

Supreme M 371

Chapter 371 Idiocy Part 2

"Even Invigoration is useless. Healing magic repaired my body, but every bit of energy I spend is lost forever. The only reason I survived this long is that I modified one of the circles in a last ditch effort. Now it's supposed to hold all kinds of energies, but it does a poor job.

"I didn't know what's wrong with me, so I had to make it a makeshift jack of all trades."

"Okay, now unless you have something medically relevant to say, shut up and let me think." Lith replied.

"Sorry, it's just that after being alone for so long, talking to someone that can understand my research..."

"Mom, what part of shut up you didn't understand? The shut or the up?" Nok scolded her. Kalla's eye glowed in silent annoyance.

Lith had no idea what to do, so he used his diagnostic spells first and used Invigoration later. Once again according to his magic, aside from being on the verge of death, Kalla was fit as a fiddle.

'This doesn't make sense. It sounds like one of those "The procedure was a success but the patient died" jokes.' Lith thought. 'I have one last card to play.'

Lith then used the Scanner spell. It was the fulcrum of tier five healing magic, the art of perceiving and manipulating all kinds of life forces. He had already turned it into true magic, but had failed to find a way to integrate it with Invigoration.

Unlike Invigoration, Scanner revealed to Lith in what pitiful state Kalla was. Her life force had stopped flowing. For some reason, Kalla's body was unable to replenish its strength or assimilate any kind of external energy.

Even when Lith attempted to share with her part of his life force, it did her no good. She was dying because her own body was slowly consuming itself in order to survive.

Her abdomen was what worried him the most. A small portion of it was completely black. Scanner was unable to sense any life force coming from it, but that was supposed to be impossible.

Invigoration confirmed the initial evaluation: there was nothing wrong with her physical condition. A second Scanner also produced consistent results: Kalla's body was starving and part of it was already dead.

It was the first time that Lith's trump cards were at odds with one another.

'Why couldn't it be something simpler? Like waxing a gorilla or teaching a crab how to give the finger?' Lith thought for long about the problem, but neither he or Solus were able to find a solution.

"Did you get caught in the aftermath of the experiment too?" He asked Nok. Since their conditions were similar, maybe the Byk could be able to provide him more clues.

"What gave you such an idea?"

"You look like crap." Lith replied.

'How tactful of you.' Solus sneered. 'His mother is dying; you could at least be gentle.'

'I have no time for niceties. I need answers and I need them now.'

"Oh, this?" Nok stood on his hind legs while looking at his battered fur.

"This is no one's fault. Since mom got injured, I had no time for hunting so I have skipped a few meals. My sis too refused to leave her side. Her hunger is worse than mine because if she doesn't eat, she doesn't get thinner. She dies."

Nok pointed his snout to a pile of dirty rags lying in a corner. It was a sour note in the otherwise pristine room.

"You sister?" Lith had forgotten about Kalla's vampire daughter.

"Lith, this is Nyka. Nyka, Lith. He is an old friend of mine."

The dirty rags stood up, turning out to be a woman in her mid twenties. Dust and mud covered most of her naked body. Her hair was disheveled, making it look like a mop too old to be still of use.

Her skin was white as milk, and so were her eyes. They had no pupil or iris, yet Lith could feel her staring at him.

"Why is she naked?" Lith asked.

"Because beasts do not care if I wear clothes and humans try to kill me no matter my attire." Her voice was raspy like she had a sore throat. Her body was flaccid and her hair white with a tinge of yellow.

'Compared to her, Nana looked like she was in her prime.' Lith was disappointed. Vampires looked nothing like he expected them. Nyka reminded him of one of the witches from the MacBeth play.

"Can you please feed her, Scourge?" Kalla asked. "With Invigoration, you can get your life force back while if Nok weakens any further, his core could suffer permanent damage."

Lith took out a lot of food from his pocket dimension, allowing the Byk to feast to its stomach content for the first time in weeks.

"Well yes, but actually no." Lith replied. "I haven't slept in a week and during the last two days I was busy with experiments. If I feed her, I might not have enough energy left to heal you."

'If I understand the underlying cause of Kalla's sickness, of course.'

'You and your experiments!' Solus scolded him. 'How many times have I told you to sleep once every two days?'

'Do you have any idea how much time I would have wasted that way?'

"I understand." Kalla interrupted their telepathic quarreling. "I've lost track of the time so often that my children..."

"Mom, shut up!" Both Nok and Nyka yelled as one.

Lith checked Nok's condition with Invigoration and was happy to see his body regaining its strength.

'What could have possibly happened to make even Invigoration useless? Why does the life force that I give Kalla go to waste?' Lith kept wondering while he alternated the use of his breathing technique and Scanner.

'Maybe it's just a coincidence,' Solus pointed out. 'But don't you think it's odd that the black area Scanner detects is partially overlapped with the one where Invigoration locates Kalla's core?'

'It's no coincidence, just idiocy,' Lith replied.

'Whose idiocy?'

'Mine!' Lith inwardly cursed at himself.

"I know what's happening." He explained to Kalla.

"To split and move your mana core you have 'destroyed its cage'. Said cage is your own life force."

"It makes sense. Both success and failure required for me to die. My survival has been an unexpected accident." Kalla pondered.

"The damage you have caused has permanently altered the flow of your life force, making it unable to connect properly with the mana core. That's why Invigoration is useless. The world energy has no way of being passed to your body anymore."

"Can you fix it?" Mother and children asked in unison.

"If I was at full strength I'd answer 'probably'. In my current condition, I don't even know how long will it take for me to collapse from exhaustion. Repairing such huge damage near the mana core is a very delicate job. Can you hold on for a couple of hours?"

"I think I have another couple of minutes in me." The shadows enveloping Kalla's figure shrank while the light in her remaining eye started to flicker.

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Cursing at both the army and his bad luck, Lith activated all of his Body Sculpting spells at once. He had modified the basic version learned at the academy into a true magic one with a few kinks of his own.

'The situation is bad. I have to alternate Invigoration and Scanner, otherwise one's readings will block the other's. Plus I have to fill the hole inside Kalla's abdomen fast. If I take my time as usual, she's as good as dead.'

In her attempt to achieve Lichhood, Kalla had damaged her life force, leaving a gaping hole that was slowly dissipating both her mana and life force. It also prevented her to use Invigoration since the mana would be drained by the hole.

Lith went all out from the start and conjured ten Chisels at once. The Chisels started to probe into the healthy life force. Kalla wasn't a slime but an Evolved Monster, which made her a unique living being.

'If she was a human, at least I'd know where to start. I have never studied a Wight's life force, dammit. It's completely different from what I have ever seen before.'

Watching at Kalla through Scanner was like trying to follow a rollercoaster constantly changing its physical form, going from liquid to solid without warning. Her partial undead nature made unnecessary for her to breathe or possess most organs.

On paper, it sounded really cool because it made her resistant to most kinds of energies. On the other hand, for Lith it was a nightmare. Her life force was a hybrid, composed of the physical form of her body and the shadow energy that enveloped her physique to connect the various parts.

Lith had to alter them both without killing her nor having enough time to study Kalla's unique nature properly. Even though Lith was in a rush, he needed to assess how bad the situation was, so he had the Chisels checking the edges of the black zone.

'The situation is worse than I expected.' Lith sighed. 'The life force around the damage has stabilized, but even just poking it's enough to make it bleed life force that disappears immediately. I can't collect nor save it. The hole is like a drain.

Solus, I may need your help.'

'There is not much I can do with a deep green core. I can barely use a tier five spell by borrowing some of your mana.' She replied.

'Don't worry, I just need you to use Spatula to collect the life force in case I make a mistake.'

Lith could have conjured and controlled more than ten chisels, but that would lessen his accuracy. Kalla was already with one foot in the grave, he couldn't afford to make any major slipup.

Manipulating life force was different from any other kind of spellcasting Lith had learned. It required to keep your focus at all times, exerting surgical control on your mana as well as on the patient's body.

In any other circumstance, Lith would have used Body sculpting to repair the damage by redistributing the life force without altering its flow. The problem was that the procedure was slow and Kalla had maybe a couple of minutes left.

'Since I don't have time, the fastest approach is to transplant life force from a healthy part to fill the hole. It will create a new one, but at least if I cover Kalla's mana core, her condition should improve.

If I'm right, it will buy me the time I need to fix her.'

First, Lith used one of his personal spells, Mould, to take a magical picture of the life force in Kalla's left paw in order to be able to restore it later once the emergency was resolved.

A paw was far from all vital organs, making it the perfect life force donor.

After he made sure that no permanent damage would befall his friend, the Chisels worked in unison on the left paw to remove the energy and brought it over the black area.

Even transplanting the life force of the same individual was a very delicate procedure. First, a Chisel had to disconnect each single block unit's connection to the paw. Then, a few Chisels would use mana strands to weave it to the healthy life force near the hole.

Lith had to be fast, otherwise the dead zone would drain the energy.

Lith hated that kind of procedure. It was more like butchering than surgery, so he also had to focus on minimizing the damages. For a control freak like him, it was a worst case scenario.

He could either rush things, maybe saving the patient, but leaving a mess behind that he would be forced to fix later, or bide his time and let Kalla die. Lith worked non stop, expending his mana so fast that he needed to use Invigoration right after the two minutes mark had passed.

Despite the situation, he sighed in relief.

'Since Kalla is still alive, I count that as a win.' Lith thought. The light in her left eye seemed to have stabilized, but she was still too weak to talk or simply she had no energy to waste.

Kalla could feel that something was wrong with her paw. She was progressively losing sensitivity. Yet she already had a hard time staying awake, so she considered it just another sign of her imminent doom.

The more time passed, though, the stronger she felt. Kalla understood that whatever Lith was doing was working the moment she regained her sight. She had been blinded for weeks, so her first instinct was to scream in joy.

Yet when she saw how bad her children's condition was, her joy turned into despair. The only thing that stopped her from trying to reach them was the sight of Lith, sweating bullets, who emitted enough mana to fight three Wights at once.

He was sparing no effort, going down to the last shred of energy before using Invigoration.

'I don't want to lose another friend. Kalla and I never spoke much but there's a connection between us. Maybe it's because we are both anomalies for our species, but she always gave me more credit than I deserved.' Lith thought.

'I'm glad to hear that, but promise me this time it will not end like with Protector.' Solus was worried about him. Both his body and mind were approaching their limits.

'I promise.' Lith replied, leaving her shocked. She knew how stubborn he was.

'I have learned my lesson back then. Exchanging my life for another is idiotic, but that doesn't mean that I will not do my best to save Kalla.' He emitted a strong burst of energy, sending his Chisels after the shadow energy that composed half of the life force.

Operating on the space near the hole was already hard. The slightest mistake would result in a partial or complete loss of the transplanted energy. Yet what he was about to do was even harder.

Lith had done all he could for the body, now he needed to restore the flow.

To do it, he had to attach small chunks of life force to the shadows and reconnect them to the damaged parts. Weaving mana threads on a moving target was as easy as killing an elephant with a pea shooter.

Chapter 373 Transplant Part 2

It required for Lith to anticipate the life force's flow, so he could place the energy on its tracks and connect the threads a second earlier they collided. There was no space for mistakes, each procedure could only be a success or a failure.

So far, he had failed a lot. The hole in Kalla's abdomen was the size of a human head, while her paw had enough life force to fill a space ten times as big. Yet it was already almost depleted.

To use what little energy was left, Lith used Invigoration before every attempt to fix the flow. It increased his odds of success at the expense of his endurance. With each use of Invigoration, the smaller was the effect and the higher the burden on Lith's body.

Each burst allowed him to use his full focus as he had just woken up from a good night sleep, and to deplete his mana without worries. Soon, he started bleeding from his nose, then from the ears and lastly from his eyes.

The Body Sculpting surgery lasted a little less than five minutes. The final result was a crude patchwork filling the hole, while Kalla's paw was pretty much crippled. As for Lith, he collapsed onto the ground with the same grace of a rock.

The hit was strong enough to worsen his condition. The bleeding continued, forming a small pool of blood beneath his face.

"I wonder what he did to me." Kalla pondered. She was feeling better by the second, but it didn't mean much. It was just that anything was better than her previous near death experience.

Her abdomen felt like someone was stirring her bowels with a rusty razor while her left paw remained limp, no matter how much she attempted to move it. It was paralyzed, yet searing pain radiated from it.

"Pain, my old friend. You are the only true constant of life." She sighed. "I will not miss you once I ascend to the status of true undead. You are as clingy as annoying..."

"Mom!" Nok cut her monologue short.

"There's no time for your monologues, Nyka has lost it."

"Damned isolation! It seems I can't keep my mouth shut." Kalla said while turning around.

Nyka was on all four, near Lith's head, licking from the pool of blood. After the first taste, she shivered in pleasure and the feeding frenzy overwhelmed her. She had never tasted anything so delicious.

All the food she had previously eaten seemed to be rotten trash compared to that nectar. She drank the blood emitting slurping sounds, yet careful to not miss even a single drop.

"Nyka, stop immediately!" Kalla ordered while trying to get near her daughter. Her left paw refused to move, so she could only drag it on the floor while moving forward.

Nyka had already drained the pool, so she took Lith's head on her lap, caressing his jugular like they were long lost lovers. Her body had partially recovered from its starvation. The skin was no more flaccid, the wrinkles had disappeared.

Her full lips were of a deep red color, but it lasted only for a second before the blood covering them was drained and they returned to be milky white. A vampire had several ways of absorbing nourishment.

One was with darkness magic, but it was as tasty as airplane food so it was kept either as a last resort or as a combat option. Another was through the skin. Some of them bathed in blood, gaining from it strength and the same relaxation coming from a full day of SPA.

One of the two most favored methods was drinking it because it gave them pleasure.

"I just want some more." Nyka replied turning her fingers into claws and pricking on Lith's neck with them. Her eyes were now full black, the sign that her mind was overpowered by her hunger.

"Sorry, sis!" Nok charged at her like ram, yet Nyka swat him away like he was a fly, sending the Byk crashing against the south wall. Nok was just a magical beast, his strength and weight were meaningless in front of a higher undead.

'Dammit!' Kalla thought. 'My body still feels like a ragdoll filled with rusty nails. If I feed her or use magic, I could undo whatever Lith has done and kill us both. I must find a way to protect Lith and Nok. Neither of them can survive being fed upon.'

Kalla racked her brain in search of a solution while Nyka hissed in frustration. Lith's skin was not only sturdier than leather, but it also healed so fast that a single droplet of blood had yet to be spilled.

The vampire's patience had run out. Her mouth got close to the main artery, meeting a fierce resistance. A stone fist struck her in the jaw with the strength of a wild ox.

"Hands off the merchandise, sister!" Solus warned her. She was now in her glove form, holding the Gatekeeper sword against Nyka's heart. Both were floating in mid air thanks to spirit magic.

"Make one move and I'll kill you." She was using air magic to speak, just like the magical beasts did.

Between the hit and the enchanted metal pressing against her skin, Nyka came to her senses. The killing intent Solus radiated had triggered her survival instinct, allowing her to snap out of her feeding frenzy.

Nyka raised her hands in submission, but Solus kept pushing her away with the blade until Nyka's back was against the wall at a safe distance from Lith.

"I'm really sorry." The vampire sounded sincere, yet Solus kept infusing the Gatekeeper with magic, ready to pulverize the enemy.

"It's just that I'm so hungry and that blood was... spectacular."

"She never fed upon an Awakened before." Kalla explained. "To a vampire, the more powerful a being is, the tastier is their blood. Please, ring fairy, spare my daughter. This is all my fault."

"I don't give a damn about why she did it." Solus's voice held no kindness, only rage. "Until Lith wakes up, I'm not going to take any chance."

Solus had yet to finish the phrase that she was forced to reconsider her options. A low rumbling was spreading through the ground while the amount of mana in the room was skyrocketing.

Both Solus and Kalla were surprised. They had seen the phenomenon happen multiple times, but only for magical beasts. Lith's body was emitting a silver light, which became a small pillar piercing toward the sky.

"This is so wrong!" Solus darted back on Lith's hand, checking his body with Invigoration. The impurities in his body had reached once again his mana core, triggering the refinement process.

"This didn't happen to Tista, only when a magical beast turned into an Evolved Monster."

"I don't know who this Tista is, but if their core was below the cyan level then it's normal. Reaching the blue core is a major event." Kalla explained. "It marks the moment when a common magical beast can become the first member of a new species."

"Yet you are also right, this is wrong. Usually, only magical beasts and plants receive Mogar's help. The other races are not attuned with the world energy, which makes their Awakened undergo terrible suffering."

"It's because unlike us, their bodies are incapable of evolving. What really worries me, though, is that I have never seen a silver light. This doesn't make any sense."

In all the evolutions Solus and Kalla had witnessed, the light had always been of a golden color.

Chapter 374 Symphony Part 1

"This is really interesting." Leegaain said while showing Milea the scene unfolding inside Scarlett's lab. The moment he had perceived the anomaly, he requested Tyris to share her vision.

"What does this mean?" Milea asked. "He's just going from cyan to blue, it's no big deal. Why the light pillar? It didn't happen to me."

"That's because you are human while he is not. What baffles me is that silver light. You see, back when I refined my mana core from cyan to blue, evolving from a Salamander into a Drake, I produced a black pillar. Tyris generated a white one and Salaark a red one."

The Dragon's words left her in a stupor.

"Are you saying that..."

"No, I'm not." Leegaain cut her short. "A different colored pillar means nothing until all tribulations have been overcome. What I'm saying is that a human never achieved Guardianhood and if I'm right they never will. Because whatever he is, he's not human."

From their respective viewpoints, Salaark and Tyris watched an enormous pillar of silver light descending from the sky above Lith's position. Until that moment, they had always dismissed his existence as an oddity. Now their interest was piqued.

If Lith knew what was about to happen, he would be grateful for being unconscious. Every major breakthrough was always more excruciating than the previous ones. Luckily, his body was refined along with his mana core, making it more resistant to pain.

So, when his nails fell off like invisible pliers had pulled them out, he didn't wake up. Neither he did when his bones broke or his flesh was turned inside out. It had already happened in the past, Solus was more worried about Nyka than about Lith's condition.

'I don't know what could happen if the vampire attacks him during the core refinement process. Maybe I should go back keeping watch.' Solus thought, yet found herself unable to move, just like everyone else in the room.

The magic lab that Scarlett the Scorpicores had borrowed Kalla was several meters underground, shielded from external influences by some of her best arrays. Nonetheless, the gigantic silver light pillar descending from the skies passed through them like they were thin air.

Solus had observed the evolution process of magical beasts several times and it always made her think of a giant finger of some god that came down to breathe new life in the evolving creature.

This time things went differently.

When the light pillar from the sky met the one originating from Lith, his heart withered at a speed visible at the naked eye until it resembled a giant dried plume. The blood flow stopped. The resulting agony was so intense that Lith woke up clenching his chest.

Solus could see impurities flow out of it like an invisible hand was squeezing them out. Then, when Lith was an inch from death, his heart absorbed the blood surrounding it and mixed it with the silver light, returning to its original size.

Solus noticed with mana sense that the renewed heart pumped not only blood, but also mana. She also used Scanner, to check Lith's life force for anomalies. The result was just as amazing.

'After his heart has been restored, Lith's life force's started to flow. It's no more static, maybe that's the secret behind the ability to shapeshift.' She thought.

Then, the same thing happened to the lungs. Lith opened his mouth to scream, it was like countless scorching daggers had pierced his flesh, but no voice came out. One by one, all of his internal organs underwent the refining process.

The flow of his mana and life force increased each time. When his brain shrunk to the size of an apple, Lith thought his life was over. He found himself wandering in a place where there was no light, no pain, nothing.

Only the quiet stillness he had experienced in death.

Everything was quiet, the time stood still. He had no idea how long it lasted, the only thing that gave him hope was the appearance of a small light representing his bond with Solus.

'If I can still feel her trying to reach me, then I'm not dead yet.' He thought.

When his brain recovered, Lith had no time to feel relieved or thank Solus. He knew the refinement wasn't over yet. All the impurities were now stored in his skin.

'This is going to hurt.' Lith clenched his teeth. He didn't know what would follow, but he was sure it wouldn't be nice. He took off the Skinwalker armor with a thought, to avoid it interfering with the process.

The impurities flooded Lith's skin until it turned black. They hardened on contact with air, making him resemble an obsidian statue. Cracks appeared all over its surface. He felt like every inch of his body was being dipped into burning oil.

Then, the black skin crumbled and fell. His flesh and muscles remained exposed for a long, agonizing second before a new one grew to cover him again before he could start screaming in pain.

"What the heck was that?" Solus yelled while checking Lith's condition. He was unconscious again. His physique was apparently the same, but the reality was quite different. The density of his body was on a new level, making it almost impossible to harm him with conventional means.

Solus could see him breathe mana and life force just like he normally did with air. Lith's mana core was now of a deep blue color. The amount of mana it stored hadn't changed much, but its quality had further improved.

With every breath he took, he would absorb a little amount of world energy, even without the use of Invigoration. His life force flowed freely through his every fiber, speeding up the recovery of his injuries.

"I have no clue." Kalla replied. "Magical beasts just evolve. Their body is like a cocoon they have to get freed from to reach the next stage. In Lith's case, it seemed more like torture. Like someone was forcefully replacing defective parts."

"Can't you help him?" Solus was the better Healer among the two, but she drew her strength from Lith and she didn't want to increase his burden.

"I never heard about this 'life force' Lith kept talking about and my children always shut me up. My body feels like is held together with leaves and spit. I'm afraid that if I use magic, I may fall apart." Kalla shook her head.

"My studies are more oriented towards Necromancy rather than Healing, but light and darkness magic are two sides of the same coin. I'm also a fast learner, so if you could explain to me what he did, I may be able to find a way to help us both."

Solus explained to Kalla the foundations of Body Sculpting and how to cast Scanner with true magic.

"Fascinating!" Kalla replied after a few hours of lecturing. "I have no idea what you have just said but sure sounds impressive. Maybe I have underestimated the importance of light magic in Necromancy."

"Seems I will have to start over from scratch. If my hypothesis is right, I failed because I have no control over my life force. I need to learn light magic before trying again."

Kalla asked Solus several questions, to which she replied as well as she could.

Solus was trying to describe to her how to manipulate the mana to achieve the Scanner spell when Lith woke up.

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"How long was I out cold?" He asked while clenching and releasing his fists several times. There was something off with his body.

"Almost three hours." Solus replied. "Which is odd, I expected you to need at least eight hours to recuperate. How do you feel?"

"Like there's an itch I cannot scratch. A needle in the back of my skull." Lith noticed Nok lying on the floor, still unconscious. He had so many things to ask but so little time.

First, he healed the young Byk, then proceeded to fix the mess Kalla's body was.

'Wish I could speak and treat her at the same time. My day leave is almost over, I must make use of every single second I... What the f*ck?'

To Lith's surprise, he could not only perceive Kalla's life force with much more clarity than before, but also understand where he or she had messed up. It was more about listening rather than seeing.

Life force was like a song performed by a living being and every defect was a sour note. Lith listened to the melody played by the Wight's body, guiding its flow along its intended path instead of trying to force it.

The patchwork covering Kalla's mana core soon became a smooth surface, even leaving a few energies to spare that Lith redirected to the butchered left paw to hasten its recovery. The procedure required over an hour but neither Lith nor Kalla noticed the passing of time.

Lith was engrossed by his new ability and used it to heal his friend while deepening his understanding of Body Sculpting at the same time. Tier five Healing magic hadn't become easier all of a sudden. Scanner was the same spell as before.

Yet the blue core allowed him to obtain a whole new set of information that made it possible for him to understand the breath of life rather than discovering it with a trial and error process.

Kalla instead focused on herself, trying to put into practice what Solus had explained to her. Lith's touch made it easier for her to sense her life force. It was like a gentle massage over her soul that was easing her pain.

When Lith was done, Kalla felt exhausted but relieved. Somehow, she knew her life wasn't in danger anymore and her paw, albeit was still limp, had stopped hurting.

"There." Lith said. "Everything should be all right. Take a few days to rest. No magic allowed. Your core has yet to settle in the new life force. If I were you, I'd wait until your paw works again. A few weeks should suffice."

"A few weeks?" Kalla grumbled. She had never taken such a long break from her research. A few hours at most. She wanted to object and bargain her way out, but after looking at her children's condition she decided to comply.

"I understand you are in a rush. What do you need my help for?"

Lith sighed, hoping she would believe him, before explaining to her both his reincarnation problem and the need to get Solus a body. If Kalla was surprised, she didn't show it. Nok and Nyka were another story.

Their mouths almost fell onto the ground hearing Lith's words. To them, lizards becoming dragons was something plausible. They were used to Scarlett stories, where she slaughtered princesses and rescued kidnapped trolls.

Reincarnation and a girl in a stone were too far fetched to believe though.

"Coming to me was the right move." Kalla replied after pondering for a while. "I just don't get why you have submitted to the humans' army."

"I didn't submit." Lith scoffed. "My problem can't be solved with a single spell or a generic artifact. If I had to find a solution all by myself, not even the extended life of an Awakened one would be enough. I have only one attempt at achieving my goal.

I must make it count."

"True." Kalla admitted while tapping her chin with a single claw. "Scarlett has amassed centuries worth of knowledge, yet even something 'common' like Lichhood is a huge gamble. Without her books, I wouldn't even know where to start."

"That's my problem. I have no starting point. That's why I had to make the humans think they need me more than I need them. Between the Mage Association and the Army, I have now access to countless tomes but it's still not enough."

"They don't trust me enough to let me read the books I need. I need to play my cards right and use my status to access otherwise forbidden areas." There were countless ruins in the Griffon Kingdom.

Some were just piles of dust and debris, others were places of power. Such areas were still protected by powerful barriers and only the army mages knew how to disable them. Why waste years to open a door when you could just borrow a key?

Lith showed Kalla a map, pointing to her the regions he could choose for his assignment as a ranger.

"My plan is to pick one of the less populated areas with the greatest number of ruins. The others have already been thoroughly explored. Hoping to stumble into a secret relic that no one but me is able to find would be nothing but wishful thinking."

"Joining the army gives me access to the list of the ruins and to the methods to access them. The problem is that there are too many of them. Can you at least point me in the right direction?"

Kalla limped to one of the libraries, pointing to Lith a thick book with a deep green cover.

"I would pick it myself, but without spirit magic I have only claws. Doctor's orders." She smirked. Lith took the book and started to flip through it.

"Can you really understand this gibberish?" The tome was filled with odd runes he had never seen before.

"Of course not. Who has the time to learn a dead and buried language? Put some mana into it." Kalla replied.

Lith did as requested and observed the runes rearrange themselves in the common language the three Great Countries shared.

"This is amazing!" Lith blurted out in envy. "How did Scarlett managed to do this?"

"She didn't. She, uhm, liberated most of these books from a mad Lich, but this is a story for another time. Read from page 290."

The chapter told the story of a forgotten race, the Odi. Millenia ago, their magical and scientific knowledge had allowed them to defeat all illnesses. Their empire grew in wisdom and power, until time was the only enemy they had left.

The Odi became arrogant and attempted to find a way to achieve eternal life. According to the book, they started experimenting on the lesser races to develop a method to transplant the conscience from an old body to a young one.

Thousands of lives were lost during the experiments, but in the end they succeeded. It marked the beginning of their end. Until that moment, the Odi had believed that everyone would benefit from the research.

That they would use the lesser races as a source of spare bodies. Their upper echelons had different plans. They considered such an idea revolting and aimed to preserve the purity of their bloodline.

While commoners would receive a lesser body, the nobles started to buy children from the less fortunate among the Odi to use them as vessels. It didn't take long for a civil war to break out, nor for the so called lesser races to exploit it to exterminate the Odi for good.

"The Odi laid the foundations to Lichhood." Kalla explained. "Maybe in one of their ruins you can find some clues to follow in their footsteps. Even if it doesn't work for you, it could always prove useful to your ring fairy to escape from her cage."

Chapter 376 Twin Melodies Part 1

According to the book, during the time the Odi civilization was at the height of its prosperity, they ruled over a vast area in the north that was now part of the border between the Griffon Kingdom and the Gorgon Empire.

The borders were one of the most dangerous sectors, since even if the two countries were at peace from centuries, small and medium sized battles were a common occurrence.

Most of Lith's patients when he worked at the Academy were soldiers stationed in the north. After copying everything relevant to his research Kalla had to offer, she and Lith discussed for a while what was the best place to start his assignment.

"She's not a ring fairy, by the way." Since their last mind fusion Lith was aware that, by saving Protector, he had accidentally revealed Solus's existence to him. Kalla had witnessed both the conversation between the Ry and Solus back then and her protecting the unconscious Lith now.

Keeping Kalla in the dark was pointless if not even stupid. The more she knew, the more helpful she could be. It was the reasoning that had led Lith to tell the Wight his whole story.

"She's a person, just like me and you. Solus, these are Kalla, Nok, and Nyka. Guys, this is Solus, my partner."

Solus had conflicting feelings about that situation. On one hand, she was happy about becoming an active part in Lith's life. He had already introduced her to his sister. Kalla and her children were the first friends he had made aware of her existence.

On the other hand, Kalla learned about Solus years ago, so it didn't mean much.

"Nice to meet you, Solus. Scarlett told me a lot about you. You are the first cursed object she has ever spared. Even though after seeing you in action, I don't think you are a cursed object."

Maybe it was because of his pampered life, but Nok was a simple minded creature. It didn't take him much to recover from the surprise and accept Solus as a friend.

"How do you fit into something so small? Is it painful? How do you eat? What are your favorite foods? Can stones copulate? How many cubs do you have? Do the two of you have an offspring together already?"

Some of his questions were shallow, others were personal enough to make her blush.

Last, but not least, she didn't like Nyka. During the time Lith had been unconscious and she explained Body Sculpting to Kalla, the vampire had cleaned herself with darkness magic. Once she was sure her mother was safe, she had gone hunting.

Now she had raven black hair and emerald green eyes both emphasized by her pale skin. Nyka's body wasn't milky anymore but of a light rosy color. Solus could appreciate all the changes proper feeding had triggered because the vampire was still stark naked.

She wasn't a stunning beauty, but undeath gave her smooth, delicate features and kept her body toned without a shred of body fat. It also made her soft curves perky beyond belief.

Every one of her movements was graceful and sensual, making Solus turn green with envy. Yet that wasn't the reason why Solus didn't like Nyka.

"I'm so sorry, big sister. I had no idea he is already taken. I'm really sorry for feeding on your thrall without your permission." The vampire said giving Solus a deep bow.

'I'm not a goddamn parasite, I'm a symbiote!' Solus thought in outrage. 'Our relationship is already complicated, hearing her calling Lith a thrall irks me to no end. Yet if I clear her misunderstanding, she'll resume looking at him like a juicy steak.'

Kalla didn't miss how socially awkward her daughter was.

'If she ever wants to mingle with humans, she must learn their ways. I might ask Lith to bring her along with him, once he is done with the army.' Kalla thought.

"I think the best region to start your research is the Etochian one." She said. "It's mostly composed of no man's lands, which will give you the privacy you need, and it holds several ruins. I know because I have been there.

There are several undead communities in the area that I can introduce you to." Kalla took out of her dimensional amulet small fragments of white alabaster. They turned into white dust that Kalla used to draw several runes on Lith's palm.

The glowing runes lasted only for a moment, leaving Lith's skin immaculate.

"If you ever meet undead, do not fight them. Just channel pure mana into your hand and the runes will resurface. Consider it a letter of recommendation of sorts. When I manage to get in touch with Scarlett, I will ask for her help.

She's likely to know more than me. Scarlett may be able to help you narrow your search."

"Thanks, Kalla." Lith replied. Despite all the good news, he was still worried. His body felt off since the moment the refining process had ended. At first, Lith thought that having his body undergone major changes, it would take some time for him to get used to them.

However, the feeling was only getting worse. Lith used Invigoration on himself, finding nothing unusual. Then he switched to Scanner, examining his own life force. There were several scars from when he had saved Protector.

No matter how hard Lith tried, he couldn't get rid of them. Everything seemed fine again, so Lith stopped using his eyes and tried to listen to the melody produced by his body.

'So many sour notes. I guess each one represents the life force I lost forever. Sounds almost like a requiem.' Lith inwardly sighed. 'Wait. Solus, do you hear that?'

'Yes.' She replied while sharing his senses. 'It's like there is a second melody on the background.'

Lith focused on the new melody, it sounded like a joyful allegro. After several attempts, Lith managed to reduce the volume of the main life force and to turn up the second one.

Along with the tune, his life force also changed its appearance. If before it resembled a colossus made of red lego bricks and erector set, now it looked like a sealed star. There was an outer shell made of black bricks while the inner part was composed by a stream of raging energy originating from a sphere that he supposed being his mana core.

'What the heck? How is it possible for me to have two life forces? Why don't I feel any different?' Lith thought.

'It's better if you open your eyes.' Solus suggested.

Lith did as instructed, discovering that his body now stood slightly over two meters tall. It was covered in thick curved black scales while his hands and feet ended in razor sharp claws.

'Solus, what happened to the Skinwalker armor? Tell me I didn't destroy it. It's too expensive to lose it in such a stupid way.' Having a monstrous body scared Lith much less than the thought of having wasted money.

'Don't worry, I stored it away the moment you started to change. Look at yourself into the mirror.' She replied while conjuring a reflecting surface made of ice.

Chapter 377 Twin Melodies Part 2

Lith could notice that his appearance resembled the one he had assumed in the past while trying to save Protector and when he faced the Clackers in the forest. It lacked the horns, the wings, and the tail.

His face was a black slate with no nose or ears. Two yellow eyes were open, while the slits for the other four, albeit being recognizable, were wide shut. Lith tried multiple times to open them but to no avail.

"Damn, I look like a demon." When Lith spoke, he revealed a mouth filled with sharp fangs. It wasn't visible before because the scales covering his face matched to perfection.

"Remarkable." Kalla said. "You've already learned how to shapeshift and you did it on your own at that. Scarlett tried to teach me, but it was too complex. Plus, I deemed it useless. I have no desire to change my physical appearance just to please others."

"I didn't learn anything." Lith was deeply confused. "Protector explained to me how to do it, but I always failed in the past. After my core has become blue, I seem to have developed a second kind of life force. Do you have one too, Kalla?"

"No, or at least is what I think. Before today I never heard about life force, but I'm pretty sure that not even in Scarlett's crazy stories was ever mentioned someone capable of natural shapeshifting.

"It's something that has to be learned. You can't just take any form you want. Before shapeshifting, you are supposed to be able to visualize every single detail in your mind. To know your imaginary body like the back of your paw.

Let me check one thing." Kalla placed one of her claws on Lith, using Invigoration on him.

"Whatever this form of yours is, is useless. You are not stronger nor faster than before. Even your mana core is unchanged. Sure, the scales may offer you some protection, but I can't see any value in sticking out like a sore thumb."

After checking his condition with his own Invigoration, Lith agreed with a sigh.

"Unless I want to murder someone in broad daylight and pin it to a monster, this form is as useless as a third nostril." He activated Scanner again, focusing on the original melody and returning to his human form.

Right after the transformation, Lith coughed uncontrollably for a few seconds.

"What's wrong?" All those present asked in unison. An Awakened one getting sick was something unheard of.

"I don't know." Lith replied with a hoarse voice. "Seems my new form suffers from acid reflux or something. I had a burning sensation in my throat the whole time."

Lith left Scarlett's lab after giving everyone a present. A book about Body Sculpting for Kalla, a lot of food for Nok, and a glass of his blood for Nyka. Kalla's blood was toxic for the undead and she had explained to him how Awakened blood was a powerful delicacy for vampires.

Much to Nyka's dismay, Kalla stored it for a rainy day. For a vampire, even a small amount from a blue cored Awakened was the equivalent of several liters of blood from normal humans.

Lith returned the teacher ring to Marth before going back to his living quarters in the military camp. He spent the hours left of his day leave sleeping, to recover part of his strength. Between the breakthrough and treating Kalla's life force, he was exhausted.

The next day, when he went to Berion's office to announce his final decision, the Commander had a deep frown and his fingers were drumming on a thick folder.

Berion grumpily replied to the salute and left Lith standing on attention for a few minutes before talking.

"Lieutenant Verhen, do you know what Article 16 of the code of military justice states?"

"It is forbidden for any soldier, NCO, and officer to assault in any way a fellow member of the army." Lith quoted from Soluspedia.

"So you do know the code." Berion stood up, piercing Lith with a steel gaze.

"Then how do you explain what you did in the mess hall of Regharos' boot camp?"

"I simply gave Sergeant Proudstar our mother's regards." Lith couldn't believe the Commander was making a fuss for such an insignificant reason, nor that Trion could be stupid enough to report him. It would only make a fool of himself.

"I don't care about your brother. I'm talking about all the people you sent to the hospital." The Commander's icy tone left Lith unfazed. His words, not so much.

"I beg your pardon? I didn't throw a single punch nor spell."

"Son, I have been young and stupid too. I can understand that you wanted to teach him a lesson, but you went overboard. Only active soldiers are trained to withstand killing intent. Kitchen staff are basically civilian."

Your little show made some faint, some puke their guts out, while the less fortunate now have white hair and blabber about monsters dwelling in the shadows."

'Oh f*ck!' Lith thought. 'I was so angry back then that I completely forgot about kitchen staff. Yet it's hard to believe that a sliver of killing intent could have done so much damage.'

"This folder contains the medical files of all the people you have injured. Their medical bills will be deducted from your pay." The Commander's index tapped on the stack of paper.

Lith pretended to be contrite, but he couldn't care less. He could make as a Healer in a day what the army paid him per month.

"At ease, Lieutenant. I hope you have made your decision. Otherwise, a few days in solitary will teach you not to disgrace our uniform."

Lith took out from his pocket dimension the map of the Griffon Kingdom and showed Berion the Etochian region. The frown disappeared from the Commander's face and was replaced by a worried expression.

"Are you certain, Lieutenant? I wanted to assign you a harsh environment as punishment but that's too much."

Noticing Lith's confusion, Berion smirked.

"I'm not worried about the borders. There are plenty of good soldiers there that can help you if the necessity arises. Nor I'm not worried about monsters or magical beasts. I read your file, I know you're a survivor. What worries me are these."

The Commander pointed at the various ruins Lith and Kalla had studied earlier.

"Do you know why we give to the Rangers the passcodes to the lost cities? Because they are part of your patrol duty."

"Does someone live there?" Lith was more confused by the second.

"Of course not. No citizen of the Kingdom lives there. Have you ever wondered why even though so many centuries have passed, the arrays are still working? How we managed to learn how to bypass them safely?

"It didn't take any effort on our side. Everything was engraved in multiple languages on the pillars surrounding the lost cities. Those who created the arrays, left all the necessary instructions to keep them active.

"Your duty consists also in checking that the magical formations are functional and not letting the ruins become a threat to the Kingdom. Those arrays weren't built to keep people out, but to keep the things that spawn in the lost cities in."

Chapter 378 The North Part 1

Judging from Commander Berion's tone, his words were meant to warn Lith about the danger the lost cities represented. Maybe he even hoped the young Ranger would reconsider his choice.

Lith's curiosity was piqued, instead.

'How many secrets does the Griffon Kingdom keep from its citizens?' He thought. 'I can understand sweeping Necromancy under the rug. It's a branch of magic too dangerous to let it fall in the hands of nobles with more money than life left.

'Heck, even Balkor is something that better stays forgotten. If the story of what happened to him becomes public, small villages like Lutia would either smother their children's talent for magic or lose any trust in the Crown.

'But this? Why a bunch of ruins is deemed so dangerous? Why have I never heard anything about them, not even at the Academy?'

"With all due respect, Sir, but if the lost cities represent a threat to the Kingdom, why are they still standing? I doubt the combined forces of the army and the Mage Association can't bring them down, even if one at the time."

"Excellent question, Lieutenant." Berion nodded. He liked Lith not showing any fear for his personal safety and only thinking about the safety of their country. Alas, what he mistook for loyalty was just Lith's innate scientific curiosity.

Misunderstanding or not, the real reason for Berion's earlier anger wasn't the incident with Trion, but it's consequences. Rumors about the events at Regharos had spread like wildfire, attracting the interest of several high officers.

The Commander wanted to keep the existence of his golden goose a secret for as long as possible. Any meritorious act a subordinate performed would generate merits for their commanding officer.

So far, Lith had caused Berion a lot of trouble for little return. The purple crystal disappearance, Sergeant Tepper's complaints, and now an assault against fellows Non-commissioned officers. Berion had invested in Lith, but if someone stole him, it would have been all for naught.

"Cleansing operations have been conducted multiple times with poor results. Once in a while, we have to cull their numbers to prevent them from overpowering the arrays. That's why we need you to check their threat level.

"The problem is that there is no way to exterminate them for good. We tried and failed on several occasions over the centuries. Those things are hard to define. They are neither alive or undead. Even after wiping them out, they keep respawning.

"As for destroying the lost cities, it's too big of a risk. Our mages have assessed that, whatever created those things in the past, still lingers up to date. Those ruins are like a giant living array that has corrupted the very earth they were built upon.

"They hold an incredible amount of magic power that somehow never runs out. If we destroy those cities, we could create an even worse threat. Not to mention that all the knowledge they hold would be lost forever."

Lith was now even more eager to explore those ruins.

'It's like the library of Alexandria built on top of a nuclear reactor.' He thought. 'I wonder why Awakened ones never solved the issue. Is it because it's beyond even their capabilities or do they just not care? It's also possible they are the reason behind the constant respawn of the creatures.

'It would make sense if the Awakened ones want to keep others away from the prize.'

"I expect you to depart immediately." Berion handed to Lith a dimensional amulet shaped like the Ranger's Crest. It contained everything he could need during his travels.

"Remember to always report your position at least thrice a day. We need to know where you are and what are you doing. It's especially important before you enter one of the lost ruins or an unmapped city.

"Never underestimate the dangers of the border regions. There a lot of deserters from both the Griffon Kingdom and the Gorgon Empire living there. In the past, we have lost a lot of promising Rangers because of their carelessness.

"Don't hesitate to call for backup. The real strength of the army resides in its numbers. Feel free to get from the armory whatever you may need. Good luck, Ranger Verhen."

After exchanging the salute, Commander Berion offered Lith his hand. Lith was surprised by the gesture, but he shook it nonetheless.

'Seems he has high expectations for you.' Solus pondered. 'It doesn't match with my idea of a Ranger being like a beat cop, though. I mean, what can he possibly hope for you to achieve in the wilderness?'

'We'll find out.' Lith followed the Commander's advice, restocking his supplies of food and Alchemical tools. There was no weapon or armor that outperformed his current equipment, which was disappointing.

Lith left the camp, reaching the city of Belius with the Warp Gate. It was the biggest settlement in the region. Belius was a fortress city built in front of a narrow pass between two mountain ranges that formed a natural border separating the two countries.

On the other side of the pass there was a twin city, Relius, flying the Gorgon Empire's flag. Lith was stunned by the amount of magic in the air. There were countless arrays in place, preventing the use of dimensional magic, flight, and even spells above tier three.

Lith could sense a dissonance in the air that gave his mana core an ill feeling.

He had never seen so many protections since he had left the Royal Palace.

'Paranoid much?' Lith realized how hypocritical it the word sounded coming from him the moment he thought it.

'Yeah and for a good reason.' Solus pondered. 'Both cities must prevent the enemy from building a dimensional corridor that would make all the weapons and walls in the world useless. Dimensional items make smuggling anything an easy feat.

No wonder they are banned here.' She had attempted accessing her pocket dimension just to find it sealed.

Even leaving Belius proved to be not an easy feat. Lith had to fill a lot of paperwork to be recognized as the newly appointed Ranger of the region, had to declare everything he had stored in his army and personal dimensional amulets.

Much to his dismay, he found out the Mage Association had a way to undo his imprinting on the enchanted items and could verify Lith's claims.

"Are you sure you want to leave right away?" Asked a clerk of about twenty years of age after making an inventory of Lith's possessions before returning the amulets to him.

"Belius may have strict regulations, but it's one of the most beautiful cities of the Kingdom. Once you get out of the gates, it could be weeks before you have a proper bed and meal."

"Thanks, but no thanks. Without my magic, I feel naked." Lith replied. "I can't wait to get out of here."

The man nodded, opening a Warp Gate that brought Lith right outside the city walls.

"Lucky b*stard."

"Noble scum."

"F*cking as*hat."

Those were just some of the words that welcomed his arrival, together with numerous spits onto the ground to emphasized their contempt.

Even the city guards were about to join the crowd until they noticed the traveler was alone and donning the green of the Rangers. They hastily swallowed their own phlegm giving him a salute.

Chapter 379 The North Part 2

Lith could understand why his appearance had caused so much anger. The city had many gates and each one had a queue several hundreds of meters long that was getting longer by the minute.

Merchants, travellers, even residents had to pass several checks to get in or out. The Warp Gate was a fast lane, usually reserved for nobles and high officials. Lith ignored them, activating Life Vision to check if he could take off.

'What the heck?' His surprised expression was mistaken by some of those present as an indignant one, which prompted them to resume their swearing. Lith couldn't care less about them and spun around himself to make sure his eyes weren't playing a trick on him.

The arrays weren't in a fixed position. Unlike the academy and the Royal palace, they could only be described as a maelstrom. The magical energies covered the whole city at all times, but they also change their size and height with no warning.

Lith watched a mage flying above the city, until the array became like a hurricane and reached for the sky. The poor fellow fell like a rock, crashing on a rooftop with deadly consequences.

"Move along, sir. Otherwise you may be run over." The guard's voice woke Lith up from his stupor. He walked away double time, eager to find a better viewpoint which would allow him to study Belius.

The city was surrounded by walls made of stone that stood twenty meters (66') high with evenly spaced observation towers built along the perimeter. Each one of them was topped by blue magic crystals the size of a person.

Lith and Solus observed the arrays for a time, watching them shift like a tide. Whenever one of the spells the formations were meant to negate were used, even from a considerable distance from the city, the towers would detect it.

They would then produce a lightning of mystical energies invisible to the naked eye marking the mage as a target. The arrays would shapeshift accordingly to the information received killing their victims almost instantly.

Thanks to his heightened senses and the tall tree he had climbed, Lith was able to spot from a distance several towers placed along the mountain range, spanning as far as the eye could see.

'By my maker, those towers are relay points for Belius' arrays.' The revelations flabbergasted Solus.

'Yeah, they also allow the sealing magic to pinpoint its target and send an alarm signal.' Lith pondered. 'The corpses of the idiots we've seen trying to bypass the city checks have all been promptly collected.'

He had no idea what was actually happening but he could see a Warp Steps and several humanoid figures appear where the trespassers had fallen just a few seconds after their demise.

Everything happened too fast to be a coincidence, so Lith assumed that, just like for the Academy, elite guards could ignore the arrays and move freely.

'An almost living magical formation capable of changing its shape. To think that Yurial always nagged about Wardens being useless.' A sad smile appeared on Lith's face while thinking about his lost friend.

'I wish he were still alive, here with us. I could finally say to him "I told you so".'

Lith jumped down on the ground, landing with a roll to break his fall. It couldn't actually harm him, but he was still in an area where air magic was negated by the arrays. Neither his armor or spells could justify him being unscathed so he had to play the elite soldier card.

Lith had to run for over one kilometer to escape from the boundaries of the array. Only then he was able to take out from his pocket dimension the map of the Kellar region and put it inside Soluspedia replacing the one of the Distar Marquisate.

'We have up to four months here.' Lith thought. 'Let's plan our patrol so to give priority to the lost cities.'

The Kellar region was mostly uncharted. Aside from big cities like Belius, small settlements would pop up as fast as they would disappear. In the north, a cold wave was enough to freeze to death whoever didn't possess a properly insulated house.

Monsters would run rampant, slaughtering small villages for a midnight snack. Last but not least, there were the Rangers like Lith. Most of those small settlements were illegal, a safe haven for bandits, deserters, and all those who had an aversion to paying taxes.

They enjoyed the safety the army's patrols ensured, just like the comfort of using the roads paved by the Kingdom to connect rural areas with the main trading cities. Yet they took everything for granted and considered the harsh life in the north reason enough to be exempted from paying their dues.

In case such settlements were discovered by soldiers, one of the two had to disappear.

Lith was flying high enough to check with Life Vision a large area while he moved towards his first destination, the fallen city of Kaduria. The landscape was different from what he was used in the Distar Marquisate.

While his birthplace was mostly comprised of cultivated lands and woods filling the space between the populated areas, Kellar was mostly barren. It was still late fall, but snow already covered the ground and the tops of the few trees Lith encountered.

Ever since he departed from Belius, he met no farms nor villages. The frozen earth was full of rocks, making it unfertile without a considerable amount of effort. The area Lith was currently in was too far from the main road for any kind of trading to be profitable.

The only life forms he met were animals looking for food. Winter was coming and those without enough fat reserves were bound to meet a bad end. After several hours of flight, Lith was starting to feel tired.

'I have yet to recover completely from treating Kalla, tonight I'd like a good night sleep. Solus, did we meet a mana geyser on our way here?'

'None, but I believe that even without an external energy source I can at least form the ground floor of the tower.' She replied.

'Are you asking me to sleep while you work your a*s off? No way, we're in this together. Either we both rest or I use Invigoration.'

'Or we could sleep there.' Solus pointed at him the smoke coming out of several chimneys visible on the horizon.

'F*ck me sideways!' Lith cursed. A human settlement was the last thing he wanted to meet. He used the army's communication amulet to call his handler.

"Ranger Lith Verhen calling the Nest, do you copy?"

"Loud and clear." Said a feminine voice coming from the other side. Unlike Lith's amulet, the one provided by the army was engraved with several green mana crystals which, among many other things, strengthened its signal.

The gemstones emitted a series of flashes, scanning his surroundings.

"You deserve your reputation, Ranger Verhen. Covering so much ground in a single day is praiseworthy. Please give me a brief report of your findings." It was a polite way to ask him to prove he hadn't ignored his patrol duty.

There wasn't much to say, but Lith had taken note of all the unmapped landmarks he met on his way. He was certain they had been left out on purpose, some were too obvious to be missed, unless one was blind, deaf, and dumb.

Chapter 380 The Village Part 1

The handler was pleased, or at least it was what Lith hoped for. He could hear her taking notes the whole time.

"I called because I met a human settlement. Do you have my position?"

"Positive. Call me back once you are done. Do not lower your guard. Based on the images collected it's a medium sized village, so it's likely to be run by a renegade mage or a deserter."

"Once I'm done doing what?" Lith said. "If I get down there, either will be a massacre or they'll run away as soon as I leave. If our purpose is collecting taxes, then it's better for me to stay away from the village and let you do your job."

"Negative. Our duty is not collecting taxes, but ensure the safety of the citizens. You must make sure that no one there is forced to stay against their will or is being subjected to the practice of illegal magic.

"Taxes are just an excuse to prevent bureaucrats from bothering us with budget issues. In the wilderness we are the law, young Ranger. Today, you are the law. So get down there and call me back once you are done. I expect a full and detailed report."

Cursing at his bad luck, Lith descended to the ground. He activated Life Vision while Solus activated mana sense. They could perceive about 100 life signatures but no arrays or magical protections of sorts.

'Do I go there incognito or do I keep my uniform?' Lith pondered.

'Incognito? How exactly?' Solus chuckled at the idea. 'Aside from your uniform, you only have light clothes suitable for disguising yourself as a farmer or a hunter back in Lutia. Your skin and hair are too dark to pass yourself for a man of the north.

'Also, you have no backpack. No one in their right mind would think you got here by chance. With your build and well fed appearance, they wouldn't believe you are lost or have been robbed either.'

As it happened most of the time, Solus was right. Lith had not bothered packing disguises or makeup.

'Point taken. I'd say it's better to check the outskirts of the village before going deeper inside. It's unlikely we'll meet a dangerous opponent, but after Nalear I don't like the idea of getting surrounded again.' Lith thought.

He was surprised by the lack of watchmen. The path to the village was clear, making things too easy to be true. The closer he got to the settlement, the more Lith became aware of his surroundings.

The houses were made in hardwood and looked solid. Lith could smell a fresh coat of tar mixed with other substances used to fill gaps between wood to insulate the heat and prevent drafts.

'Two things. One, this isn't a makeshift camp. It's been made to last. The lack of guards doesn't make sense. Why are they not afraid of hungry monsters or magical beasts raiding the place for food? Two, how did my predecessor miss all this?'

Lith stopped the moment his eyes caught an anomaly near his left foot. There was a thin tripwire a few centimeters above the ground. He followed both extremities, one at a time, discovering they were tied up to trees, not to an alarm.

He focused on his sense of smell, detecting a lot of metal lying around coupled with a sour scent. Lith used air magic to float above the ground and by following the scent he discovered several traps, all coated with poison.

'This should be Death Pepper.' Lith thought after licking a greasy substance off a sharp blade placed at the height where the thigh of an average man would be.

'It's a nerve paralyzing poison that kills fast but leaves the meat available for consumption since it loses effectiveness when cooked. They say it even gives the game a spicy flavor, hence the name.

It makes you wonder if these nice villagers have a taste for human flesh.'

Soon Lith understood the trap maker's pattern. Tripwires were actually double traps. If one noticed them and stepped over them, they would fall into a spike pit, the same if they missed it.

All the other traps were connected to long wires running towards the village that Lith imagined being alarms to announce the hunter that dinner was served. He could have disabled them, but it would also mean leaving a trail of his passage that could alert anyone returning to the village after him.

Once he got close enough to the settlement, the matter became even more serious. Life Vision spotted the last line of defense. The traps right before the village were all comprised of enchanted poisoned blades.

'What the heck is this? The set of the Texas chainsaw massacre? Why I always stumble into hornet's nests?' Lith had already lost his patience. The situation was a waste of time for him. He only wanted to reach the ruins and learn from them as much as he could.

'The villagers may just be trying to defend themselves.' Solus replied. 'Also, you need merits to obtain access to top secret tomes. I get you are tired and cranky, but we have to play this by the book.

'First impression matters. A poor job could trigger an internal investigation and further slow us down.'

Lith took a few deep breathes to calm himself before moving forward. He reminded himself of the words of both his handler and Commander. His actions would be investigated and evaluated, so he had to be smart.

The outer rim hosted only livestock and carriages. The small houses were actually barns, henhouses, and stables.

'This is good news. Over half of the life forces are harmless animals. The odd thing is what do they need all these carriages for? Why do they have so much wheat? There isn't a single plot of cultivated land here.' Lith thought.

The sun had yet to set, but the daily activities seemed to be already over. All the human life forces were in the middle and inner rim. Those in the middle rim seemed to be already asleep, while the people of the innermost rim were assembled in the biggest building, located at the center of the town.

The buildings in the middle rim were even smaller than those in the outer one and with much better locks. The doors were barred and secured with a heavy chain. They had a chimney but no windows. Life Vision revealed two individuals lying still on their beds.

At that point, Lith had no need to check inside the houses. All the pieces of the puzzle were falling into place but one.

'Seriously, how could a Ranger miss this place?' Suddenly the missing landmarks on the map acquired a new significance. Lith walked towards a man that was approaching his position while Solus refused to believe in Lith's cynical conclusion.

She left his right hand, assuming liquid form to sneak under the door. The two inside were a boy and a girl of undefined age. They had their wrists chained to a metal pole placed right behind their bunk.

Their hair was disheveled, stained by several streaks of coagulated blood. Solus used Invigoration on them to check their condition. Both the youths suffered from severe malnutrition. Their bones were cracked in multiple points, their bodies covered in bruises and lacerations.

During the fifth year at the Academy, when Lith had worked in the ER of several hospitals, they had seen this kind of injury several times, but seldom with such deliberate cruelty.