt to regain control of the city. As things stood, he felt that he would soon be forced to cede authority to the bandits.

Countless attacks and assassination attempts were committed on the Baron's life, but the wizard and bodyguard Ricley stopped them all. He didn't care about the state of the city, no matter how many times the baron begged him to root out the bandits. He always acted as minimum as possible, just doing his duty as a bodyguard and nothing more.

During this period, the church became a neutral zone in the city. It doesn't matter if they were bandits, guards or adventurers; no one dared to interfere with the church. Without Robert's alchemy shop, the priest and his nuns were the only ones capable of healing in the entire city, further consolidating its position in the city.

The priest, drunk on his newfound authority, became increasingly arrogant, even going so far as to openly charge "donations" in exchange for healing.

In less than two years, the frontier city of Faltra had turned into a lawless zone, where the strong fought for power and the weak fought hunger.

Chapter 29:

Outside the city of Faltra.

Khali and Athos met outside the city to perform Athos' first combat test.

"How are you feeling, Athos? Are you nervous?" Khali asked rhetorically, already knowing the answer. He was wearing a blue hooded cloak and carried only a wand at his waist.

"It's not my first time killing." Athos responded, trying to sound confident, but he was a nervous wreck inside. Unlike Khali's plain appearance, he was wearing a hunter suit made of monster hide.

He carried an iron sword and a reinforced wooden shield on his back. Athos had retired the short sword because of the ongoing damage he received in training. He was 12 years old now and had left his thin frame behind.

His body had already built up muscle from the constant diet and training regimen, maintaining a good balance between muscle and flexibility. His face still had childish features, but there were already hints of facial hair starting to grow.

"No need to be nervous. Let's go over the mission to make sure you haven't forgotten anything." Khali spoke seriously.

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"The gangs have blocked off the city, preventing any caravans from entering the city. The baron is desperate and has sent a caravan with a squad of guards to nearby villages to collect resources from nearby villages." Athos said.

"The problem is that the gangs know this and plan to attack the caravan after they leave the last village and are heading back to the city. Our mission is to wait for the convoy to be attacked and one of the groups annihilated, then attack the victor and take the resources to us, putting all the blame for the attack on the gangs. Afterwards, we will secretly return everything that was taken back to the villages and the baron will not be able to bother them until the next harvest." Athos said, still skeptical about the whole plan.

He didn't contest the plan just because it was a mission his teacher gave him. Athos didn't care for any of those villagers, but he couldn't pass up the chance to test his power against anyone other than Khali.

His teacher was a monster in his eyes and he wanted to know how strong he was compared to others. Fighting this group of enemies would be good practice when he faced the baron's personal guard.

"How many guards are expected in the caravan and their power level?" Athos asked, curious about the enemy he would face.

"20 guards have been dispatched and a platoon leader." Khali responded instantly. "What about the bad guys? Did you investigate them?"

"A little over 40 bandits. They have more than twice the number of guards, but they're undisciplined and unorganized and poorly trained, so there's not much difference in the overall strength of the two groups." Athos yawned as he reminisced.

"That's where you're wrong, Athos. I saw 3 guards with mana capacity guarding the caravan. The difference between a mana user and an ordinary person is bigger than you think. The guards will feel cornered because of the numbers, but I'm sure they will win." Khali declared confidently.

They had bet on who would win the fight and Khali was confident in the guards' chances. He bet an enchanted weapon with Athos that the guards would win, while Athos bet he would clean the rock worms' coconut for 1 month if the bandits lost.

"3 mana users can overcome the bandits' numerical advantage." Athos said in a bitter tone.

"It's too late to give up. You were the one who wanted to bet, you can't run away now." Khali boasted, but Athos smiled cruelly before continuing.

"It's a shame that bandits have 5 mana users in their group. 2 of them are also archers, can do a lot of damage from a safe distance, while guards have no way to attack from a distance and need to stay in formation to protect the caravans." Now it was Athos' turn to brag.

"Are you kidding me? How did the gangs get enough manpower to send 5 mana users for a single raid?" Khali asked in disbelief and regret. If what Athos said is true, he can now say goodbye to his enchanted sword.

"Many adventurers left the guild and turned to crime in these 2 years. It may not seem like it, but the gangs take good care of their own and if you can use mana, they also take care of your family, so the bad

guys are much stronger than appear.” Athos laughed in his face, almost feeling the enchanted sword in his hands.

“Hey Athos, what do you think about us forgetting about this bet? As your teacher, I believe I shouldn’t encourage this kind of behavior-” Khali started throwing up a lot of nonsense to try to get away with it. An enchanted weapon was expensive, even for him.

“It’s too late to turn back, professor. The sword will be mine.” Athos prevented him from evading responsibility.

“Damn, you’re greedy as a dragon. When will this caravan arrive? I want to freeze some stuff to vent.” Khali asked sullenly.

“It will still be a few more hours for them to get through here. Are you sure the ambush will take place here? I still think we should hurry up and follow the caravan from afar.” Athos asked worried about the mission.

Khali, on the other hand, was completely relaxed. “Don’t worry. They’ll certainly attack here. You’ve been spying on them and heard the location of the ambush, haven’t you?”

“About this, I want to ask you a favor. Can you leave the attack to me? If you get involved it will be over in seconds, but this might be good practice for me.” Athos asked using the skill, puppy dog gaze.

A tiny stream of mana spread through his pupil, dilating beyond what should have been possible. Athos still had many childish traits, further adding to the damage.

“I refuse.” Khali looked with distaste at Athos. “And don’t ever try to look cute in front of me again, it’s disgusting. You’re more suited to those evil smiles and murderous looks.”

Athos just snorted in response, turning around as he crossed his arms. “Why don’t you let me do the attack alone? They’ll be tired of the fight and I’ll have the advantage of the surprise attack. It’s a guaranteed victory.”

“No, it’s only a guaranteed victory if I attack. You’re still not strong enough to deal with dozens of enemies at once. You’ve barely begun to learn elemental spells.” Khali chided him for being overconfident.

“Actually, I am. You’re only considering my skill as a warrior and mage, but you forgot that I’m also an alchemist. I came prepared.” Athos pointed to his own belt and Khali’s, both of which were filled with different potions created by Athos.

“Still, it’s very dangerous. Your combat experience is very limited and you could end up getting seriously injured or even killed because of a single moment of carelessness.” Khali insisted, worried for his safety. After spending two years together, he became attached to Athos and now saw him as a little brother.

“That’s why this is the perfect situation. I need that experience and I have you here even if I’m careless. You know all the training in the world is useless without real combat experience.” Athos didn’t give up either, determined to fight that fight alone.

“Haah...ok, you won. I’ll let you do this attack yourself, but if I see you can’t handle it I’ll intervene, am I clear?” Khali looked into his eyes until he saw him nod.

"Thanks brother." Athos smiled happily at him, before turning around. They were on a hill a little farther from the supposed site of attack, but thanks to a magical binocular-like tool, they had no trouble keeping an eye on the site.

Athos anxiously waited for his enemies to arrive.

Chapter 30:

3 hours later.

"I can see them." Athos screamed, waking Khali. there was a small caravan with three carriages approaching in the distance. The carriages moved in a row, with horse-mounted guards escorting the carriage in formation and a mana user at the front of each of the carriages.

"Have they arrived yet? They're early." Khali said looking at the position of the sun.

"I still haven't seen the bandits. Will they make it in time?" Athos surveyed the surroundings, but found no trace of bandits.

"No problem. I made sure the ambush took place here." Khali smiled in anticipation, like a kid hoping his prank will work.

"What did you set up this time?" Athos asked suspiciously.

"Just watch it, you'll love it." Khali was suspenseful, refusing to speak up.

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Athos sighed and gave up, knowing it was impossible to convince him when he was like that.

He watched intently as the caravan approached. The caravan followed the road until it reached a small clearing in the open. The guards looked around intently, but the threat came from an unexpected place.

As the leading caravan moved forward, the ground began to crack under the weight until it gave way completely.

"What is it?" The platoon leader at the front of the caravan exclaimed, quickly jumping off his horse to save himself. Unfortunately for him, his subordinates were not so lucky.

The carriage sank and with it, all the guards in formation around it.

"Ack, shit!" One of the guards yelled.

"Help, I need help!" Another guard screamed in pain, having the misfortune to fall under the carriage. He survived by chance, but his right leg was completely crushed by the weight of the carriage.

"We're under attack, we're under attack!" The platoon leader yelled at the top of his lungs, snatching his shield and axe from his back. He became alert and looked closely at his surroundings.

The two carriages trailing behind him came to a quick stop and the guards around him dismounted from their horses and positioned themselves, ready for combat.

"..." 10 minutes passed, but no enemy appeared. The only sound they could hear was their mate screaming in pain.

"Isn't anyone going to show up?" The platoon leader asked confused, starting to think that this hole was just a random monster lair. He let his guard down and ordered the guards to assess the damage to the carriage.

At the same time, Athos and Khali were cackling as they watched the guards search for enemies that didn't exist.

"Pffttt, HAHAHA! You're a genius, professor. Look at their faces." Athos held his stomach with laughter.

"I said you'd like it. I used the rock worm to dig a hole in the road and the idiots went straight for it." Khali laughed at them when he spotted something. "And look who just arrived?"

Athos turned in the direction Khali was looking and saw dozens of bandits. They had already spotted the caravan stopped and were hesitating about what to do.

"Do you think they'll back off?" Athos asked.

"Of course not. They're going to send someone to investigate and as soon as they find out there's no problem, they will attack with everything." Khali said and it didn't take long for two hooded people to walk away from the bandits and approach the guards.

They moved carefully, using the trees for cover to avoid being seen. They got as close as they could, mixing their mana with their surroundings, showing that they were both mana users.

"Do they have two assassins capable of using mana? The leader's head will roll before they know what hit them." Athos joked.

"Shouldn't you be getting ready too?" Khali asked, seeing Athos just watch and do nothing.

"Don't worry, I'll move as soon as the attack starts and both sides are too busy to pay attention to me. For now, I'll just enjoy the show." Athos spoke, without moving.

Khali nodded and watched silently as the assassins returned to their group, before the bandits began their attack.

"Apparently, the caravan stopped because the first carriage fell into a hole dug by a monster. There is no trace of a struggle in the area." One of the assassins sent reported.

"So it's just a coincidence? Looks like Mr. Eishin smiled at us today. Our informant warned us that the caravan left earlier than expected and we ran as fast as we could here, but it looks like it wasn't necessary." The bandit leader laughed heartily upon receiving the good news. She was wearing green and brown hunter clothes and a long wooden bow on her back, with a short sword at her waist.

She was a former adventurer named Evylin, who had been turned into a debt slave, for failing a quest. She was stripped of her title and all her possessions and sold to a wealthy merchant who ran numerous shops in the merchant city of Shiima, a large city two weeks' carriage from Faltra.

The turning point in her life was when the city's gangs attacked the slave carriage she was in, killing all the merchants and freeing all the slaves. This had happened at the beginning of the blockade, when merchants were still visiting the city.

The bandits had confused the carriages, their target was a carriage carrying metals, but they confused it because the company symbols were similar. Even so, the feeling of gratitude Evylin felt upon being rescued did not change, causing her and all 18 other rescued slaves to swear allegiance to the bandits.

She had formed her own team with the rescued slaves and as the only mana user among them, she naturally became their leader. She had built up her reputation within the gang during these two years and when she learned that the baron was extorting nearby villages and that the gang leader was planning to attack them, she promptly volunteered for the attack.

She was born in one of the villages in the baron's territory and knew how difficult life was there. She had left the village behind in search of a better life in the city, but her family still lived in one of the villages. With winter approaching, their family would die of hunger or cold if what little they had was taken from them.

The other two gangs in the city also participated in the attack, sending their own teams. They totaled exactly 43 members, 5 of them mana users. It was a great force compared to the guards, but its leaders wanted to be sure of victory. This was the gangs' first joint operation and as the person appointed to lead the mission, she had to ensure it was a success at all costs.

The gangs had wanted to take over the city for a long time, but the baron was an obstacle in their way. They attempted numerous assassination attempts, but were never successful. The mage who protected the baron stopped them every time.

As a last resort, the leaders got together and decided to put their differences aside and unite into a single criminal organization. This was their first joint mission, a way to test whether they would be able to work together or not.

Evylin took a deep breath to hide his nervousness and began shouting orders: "All of you, stay alert! We will follow the previously agreed plan and split into two groups and attack them separately. The first group consisting of the heavyweights will attack from front and get the guards' attention. The second group is smaller and is made up of fast attackers and will quickly attack you from behind when they are distracted.

I and my archer friend here, will cover for you and kill the guards from a distance, while the assassins will sneak around and wait for the opportunity to kill the enemy's mana users." Evylin spoke, before looking at an armored bandit with plate armor.

"Dave, you're the only mana user who's going to be on the front lines. You're going to command all 24 men in the first group while I'm gone. Any problem?"

"No problems." Dave nodded, tapping his gauntlet against his chest, showing he was ready.

"Good, let's start the attack." Evylin smiled determinedly and started to run to her position.