

## Supreme M 351

### Chapter 351 Abyss Part 2

"Last, but not least, the difference between a good and an expert swordsman lies in the footwork!" Tepper ignored Lith's words and performed a feint to the face before side stepping to stab at his exposed shoulder.

Unfortunately for the Sergeant, footwork was something Lith had learned back on Earth and it was the first thing he had practiced as soon as his body allowed him to. Tepper's blade hit only air.

Lith had sidestepped too and his blade was barely an inch away from the opponent's leg.

The Sergeant inwardly cursed at himself for performing such an ample movement to impress the unit. Lith and Tepper were too close. At such distance, even a small opening was the difference between victory and defeat.

"In the next five months you'll either become good swordsmen or you'll start searching for a new job." Tepper's voice was perfectly relaxed, not revealing the surprise nor the anger he was feeling.

"As for you, maggot, get down and give me forty!"

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During the following months, the training involved getting accustomed to use several magical tools and to use chore magic for tactical purposes.

Lith already knew most of the tools thanks to his Forgemastering lessons or Solus's Alchemy. They were the magical equivalent of sniper rifles, grenades of all kinds, and climbing suits.

There were no such things as boots of flight or levitation. Long lasting spells required to be controlled by their caster's will, but magical items had no will of their own, they could only turn on and off the spells they were imbued with.

Much to Lith's comrades' dismay, chore magic became more and more relevant over time. Earth magic was crucial to cross quagmires or walk through muddy fields without leaving traces.

Water magic allowed to more easily wade rivers, or in Lith's case to walk on water, and could be used as an invisible umbrella offering protection against rain, snow, or hail.

Soon Lith's skills in both hand to hand combat and swordsmanship were outmatched by his instructors'. He wasn't surprised nor disappointed by finding himself lacking. He had joined the army to learn how to fight and it was finally starting to teach him something.

The worst part for him was the team exercises. They were meant to build trust and teamwork between the members of the same unit, but they only resulted in Lith drifting more and more apart from the others.

He didn't trust them and they didn't trust him. Lith was like the moon to them, cold and distant. Something they could look at but never reach. He had no weakness the unit could help him overcome.

When units competed against each other and he received the role of scout, Lith would single handedly wipe out the enemy team. If he was assigned the role of rearguard, instead, even if the unit made grave mistakes, he would be the sole survivor.

The drill Sergeants soon considered him a scourge rather than a monster. He was the living proof that everything they taught to the other cadets was a lie. Teamwork, trust, and hard work were useless against an overwhelmingly strong opponent.

Life Vision allowed him to spot his opponents, no matter how good they were at hiding. Magic wands and chore magic were more than enough to snipe enemies from a distance before they even understood what was happening to them.

"He has no care for the unit nor for the lives of his teammates." Sergeant Tepper explained to Berion, the boot camp Commander.

"I think he is a liability. A dangerous individual that has nothing to offer to the Kingdom. I swear it on my stripes, sir. To watch into his eyes is like staring into the abyss. There's nothing inside. My opinion is that Lith 1416 should be deemed unfit for service."

Berion sighed. He liked people like Tepper. Honest, hard working men that put their Country above everything else. Yet they failed to see the bigger picture.

"Does he get the job done?" Unlike the Sergeant, the Commander had access to Lith's personal file. He liked it. A lot.

"Sir, it's not a matter of success or failure..."

"Really?" Berion cut him short. He pinched his nose, trying to stop the migraine he experienced every time someone spouted bullsh\*t too big for him to bear with a smile on his face.

"So, if tomorrow the Royals are in danger, it's not a matter of success or failure? If we find Balkor's hideout it's not a matter of success or failure? Are you insane, Sergeant? I asked you a question, does he get the job done or not?"

The Commander didn't stand up dramatically, he didn't even raise his voice. He simply stared at Tepper like at a dumb kid after one question too many.

"Yes, he does." The Sergeant replied swallowing his pride.

"Then this conversation is over. As long as he doesn't show violent tendencies or a defiant attitude toward the Kingdom, I don't see any reason to dismiss him. I'm eager to see how he performs during the field test."

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Leegaain, the father of all Dragons and Guardian of the Gorgon Empire's area, had his fair share of troubles too. Ever since they had found and destroyed the Master's lab located under the Blood Desert, the three great Countries had been spared from the Abomination threat.

Leegaain had never underestimated the Master, not even during that four years long absence.

'We have no way to know if they were licking their wounds or simply had moved from one place to another. The only thing I can do is to keep my eyes open and prepare for the worst.' Leegaain thought.

'Thanks to my help, Tyris is almost done rebuilding the two missing power cores. Once they are completed, the Griffon Kingdom will be once again properly protected and she will fulfill her end of the bargain. With her assistance, my research could bear countless fruits.

'As for Salaark, I was skeptical of her decision at first, but I must admit that keeping Balkor alive was the right thing to do. His expertise in handling Abominations makes him a perfect assistant in my work.

'Now my only question is: why has the Master returned right now? It's because they have finally completed a new lab or because they fear us no longer? Only time will tell.'

"I never expected you to be so devious." Milea, the Magic Empress of the Gorgon Empire and Leegaain's only disciple was overjoyed.

"You didn't bring me to the White Griffon to show me the slave items, not the Abomination hybrid. You wanted me to see an academy through your eyes!"

"One thing does not exclude the other, kid." Leegaain grinned.

"Those who don't learn from past mistakes are doomed to repeat them. I brought you there for several reasons, but you are right. The academy was the most important of them. Now you know how the Kingdom achieved such long lasting peace."

"How long will it take to complete our first academy?" Ever since that day, Milea had used even her personal funds to start the research project. She couldn't believe that she just like all her predecessors had been so blind to never notice the difference between a school of magic and an academy.

## Chapter 352 Extinction Part 1

Until Nalear's attack, Milea had always thought that the six big academies were just ostentatious schools of magic. The Gorgon Empire's schools produced the same amount of research, if not more, and they were also protected by several arrays.

Sure, they couldn't host so many students at once, nor they could grant its staff rings or Ballots like the academies, but Milea had never found them reason enough to investigate them further.

At least until she had seen with her own eyes the true meaning behind a power core.

"Without someone who knows what they are doing? A century. Maybe two, if you are unlucky." Leegaain replied.

"That long?" Milea fell on her throne with a thud. That wasn't the answer she was hoping for.

"It's not like you are building a simple castle. You must first find a spell capable of imbuing every single stone, one at the time. Then all of them must be compatible with the power core and work in synergy.

"What did you expect? You guys don't even know how to build a power core!" The Guardian scoffed at her impatience.

"You should be happy that thanks to your longevity you'll be able to see it completed, even if it takes three centuries. Your grandkids will surely be grateful for all your hard work."

"Can't you help us? Even a little bit?" Milea scratched one of the scales on Leegaain's humongous neck, causing his tail to waggle uncontrollably.

"First, I'm not a dog." He replied even though his body begged to differ. "Second, no. I care about you, not your people. They can all die for what I care about. Also, this project will help you to find talented people or at least trustworthy ones.

In the long run, you'll be able to discern those who truly understand the relevance of long term planning and those who are only sucking up to..."

Leegaain was interrupted by his own communication amulet buzzing into his consciousness.

"It can't be another summon from the Council. Two calls in four years would be an all time record. Nor can be Salaark or Tyris. They are close enough to establish a mind link whenever they... What the heck?"

Milea knew about the Council as well as about the odd relationship the Guardians of the Garlen continent shared. She often wondered if they had an offspring together and if yes, what they would look like.

"What's the matter, Leegaain?"

"Fenagar is calling me. It never happened before, we hate each other guts." Seeing Milea's confused expression, he calmly explained to her their shared past while ignoring the ringing amulet.

"He is one of the Guardians of the Jiera continent. His area of influence is right in from of mine. Only one ocean separates us." He snarled.

"Only one ocean?" Milea chuckled.

"He is still too close for comfort. I don't know if it's because he started as a lizard too, or because his base elements are polar opposite to mine, water and earth. Bottom line, he is a Leviathan, a wingless ocean dragon, and we'd rather fight to the death than be together in the same room for more than one minute."

Leegaain finally tapped the white mana crystal on the amulet, letting a real life hologram of Fenagar's head appear in the throne room. The resemblance between the two dragons made Milea yelp in surprise.

The only differences she was able to notice were that while Leegaain's scales were pitch black and his eyes yellow, Fenagar's were respectively pristine white and blue. He even had horns on his head which resembled a crown, just like Leegaain.

But Fenagar's had a different shape and size, with two massive curved horns coming out from his temples, giving the Leviathan a demonic looking. Unlike the Dragon, whose gaze was always calm if not loving to her, the Fenagar's eyes were filled with fury and malice.

Even if it was just a hologram, Milea could almost feel the salty breeze of the ocean blowing on her face, right before the incoming tide swallowed her.

"What do you want, Fenagar?" Leegaain's voice snapped her out of her reverie.

"I hoped for this day to never come, Leegaain." The Leviathan hissed, keeping his eyes on his opponent.

"Have you been attacked by Abominations too?"

"I wish." Fenagar sighed. "I have bad news and worse news. The bad news is that the human race on the Jiera continent is almost extinct."

"What?" Milea and Leegaain shouted as one.

"Don't worry. It didn't happen because of Abominations, Fallen races, or Evolved Monsters. Humans did it to themselves. One of the most powerful Countries of Jiera, the Torin Kingdom, developed a biological weapon. A plague, to be precise.

"Their plan was to unleash it on their enemies and kill whoever didn't submit to their rule. The idea was good, but the execution poor. Once the other countries realized what was happening, they used their dead to poison the enemy's wells and lands.

"The plague spread through the Torin Kingdom as well while it was surrounded from every side until it was too late. The infection was faster than the Healers could cure it or flames destroy it.

"You can imagine the rest. Now only talented Healers, Awakened ones, and their families remain."

"And you stood there and did nothing?" Milea asked.

"What was I supposed to do, child? Take over the kingdom? Kill everyone who knew about the plague?" Fenagar chuckled.

"I serve Mogar. I serve only the balance. I don't care about who lives or not. Even if I intervened, they would have called me a tyrant and started over once I left. You can't stop an idea with violence, only try to prove it wrong and that's what I did together with the other Guardians.

"We warned them, but they didn't listen. We even caused a small outbreak before they implemented their plan, hoping they would realize the immense risks it carried. They buried their dead and moved on as nothing had happened. For the greater good, they said."

"You have yet to answer me." Leegaain snorted. He didn't care for the Gorgon Empire, let alone for the people of another continent.

"Your pet interrupted me!" Fenagar roared in outrage. "I was just politely answering. I called to inform you that the royal family of the Torin Kingdom is currently sailing towards your turf. Together with their magicians, a small army, and the plague to which they are all immunized."

"Why the heck did you let them go?" Milea's eyes brimmed with rage and mana at the thought of the danger her people were about to face.

"I like your sass, little human pet." Fenagar chuckled. "I did it for your master. He is a collector of endangered species and forgotten knowledge. I thought no one better than him could decide if there's something worth salvaging."

"First, Milea is not my pet. She is my apprentice." Leegaain voice was calm as Milea was enraged.

"Then excuse my rude words, Milea. I'll remember your name." Fenagar apologetically tilted his head, shocking Milea. She had never heard a Guardian apologize before.

"Second, thanks for the information. I know you didn't have to inform me. How many are they? Where I can find them?"

"Around two hundred ships. They are crossing our borders right now, near Dead Island. You can't miss them." Fenagar's image disappeared, leaving the two alone again.

"What are we waiting for? Let's go!" Milea kicked one of Leegaain's scales, prompting him to get up.

"What are you planning to do?"

"Kill them all, what else? If they get close enough to our coasts, they could Warp Steps into the Gorgon Empire. I can't allow the maniacs who created such a plague into my lands.

"Not knowing they are insane enough to carry it with them instead of destroying it. I'd say their intent is clear. They don't seek asylum, they want new lands to start over. Well, not on my watch."

Milea dispatched several instructions, setting her fleet to sail with the order of sinking every ship coming from the Jiera continent, no matter the cost.

"What about the plague?" Leegaain asked.

"I had enough with the one from the Griffon Kingdom. It has to be destroyed. I'm not going to spare anyone willing to spread such madness."

"Then you'll have my help."

Less than an hour later, the Torin Kingdom was extinct for good.

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Lith's boot camp.

After countless hours of training and combat simulations against other units, it was time for the recruits to perform their first field test. Sergeant Tepper appeared confident and relaxed as usual, but him not insulting them even once spoke volumes about how serious the situation was.

"Even though you are cadets, you are still part of the army. Our Griffon Kingdom has been blessed by centuries of peace, so aside from the troops stationed at the borders, the army's main job is to guarantee the safety of our citizens.

"Sometimes a local Lord can need our help against rioting citizens or get rid of organized crime. More frequently, we are called to exterminate monsters. They are usually stronger than humans, spawn fast, and destroy everything on their path.

"Every time a mercenary group is called to clean our mess is a dishonor for the Crown and the army alike. The reason why the mercenary guild exists is that we can't be everywhere at a moment's notice.

"We do not have enough soldiers to cover the whole Kingdom. Too many people prefer to make a quick buck at the expense of the weak rather than dedicate their lives to the service of others. If you are one of those people, the army is the wrong place to be." Tepper looked straight at Lith, who remained unfazed as usual.

"When we are called for help, we must be fast, ruthless, efficient. Monsters are able to proliferate only in the absence of magical beasts. That's why killing one without reason is a crime.

"Magical beasts are smart creatures, able to comprehend and speak the human language, so if you meet one, ask for its assistance rather than attack it. Monsters rarely act alone, that's why we operate in units.

"Monsters are efficient, learn from their mistakes, and their system is merit-based. You'll never meet a lazy a\*s spoiled monster because they die first. To beat them, we need to be better than them.

"We may be weaker, but our training and equipment give us an edge they'll never have. Most monsters are unable to use magic and even the few that do are usually limited to spells from tier one to three.

"That's not reason enough to underestimate them. Monsters reach adulthood in a matter of weeks, while it took you sixteen years to become cadets. Today we'll discover if you have what it takes to become an active soldier, a paper pusher, or if you'll be sent back home with a gift wrap."

Tepper gave each one of them an enchanted uniform together with a dimensional ring, several kinds of magic wands and potions. After they changed and stored everything into their rings, the briefing continued.

"Today you have to face the most human like among the monsters. We are about to attack a recently established tribe of orcs."

While some of his comrades gasped in surprise, Lith accessed Soluspedia. According to lore, orcs were a corrupted race that descended from elves, but since no one had ever met an elf, Lith skipped the lore and went straight to the important part.

Orcs were humanoid creatures, with an average height of 1.8 meters (5'11"). They were gifted from birth with a physique that dangerously reminded Lith of his own after experiencing several breakthroughs.

They were stronger, faster, and sturdier than humans. Their skin was naturally resistant to most elements and they would hardly get sick. Rarely an orc would display a talent for magic, but when it happened, the creature would display incredible abilities.

'Great!' Lith thought. 'So far this is the most dangerous race of monsters I have ever met. Based on what's written in the bestiary, they seem naturally close to Awakened ones. I'd better keep my head empty and my eyes open against them.'

Unlike humans, they were all bald, even the females. Their skin was brown as tree bark and almost as hard. Orcs also had enhanced senses that made it difficult taking them by surprise and were able to display short bursts of explosive strength or speed.

"Before explaining to you the nature of our opponents, I need to ask you a few questions. Be honest because your survival depends on it. How many of you have fought for their lives in the past?" Four out of ten hands were raised.

"How many of you have already met a monster?" Only one hand remained.

"How many of you have ever killed something that wasn't game?" Same as before.

"Really? What exactly?" Lith's hand once again frustrated Tepper's speech.

Everything the Sergeant did, from the insults to the groundless punishments was to give them a common enemy. Someone to hate, to make them all feel equal during their hardships and form bonds of camaraderie that would help them survive actual combat.

By knowing each other they were supposed to be able to always have each other's back, increasing their odds of survival. Even that series of questions were meant to make them realize how little they knew about the world around them.

That was the point of the whole field test against humanoid monsters. They needed to feel the fear and learn how to conquer it. To realize if they were capable of taking a life. It was a critical moment in a cadet's training.

Yet Lith's flexing made it look like a joke.

"Magical beasts, humans, goblins, ogres, Abominations, Evolved Monsters, and undead." He replied.

"What?" The unit and the Sergeant said in unison.

"My body count is 137 if anyone's interested." Lith said with a shrug.

Mentioning Evolved Monsters was a tell big enough to allow Tepper to solve the riddle that had pestered him in the last months. A few years ago, there had been a rumor going around of a student of the White Griffon slaying a wyvern with a powerful sword.

That very same student had even received a family name from the King himself, who had let known far and wide about how he hoped the student would have a brilliant future in the army.

'Thank the gods I spoke with Commander Berion before flunking him.' Sergeant Tepper was inwardly panicking.

'Otherwise, it would have cost me my career, if not my life!'

#### Chapter 354 Conundrum Part 1

Sergeant Tepper hid his surprise behind his usual strict expression while the rest of the unit sneered at Lith's words. They were all of commoner origin and with no access to information regarding what happened in the rest of the Kingdom.

They had never heard about Balkor or about Nalear's assault on the White Griffon, hence they took Lith's claim as an attempt to impress their commanding officer.

"You and what army?" Vipli's snarky remark made the whole unit laugh.

Tepper inwardly sighed at their ignorance, but at the same time found no reason to correct them. Lith didn't seem to mind their mistrust, while the atmosphere had become more relaxed.

'Their mutual spite has only one downside: until they find a common ground, I have to think as I'm commanding two different units at once. Lith can't coordinate with the rest of the cadets because he is the one they hate. The common enemy that binds them together.' Tepper thought.

"One last question. Who among you thinks to be able to lead the unit?" For once, Lith's hand remained down. Only Vipli and Nhilo raised their arms.



"Very good. Nhilo, you'll be my second in command. You are promoted to the rank of Corporal until the end of the mission." Vipli was disappointed whereas Nhilo was brimming with joy, but neither of them let it show on their faces.

They simply replied with a: "Sir, yes sir!"

"Why do you think I chose you, cadet Nhilo?" Tepper asked.

"Because Vipli is our second best scout. His skill set is more suited for the frontlines while I have no particular strong suit aside from my tactical knowledge." Tepper nodded at her reply.

'Good girl. Smart enough to recognize her limits as well as those of her comrades. She didn't even attempt to berate Lith, acknowledging him as the best scout instead.' He thought.

The Sergeant then assigned to each member of the unit their role. To no one's surprise, Lith received once again the role of the rear guard. Aside from Nhilo, everyone else sniggered.

They thought he was being punished for his lie since the rear guard was considered the most boring and useless job.

"There's nothing to laugh about!" She scolded them. "The rear guard is one of the most vital roles. His duty is to cover our backs and make sure that if something goes wrong, we have a clear retreat path."

Liwell was about to reply, but Tepper's cold glare stopped him in his tracks. Only then he realized she was now his commanding officer too. They were no longer peers and his words could have been taken as insubordination.

Tepper briefed them about the orcs' strong and weak points before taking out from his dimensional amulet a whole rack full of weapons of every kind.

"Take whatever you think you might need."

Lith took for himself a few throwing daggers, a short sword, and a bastard sword.

After everyone completed their equipment, the Sergeant led them out of the boot camp and inside the woods. They marched for a few hours before he made them stop for a brief rest.

"We are very close now. Our scouts inspected the place a couple of days ago and reported that the tribe should consist of no more than twenty orcs, children included. Our duty is to kill them all, no matter the age or gender. Am I clear?"

After everyone nodded, Tepper continued.

"Male and female orcs are equally strong. Orc elders are not like your usual grandpa, they are seasoned warriors and what they lack in strength they made up in skill. Any faulty member of the tribe becomes their dinner, so you'll only fight against dangerous enemies.

"If you underestimate the orcs, you'll die. This is your mission, so you are on your own. I'm only here to supervise, not to help. If you screw up, I'll do my best to save you. If you royally screw up, there's only so much I can do. Keep that in mind."

The Sergeant handed Nhilo a map of the region, giving her the opportunity to use all the information at hand to come up with a battle plan.

"Sir, I request permission to leave the HQ to perform my duty." Lith stood in front of Nhilo, speaking with his usual flat voice.

"We have yet to move, so there is no need for a rear guard. Permission de..." The words died in her mouth as soon as Nhilo realized what was happening.

It wasn't the first time she was picked as the team leader and Lith had never wasted her time before.

"How many of them?" She corrected herself.

"Three from behind, three from the front." His words made everyone flinch, even the Sergeant.

"They are coming from our 10, 12, 2, 4, 6, and 8. We'll be surrounded in less than a minut..."

"He's just bullsh\*tting us! There's no one around." Vipli felt outraged. He had stood guard from the top of a tree the whole time while Lith had strolled around the area. There was no way someone could sneak past him that easily.

"Permission granted." Nhilo ignored him. "Do you need backup?"

Lith shook his head before darting away. Despite he was running, his boots produced no noise. He was using a mix of air and earth magic to make his steps light like a falling petal.

'Does he get the job done?' The words of Commander Berion echoed in Tepper's mind while he was climbing the nearest tree to assess the situation. He had not assigned the role of scout to Lith only to avoid him soloing the mission.

"Lith is right, they are coming from every direction." Tepper said leaving Vipli dumbstruck.

"What are your orders, Corporal?" The situation wasn't that bad.

Worst case scenario, Tepper could easily handle three trolls. His intervention would mark the team failing the field test, but cadets had much more to learn from a defeat rather than from a victory. Especially from an undeserved one.

"Everyone, battle formation eleven." The unit followed Nhilo's order, assuming a circular formation and holding their lightning wands ready to fire. She led them to the nearest clearing, leaving the enemies no place to hide.

Such a spot would also bring out the maximum potential of the wands' long range attacks.

'Their faces were priceless.' Lith grinned. 'Being the last in line also means I can use Life Vision with no risk of being discovered. I always avoid a fair fight when possible. Solus, is there something I should know?'

'No arrays nor any surveillance spell.' She replied. 'You can go all out if you want. There are no witnesses since the rest of the unit remained behind.'

Lith nodded, taking the army's bastard sword out of the dimensional ring. He circled around the orc to kill it with a surprise attack.

'I wish I could take one alive and experiment on them. If I'm right and these creatures are naturally close to the Awakened state, there is no telling how much I could learn from them.' Lith inwardly sighed.

As always, he had so many things to do and so little time.

## Chapter 355 Conundrum Part 2

Lith was now moving a few centimeters above the ground, using air magic to float and prevent the enemy from detecting his presence. He even used darkness magic to cancel his own smell.

Yet, as soon as he obtained a clean line of sight, Lith noticed the orc staring back at him with eyes filled with mana. It was a male, slightly shorter than Lith. He was armed with a heavy stone club and was only wearing pants made of orc's skin.

In the orcs' society, the weak were nothing but livestock.

'What the heck? I always moved while keeping myself hidden behind trees or vegetation. There's no way he could know my position, unless...'

Lith activated Life Vision again, noticing that the enemy's mana was moving from his eyes to his free left hand. The orc waved his hand, releasing a wind blade towards Lith's neck.

At such a short range, it was fast and powerful enough to decapitate an opponent unaware of the existence of true magic. Lith had no problem going under the blade while using spirit magic to break the orc's neck.

Unfortunately, it had no effect.

'My usual rotten luck.' Lith inwardly cursed. 'First, the f\*cker employed some kind of Life Vision, then he used a tier two true spell, and now this? Why do I always find champions instead of regular grunts? Core color?' He asked Solus.

'Deep yellow but definitely Awakened.' Solus replied. 'This orc must be one of those the bestiary refers to as "displaying incredible abilities".'

The orc didn't like Lith being taller than him. In his society size meant strength and strength meant survival. Seeing a feeble human surpassing him meant hate at first sight. When Lith easily dodged the air blade, hate turned into rage.

The orc swung his club in a wide arc that started above his head and ended at Lith's feet causing a thundering noise. Lith sidestepped, avoiding the telegraphed attack and stabbing the opponent's heart at the same time.

The orc grunted, activating earth fusion to stop the sword in its tracks. He contracted his strong muscles which together with his thick ribcage formed a rock hard defense. Lith reacted by infusing himself with fire magic, piercing both like paper.

The boost granted by the yellow core was nothing compared to the one from Lith's bright cyan one.

The creature died with a shocked expression on his face while releasing a foul smell. The sword had not only robbed the orc of his life, but also of the control over his bowels.

'What the heck does this mean?' Lith could see the creature's life force fading away, yet the mana flow was increasing. He kneeled near the corpse, using Invigoration to get a grasp of the phenomenon.

'Amazing!' Solus exclaimed. 'Somehow the life force is being converted into mana instead of going to waste. The question is: to what end?'

'I don't know and I don't care.' Lith decapitated the creature, just to be safe, before storing it inside the dimensional ring.

As soon as the head was removed, all the accumulated mana departed from the body in the form of a yellow dart. It flew above the trees disappearing at the speed of light.

'This doesn't make sense!' Solus was shocked. 'Usually when someone dies, their core leaks mana until it turns grey and disappears. This time, instead, it grew in power before releasing a large amount of mana and turning red at once.

'Only then the core started leaking mana.'

'What does this mean?' Lith asked.

'I don't know. Otherwise I would have said that it makes sense.' Solus's thoughts oozed sarcasm

'One down, two more to go. I hope they let me keep the body. Maybe we could learn something from it.' Lith thought while activating Life Vision just in time to notice the other two orcs converging on him.

Lith took out a couple of wands, floating above the ground again to hide his movements. Yet once more the enemies seemed to see through the vegetation, following him with ease.

'Orcs do not use magic my pale a\*s!' Lith inwardly cursed. 'Either I'm the unluckiest man alive or there's something terribly wrong here. Solus, what color are their cores?'

'Deep yellow and orange.' She replied.

Lith stopped wasting mana trying to be stealthy and used it to infuse himself with several elements at once instead.

The orcs used their natural abilities and air fusion to boost their speed, but they were still unable to keep up with Lith's pace. Physically they were equal, but the gap between their cores was too big.

Lith focused on the weaker orange cored orc first. Ice spears from the first wand pierced the orc's body while lightning bolts from the other wand traveled through the ice, striking directly the internal organs.

Lith used wands instead of spells to not waste mana and make his victories more believable.

The yellow cored orc suffered the same fate. Even knowing Lith's strategy, there was nothing the creature could do to stop him. Both the corpses released a dart of light before they could be stored inside the dimensional ring.

'This doesn't make sense!' Now it was Lith's turn to be shocked.

'Whatever these creatures were, they weren't Awakened. I was wrong before. That wasn't a tier two wind blade, that was simply a boosted chore magic spell. All three orcs didn't use a single proper spell. It's like they never practiced magic before.

'Also, why I couldn't store any of the bodies until the accumulated mana departed?'

'I have a crazy theory.' Solus thought.

'Crazy is better than nothing.' Lith replied.

'What if those creatures were just normal orcs? What if somehow, they borrowed those powers and after their deaths, the mana returned to its rightful owner? It would explain why the mana was "alive" and where it did go.'

'Only one way to be sure. We have to rush back to the unit and check the remaining three orcs.' Lith started to move even before their telepathic conversation was over. Killing the orcs had taken him less than a minute, so he considered unlikely for his comrades to be dead.

He was right. When Lith arrived, the battle was still ongoing and the cadets were winning. Nhilo's decision to move the unit to the clearing had allowed them to keep the orcs at bay.

The cadets had used earth wands to build obstacles and trenches that made it impossible for the orcs to get close without getting caught by barrages of spells. As Lith had imagined, with their weak cores and only chore magic at their disposal, the orcs were sitting ducks at long range.

Fusion magic allowed them to tank part of the damage, but their defeat was only a matter of time. Tired and frustrated, the creatures sought shelter inside one of the trenches. They took each other's hand, allowing the energies inside themselves to resonate in unison.

Solus looked at their cores getting stronger and stronger. She was incapable of believing her own mana sense.

'That's our thing!' The shock prevented her from being clearer.

'The orcs are becoming one!' She said only making Lith even more confused.

#### Chapter 356 Demons Part 1

'What the heck does it mean "the orcs are becoming one"?' Lith hated when things went beyond his comprehension. Sadly, it happened most of the time he was forced to risk his life.

'Are they writing "doing a threesome" off their bucket list, merging into a three headed creature, or what?'

'Gross times two!' Solus replied. 'I mean their cores are resonating, just like we do sometim... Wait, I stand corrected! Only one core is actually getting stronger, the other two stabilized already. It's easier if I show you.'

Solus shared her recent memories, allowing Lith to see that the three orcs were even weaker than the ones he had killed earlier. Two had an orange core and only one orc had a yellow core.

'Clearly the orcs coming from the front are just a diversion.' Lith thought.

'This explains why they are still so far. They were expecting their companions to strike from behind. By now the orcs have realized something went wrong and are changing their tactic accordingly.'

He could see with Solus's mana vision that after the orcs' cores started resonating, one of the orange cores had been promoted to yellow and was quickly advancing toward becoming green.

'Why boost an orange core when they have a yellow one available?' Lith pondered.

'The female they are overdosing with mana is even the weakest among the three.'

It took just a second for Lith and Solus to understand the meaning of such an action. Orcs were a utilitarian race. Each member of the tribe was but a tool to an end for its leaders.

The cadets didn't stand idly, not giving the orcs a second of respite. As soon as their enemies disappeared inside the trench, the cadets used their wands to unleash a hail of ice spikes to smoke them out.

Lith could see with Life Vision that the life force of the orcs was dropping fast. They had to act soon, before they became corpses. Lith took his earth wand from the dimensional ring, ready to counter whatever the suicidal orc had in mind.

The creature jumped out of the trench covered in blood, yet at the same time, the deep green aura enveloping her body made the orc appear majestic and dangerous.

"Take it down!" Nhilo ordered.

The cadets obeyed their Corporal. They focused their aim on the standing orc, who darted forward like a bullet. She was now almost too fast for them to see. The female orc danced around the obstacles set in her course with the grace of a ballerina and the speed of a cheetah.

"Switch to lightning! Ice it's too slow."

So far, Sergeant Tepper was proud of Nhilo's performance.

'These kids sure have rotten luck. Facing a tribe with a shaman can be a real hassle even for veterans. If it was a big tribe, that is. According to our scouts, there are only twenty orcs.'

'Three are already dead and if the unit doesn't screw up, the tribe will soon be down to fourteen members. The cadets might be able to wipe the tribe out. It would do wonders for their careers.'

Tepper looked briefly at Lith.

'How did he manage to kill three orcs that fast and without a scratch?' He thought while hearing Commander Berion's voice echoing in his head over and over.

'Does he get the job done?'

The cadets needed but a moment to switch their wands. Yet as soon as the hail stopped, the orc was able to move unimpeded. She leaped forward, to cross all the trenches at once and reach her targets.

It was a simple but effective plan. Also, it was exactly what Lith had been expecting the whole time.

'What a moron! Once you leave the ground, you can't change direction or speed anymore.' Lith thought while erecting a stone wall in front of the female orc, who crashed into it with enough strength to broke her nose, jaw, and skull at once.

'Don't let your guard down!' Solus warned him. 'Her core is still in overload. It's going to blow up any second!'

'Who do you take me for?' Lith scoffed. 'I never let my guard down until the monster is dead.'

He kept waving his wand, creating three more walls that trapped the still confused orc, leaving her only one predictable way out.

"Fire in the hole!" Nhilo ordered and the unit executed.

The four walls created by Lith formed an enormous chimney. All the cadets threw a Fire Roots, the Alchemic equivalent of a concussion grenade, into its hole. None of the Fire Roots missed the target.

The resulting explosion made the stone walls crumble, burying the orc under a ton of rubble. After an orange light departed from under the rocks, the two remaining orcs came out of their hiding spot and knelt with their faces on the ground.

"Good job, Corporal." Tepper nodded. "Now kill the last orcs and finish the job."

A long moment of silence followed the order. The orcs were monsters who had tried to kill them until a second ago, but they were now surrendering. The unit's hesitation only lasted that long before they unleashed a barrage of spells that butchered the helpless creatures.

Blood, guts, and excrements flew everywhere.

"Killing them from a distance was the right move, but the next time only use lightning bolts for the finishing touch. Ice magic always makes a mess." Tepper said. Lith was about to collect the corpses when the Sergeant stopped him.

"Nice move trapping the enemy like that, Cadet Lith. How did you know the orc was going to blow itself up?"

"I didn't." Lith lied. "I just wanted to stop her movements."

"A good call anyway." Tepper nodded. "Change of plans, Cadets. What you have just seen is proof that the tribe has a shaman. An orc shaman is more than a simple mage. With the right tools, it can greatly enhance the strength of the whole tribe.

The effects of their magic are only temporary, just like our potions. Yet even a single shaman can turn a small tribe in a force to be reckoned with. Each orc becomes stronger, faster, and can use chore magic with enough power to make it deadly.

Also, as you got this close to experiencing it on your skin, they can turn their weakest members into powerful bombs. Since we don't have mages on our side..." Tepper stared at Lith during the last phrase.

"...you have the right to ask considering the mission successfully completed. Killing a shaman is way beyond the purpose of the field test. One or more of you could get killed if you face them without a good plan.

On the other hand, you can also decide to continue the mission. Make your choice."

While the unit discussed the matter at hand, Lith stored the two corpses away.

"We want to continue the mission, Sir." Nhilo said. For the first time since the unit had been formed, they were happy having Lith by their side. Him single-handedly killing half the enemies had been a key factor in their decision.

Tepper nodded, giving them new wands to replace their used ones.

"In such a case, you'll need my help. I'll take care of the shaman, but you still have to deal with thirteen more orcs on your own."

## Chapter 357 Demons Part 2

"I think it's better if Lith acts as our scout together with Vipli, Sir." Nhilo said.

"Why do you ask my permission, Corporal? Your mission, your rules." The Sergeant replied.

"How many orcs can you face at once on your own?" Nhilo asked Lith.

"Depends. Three if they are as weak as those you just killed. Two otherwise."

Hearing Lith referring to the orcs as 'weak' sent a shiver running down the Cadets' spine. Tepper was really curious to see the corpses of those Lith had killed by himself, but it could wait until the end of the mission.

"Based on the information we have and how fast the orcs spotted us, their camp should be nearby. Feel free to engage the enemy, but don't get too far from us. If you spot anything suspicious, your first priority is to warn me. Are we clear?"

Lith inwardly smiled. Seeing Nhilo acting tough reminded him of Phloria. The two girls couldn't be more different, since Nhilo was just 1.6 meters tall with red hair and green eyes. Yet something in her tone made him recall a few happy memories.

"Yes, Sir." Lith replied before disappearing into the woods.

'Judging by the Sergeant's reaction, what we have seen so far isn't anything special.' Solus thought. 'I wonder why the bestiary was so vague about the shaman's powers.'

'Probably because the author never met one.' Lith shrugged. 'At the academy, we focused more on copying everything we could about specializations and magical ingredients rather than worrying about monsters.'

'In the four years we spent there, we barely managed to get everything we needed about magic. Copying the whole library would have taken me a lifetime. Not to mention that Soluspedia isn't that big.'

The magical space that Lith called Soluspedia and that gave him instant access to all the knowledge stored inside, had kept expanding as Solus regained her strength. Yet it was never enough.

Between all the books Lith owned and his own grimoires, Soluspedia was always full to the brim.

'What really bothers me is how they managed to find us so far from their camp. I didn't notice any array on our path. What about you, Solus?'

'Me neither, but I can't keep mana sense always active. It consumes too much mana. I prefer to keep it for battle and perform sweeps from time to time.' She replied.

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Meanwhile, at the orcs' settlement, Ragh'Ash the shaman was deeply worried. About an hour ago, his holy crystal had warned her about twelve humans closing in to their position. After blessing six of her best warriors with the power of the gods, she had eagerly waited for their return.

Human meat was a delicacy and the women needed all the food they could get to increase the orcs' numbers. Their Grey Wolf tribe had almost been wiped out by the Red Worm tribe whose shaman wanted Ragh'Ash's holy crystal for himself.

Their victory had cost the Grey Wolf most of their warriors, so they had been forced to run away before the other tribes could exploit their weakened state.



When the warriors returned, it wasn't in the way Ragh'Ash was expecting. One after the other, the blessings she had bestowed upon the three greatest warriors of the tribe had reunited themselves with the holy crystal.

Something had slain them like they were flies. Before Ragh'Ash could seek the holy crystal's guidance, the remaining three warriors she had sent had followed their war-siblings in their travel to the afterlife.

"This doesn't make sense!" Testa'Lhosh the war chieftain couldn't believe his own eyes.

"Six lives were sent to slay our enemies and six lights returned. Are you sure they are humans? Only magical beasts can slay orcs that fast."

"Quite sure." Ragh'Ash replied. "An hour ago they were still quite far, so my readings weren't that accurate. Let me try again."

Ragh'Ash put her hands on the holy crystal, letting her mana flow into it. The holy crystal wasn't actually a gift from the gods. It was simply a huge violet mana crystal the size of an adult human man.

It was also the most sacred relic an orc tribe could possess. Before their Fall, orcs shared a deep connection with the mana crystals. So deep it survived even the self inflicted disaster that destroyed their ancient civilization.

Through the violet crystal, Ragh'Ash's mana was focused and amplified, to the point her Life Vision could sweep dozens of kilometers at once. There was only so much information her brain could process at once, so she would mistake her own perceptions for a vision sent from the gods.

Over the centuries, their science had turned into superstition. Their bloodlust clouded their minds, leaving them forever crippled as a sentient race. Yet when a shaman was born, they would always be Awakened ones.

Ragh'Ash now could perceive their enemies with much greater clarity. They were ten humans and two...

"Demons!" Ragh'Ash screamed in panic, almost fainting due to the shock.

"Demons?" Testa'Lhosh shuddered in fear. According to the lore, nondescript cruel demons had caused the fall of the orc race. It was totally not their fault. They were certain of it because their elders said so, before being eaten for dinner by their own grandkids.

"You were right! Two of them are disguised as humans, but they are not. Neither they are beasts or other races. They can only be demons. One is the blackest night, with no stars or moon to light the way. The other is the brightest day, so pure and dazzling it almost blinded me."

Ragh'Ash's eyes were bloodshot from the effort of withstanding Solus's light. Testa'Lhosh was a proud chieftain, there was almost nothing he was afraid of. Ragh'Ash's words left him unfazed. For almost ten seconds.

"There's no time to lose! We must run for our lives!" Testa'Lhosh screamed when his brain realized the meaning of the shaman's words. The chieftain had never met a demon, but he knew facing one meant death.

It was what his own father told him before Testa'Lhosh turned him into a new pair of pants. The chieftain was really fond of them. He wore that skin just like his father did. It was practically a family heirloom.

"No, we must stand our ground and kill them. The humans are weaker than our newborns and both demons are lesser ones. The black one is weaker than me, while the white one is even weaker than you."

Ragh'Ash shook her head while a cruel smile revealed her jagged teeth.

"By feasting on their flesh and blood we'll be able to break the curse that plagues our race! The Grey Wolf will devour the whole world. With our ancient might back and the holy crystal, we'll be unstoppable!"

"Are you sure eating demons can cure our curse? It's the first time I hear such a thing." Testa'Lhosh scratched his head in confusion. According to the lore, there was no cure. The demons had made sure of it.

"Of course I'm sure of it!" Ragh'Ash screamed in frustration.

"My own mentor told me about it on his death bed." Before Ragh'Ash turned her into a bedside rug. It was more a dying curse than the passing of knowledge, but that's another story.

#### Chapter 358 Holy Crystal Part 1

The Grey Wolf tribe only had twelve members remaining plus the chieftain and the shaman. Ragh'Ash had to think carefully about their strategy. Albeit lesser demons, their enemies were still demons.

Of the twelve orcs, four were just kids. Their bodies were yet to become able to endure the blessing of the holy crystal. The shaman decided to keep them close to her, so in case of emergency, she could turn them into living bombs and get rid of the tribe's enemies.

'As long as the tribe has women, we can always have more children.' Ragh'Ash thought. 'The only things that matter to our survival is the holy crystal and breaking the curse. Everyone else is disposable.'

The shaman used the crystal once again. This time she didn't panic. Ragh'Ash took her time to assess the enemy strength and position while using her knowledge of the territory to come up with a battle plan.

She was the only one capable of rational thought thanks to her Awakening. The others, just like Testa'Lhosh, were mindless brutes, incapable of escaping the clutches of their base instincts.

Against a smart enemy equipped with magical weapons like Sergeant Tepper's unit, the blessing of the holy crystal wasn't enough. She needed a foolproof plan. Literally. Otherwise those morons would screw up and leave everything on her shoulders.

According to her readings, the demons and the humans were apart, even if not by much.

'Sending more orcs would be just a waste of resources. I'll let them come here, where the powers of the holy crystal and my magic are at their peak. I'll leave the humans to the tribe while Testa'Lhosh and I will take care of the demons.'

'The gods from above and from below are on our side. The two demons share the same body, making them a lesser threat than what I feared. We outnumber and outmatch them. Thanks to my new pet, our victory is already written in the stars.' Ragh'Ash thought.

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Lith kept coming closer to the orc settlement, yet he met no resistance whatsoever. There were a few traps laid on the ground, but they were devised against animals to get food, not against a real enemy.

'Orcs are supposed to be stupid. They should have charged at us like mad bulls already.' Lith thought while using Life Vision to check his surroundings.

'I guess a shaman is a real game changer.' Solus pointed out. 'It's better to go back to the others and ask for more information. The Sergeant seemed to know more than what he told us. We should seek his advice.'

Lith mind nodded. He rushed back to the unit while Solus watched his back with mana sense, allowing him to move at full speed without any worry.

"How many orcs did you kill?" Liwell asked with a big smile on his face. Lith was so used to their ill concealed scorn that it gave him the creeps.

"None, that's why I returned. Something is wrong here. The orcs knew our position with enough precision to set an ambush, yet they aren't supposed to be able to use arrays." Lith said, leaving the unit confused.

"What's an array?" They asked each other, receiving only a shrug in reply.

"Also, they are supposed to be dumb. If that was true, they should either run away or come at us in full force. Yet nothing has happened. I feel like we are walking into a trap. Sergeant, could you please tell us what a shaman is capable of?"

"Sometimes in battle, you're forced to face the unknown, Cadet Lith. A shaman is a rare creature, even adventurers have a vague knowledge of them. Only the army possess detailed records and I have already shared with you more than I should." Tepper replied.

"As a fellow soldier, though, I can say that I think your observations are on point. The shaman seems smart enough to make use of their superior numbers. When you decided to continue the mission, you knew you would face a magician."

'The whole unit is green and he wants to send us against an unknown enemy?' Lith thought. 'Either he is overestimating himself or underestimating a magician.'

'Or maybe he is overestimating you.' Solus suggested. 'I think that at this point he is sure you are a magician and the army rules allow you to use your powers in case of emergency. Probably the Sergeant thinks that the two of you are more than enough.'

'I wish I shared his optimism. Until I know what kind of core the enemy has or the kind of tricks they are capable of, the only thing I'm sure of is that I can survive. I need to keep at least the Sergeant alive. Otherwise if the entire unit gets butchered, I could get blamed for it.'

The unit effortlessly advanced through the woods until Lith signaled them to stop.

"It's a trap indeed." He said jumping down from a tree without making any noise.

"The settlement has no guards and there are no signs of activity. The tribe consists of ten adults and four teenagers. Eight adults are spread outside what I presume is the shaman's tent and are armed to the teeth."

"What about the mana crystal?" Sergeant Tepper asked with eyes full of expectation.

"I saw no crystal." Lith lied. "Maybe it's inside the tent, I can't see through walls."

'The bastard knows about the crystal!' Lith inwardly cursed. Thanks to Life Vision and mana sense, Lith had now a clear idea of the enemy's strength. His comrades had only one path to victory.

If they managed to keep the orcs at bay they would win, otherwise it would be a slaughter.

Inside the tent, Lith had spotted a bright cyan cored orc that was likely to be the shaman, a very bulky individual at least two meters (6'7") tall, and four children that seemed to be around twelve years old.

Near to them, there was the biggest and most powerful mana crystal Lith had ever seen. He had hoped to keep its existence a secret to snatch it away during the fight. It was a priceless natural treasure with endless application to Lith's studies.

"There has to be a mana crystal, otherwise the shaman couldn't empower other orcs." Tepper said. "Orcs consider them gifts from the gods, they would rather die than leave one behind. The Mage Association highly values orcs crystals."

"They hope to understand the secrets of the shamans' powers by studying them. We have to retrieve it safely at all costs!"

"What is our priority?" Lith asked. "Wiping out the orcs or retrieving the crystal?"

"Your primary objective is to remain alive." Sergeant Tepper sighed. He had almost forgotten he was with cadets, not an elite force.

"The secondary objective is to wipe out the orcs. If we do that, the crystal will fall into our hands."

"What's a crystal?" Nhilo asked, relieving Lith from his burden.

The more he learned about the orcs the more the mission appeared suicidal in his eyes. Sending the cadets forward without warning them about mana crystals would just add insult to the injury.

Tepper briefly explained the unit the mana crystals' uses, properties, and volatile nature.

"With all due respect, I don't think we can do it, Sir." Nhilo said after Lith draw her a rough sketch of the orc settlement and the enemy positions.

## Chapter 359 Holy Crystal Part 2

"The orcs have the home advantage, are physically superior, and have a magician on their side. We can't set a trap without being noticed nor can we handle eight adults at once. Also, the children's position is highly suspicious."

"I don't think they are close to the tent to keep them safe, but rather to use them as sacrifices. A single one could throw our formation into disarray and doom us all. Not to mention we cannot even bombard the shaman's tent without the crystal exploding."

"I agree with your analysis, Corporal." Tepper nodded. "Their behavior is highly unusual, even for the presence of a shaman. The orcs were supposed to send another wave of warriors and attempt to escape after their second failed attack.

"Orcs being cautious is almost unprecedented. They regard humans as food, not enemies. Yet they are acting as if they are afraid of us. We need reinforcements. Lith, you can use dimensional magic, right?"

Lith nodded while watching his companions' expression turn to a mix of surprise, envy, and hate. Tepper noticed it too.

"He is not a noble. Lith comes from a family of farmers. He became a magician thanks only to his own hard work. Show some respect." The Sergeant's words left everyone dumbstruck.

To them meeting a magician of commoner origins was like finding a unicorn under a rainbow with a pot of gold in its mouth.

"Bring us back to the camp." Tepper ordered.

Lith attempted to open a Warp Steps, but the dimensional door quickly became unstable, shattering before it was fully formed.

"This is bad." Lith clicked his tongue. "Something like this has only happened to me once in the past. It means the orc shaman is preparing something big and powerful enough to upset the normal elemental balance."

'Solus, why didn't you warn me of the array?' Lith was surprised, it wasn't like her to make such a rookie mistake.

'There is no array.' She explained. 'Nor any significant disturbance in the world energy. Quite the contrary, the air is really quiet and the mana thin.'

'How thin?' Lith asked.

'Not much, but now that you mention it, there is something wrong.' Solus needed to focus her mana sense to the extreme to separate the world energy into the six elements that composed it.

'By my maker! This is exactly the opposite of what that wyvern did. There is no abundance of an element this time. The earth magic in the air is less than half of what it should be. I can see it being siphoned towards the orc encampment!'

"Do you mean you can't Warp us back?" Tepper inwardly cursed. Even if he called for reinforcements, it would take them too long to find the unit's actual position.

"I think I can, but it will take time and effort. I need you to watch my back." Lith said to his comrades, but he meant those words for Solus alone. She was still tired from the overuse of her mana sense, yet Solus reassured him and kept watch.

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<"now, my="" warriors!=""" receive="" the="" power="" of="" the="" earth="" god="" and="" become="" their="" avatars!"=""></"now,> Ragh'Ash had used Invigoration though the mana crystal as if it were a part of her own body.

With the combined effect of Invigoration and the natural ability of purple crystals to absorb the world energy, the shaman had collected an enormous amount of mana. Ragh'Ash had called upon earth magic in particular, to make her pawns invincible.

The world energy seeped into the warriors' mana cores, temporarily boosting them from the red level to the yellow one. Such unnatural status would have been their demise if not for the orcs' peculiar physiology.

Their bodies contained very few impurities, allowing them to grow strong enough to withstand the power of an Awakened core, even if only temporarily. The crystal was a key element in the process.

It was not only capable of storing the necessary world energy, but it also kept it pure. If Ragh'Ash had attempted to give them her mana, it would be like poison to them. Only in its purest form could world energy be absorbed without being rejected.

The earth elemental energy coursing through the warriors' bodies would double the effects of earth fusion, making them immune to lightning and resistant to all the other elements.

Yet, it came with a price. Only the strongest orcs could survive their cores being enhanced not once, but twice. Ragh'Ash could see energy cracks appearing on the skin of five out of the eight warriors she had blessed. They only had a few minutes left to live.

'The weak can only blame themselves.' Ragh'Ash thought. 'The demon's meat is too precious to be wasted on failures. Their death was only a matter of time.'

While the orcs charged towards the humans' position, the shaman and the chieftain followed them from a distance. Testa'Lhosh carried the holy crystal on his back, while the ground emitted a low rumble wherever Ragh'Ash stepped.

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"Orcs incoming!" Vipli screamed on the top of his lungs from the top of a tree.

Lith inwardly cursed while pushing his willpower to the limit to compensate for the lack of earth elemental energy with his own mana. Finally, the Warp Steps appeared, but instead of being static as usual, its edges spun like a buzz saw. They emitted sparks every time Lith sent new waves of mana to prevent it from collapsing.

One after the other, the cadets rushed through it until only Nhilo and the Sergeant were left.

"We can't leave Lith behind! They will kill him!" As the commanding officer, Nhilo felt it was her responsibility to remain behind with him.

"That's why I'll stay here." Tepper said while throwing her through the Gate. "There's no need for us all to die."

"Indeed!" Lith used spirit magic to push the Sergeant away before closing the Warp Steps. When Tepper's face hit the boot camp's ground, he wasn't angry. Quite the contrary, he was almost moved to the tears.

"That idiot! Together we had a chance, alone he is as good as dead. Shamans can prevent an opponent from flying. Without Warp Steps, he has no way out. I misjudged Lith. He preferred to die a hero rather than see one of us die."

He ran to the HQ to request immediate backup. With him as a guide, the mages would only need a few minutes to reach the orc encampment. He could only hope Lith would survive long enough for it to be a rescue mission instead of a revenge one.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the crumbled Gate, Lith was overjoyed. He was wearing his Skinwalker armor again. The Gatekeeper sword was firm in his hand while Invigoration gave Lith back his strength.

"With no witness messing with my plans, I can pretend to be a hero and get myself a purple crystal. Two birds with one stone."

Lith took flight, weaving several spells at once just to be safe. Two orcs leaped toward him while swinging their weapons, only to be chopped in half like fresh fruit. Lith's flight spell made him even faster than he was with fusion magic, whereas the orcs were sitting ducks while in mid air.

'Worst case scenario, I can rain spells from the skies until they are all dead or I can run away if the unexpected happens. Killing non flying opponents is child play.' Lith thought.

He readied his sword for the second wave of enemies while pouring air magic into it to enhance its edge.

Ragh'Ash saw Lith descending upon her warriors and acted accordingly. Her hand touched the holy crystal, depriving the environment of the air element and causing the flight spell to fail. Lith crashed in the middle of the orcs who immediately surrounded him.

#### Chapter 360 Fair Fight? Part 1

By watching the orc warriors' weapons coming down on the demon like they were the wrath of the heavens, Ragh'Ash could almost smell the sweet scent of Lith's blood in the air.

Which is why she was dumbfounded when a fireball exploded on the ground and sent the orcs surrounding Lith flying like leaves scattered by the autumn wind.

<"how is="" that="" possible?=""></"how> Ragh'Ash blurted out in her stupor.

The lack of air element prevented Lith from flying or casting powerful air spells, but there was more than enough to support a tier 0 gravity magic trick. Even the shockwave from a simple fireball was enough to buy him some space once his opponents had become weightless.

'I think we are in trouble.' Solus was worried. 'The lack of earth magic already prevented us from Blinking. Now even flight and lightning bolts are sealed. What if the shaman can seal the other elements too?'

'That's the bad news. The good news is the same applies to them.' Lith watched some orcs trying to produce air blades, yet all they managed to do was waste their mana.

'Their coordination is nonexistent. We'll see who runs out of tricks first.' Lith's hands moved so fast that for a second even the shaman only saw a blur. Then, a volley of fireballs and several ice spears darted toward the mana crystal.

Ragh'Ash attempted to raise a stone wall and failed.

'Gods below! What have I done? I must protect the holy crystal!' She thought. She didn't have the time to nullify two elements and even if she did, it would make her completely useless in combat.

The only thing she could do was to push Testa'Lhosh and the crystal away with spirit magic while shielding herself with the thickest ice wall she could produce in the little time she had left.

She succeeded in saving both the crystal and herself, but it came at a terrible price. Lith had timed the two spells so that the fireballs would hit first, shattering the ice protection he knew she would have employed, so that the ice spears would find a clear path to the enemy.

Ragh'Ash was alive, but barely. Chunks of her flesh were missing because of the explosions and several spears had struck her despite her raising walls one after another. She was already healing her wounds with Invigoration, but the aftereffects would leave her weakened nonetheless.

'What an idiot!' Lith inwardly laughed. 'Playing dirty is a game two can play. I want the crystal badly, but not if it costs me my life. By attacking it, I can force the orcs on the defensive.'

The orcs rushed Lith again. The demon's blasphemous act had pushed their rage to its peak, allowing their bloodlust to blind them. Exactly like Lith wanted. The orcs were a threat to his life only if they coordinated their efforts.

They attacked him as if they were alone, giving no consideration to their own companions' movements. Without tactics, the orcs were just an annoyance. Their crude weapons were nothing compared to Gatekeeper, their boosted cores granted them feeble abilities compared to Lith's bright cyan one when pushed to its limit.

Ragh'Ash's plan had only one flaw. Both she and Lith knew it, but only one of them could exploit it. Depriving the world energy of a specific element blocked the related spells, but it couldn't affect fusion magic.

Fusion magic didn't rely on external energy but on the elemental power its user naturally stored. Lith's air fusion could not only make him incredibly fast, but it was also channeled and amplified by the Gatekeeper's enchantment, boosting the sword's edge.

A single slash was what it took to cleave an orc asunder, along with the ax with which he had attempted to block. A single lunge would go clear through its intended victim and beyond, wounding those stupid enough to be near its exit point.

<"curse you,="" demon!=""></"curse> screamed in anguish as she ripped off the head of one of their youths to consume his flesh to regain her strength. The fight had barely started, yet the number of her warriors had halved and she was gravely injured.

Thanks to Invigoration, Ragh'Ash was able to instantly assimilate the food's nutrients and restore her strength. Testa'Lhosh immediately ran to her side. The chieftain was visibly worried for her.

Without the shaman, the tribe was as good as dead. The holy crystal would become a liability instead of a treasure. Testa'Lhosh's life depended on her.

<"the warriors="" will="" not="" last="" long="" without="" my="" help.=""></"the> Testa'Lhosh said while delicately leaving the crystal by her side.

<"do whatever="" you="" need,="" but="" try="" to="" keep="" me="" alive.="" you="" still="" need="" a="" man="" to="" have="" offspring.=""></"do> The chieftain didn't trust her more than he would a nest of vipers. His words were meant to remind the shaman that the survival of the Grey Wolf tribe needed at least two orcs.



He didn't miss how Ragh'Ash moved her gaze from him to the remaining three youths. There was still a male left, which meant she still had options. Inwardly cursing his bad luck, Testa'Lhosh unsheathed his greatsword and joined the fray.

Aside from the holy crystal, the chieftain's blade was the only treasure of the Grey Wolf tribe that had survived the war. It was an enchanted weapon that had fallen into the orcs' hands after its previous owner had fallen into their stomachs.

Ragh'Ash nodded. Her powers activated the crystal once again, passing all the remaining energy she had stored within it to the chieftain. His core immediately turned from bright yellow to bright cyan, which Solus promptly reported to Lith.

'For f\*ck's sake! I hate fair fights!' Lith inwardly cursed. Testa'Lhosh was at least 20 centimeters (8") taller than Lith and 30 kg heavier. Thanks to his Awakened like body, those 30 kg were all muscles.

Lith had no advantage against Testa'Lhosh, aside from his own equipment and training. In terms of sheer physical strength, the chieftain was like an adult fighting a prepubescent teen.

'How long until the balance is restored?' Lith hated forcing Solus to consume her remaining mana, but he had no choice. Only when all of Lith's skills were online again he could safely terminate the orc tribe.

'Earth is back to normal already. Air should support spells up to tier two.' Solus replied. She was already so weakened that only her natural senses remained. Solus decided to save the remainder of her mana for an emergency, just to be safe.

She could have used Invigoration, but unlike Lith's, it required more time and was dependant on her companion's status. Using it would not only leave her completely helpless for a while, but could also destabilize Lith's mana flow.

Solus couldn't stand by idly either, so she moved from Lith's mouth to his right hand and turned into her glove form. That way he could at least use her as a shield if the need arose.

The greatsword gave Testa'Lhosh the superior range, forcing Lith on the defensive. Their fusion magic was on par, so it was like neither was employing it. The chieftain was faster, stronger, and to make things worse he shouted orders that made the remaining orcs regain their sanity.

Ragh'Ash was now back on her feet, using the crystal to infuse one of the young female orcs until the youth screamed in agony. The shaman didn't trust the chieftain more than he trusted her.

Ragh'Ash wanted to win, no matter the cost.