

Supreme M 361

Chapter 361 Fair Fight? Part 2

Meanwhile, the four remaining orcs surrounded Lith, threatening him with their weapons from every side. Their duty was to restrict the enemy's movements and create openings for the chieftain.

'Five against five. Once again, I hate fair fights!' Lith thought while unleashing his Death Call spell. Four tentacles made of darkness magic came out from his body, targeting the orcs like sharks following blood in water.

The warriors stood their ground, clubbing and slashing at the tendrils only to see their weapons getting covered in cracks. Darkness magic wasn't tangible, but its hunger was real. To not get eaten, the four orcs were forced to step back whenever Lith came too close to them while dodging the chieftain's blade.

Before the boot camp, Lith would have had a hard time against an opponent such as Testa'Lhosh. It still wasn't an easy fight, but the skill gap made it manageable. While the chieftain put all of his might behind each strike, Lith used his blade to deflect the opponent's by using the least amount of strength possible.

Between Death Call and Lith avoiding their mighty chieftain's blows by a thread, the orcs truly believed they were facing a demon. One of them had been grazed by the tentacles multiple times. The contact had sapped her strength and hastened her body's decay.

The female orc's skin was full of cracks, she knew her death would come in a matter of seconds. In her mind, the orc thought the demon was to blame. She had no idea it was all her shaman's doing. The warrior threw herself against Lith, disregarding what little life she had left.

The tentacles drained her life force and defused the explosion at the same time, but they weren't fast enough to prevent her from crashing against Lith and sending him towards the Chieftan's oncoming blade.

Cursing at his bad luck, Lith could only attempt a parry and watch it fail. Testa'Lhosh's blade clashed with the Gatekeeper, moving it aside. The lunge had enough power left to pierce the Skinwalker armor and penetrate into Lith's flesh while breaking his collarbone.

Lith would have fainted from the shock if he had not cut off his pain receptors at the last second. His left arm was now limp, blood came out profusely from his shoulder. The only silver lining was that the energy robbed from the dying orc was already mending the wound.

The problem was living long enough for it to matter.

Testa'Lhosh fearlessly pressed forward.

'The demon is doomed.' The chieftain thought. 'With only one hand and the blood loss sapping his strength, he can't avoid my blade anymore.'

<"follow your="" sister's="" example!=""" use="" the="" power="" of="" the="" gods="" to="" slay="" the="" demon!"=""></"follow> Testa'Lhosh yelled. Three orcs meant three more free slashes, which equaled one dead demon. Easy math.

Lith had no idea what the orc had just yelled, but when Solus warned him about another enemy doing a suicidal rush from behind his back, their plan became evident. Lith knew what to do, but he couldn't afford to turn around, so he let Solus take the wheel.

The moment before the orc was about to strike, a stone wall emerged from the ground, stopping the enemy and his weapon at once. The orc had no time to be surprised by Solus's timely use of the earth wand with spirit magic.

The ethereal tentacles passed through a wall and seeped into his flesh, renewing Lith's strength at the expenses of the orc's life force.

<"for the="" grey="" wolf!=""=""></"for> Ragh'Ash yelled at the youth. The little girls screamed in agony and frenzy, the only thing she could think of was making the pain stop. She rushed toward Lith with the speed of a bullet.

The mana ravaging her body also gave her superhuman abilities. Lith and Testa'Lhosh cursed at the shaman in unison. Neither wanted to die. Whereas Testa'Lhosh saw only a death threat, Lith saw an opportunity instead.

Lith grabbed the stone wall Solus had erected and used gravity magic to turn Testa'Lhosh into the new center of gravity. The orc girl's feet leaped from the ground with great strength, almost making her fly but also leaving her exposed to gravity magic's effects.

She found herself falling towards the chieftain while Solus erected a second wall right in front of Lith. It was meant to be used as a foothold and a shield at the same time.

Testa'Lhosh had no idea what was happening, so he dodged the incoming bomb over and over, hoping to get rid of it. Yet the poor girl followed him like a curse.

Realizing he was doomed, the chieftain grabbed the girl and rushed between the two stone walls, to make sure that Lith would die along with him. Much to Testa'Lhosh dismay, when he got there, Lith was nowhere to be found.

In his place, there was what looked like an acorn the size of a fist. It was covered in runes of power which blinked faster by the second. Lith had Solus conjure one stone wall after the other and used them as footsteps to escape gravity magic's short-range and get to safety.

He had also left a Fire Root as a goodbye gift. The combined explosion of the girl and the Fire Root turned the stone walls into debris that flew in every direction like deadly bullets.

Once again Ragh'Ash had to prevent the crystal from being destroyed. This time she could at least conjure a great stone wall to protect the holy crystal and what little was left of the tribe.

Ragh'Ash immediately used Life Vision to find Lith.

'He's not on the ground nor in the air. Where the heck is he?' She thought.

The shaman used the power of the holy crystal to sweep the whole area, discovering that Lith was quite far from her position and was getting further by the second.

<"how dares="" he="" to="" run="" away?=""=""></"how> Ragh'Ash felt she was going crazy. The two remaining orc warriors had fled the moment they saw the living bomb converge to their position. They both considered a cowardly escape much better than a heroic death.

Ragh'Ash had no way to communicate with them and even if she did, the shaman doubted they would listen to her anymore. All that was left of the Grey Wolf were her and the two kids.

'What a cowardly, sly creature.' Ragh'Ash thought. 'I can't follow the demon. The children are too weak to carry the crystal, even if I bless them a little. If I carry it myself, I'd be a sitting duck. At least I'm safe now.'

Yet actually she wasn't. Lith hadn't run away, he had seen the shaman eating and meant to even the field.

'Why would I rush in against an unknown opponent with a wounded body and my mana depleted when I can take a break?' He thought while eating some meat from his pocket dimension.

'I'll wait for the world energy to stabilize again, so I can have full access to my spells. How are you, Solus?'

'Much better, thanks. I think retreating was the right move. All that spellcasting and fighting had left you drained. How is your shoulder?'

'Perfectly healed. I'll use Invigoration to get back to my peak form before going in for the kill.' Lith replied. He had no idea what the shaman could do with her crystal, but he was certain Ragh'Ash would rather detonate it than leave it in his hands.

Lith used that time to sort through his Alchemic weapons. Even if Ragh'Ash siphoned elemental energy again, he could still use them, since the spells they contained were already formed. The problem was that unlike his own incantations, alchemical weapons could hurt their user.

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'I don't like this situation.' Lith thought.

'The shaman seems to always know where I am. She caught us unprepared twice, so it's likely that if I stand for too long in the same place, she may attack us from a distance.'

'Agreed.' Solus replied. She had regained about half of her strength, but they couldn't afford to wait much longer. If the Sergeant returned with the reinforcements the crystal would be lost.

'We need to aim for a quick exchange. We have to get there fast, before she can siphon any element so that we can Blink in for the kill.'

Lith nodded. That kind of approach was outside his comfort zone, but there weren't many options left. He took off, flying at full speed towards the location where he had killed most of the members of the Grey Wolf tribe.

Ragh'Ash hadn't gotten far. Moving the holy crystal was a delicate job. She couldn't fly with it. If anything happened and the spell was broken, the holy crystal would be lost. She just made it float a few centimeters from the ground, pushing it while she walked back towards the camp.

The silver lining was that thanks to the constant contact, she could sweep her surroundings from time to time to check on Lith's whereabouts. As soon as Ragh'Ash noticed him getting closer, she knew only one of them would come out alive from their next meeting.

<"go back="" to="" the="" village="" and="" hide!="" if="" i="" don't="" return="" within="" a="" few="" minutes,="" run="" away="" and="" never="" turn="" back!=""=""></"go> Ragh'Ash

ordered. The youths never thought, even for a second, that the shaman was doing that to protect them.

Her only purpose was to protect the last members of the tribe, who were too weak to be of any use in actual combat. Ragh'Ash had seen how Lith had turned her own living bomb against her orc warriors. It was a mistake she couldn't afford to repeat.

She watched the two youths disappearing in the woods as she pondered about her strategy. Ragh'Ash wasn't used to fight alone, without any warrior providing her assistance.

'The demons' magic is unpredictable.' She thought. 'My only option is to overpower them quickly with the help of the holy crystal. If only that stupid beast helped us earlier, I wouldn't be in dire straits now. What kind of pet doesn't protect its owner?'

The earth trembled below her feet. It was the only sign that the creature was still following her. Ragh'Ash called it her pet, but its motives were still a mystery. It had helped her to survive many times, yet its timing was always unreliable at best.

Ragh'Ash placed her hands on the crystal, channeling air magic through it to conjure a huge storm cloud above her position. Monsters' mastery of magic was shallow. Due to their Fallen nature, they would seldom be able to research complex spells and would even more rarely pass them down.

In a 'might makes right' society, sharing knowledge or power was like digging your own grave. That limited the shaman's knowledge to the first three tiers of spells. Thanks to the holy crystal though, Ragh'Ash could replicate tier four spells' effect or at least equal their destructive power.

As soon as Lith spotted the shaman with Life Magic, he also noticed a pillar of mana going from the ground to the sky. The storm cloud was pitch black and covered a radius of 100 meters around the shaman's position already.

'She's stealing my thunder, literally!' Lith thought. He was actually scared by how fast Ragh'Ash had summoned such a huge thundercloud. It was something he was still unable to do.

'I wouldn't worry about that.' Solus chimed in. 'There is something wrong with the ground below her feet. I thought the lack of earth element in the world energy was confusing my perception, but even now that the balance is restored the anomaly is still there.'

'What kind of anomaly?' Lith's paranoia sense was tingling. Life Vision showed him nothing but trees, grass, the shaman, and the crystal. Yet he didn't doubt Solus's words for an instant. He knew here senses were far better than his own.

'It's a blur, so I can't tell you what it is nor how strong it is, but there's something moving there. It could be some kind of spell, a creature, anything. Just be vigilant, okay?'

Lith mentally nodded as he charged the Gatekeeper with all elements but light magic. As soon as Ragh'Ash's eyes met Lith's, she unleashed a natural lightning so big that its flash turned the whole world white for a second, almost blinding her.

Lith was able to react in time only because he had done the same thing in the past. The moment he saw a pulse of Ragh'Ash's mana reaching for the thundercloud, he Blinked behind her back, aiming for her head.

Lith's timing had been impeccable, the precision of his lunge surgical. Yet instead of relieving the shaman's neck from the burden of its head, Lith was sent flying before he could even understand what was happening.

Something big and black had jumped out of the ground, as nimble as a shark after a seal. Solus had no way to describe it if not as a worm, but it was a worm like she had never seen before.

Its skin wasn't pink nor soft. The creature looked like made of obsidian, with several bumps and deformities all around its body like a lazy artist had given up the job halfway through.

The worm was as big as a bull and about 4 meters (13') long. Its gaping mouth was big enough to easily swallow an adult man whole. Solus could see it had multiple series of jagged teeth which somehow were rotating at high speed like a buzz saw.

It had been the impact between the teeth and the Gatekeeper to thwart Lith's death blow. When the clash happened, the enchanted blade managed to resist the teeth's destructive force, but it couldn't escape their grasp.

The centrifugal force had spun Lith and the blade as if for a split second they had been trapped inside a washing machine, before all the accumulated magic in the Gatekeeper had forced the creature to release its prey.

Between the impact and the spinning, Lith's vision was a blur. Yet the black worm wasn't faring much better. It writhed on the ground like a beached fish, spitting blood and teeth before reaching again for the safety of the earth.

'What the heck was that?' Lith and Ragh'Ash's thought in unison. Whereas Lith was wondering why the magical beast had interfered, Ragh'Ash's was shocked by dimensional magic.

Both the magicians recovered quickly from the surprise, moving on to their own plan B. Lith Blinked away, not giving the shaman the time to aim at him with a second lightning while Ragh'Ash's embraced the crystal starting to chant a second spell.

Lith threw against her several Fire Roots, to force her to interrupt her casting and focus on defending the crystal. Yet the moment the Alchemical tools touched the ground, small holes opened below them making them disappear.

When they exploded a few seconds later, they were already gone so deep that the explosion was completely muffled by the ground, sounding more like farts. Everything happened so fast that Ragh'Ash didn't even have the time to notice the threat.

Chapter 363 Unexpected Helper Part 2

'Seriously, what the f*ck is that?' Lith inwardly cursed at the worm. 'There is no mention of such a creature in all the bestiaries I own. It doesn't seem an Evolved Monster but it's not dumb either. How strong is its core?'

'Unknown. I can't see the mana core just like I can't see its life force. I can barely pinpoint its location by following the anomaly it creates in my mana sense. Either that creature has special abilities or that black stuff covering its body it's not skin but a jamming device.' Solus replied.

'This means I'm not just facing a shaman, but also another unknown enemy. There's no way someone that can't even use dimensional magic has tamed or equipped the worm.' Lith was seriously considering to give up on the crystal.

Whoever had the talent and the means to shield something from Solus's senses had to be at least as good as her maker. Even if he managed to slay the beast, its owner wasn't an opponent he could take lightly.

Ragh'Ash completed her chant opening a channel between her and the crystal. Now she could not only access to all of its powers without the need of the physical contact, but also could use the crystal's energy like it was her own.

It was a desperate move for desperate times. The longer the channel was open, the more likely Ragh'Ash was to die from mana overload. Until then, she would have access to an almost infinite supply of mana.

The first thing she did, was to wrap the holy crystal with the strongest materials the ground had to offer. That way she could completely disregard its safety and focus on the demon.

'Incoming from your 4!' Solus warned Lith, who darted upwards just in time to avoid the worm's charge. It moved so fast, causing only such small trembling in the ground's mouth that without her warning Lith would have never noticed it.

The worm's mouth was wide open, which allowed Solus's spirit magic to feed it a generous serving of Fire Roots, Black Lotus' petals, broken lightning wands, and a sprinkle of green pepper.

As someone who had studied Alchemy during the last four years, she knew exactly what kind of ingredients were never to be mixed. Unless, of course, one wanted to trigger an uncontrollable chain reaction that resulted in the death of anyone in a ten meters (33') radius.

The first explosion made the worm squirm in mid air, messing with its landing. It hit the ground with the same grace of a wet sock before starting to dance around like a firecracker. Smoke, blood, and teeth came out non stop as the explosions grew in frequency and power.

Lith had barely the time to grin at his partner's brilliance when Ragh'Ash raised her hand and unleashed a barrage of spells like Lith had never witnessed before.

The ground below him shot rock spikes as big as an arm, the air surrounding him became so cold that frost formed over Lith's clothes as a hail of fireballs and a lightning storm struck in every direction leaving him no way out.

The shaman's glowing eyes meant she too was using Life Vision. He couldn't Blink recklessly, if Ragh'Ash understood how to predict his exit points Lith's dimensional magic would become useless.

When Lith disappeared from her sight, Ragh'Ash turned around, expecting him being right behind her. She had no idea the spell had a limited range, so she assumed the worst and reacted accordingly. Yet Lith wasn't there.

He was nowhere to be found to be precise.

Since the worm's stone hide hid it so well from Life Vision and mana sense, Lith had Blinked behind it to use it as his cover. The worm was still writhing as it coughed smoke and blood, yet the creature refused to die.

The final explosion was strong enough to crack its shell, but not even that seemed to be able to put it down. The worm emitted high pitched noises that gave Lith the creeps. They sounded too similar to the cries of a newborn.

<"there you="" are!"=""></"there> Ragh'Ash yelled when the crystal revealed to her the demon's position. She didn't care for the worm, resuming the assault while calling forth another lightning from the sky at the same time.

'How can she have so much mana?' Lith inwardly cursed before Blinking away.

'The cold is so intense that if not for my natural resistance and the Skinwalker armor I would be already hallucinating.'

'It's the crystal.' Solus explained while keeping an eye on the worm. 'It's like she has a cyan and a purple core. The good news is that her body is already collapsing from the exertion. The bad news is that, at this rate, you will die before her, so please do something!'

Each Blink brought Lith higher until the rock spikes couldn't threaten him anymore. His survival took priority compared to giving away how Blink worked. Luckily, he had mastered true dimensional magic, so Lith could Blink while weaving another spell.

Ragh'Ash aimed the natural lightning for Lith's exit point, timing the spell so that he wouldn't have the time for another Blink. It was the flash accompanying the thunderbolt that revealed her the truth.

Its light was reflected on a throwing dagger near her feet. It wasn't an enchanted weapon, so not even Life Vision could detect it. She didn't have the time to wonder how long it had been there that her world turned upside down.

Lith was exactly where she had predicted, but the lightning wasn't. It was about to hit her instead. After each Blink, Lith had negatively charged himself to repel the incoming lightning and positively charged his set of throwing daggers while Solus spread them in a diagonal line with spirit magic.

Only a small part of the thunderbolt struck him, but thanks to earth fusion Lith managed to escape from the clutches of death. All the remaining energy followed the path of least resistance Lith had created, aiming for that last dagger Ragh'Ash had just noticed.

'Physics rocks!' Lith thought as he fell to the ground.

Fear froze the shaman to the point she couldn't even close her eyes. Yet much to both magicians' surprise, she survived. The worm that they had left for dead came out of the ground in front of her and shielded Ragh'Ash with its body.

Not even the black armor could resist the power of nature. The cracks caused by Solus's Alchemical cocktail expanded until it was destroyed, revealing the creature inside.

It was a Rock Worm, a magical beast pretty common inside underground dungeons.

'What the heck is it doing here and why did it save the shaman?' Lith inwardly cursed at the beast.

Ragh'Ash didn't have the time to rejoice. Her body was very close to collapse and for some reason, her strongest weapon had been turned against her. To make things worse, her pet had fallen too.

She had no choice but to use her last trump card. Every time a shaman used the holy crystal, their bond became stronger. The crystal gave them mana and they gave it bits of their life in return.

An expert shaman could feel those bits and use them to access the memories of the past shamans. It wasn't even a spell, it was simply another kind of exchange, a bit of life of a bit of the past lives of others.

Ragh'Ash could only hope that one of her ancestors knew a spell capable of killing the demon and that accessing it wouldn't cost her sanity.

Chapter 364 The Master Part 1

Ragh'Ash's mind delved inside the crystal, only to find her own dreams and ambitions. Then, she went deeper, finding more and more shards of light representing the memories of others. She ignored those which belonged to her mentor.

Ragh'Ash's teacher wasn't even a real shaman, she had been so weak that Ragh'Ash killed her as soon as she came of age. Most of the lives she explored were equally insignificant.

'May the gods below eat their useless souls! How long has it been since there was a shaman rather than a crystal bearer?' Ragh'Ash thought. In her desperation, she had forgotten that shamans were rare.

What she was attempting required time, but that was something she didn't have.

Lith was sick and tired of this fight. The moment Ragh'Ash stopped her movements, he cast one of the tier five Battle Mage spells he had mastered with true magic.

'As long as she has that damned crystal, she has the mana core advantage. Yet despite her use of very powerful incantations, they were all low tier ones. If I can't beat her with quantity, I'll go with quality.'

Lith had prepared Burial Ground from the moment he noticed the thundercloud. Burial Ground was a versatile spell that could be used for both offense and defense. The reason he had yet to employ it was Ragh'Ash's ability to neutralize the elements.

Powerful spells were very delicate, the slightest imbalance in the world energy would render them little more than a waste of mana. Luckily, the shaman spaced out long enough for the spell to take form and make the crystal's siphoning ability useless.

Several pillars erupted from the ground at once, surrounding the orc. Each one of them kept growing in height, while countless stone spikes emerged from the pillars and extended in every direction. Some attempted to stab the shaman, while others connected with other spikes, forming new pillars that generated even more spikes.

Thanks to Life Vision, Ragh'Ash could see that the spell was a hybrid of earth and darkness magic. The stone pillars were a conduit for the dark energies, so even standing close to them was enough to sap her life force.

'Damn demon! I found the spell I needed only to not have the opportunity to use it.' Ragh'Ash thought. She had no time to focus on elaborate spells, the cage was getting smaller by second. Dodging the ever increasing number of spikes required her full focus.

She released a barrage of low level spells to make Burial Grounds crumble, but the darkness magic also acted as a shield, weakening her spells before they even hit. The cage repaired itself almost as soon as it was damaged.

The only thing that could counter a high tier spell was another high tier spell. Ragh'Ash's body was soon pierced by the spikes, that kept growing and ravaging her internal organs.

In a last ditch effort, she tried to make the crystal detonate, but it was too late. The exertion from using spells non stop had taken its toll. Even though her mind was still alive her body refused to obey. Her mana stopped flowing, her mana core had already started turning grey.

Her will extended no further than her thoughts while the cage shrank until all that remained of the orc shaman was mincemeat. As soon as Ragh'Ash died, Lith changed into his army uniform and stored the crystal inside Solus's pocket dimension along with the pieces of the Rock Worm's black armor.

Lith knew it was just a matter of time before someone arrived, he was preparing for the final act of his masquerade. He only kept the Gatekeeper outside, since unlike the clothes, he could make it disappear without anyone noticing.

"Don't play dumb with me." Lith said waking up the Rock Worm that was still unconscious after being hit by the lightning.

"If you were a human, I would have already killed you, but since you are a magical beast, I'll give you a chance. I know you can speak. Tell me what you're doing here and why you tried to kill me."

"If I do as you say, will you let me go?" The Worm asked.

"If you don't, I'll kill you right now." Lith replied.

'Solus, how strong is this thing?'

'Pretty strong for a magical beast. Its core is cyan, but what's more interesting is that it also has a dormant black core.' Solus warned Lith.

'Just like the Wyvern we faced at Xenatos.' Without the black armor, she was able to use her mana sense again. Her findings shocked her and sent a shiver down Lith's spine.

He immediately used air magic to make the beast float, afraid it could suck the life force of the plants to heal itself with its black core.

"I'm here for the crystal. My Master sent me to retrieve it." The Worm replied hoping to buy enough time to find a chance to escape.

"Otherwise I wouldn't have wasted my time with filthy orcs nor would I have saved that incompetent shaman time and time again."

"Your words make no sense". Lith replied. "Why didn't you just steal the crystal from the beginning if your aim was just to take possession of it?"

"Each of the Fallen races has a unique trait. The orcs have the ability to manipulate mana crystals as no one else can."

"Fallen races?" Lith asked. It was the first time he had heard such a term.

"Fallen races, monsters, lost children of Mogar. Different names for the same thing. Failures." The beast explained with a hint of rage in its voice.

"My Master has long researched for a way to imitate their talent to no avail. Even interrogating shamans proved to be useless. Their superstitions are so strong that it makes them immune to any kind of torture.

"So, after several failures, the Master decided to change his approach. First, I found a tribe with a shaman and a powerful crystal. Then, I followed the crystal and applied a marking spell to it.

"Every time the shaman used its power, the marking spell would leave behind a trace for the Master to follow. At that point, all that was left to do was to force the shaman to use all of her abilities before retrieving the crystal.

"It took me several years to trigger enough tribal wars to collect the data I needed, yet I never managed to force the shaman to use her most powerful abilities. At least until now."

"The Soul Exchange that Ragh'Ash used was the last piece of the puzzle, something only a skilled Awakened orc can use. I can't believe that after all my efforts to groom her and assure her survival, it was her idiocy that doomed us both."

The Master had given the Worm the black armor to make it impervious to magic and almost untraceable.

Almost.

The Master had no idea something like mana sense existed, nor that his minion would suffer so much damage that not even its black core could heal it quickly enough for it to matter.

"Who is this master?" Lith asked.

The Rock Worm wasn't a zealot. The Master had proved incapable of making it evolve and refused to turn it into an Abomination because it was still too weak. The creature owed nothing to their cause.

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'If I tell the Awakened the truth, that the Master is just a human, he'll have no reason to spare me. I have to bluff my way out.' The creature thought.

"The Master is a powerful undead. They are watching us even now! Kill me and they'll send their legions to avenge my death."

'Solus?' Lith asked.

'Nothing.' She replied after a deep scan with all her senses. She even analyzed the single elements composing the world energy which gave her a terrible headache.

'No trace of spells or even of other anomalies in the area. I can faintly see someone incoming though. I don't know the others, but one of them is Tepper.'

Lith pierced the Worm with the Gatekeeper, infusing it with enough darkness magic to turn it into dust.

'Why did you kill it? It could have still talked.' Solus asked.

'It would have just fed us more lies and we have no more time.'

The Sergeant and several mages arrived a minute later and circled around the area looking at the traces of the battle. Before joining them, Lith Warped Solus under his bed, just to be safe.

He had no idea if they would believe him, nor what tools the army had at its disposal to search him for dimensional items.

They were all surprised to see Lith in one piece and when he reported that the crystal was gone, their worries turned into suspicion. Lith told them most of the truth.

He only belittled his wounds, which Solus had replicated on the uniform before leaving, and explained how after the shaman's defeat, the Worm had swallowed the crystal before disappearing underground.

"Do you have any proof of your claim?" An elder mage asked him with a stone cold voice.

"I only have some pieces of its armor. They fell off when I tried to stop it with a barrage of spells." Lith handed them a black stone that left the mages stunned.

"This is Darwen!" One of them exclaimed. "It's a rare material capable of nullifying most detection arrays and resisting magic. How much did you get?"

"Not much. Just the pieces inside my ring." The rest was inside the pocket dimension, but judging by their smiling faces it was still quite a catch.

'Damn! I should have kept more.' Lith inwardly cursed at himself. 'The silver lining is that they will be more inclined to believe me now.'

The elder mage took Lith's ring as he stared in his eyes.

"Young man, this ring is an army property. We can break your imprint and check its content anytime. Do you realize that both the crystal and the Darwen you found both belong to the Kingdom? That you, as a Cadet, are one of its servants?"

Lith nodded.

"If we find you in possession of stolen items, you'll be charged with treason. Are you sure you don't want to amend your story?"

Lith nodded again.

"This is preposterous!" Tepper objected. "He risked his life for the unit. Without him, my Cadets and I would be dead. The Kingdom would have lost good soldiers, the crystal, and the Darwen. How can you doubt his word?"

The elder mage sighed.

'Commander Berion is right. The Sergeant is a naïve idiot and the Cadet can't be trusted.'

"Greed blinds even the best of us. Especially mages." The elder replied before casting a diagnostic spell that examined the content of Lith's body, with particular care for his mouth, stomach, and anus. They were the places where thieves hid their dimensional items.

After that, he chanted a short spell that broke Lith's connection to the dimensional ring and examined its contents. As the Cadet had stated, there were only the corpses of a few orcs and some Darwen pieces.

Sergeant Tepper looked at the elder with a fiery gaze as the mage's cheeks turned red from embarrassment.

"I'm sorry for doubting your word, Cadet Lith, but I had to be sure."

"No harm, no foul." Lith replied.

'My paranoia is once again the MVP.' He inwardly sighed in relief.

After they returned to the camp, Lith was stripped and searched again with the diagnostic spell. Only after interrogating him for an hour did they finally let him go. He never contradicted himself, because most of what he said was true.

When he returned to the barracks, the other cadets gave him the salute before extending their hands.

'Why do people only like me after I kill a lot of bad guys?' Lith thought.

'Because that's the only moment when it seems like you care for them .' Solus sarcastically replied after reuniting with him.

"How did you kill so many orcs?"

"How did you defeat the shaman?"

Were just some of the questions he had to reply to over and over for the rest of the day as the story of his battle become public knowledge. From the next day, his life returned to normal.

Until the end of the boot camp, he managed to outperform his peers without engendering any more ill will.

Him being a mage was a secret, so of course soon everyone knew about it. It made him pretty popular, especially with the female cadets, but not for the reason he hoped for.

The greatest deterrent against relationships in a boot camp were pregnancy and the lack of contraceptive potions. A mage was an obvious solution to the problem. At the end of every day, Lith would find a line of people asking for his help.

'I feel like a condom machine. All the work and none of the fun.' He thought multiple times, yet he never refused. It was a small price to pay to be universally appreciated.

Before the graduation ceremony, every cadet received two days of leave to reconnect with their families before being moved according to their career choices, if they had one, of course.

When Lith returned home, his family welcomed him like he was returning from war rather than from the camp. They weren't used to not seeing him for such a long period of time. Lith spent every day and evening with his relatives, especially with his little brother and his niece.

In those six months they had grown a lot and he felt he had lost so much. During the nights, he worked on a mana crystal and studied the Darwen he had recently acquired.

'Just like darkness energy is entropy and destruction, light magic is life and order. It allows giving shape even to what is shapeless.' Lith thought while creating small holograms of the monsters he had faced while telling fairy tales to the kids.

Sometimes he even projected for his family some of the animated movies he still remembered from Earth. He made up the voices with air magic. The holograms were all in shades of grey, the background was non-existent yet every time they had guests, they would always ask for an encore.

Chapter 366 Career Change Part 1

Two nights weren't enough for a complete study of Lith's spoils of war, but they were more than enough for a preliminary analysis.

"If the violet crystal has something special, I'm not able to notice it." Lith said while storing it inside his tower.

"Guess both the Sergeant and the Rock Worm were right. The gemstone per se is just like any other, it's the orcs who have the talent to use it in odd ways. This leaves us with a dilemma.

"Even though Invigoration couldn't help me uncovering the crystal's secrets, it allowed me to sense the marking liquid this so called 'Master' applied to the crystal. This means I have to choose if to cut the magic gemstone into smaller parts and use it for my creations, or to keep it as it is to learn about the orc's way with the crystals.

"The two things are mutually exclusive. If I cut the gemstone, I'll also destroy the markings in the process."

"I don't think it's much of a dilemma." Solus replied. "Even if you manage to successfully cut the crystal, there's nothing we can use it for. Violet magic crystals are too rare to waste them on trivial enchanted items. It has to be a masterpiece.

"Even if we had the materials to make one, going public with a new weapon empowered by violet crystals right after the orc accident would be like putting a target on your chest, back, and nether regions.

"We have to let things calm down before doing anything. So, until we really need it to craft an artifact, let's keep it as it is."

"Agreed." Lith nodded with a sigh, adding the violet crystal to his collection of precious but still useless things. It consisted of the dryad's gifts, the various corpses he collected over the years, and the weapons he robbed from his opponents.

"I wish this was a video game. A timely chain quest would pop up and give me what I need the moment I need it."

The Darwen had proven to be a nasty client. To shield its user from detection techniques, it required to cover them entirely. It was very hard, but also brittle, making it easy to crack.

That was the reason why the shell protecting the Rock Worm was so rough. A more precise refining process would most likely cause it to shatter. It would also require a very powerful magic. Being the Darwen resistant to magic, even analyzing it had been a hassle.

"The best use I can find for it is to turn Darwen into fine dust and then coat some kind of ninja suit with it. I could save it for stealth missions since it's useless in battle. If only I could enchant it to improve its performances..."

"Not even the 'Master' could, so I think it's better to bide our time and not waste the Darwen on a pet project either." Solus really wanted to cheer him up, but didn't know what to say.

Even though he could now return home more often, leaving his family again made Lith sad. During his past life, the only thing he had ever wanted was to be a good brother to Carl and a good uncle to his brother's children.

Now he finally had the opportunity to live his dream, yet he had to leave it behind to pursue his new goals.

'If I take a break now, I'll no longer be the Kingdom's golden boy.' He thought.

'Now it's my best chance to access all the libraries and databases that back when I was just a commoner were forbidden to me. With the Association backing me and a badge from the army, there shouldn't be much outside my grasp.'

Lith Warped back inside his room. Aran and Leria were waiting for him right behind his door, knocking on it with their little hands.

"What are you doing up this early?" Lith asked them while pinching his nose to keep a headache at bay. All that noise was making him cranky. Mostly because he hadn't slept in a week plus studying the Darwen had required multiple uses of Invigoration in a row.

"Are you really leaving today, uncle Lith?" Leria asked staring at him with her big, puppy, chestnut eyes.

"Yes, right after breakfast." It was already the morning of the third day, he was expected to get back before lunchtime, which still left him a few hours. A wave of Lith's hand made plates and cutlery float on the table while steaming hot food came out of his pocket dimension.

The whole family was reunited for his return, even Tista had interrupted her travels to meet her big brother.

"Can't you stay here one more day? Pretty please?" How Aran had managed to have blue eyes was a mystery to Lith. Both the kids were beautiful and healthy. They would rarely get sick. Lith wondered if it depended on their parents having received his special treatment.

Leria had blonde hair with shades of black, just like her mother Rena, while Aran had the family trademark dark brown hair. They were both so small Lith could easily keep them on his lap at the same time.

"No, I can't. I'm really sorry." Lith replied. He then snapped his fingers, producing with air magic a jingling sound to alert the rest of the family that the meal was ready.

"I'll return as soon as I can. In the meantime, I've prepared a present for you." Lith gave them what looked like a Rememberer each. It was an egg shaped recording device, used to capture important moments in the lives of those rich enough to afford them.

The ones Lith had forgedmastered, instead of projecting real events, were able to replay the kids' favorite fairy tale. Aran's was the adventure of Forgemaster Lith Jones and the last crucible. Leria preferred the story of Battle Mage Solus Van Helsing, the kick ass vampire slayer.

"You should have given them the Projector just before your departure." Rena scolded him. "The food will become cold before they get tired of it."

"It's unlikely." Lith shrugged. "The magic crystal I used only allows for one use every few hours. It will teach them moderation."

The children's happiness was as big as their disappointment when the Projector finished its tale and refused to play it again. After the breakfast ended, Lith hugged every member of his family before taking his leave.

"Take care, little brother." Rena said. "Always remember that no matter how many bad things you'll see out there, this house will always be the place you belong to. If you ever need our support, you'll find us here."

"Do whatever you need to return home safe." Raaz whispered in Lith's ear. "Your mother can't bear to lose another son."

Lith didn't understand his father's words until Elina asked him to bend down to caress his face.

"I know it's stupid of me after all these years, but if you ever meet Trion, tell him to come home. I just need to know he is all right." Her voice was almost broken.

'Is she really afraid that I'll disappear too?' The pain in Elina's words shocked Lith.

The moment he left home, his communication device appeared in his hand and Lith started to call in some favors. He arrived at the boot camp early, with plenty of time left to change into his uniform and make final preparations.

Chapter 367 Career Change Part 2

When the mail arrived, everyone rushed to open their own envelope to discover their final scores. Most rejoiced, but some cried in despair. Among the girls, only Nhilo had been evaluated fit to become a soldier.

The other two and Liwell were forced to choose between becoming members of the administrative department or return to their civilian life. The rest of the unit had received a passing grade. Vipli and Nhilo were the only ones promoted to Non Commissioned Officers.

Nobody was surprised when Lith's grade was confirmed to be an M. What unsettled him was that, while for the others it was required to report to Sergeant Tepper, Lith had been summoned to Commander Berion's office.

Aside from his score, the letter didn't report any further detail.

"Don't worry, I'm sure there's a good reason for this." Vipli tried to reassure Lith. "It would make no sense making me an NCO and keeping you as a Private."

"Thanks. I hope you are right." Lith patted Vipli's shoulder before going to the Commander's Office.

'If I have to spend a year and a half starting from scratch, I might as well quit and they know it.' Lith thought.

'What could have gone wrong? Did I fail the psychological evaluation? Either that or I'm being punished for the crystal's disappearance. I can't think of any other reason to kick me out with such an underhanded ruse.'

Lith's paranoia once again took the wheel, painting himself into a corner before he could even reach Berion's door.

"Welcome, Mage Verhen. I didn't expect you so soon." The Commander's polite manners didn't surprise Lith.

'If he knows my family name, then he probably wants to avoid me making a scene.' He thought.

Commander Berion was a man in his early thirties. He was almost as tall as Lith, standing 1.8 (5'11") meters tall with pitch black hair and eyes. His pale blue uniform could barely contain his muscular body, giving each of his movements an impression of strength.

Lith gave him a salute, which the Commander returned before inviting him to sit down.

"Let's get straight to the point, Mage Verhen." Lith didn't like the Commander's flat tone, nor the fact Berion kept referring to him as a civilian mage.

"You are an outstanding individual. Alas, you are far from perfect. Your performances are controversial at best. You didn't develop any kind of bond with the members of your unit nor with your commanding officer."

The Commander handed Lith several complaints about him filed by the other Cadets and even by Tepper during the past months.

'I should have let them die in those woods.' Lith inwardly thought in outrage.

"Your psychological evaluation says you are emotionally detached and manipulative. In the light of all the circumstances presented to me, I can't make you an officer. You are unfit to lead even a small unit."

Lith gritted his teeth, waiting for the final blow.

"At the same time, you have broken every record of this and many other camps. You also risked your life to save your unit when you could have just run away. No one would have blamed you for leaving them for dead in such an impossible situation.

"Your bravery earned you gratitude, admiration, and provided the army with plenty of materials for our R&D department." This time the Commander handed to Lith commendation letters from the Sergeant and his peers, asking Berion to ignore their previous complaints.

"This is why I'm promoting you to first Lieutenant."

"I thought you said I'm unfit to lead." The sudden turn of events left Lith in a daze.

"You sure are. Yet without a proper rank, you wouldn't even get a proper meal, let alone the clearance level necessary for the jobs I have been allowed to offer you."

The Commander steepled his fingers.

"Based on your evaluation, you are a perfect candidate for our secret services. I won't lie to you. It's a very hard job and a lifelong one at that. If you decide to accept, there will be no option for retirement or quitting. The only way out is feet first."

'Black ops squad, uh?' Lith thought. 'No way. I would be constantly monitored, either by enemies or allies, and would have no freedom of movement. The army is a tool for my ends, not the other way around.'

"I'm honored but I have to refuse, Sir. I don't think such a job would allow me to pursue my magical research nor to have a family of my own." Lith lied through his teeth. He would rather die than marry and have children.

Berion nodded without showing one bit of surprise.

'Always the family man, just like his file reported.' The Commander inwardly sighed. 'It was worth a shot.'

"Then I'm sorry to say that the only positions available to you are as a member of the Knight's Guard or the Rangers. My hands are tied."

Lith knew everything about the Knight's Guard. Phloria had talked about her father's unit until Lith's ears bleed. Solving crimes and protecting Royal Constables wasn't an alluring job. Lith would rather work for the Mage Association instead of being ordered about all day long for the rest of his life.

"Tell me more about the Rangers." Lith replied, making Berion smirk for a split second.

"The Rangers are an elite force, entrusted with great powers and responsibilities. Don't let the name fool you. It has nothing to do with hunting game or patrolling borders.

"Their duty is to travel through the Kingdom, to protect isolated communities from all kinds of threats, and to keep in check the monsters' population. If you accept, you will be assigned a vast area that you'll need to know like the back of your hand.

"If nobles abuse their authority in rural areas, where there are no mages or army members, your duty will be to uphold the law. If monsters infest a region, you'll have to get rid of them before they can swarm a populated area.

"Also, there are lots of no man's lands, where people settle in without paying their due taxes to the Kingdom or even respecting its laws. If you find such villages, they can only be offered two choices. To submit or die.

"Organized crime is already a plague. The last thing we need is a criminal country inside of the Country."

"Would it be the same region until the end of my service?" Lith asked. No matter how big an area was. Once he finished exploring it, Lith would turn into nothing more than a baby sitter.

"No, it would change after two or three months. Elite doesn't mean immune to bribery. Nobody watches the watchers, so they have to be rotated. Depending on how fast you work, you may even have free time. Rangers are allowed to go home and use Warp Gates, but their job is subject to scrutiny."

"I think Ranger would be the most suitable position for me, Sir."

"Are you sure?" Berion still needed to give Lith the final details.

"It's a very vexing duty. Since they have access to communication amulets, magic, and Warp Gates, Rangers act alone, unless they deem reinforcements are required. Prolonged isolation can take a huge toll on the mind."

Lith inwardly smiled at those words.

'With Solus by my side, I'm never truly alone. No partner also means no witness. I can do what I want, take whatever I want and nobody would ever know.'

"Affirmative, Sir. Before starting active duty, I'd need your help with one thing."

Chapter 368 Brotherly Loathe Part 1

Regharos city's region Boot Camp

The Cadet's graduation ceremony was an event celebrated not only by the new members of the Griffon Kingdom's army, but also by their commanding officers.

Finding diamonds in the rough and helping promising recruits to overcome their limitations was one of the most common ways for a Drill Sergeant to rack up merits. The success or failure of their Cadets could change their careers.

Trion Proudstar was still recovering from his clash with Phloria Ernas. She had kept her word. Neither she nor her family had made a move against him, but the army wasn't as forgiving.

Phloria was considered one of the most outstanding young officers. She had yet to fail an important mission and most of the soldiers she trained had become members of elite units.

Back when she was still a Cadet, Trion had done everything he could to make her flunk.

Now that their roles were reversed, every success Phloria achieved made him the object of harsh reprimands and contemptuous looks. To his superiors, Trion had failed to recognize her value. The more she rose in the ranks, the bigger the stain on his personal file became.

Trion's only source of relief was the camaraderie from his fellow Sergeants. They knew about his brother and understood his grief. Most of them came from messed up families and each had their own burden.

Making a stupid mistake wasn't an issue. As long as Trion was willing to learn from it, he would have their full support. The end of the semester also meant that they could finally relax and enjoy a slow meal.

The mess hall was filled with voices telling the most ridiculous anecdotes about their own Cadets. Spring recruits were considered the worst batch, since it usually consisted of nobles or lazy youths that had no idea what to do with their lives.

"This Cadet I had, Revkin, he was really a piece of work." Trion was bantering about his latest success. "Rough and undisciplined, but a real soldier to the core. The harder you taught him the faster he learned..."

He was about to tell his friends about how he had recommended Revkin for the rank of Lance Corporal, when an eerie feeling crawled up his skin. It was almost the end of the summer, so the climate was still hot, yet Trion felt a knot in his stomach.

It was a sensation he had never forgotten, like the cold drafts that plagued his room during winter when he was still a kid.

"Why suddenly so silent?" Asked Beligros, one of Trion's closest friends when he saw him anxiously look at the Mess Hall's entrance.

The answer walked through the door just a few seconds later, donning the deep green of the Rangers and the rank of First Lieutenant on his sleeves.

"By the Great Mother." More than one voice said while he passed in front of their tables. Most Drill Sergeants checked Lith out, envying whoever had been lucky enough to be his commanding officer.

Everything about how he moved and wore the uniform told them he had just graduated. Cooking up an officer right off a Cadet was usually a career-maker event. Some of the female Sergeants checked him out for less noble reasons.

It had taken Lith quite an effort to find Trion in the myriad of Boot Camps across the whole Griffon Kingdom. To get access to the right one without an official reason had cost him owing some favors. There wasn't much his connections could do.

Lith's influence outside the Distar Marquisate was almost none, yet it was a price he was happy to pay for his mother's sake. He had never realized how much suffering Trion's absence had caused Elina, otherwise he would have hunted his brother down years ago.

"Sergeants." Lith said as he gave them a salute after reaching Trion's table. It was unusual for an officer to salute NCOs first, but being freshly promoted Lith was paying them the respect their rank and seniority deserved.

All of Trion friends were pleasantly impressed by the courtesy the giant was showing them, so they stood up and returned the salute. All but Trion. His knees felt weak as the knot in his stomach was quickly moving up to his throat.

The scene in front of him was right out of his worst nightmare.

"What are you doing here?" Trion asked using sheer willpower to look into Lith's eyes as he braced for the impact.

"We need to talk." Lith's gaze wasn't angry nor menacing. His tone was flat, like he was just asking for directions in an unknown city.

"What are you doing, man?" Beligros whispered while trying to pull Trion up.

"He may be as green inside as he is outside, but he's still a superior officer and yours is a clear act of insubordination."

Trion wanted to reply, but his jaw was clenched so hard he couldn't speak. Then, the nightmare became reality.

"No need for formalities, Sergeant Beligros. After all, Trion and I are brothers." The whole Mess Hall stood up at those words, while Beligros turned pale knowing his disrespectful words had been heard.

'Dammit, I was just trying to make Trion move. Hope this guy doesn't hold a grudge' He thought.

"What do you want?" Trion replied with a hoarse voice. Whatever it was, he wanted for it to end quickly. He could almost hear the thoughts of all his peers, making cruel comparisons between the two brothers.

Lith was the tallest man in the room with his 1.83 (6') while Trion barely reached the average height of 1.65 (5'5"). To make things worse, he wasn't a scrawny kid anymore. Lith had the build one would expect from a veteran of an elite unit, not from a recruit.

Also, both his rank straight after the graduation and him being part of the Rangers were big tells for all those present. They meant he was a mage. Otherwise no matter how talented a Cadet was, being promoted above the rank of Corporal right after a Boot Camp was impossible.

"It's about our mother. She still worries about you. Do you mind telling me why in two years and a half you never bothered returning home or at least writing a letter?" The room fell silent. Lith was different from how Trion had pictured him.

Trion had always told them that his family had abandoned him, so hearing about a worried mother was mind-blowing news.

"Do you really want me to believe that she cares for me? After ignoring me for years, giving all her love and attention to her little, perfect son?" Trion's words oozed poison.

"Look, I know we never went along." Lith sighed, yet his brother's accusations left him unfazed. He didn't care for Trion's grievances. For all those years, he had believed him dead.

'What sort of world is it where you can't even trust assassins? During the plague, they threatened me to kill him unless I surrendered, yet here we are.'

"Neither of us deserves a mother like Elina and you know it. Don't let your feelings towards me cloud your judgment. She deserves better."

Chapter 369 Brotherly Loathe Part 2

"Is it true?" Trion asked.

"Yes, she is really worried about you. Mom just wants to know that you are..."

"Not that!" Trion stood up, lashing out the insecurities that he had left festering in the last six months.

"Is what that Ernas wench told me true? That everyone has forgotten about me? That I now have a niece and a little brother? That both of them were named after you?"

Lith needed a split second to understand who the 'Ernas wench' was. A Drill Sergeant couldn't get close to Jirni, unless she was investigating them. Which left Phloria as the only possible answer.

Lith clenched his fist, yet his tone remained polite.

"Rena stopped considering you a brother after you never returned from your graduation. She couldn't forgive you for making mom cry like that. Tista wrote you off the family list ever since you and Orpal said all those things about her.

"As for dad, he never talks about you. I don't think he hates you, Trion. More like he has lost all hopes. We do have a niece, Leria, and a little brother, Aran. Leria is the only one named after me."

On Mogar, it was custom to name a child with the same initial letter of the most esteemed member of the family as a good omen.

"Well, I guess it had to be expected. A humble Sergeant is no match for an almighty magician!" Trion's anger almost drove him insane. To the point he barely realized he was discussing family matters in public.

"I can't believe Rena sucked up to you that much! What did you give her in exchange for it?"

"Nothing." Lith's voice was losing its kindness and becoming colder by the word.

"She did it because I gave her a home, I protected both her old and new family, and because I delivered her firstborn. No one knew you became a Sergeant, simply because you never bothered telling us."

"I..."

"You are done talking." Lith cut him short, throwing his communication amulet on the table. "Either you promise me in front of all these people that you will come back home, or I'll call our mother right now and you'll explain to her your reasons."

Trion and all those present looked at the amulet with greed. Such an enchanted item was worth a year of their pay.

Trion hesitated for a second. If he called Elina and she started crying, his reputation would be destroyed. He had always pictured her to his colleagues as a cold hearted woman who had eyes only for her most talented child.

Trion knew it was a blatant lie. He said it for the same reason he had never returned home. It was the way he had found to get back at a family from which he had always felt left out.

Trion hoped to make them feel guilty and worried about his disappearance. Most of all, he wanted to hurt Lith. Yet it was clear he had failed. Lith still looked at him as when they were still kids.

Lith had taught to his older brothers that the flip side of love wasn't hate. It was indifference. Even when he was little, he would stare at them without really seeing neither Orpal or Trion. Lith would talk to his brothers with the same tone he used for strangers.

Be it pelts or meat, he would never bring anything for them. Whenever they were hurt or ill, Lith never intervened unless their parents asked him to.

"I'll go back home as soon as I get a leave. You have my word."

"Good." Lith nodded. "One word of advice before our business is concluded. Our parents love you, so I won't meddle with your relationship. Same for Tista and Rena. They are grown-up women who can fend for themselves."

Lith stepped forward as his eyes changed from chestnut to yellow and his pupils were replaced by a red light.

"The children, however, are another story. If when I get back I find out you have been anything but a loving uncle and brother, I will end you." Lith remarked his last words by letting out a sliver of killing intent.

Or at least that was the intention. He was already tired and cranky before Trion started to insult everyone Lith cared about, so the sliver turned into a flood.

The Mess Hall's lights flickered several times as an unnatural shadow covered the windows, making everyone present think they had dozed off into a lucid nightmare. In the darkness they saw distorted reflections of themselves staring at them with hunger, some even experienced their ghastly touch.

The Sergeants were all veterans, yet they found themselves covered in cold sweat and with their weapons at hand. They were pointed against their imaginary enemies, except for those of Trion's friends which were aimed at Lith.

"At ease, Sergeants." Lith snapped his fingers, using both gravity and spirit magic to force them to lower their blades. "Or does that mean you are assaulting an officer?"

At those words, the weapons were either stored inside a dimensional item again or let go onto the ground.

Lith spent the rest of the afternoon back at his base. Commander Berion had let him choose his first destination. Lith cross-referenced the information he had collected from the army's database with those from the Mage Association.

'Aside from Necromancy, there's not much about the study of the nature of souls and how to manipulate them, but it's a start nonetheless.'

Lith thought. 'Too bad neither my merits nor my clearance level grants me access to most of the tomes I'm interested in.' Lith collected all the lore and legends about the regions he could choose from before leaving the base.

'Commander Berion granted me a full day of leave to solve the matter with Trion and make my decision. I'll use this time to go meet Kalla one last time before leaving. With all her connections with the undead community, she could give me advice about where to start my research.

'I could also ask her help to develop an undead empty shell for Solus. Two birds with one stone.' Lith took out from the pocket dimension his communication amulet.

The last time they met, the Wight had warned him she would be busy with her experiments to attain lichhood and asked Lith to not reach for her unless he was in dire need for help.

Kalla's rune was lit, hence her amulet wasn't inside a dimensional item. Yet she didn't reply if not after several attempts.

"Sorry to bother you, Kalla." Lith said when the channel was finally open. "I just need a few minutes of your time, then I'll leave you alone. I..."

"A few minutes might be all the time I have left, Scourge." Her voice was barely a whisper. "I've been trying to contact you for months. My experiments... I'm afraid my most recent failure will also be my last.

If you manage to reach my lair before it's too late, I'll help you to the best of my possibilities. I can't make any promises."

'Those b*stards!' Lith cursed at the army clerks. 'While I attended the Boot Camp, they didn't reply to any call aside those from my family and noble friends.'

The only silver lining in that situation was that Kalla lived in the forest outside the White Griffon. Thanks to the Camp's Warp Gate, Lith could reach her in less than a minute. The only problem was that he was already months late.

Chapter 370 Idiocy Part 1

Lith hadn't seen Kalla during the last three years, they just talked from time to time when her communication amulet appeared online. Lith understood how difficult the process of safely splitting one's core was and he thought that endangering his friend's life just for a social visit was beyond idiotic.

Once he reached the White Griffon, Lith asked the Headmaster to have his teacher ring back. He didn't have the time to fly around the forest searching for Kalla.

Albeit short, his meeting with Marth provided him some vital information.

"I never met Kalla the Wight after Balkor's attack. I honestly believed she had died by the hand of a Valor." Marth replied when Lith asked him about Kalla's whereabouts.

"I would love to contact Scarlett, but she left the White Griffon for good. We have a new Lord of the Forest, Sentar the Thunderbird."

'That's why Kalla needed my help.' Lith thought. 'With Scarlett gone, there is no elder Awakened one that could cure her. Light magic it's one of the hardest elements to master.'

Sentar had conflicting feelings about both Kalla and Lith. The former she considered an undead, which made Sentar reluctant to even stand in her presence. The latter had the stigma of Scarlett considering him a possible threat.

Yet Sentar remembered how her former leader had considered Kalla a close friend, as well as how much M'Rook and Protector liked Lith. She brought him to the Wight's quarters without asking questions.

When Kalla had mentioned a lair, Lith's mind had pictured some sort of natural network of caves, maybe a dungeon. A place riddled with corpses and undead, respectively the failures and successes of her research.

The entrance was an arch made of stone that led to an underground passage. It was the only part Lith had imagined right.

The moment he stepped inside, he thought to have entered a penthouse back on Earth. The room looked like an antechamber realized to allow Evolved Monsters to move without having to shapeshift.

Everything was oversized, from the corridors leading to the other rooms to the over four meters (13') high ceiling. The floor was smooth, with no imperfection nor stain visible.

'This isn't a natural cave at all. Someone carved everything out with earth magic.' Lith thought in surprise.

"Thank the gods you're here!" A giant mass of brown fur charged at Lith like a truck. Lith wasn't scared, he had recognized Nok's voice. The moment the Byk hit him, Lith realized how wrong he was.

Even with Nok's momentum, the impact was too weak. The fur was full of white streaks and now that they were close enough, Lith noticed several bald spots.

"Follow me." Nok bit Lith's left sleeve, tugging him forward without even waiting for a reply.

Lith exploited that contact to use Invigoration. Nok was now an adult Byk. His huge build was proof he had at least inherited his mother's physical strength and of how well fed he had been.

'What the heck has happened to him? I can't find any trace of disease or injury on Nok, yet his life force is as weak as when he was just a cub. Did he suffer from Kalla's experiments too or what?' Lith thought.

They passed through a series of rooms. Each one was bigger than Lith's house and filled with state of the art equipment for all kinds of magical research. There wasn't a single inch in any room that wasn't filled with books or magical protections to prevent a failed experiment from causing a cave in.

The Alchemy and Forgemaster labs almost made Lith turn green with envy.

'Where did Kalla find the money to afford all of this stuff? I thought she was interested in Necromancy, not crafting arts.' Solus jotted down everything they had seen, hoping to recreate most of the machinery once she reverted to her tower form.

Some devices were an improved version of what she was used to seeing in the White Griffon's departments.

When they reached their destination, Lith had no doubt it was a Necromancer's lab. Several glass tubes were lined up against the walls. Each one held a corpse floating into a translucent preserving liquid.

The floor and the ceiling were covered with magic circles similar to those Lith had found during his own research about souls in the army database. They had been carved in the stone with darkness magic. Their purpose was to prevent the mystical energies from dispersing.

In a way, Necromancy was similar to Forgemastering. Creating higher undead required a lot of mana and each corpse could only be used once. The magic circles increased the odds of success by saturating the atmosphere of darkness energy, making it easier for it to condense into a stable blood core.

Kalla lied in the middle of one of the oddest circles Lith had ever seen. Her body was lying still on the floor with most of her bones and muscles exposed. Her Evolved Monster form was partially undead, so she had no need to breathe.

The small shroud of darkness that covered part of her skull and abdomen proved she was still alive. Lith rushed to Kalla's side, noticing that one of her eye sockets was empty.

Only the one still covered by the darkness was lit by the red light of undeath.

"So you managed to arrive on time." Kalla noticed Lith's presence thanks to his smell. She was running on fumes. The sight was the first thing she had lost days ago.

"Don't talk. Save your strength and let me see if there's something I can do." Lith used Invigoration on her and discovered an unsettling anomaly. Just like Nok, her body was fit as a fiddle, yet her life force was fading away as they spoke.

"I stand corrected. Tell me what happened here, otherwise you'll die healthy."

"There's not much to say." Kalla replied. "I had reached the final steps of my research. My body is now able to withstand massive amounts of darkness energy without being destroyed and my mana core has been freed from its cage."

"All that was left was to split it into two perfect half and store one into a magic crystal I prepared beforehand. It took me months to adjust its wavelength to match the one of my core. The trickiest part was..."

"What happened?" Lith cut her short.

"The splitting of the mana core was a complete success. Alas, the removing part couldn't have gone worse. I underestimated the task and paid the price. I believed that becoming a Lich was just like any other greater Necromancy spell."

"The magic circles I prepared are perfect to contain darkness magic, but are otherwise useless. The moment I brought one of the two new cores outside my body, it disappeared like smoke, leaving behind only its darkness component."

"It forcefully attempted to fuse back with the remaining half of my mana core, but it was already in a critical condition. To trigger the split, I exposed both my body and core to tremendous stress. The sudden imbalance almost killed me."

"From that moment, I grew weaker by the day. I tried all the light spells I know to no avail."