

Supreme M 381

Chapter 381 The Village Part 2

The kids were covered with thick blankets to protect them from the cold, since they were completely naked. Looking at the bloodstains on the sheets and the pavement, Solus felt aghast realizing the kids were left "ready to use."

Lith approached the man without emitting a sound. He used his Hush spell to make sure no one would disturb them. The guy was tall, at least 1.78 meters, wearing warm fur clothes and a broadsword on his side.

Lith smirked noticing the blade was not enchanted. He was eager to put his new body to test.

"Good evening, sir. How is this village called?" Lith asked with the casual tone he would use to converse about the weather.

The man turned around while unsheathing his sword. His pale skin became even whiter for the surprise, but his movements were smooth. The slash missed Lith's nose by a whisker.

"I'll overlook your rudeness this once." Lith was having a hard time keeping a straight face. The sword moved like in slow motion to his eyes. "Put down your weapon and tell me what I want to know. Otherwise, I'll sheathe it up your a*s."

The man swept his unkempt blonde hair off his eyes, unable to believe he had missed such an easy target from so close. His nervousness turned into panic when the man noticed the Ranger badge over the foreigner's heart.

"The Ranger! The Ranger is here already!" The man screamed on the top of his lungs before blowing a bone whistle which produced an ear piercing sound.

"What do you mean with 'already?'" Lith asked while grabbing with his bare hand the blade that was still pointed at his face. The man was surprised no one had responded to the alarm, but grinned before twisting and pulling away his sword.

He had expected the Ranger's fingers to fall off, yet the blade didn't move an inch instead. No matter how much strength he used. Even grabbing the hilt with two hands proved useless, it was like the broadsword was stuck into a vice.

Lith suddenly let go of the sword to appreciate his own unscathed skin.

"Seems that normal weapons can't hurt me anymore, not even those razor sharp like yours. What's this?" His palm was covered with a greasy substance that smelled like sulfur. Lith's skin tingled while his immune system neutralized the substance.

"Rot oil? Do even goons use poison now?" As the name implied, rot oil was a toxin that would make any open wound fester and difficult to treat. Without the help of a Healer, a single cut could lead to the death of even a magical beast.

The man was terrified. He couldn't understand how neither the sword or the poison was effective. He struck at Lith with all of his strength, only to almost lose the grip on the weapon.

It felt like hitting a rock. Lith was tired of playing. The nameless man's actions spoke volumes about what kind of village was that and how it went unnoticed until that moment.

Lith disarmed the man with spirit magic and fulfilled his promise. The nameless man gargled blood while the pain from growing a steel tail ravaged his body. Solus returned to Lith's hand, sharing with him the visions from the house.

'Please, save them.' Was the only thing she said before seeking comfort in their telepathic bond. The sight of the youths' miserable state had shocked her. Solus wanted for that horror to disappear forever.

'As you wish, milady.' Lith raised the nameless man as a Death Knight and armed it with the poisoned blade. A Death Knight was an undead whose well preserved body retained the dexterity it had in life.

Also, by mixing spirit magic while creating the blood core, Lith was able to impart to it some basic notions of fencing. Master and servant took their time, killing everyone who walked outside the main building or lived in the middle rim without being a prisoner.

With each corpse, Lith's small army grew in numbers.

"Surround the zone. Kill whoever tries to escape." The Death Knights obeyed in silence. They formed groups of three covering each door and window.

Lith could hear joyful music coming from inside the huge building that occupied most of the town square. He could almost distinguish several voices laughing and bantering.

"Open up! Ranger corps!" He screamed a second before kicking down the entrance. Its metal hinges broke like they were aluminum foil while the huge wooden door crashed on the ground with a booming sound.

The room inside was well lit, its temperature warm. Braziers were evenly placed to provide comfort and allow to cook the food to one heart's content. The place reminded Lith of Lutia's arrangements for the Spring Festival, making him nauseous.

On his left, along the wall, there was a long table filled with all kinds of delicacies. Behind it were sitting four people that he assumed were the rulers of the village. On his right, there were several smaller tables that could accommodate two people at most.

Between the tables, there was space enough to allow the slaves to satisfy each of their masters' wishes. All those present were skimpily clothed, some stark naked. It was easy for Lith to distinguish the victims from the tormentors.

The former were thin, with dead eyes that had lost hope. The latter was annoyed by his appearance and unsheathed their weapons.

"The door was open." Said a red haired woman with a seductive smile. She was one of the leaders. Until a moment prior she was enjoying the attentions of a couple of boys that could be at best the same age as Lith.

She raised a hand to calm her underlings, her eyes never leaving Lith's.

"I'm sure we can find a compromise. If you weren't interested in your share of the fun, you would have already called for backup and we would be surrounded. Instead, here you are, all alone.

We aren't unreasonable people. All we ask you is to stay out of our business and we'll make your permanence in the north as pleasant as profitable. We do not discriminate, to each their own."

Lith had already noticed that the slavers were both males and females. According to Solus, the females had stronger mana cores, but aside from the one speaking, none was above the yellow.

"I have a counter offer." He replied. "Those who want to live have to go down on their knees, face against the wall. All the others can consider their lives forfeited."

Single-handedly taking down a village of marauding slavers would fetch him a lot of merits. Yet even if he would gain nothing from it, he would do it anyway. Solus had never asked him anything before. Lith wasn't going to let her down.

A woman sitting at one of the front tables weaved a tier three spell, unleashing a lightning bolt against Lith's back. He simply extended his right hand capturing the energy and forcing it to assume the form of a sphere.

"You call that a lightning?" He said with a disgusted expression. "This is a lightning." He pointed his index finger releasing a stream of electricity that turned the mage and her table companion into charred corpses.

Marauders and slaves were now covered in cold sweat. Lith wasn't releasing any killing intent but they couldn't shrug off the feeling that something was wrong. Everyone knew magic, either because they used it or they had endured its effect to be disciplined.

Whatever the Ranger was using, it wasn't magic.

Chapter 382 The Village Part 3

"Stand up, vermin." With a snap of Lith's fingers, the two marauders' corpses came back to life, sending the whole room into a panic.

"Last chance. Face against the wall or die." Most of the slaves took those words as their cue. They tossed away the food trays they were holding, jumped off the lap of their masters, or just stopped standing like dolls and rushed to the nearest wall.

Whoever tried to stop them was struck by an ice bullet in the middle of the forehead and raised from the grave.

"You can't be serious!" One of the leaders, a muscular man almost 2 meters (6'7") tall, stood up with an indignant expression on his face and a huge enchanted great sword in his hand.

"Mage or non mage, there's thirty of us and just one of you. You can't hope to come out of here alive!"

"And you shouldn't have roasted a whole pig." Lith's reply made no sense until the dead beast stood up from the giant silver tray it was resting upon with red glowing eyes. It crashed the apple in its mouth and jumped at the burly man's throat.

Fear and surprise got the best of him, giving the undead pig the moment it needed to bite its prey's neck. One fell and yet a few seconds later two stood up.

Some of the marauders couldn't stand that madness anymore. Taking advantage of the distance from the mad Ranger, they jumped against the nearest window in an attempt to save their own lives.

They landed on the snow covered ground with thick glass shards piercing their exposed skin. They gritted their teeth to withstand the pain and the cold invading their bodies when the groups of undead that Lith had left on watch obeyed their master's order.

Three against one wasn't a fight but a massacre. The first undead would aim for the limbs, the second would stab at the chest, and the last would make the head roll. Blood spurts stained the pristine snow while painting the outside of the building red.

The dining hall was silent, so the sounds of battle and gurgling death cries resounded like thunder.

"I'm not alone, by the way." Lith explained with a smirk.

"All your comrades who are not here didn't run away, they joined my cause. I made them an offer they couldn't refuse." He pointed at the undead that now stood in front of the slaves ready to protect them.

The female leader glanced through the window behind her making a quick estimate of her odds of survival.

'He is still just one man. Superior Necromancy is not something a greenhorn can learn. Once the Ranger is dead, his minions will be stringless puppets.' She thought.

"There's no need to fight. We managed to reach an agreement with your predecessor, I don't see why it should be any different this time." She said while gesturing under the table, giving the other leaders the order to step away from the windows and take out their wands.

Lith had no idea what the signals meant, but thanks to Life Vision he didn't miss the sudden appearance of the Alchemical items.

'Be careful, those wands are military grade. Maybe even a goodbye gift of their late associate.' Solus said. 'With a blue core you can overpower weak spells, but the peak of tier three is still beyond your abilities.'

Lith spread his arms, one aimed towards the marauders and the other towards their leaders, releasing a barrage of ice shards. The attack was so sudden that the occupants of the front rows died before having the opportunity to react.

Only some of them were lucky enough to be unwillingly shielded by their companions and managed to flip the tables to use them as makeshift shields. The three remaining leaders dropped to the floor the moment Lith moved a finger, saving their lives by the skin of their teeth.

"How the heck does he do it?" The last man among the leaders yelled to be heard above the noise of shattering glasses and the thumping sound of ice piercing the wood.

"No chanting, no signs, and his projectiles are able to curve in mid air!"

"It's a War Mage, you idiot." Instead of wasting her time whining, the female leader was wearing her armor as fast as she could.

"We must have stumbled into a rich kid with tier four rings. Just one of them is worth more than this miserable pile of flesh and wood we call village. This is a blessing in disguise. If we kill him, the three of us are set for life. Dead men don't get any share, if you catch my drift."

Greed lit the eyes of the three leaders, who changed their wands from lightning to ice. The words "collateral damage" and "friendly fire" suddenly had a nice ring to them. They raised their arms and heads above the vertically flipped table, ready to open fire.

While they were discussing, Lith had stopped his spell. He Blinked behind the tables, catching the terrified criminals by surprise and stealing their hearts. Literally. His arm pierced their chest, leaving behind a blood core that turned the fallen into his faithful servants.

The undead would kill everyone on their path, taking position right in front of the slaves to protect them at any cost. Lith hadn't forgotten about his promise to Solus. Her wish was their command.

When the leaders came out of their hiding spot, their men had been decimated. They shoot at Lith, only to watch him Blink away while their darts created more corpses. The dead keep rising, forming a barricade that stopped any stray bullet.

"Thanks. Your help was unnecessary, though. I would have killed them anyway. You are the only ones I need to spare for interrogation." Lith appeared behind the leaders, making them flinch.

They turned around, but he only needed a flick of his wrist to cause a spiral fracture in their wand wielding arm with spirit magic. The Alchemical tools fell onto the ground while their owners writhed in agony.

Pain blurred their vision with tears they couldn't stop.

"How did you do it?" The woman didn't feel blessed anymore.

Her arm was twisted from the wrist to the shoulder. All she had worked hard for years was crumbling in front of her eyes and the corpses of her followers were staring at her with deep hatred. It was like they were blaming her for their demise.

"Magic." Lith replied with a second flick that broke the remaining arm in the same manner. The only reason why Lith had wasted so much time talking was to weave all the spells he needed, keeping them ready at a second's notice.

The three surviving marauders remained limp on the floor. Without arms, without soldiers, and surrounded by monsters led by an even more monstrous Ranger, they felt that any further struggle would be pointless.

Only after checking that no one of the slaves was about to die and that all the bandits were dead, Lith released his Necromancy spell. He then called his handler to give her a full report of the events.

Chapter 383 The Village Part 4

"Set the temporary Warp Gate. We need to talk." Her voice was seething with anger. Lith took out from the Ranger amulet the metal frame and assembled the portal. Once it was powered by his mana and several mana crystals, it took just a few minutes for her to arrive along with a few army mages.

The prisoners needed immediate help. The Gate needed much more power to allow the transportation of so many people to Belius where they would receive proper care. After a quick sweep of the place under Lith's guidance, the army personnel was shocked.

Rangers were an elite unit. However it was hard to believe, even after seeing it with their own eyes, that so many criminals had been eliminated without a single casualty.

"Are you insane?" Lieutenant Kamila Yehval, Lith's handler, was on the verge of a massive headache. She was a woman in her late twenties with long black hair held up in a ponytail. She had almond shaped eyes which made her quite cute to Lith.

"You were supposed to make your report as soon as you assessed how dangerous the situation was. Your brash actions put yourself and the civilians into danger. Why didn't you ask for back up?"

Maybe it was because of Phloria, but Lith had a thing for authoritative women. Now that he could see in person, she wasn't only a sweet voice, but also quite attractive.

"Because the first hostile I engaged revealed the organization had a deal with my predecessor. They knew a new Ranger was about to arrive. I managed to take them by surprise because I reached this place sooner than they predicted.

"I thought that, if I called for back up, their associate could alert them and give them the time to dispose of the hostages and flee." Lith lied through his teeth. He had made up the story while waiting for her.

His real motive was to not have witnesses. The slaves had no notion of magic, while the marauders could claim he was the reincarnation of Arthan the Mad King and no one would have believed them.

Lith predicted that based on the Royal Constable who would handle the case, the three prisoners had from a few days to a week left to live. The Kingdom's justice was as swift as brutal in such circumstances.

"You have a point. Still, you should have contacted me. Had you failed, the army would have lost a Ranger and those people their lives." Kamila said with a sigh.

"How did you manage to kill so many on your own?"

"I pick my allies among those who cannot betray me." Lith executed a short chant that raised an undead.

"A divide and conquer strategy. Very smart of you using their numbers against them."

'Maybe he is not one of those idiots with the hero complex.' She thought while smiling in approval.

"This level of mastery in Necromancy isn't listed in your file. We'll have to update it later."

"I hope we can discuss it over dinner. I don't know any good place in Belius, so I'd be in your care." Lith replied with what he hoped was his best charming smile.

"Are you hitting on me?" Kamila giggled.

"Well, yes. We have the same rank and your voice will be my only contact with the civilized world for the next months. I think we should know each other better. Also, I hope you wouldn't deny a lone Ranger his only wish."

"Kid, do you have an idea how old I am?" She was still giggling and had yet to say no. Lith took it as a good sign.

"Twenty, maybe?" He squinted his eyes, like he was concentrating really hard on the answer. Lith's Warp Gate flashed for a second, allowing the Royal Constable to join them. It took her but a second to read the mood.

"Flirting on the scene of a massacre is a bit cliché, but it usually works to break the ice. At least for me."

Lieutenant Yehval stopped twirling her hair and stood at attention.

"Constable Ernas. It's an unexpected pleasure to meet you so far away from home." Lith said giving her a salute.

"At ease Lieutenants. I'm a fan of your work, Lith. So when I heard you were involved, I asked the case to be assigned to me. Take me to the prisoners, we have much to discuss."

Lith accompanied Jirni to the cellar where the red haired bandit was detained.

Her arms were still shattered, making it pointless to cuff her. Her feet were chained to a wall, giving her barely enough space to stretch her legs.

"Constable Jirni Ernas. Are you ready to talk?" She asked with a flat tone.

"I'll tell you everything, but I want a deal. I don't care what you do with the others, as long I walk away free and with working arms." Her face was strained from the pain, yet she looked at the Constable with defiance.

'If I talk, I'm a dead woman. There's nothing this wench can do to me that the Ranger hasn't already done.' The marauder thought.

"Deal or no deal, you will talk." Jirni replied with a cruel grin. She struck the prisoner with her extended fingers in the space between the neck and the collarbone. The criminal coughed a few times before attempting to curse at her warden.

No words came out of her mouth.

"You see, dear, if you hit the nerve cluster located there, first the victim goes numb, then they experience an unspeakable agony." Lith took a mental note of Jirni's words. He could see the prisoner turning paler. The pain had yet to kick in, but the fear was already there.

"Now, while we wait for the confession, do you mind telling me if there's something serious between you and that pretty officer?"

"I just met her." Lith shrugged. "Why do you ask?"

"I know it's none of my business, but please, humor me. Is there a Lady Verhen waiting for you at Lutia?"

"No. Otherwise I wouldn't ask my handler for a date." Lith resented the allegation. He had never cheated on any of his past girlfriends.

"Perfect!" Jirni exclaimed with glee. "You know that I always cheered for you. I still think you and Phloria would make a perfect couple. She was so happy when Friya told her how worried you were about her happiness."

Lith became red, while the prisoner tapped her foot. She was now eager to talk. Jirni had more pressing matters at hand, so she ignored her.

"Let's be honest, dear. You are a magnet for troubles, just like I was at your age. First day on the job and you stumble into a nightmare. No matter how much we roam the world or how many people we kill, the void inside those like us never disappears.

We are monsters, but it doesn't mean we have to remain alone." She took his hand into hers.

"The Kingdom needs us to keep the real monsters at bay. You can find your place in the world if you stop being scared of hurting others and accept yourself for who you are. Think about this the next time you get a leave. Phloria is single at the moment too." Jirni winked.

Lith left her to her job after promising Jirni he would keep in touch. Before he left the village to resume his patrol, Kamila gave him a new portable Warp Gate and her contact rune.

Chapter 384 Memories Part 1

Before leaving the slavers' village and resume his flight towards the Fallen City of Kaduria, Lith would have liked to spend some more time with Kamila. However, she was too busy supervising the rescue operations.

Some of the prisoners were in desperate conditions and the army needed all hands on deck. Lith took care of those whose health was beyond the help of normal Healers. Thanks to Invigoration, he could resupply their life force and fix their bodies so fast that as long there was still a spark of life they could be saved.

'Solus asked me to save them, not just to delay their demise. I've kept my word at the best of my abilities.' He thought.

The other Healers clicked their tongues at Lith's "Speed Healing" session, thinking he was doing a poor job to rack up merits fast and leave them to fix his mess. Rangers had a bad name. Not because they were easy to corrupt or cruel people.

Their ill reputation was due to their poor social skills, usually coupled with a contempt for teamwork. In a system where relying on others to watch your back was the norm, Rangers worked alone.

"He picked the worst cases and spent a few minutes per patient." One of the Healers said while double checking Lith's work.

"Let's hope the terminator had at least the decency to stabilize their conditions before leaving. I swear, Rangers belong with beasts, not with humans. They..." The words died in his mouth when the diagnostic spell gave its report.

Aside from the malnutrition, there was no sign of injury, neither past or present. The scars had disappeared and the bones, albeit thin, showed no sign of previous fractures. The Healers were so shocked that, even knowing it was a breach of the protocol, they went to Lieutenant Yehval to ask about Lith's identity.

"The patients- they-" The main Healer was so excited he was at loss of words. "Some of them were in such a state we could only ease their pain and wait for the inevitable. Now they are fit as a fiddle. I would like to ask the Ranger to take me as his apprentice."

The man was double Lith's age, but he didn't sound embarrassed at the idea of serving under someone so young.

"I'm sorry, Captain." Kamila replied. "Until the end of his tour, I can't disclose any of the Ranger's personal information. I can relay your message to him, though."

'He's so young yet has already reached the rank of First Lieutenant.' She couldn't avoid feeling a tinge of envy considering it had taken her a decade to obtain the same promotion.

'Healer, Necromancer, ruthless warrior...' She thought while watching at the corpses whose head had been ripped off or the heart removed from the chest.

'I wonder how many other things he is good at.' She giggled while looking at Lith's contact rune on her personal communication amulet.

Meanwhile Kamila planned on calling him as soon as his rune went back online, Lith was speeding through the barren lands of the north. His journey was dull. He didn't meet any settlement even after flying for hundreds of kilometers at a height that allowed him to check far and wide.

Kaduria was relatively close, yet Lith didn't plan on going there. At least not before resting. The moment Solus's mana sense spotted a mana geyser, they checked the surrounding area for kilometers, making sure that any life form in its proximity was just an animal.

After meeting Gadorf the Wyvern, Lith didn't trust much Evolved Monsters too. He was now reluctant to expose Solus's existence even to magical beasts. First Scarlett and then Nalear had tried to take her away from him. Both had almost succeeded.

He wouldn't allow for a third time to happen. Once the mage tower was formed, Lith had Solus activating her cloaking abilities and hid the tower underground. Only then he allowed himself to relax.

"Thanks for saving those people." Solus's wisp form appeared in front of him looking for an embrace which he didn't hesitate to offer her.

"Don't mention it, partner. Is it me or the thing inside your wisp form has grown bigger again?" At first, when Solus gained the ability to materialize herself inside the tower, she was just a firefly the size of a tennis ball.

Over time, the wisp had become big enough for them to notice that something solid was at its center. Its nature and purpose were unknown, but after their last fusion, Lith supposed it was the embryo of Solus's light body.

"No, you are right." She replied. "Now that your mana core has upgraded to blue, my nourishment has become even better. I can't wait for my core to become bright green, if not even cyan!"

In Solus's mind, the former was the threshold to obtain the body made of light, the latter was the one where she expected to gain a true physical form.

Lith took note of her words and started to use Accumulation. Thanks to the combined effect of the mana geyser and the tower, he could absorb much more world energy than usual with every breath.

Refining his core would help Solus to promote her own even faster.

"I won't enter Kaduria until I've properly recovered. My body is a mess after not sleeping for so long. Using Invigoration so many times only made things worse. First thing, I'm taking a bath. Giving that scum such a clean death made me feel dirty inside. I wish I could have made them suffer more."

"Take your time. Would you like something in particular for dinner?"

"No offense, Solus, but your cooking sucks. Until you can smell or taste, everything you prepare is a coin flip at best. Also, why aren't you joining me? I know you enjoy a good bubble bath with hydro massage every time we are back in the tower."

"Yes, I do. I prefer to take them alone, though." She replied while flying toward the kitchen she had just created.

"Your behavior doesn't make sense. The whole tower is your body. Even if the wisp is away, we can talk, you can watch, and we can interact. Why are you acting shy all of a sudden?"

'Maybe because if the wisp is away I'm not forced to watch?' Solus thoughts oozed sarcasm. 'Does he not realize he's not a little kid anymore just like I'm not a naïve little girl? I don't know if Lith is so dense towards me because he considers me like a sister or what.'

'Or what.' Lith replied honestly, making Solus and all the lights inside the tower turn beet red.

'It's not that I'm shameless, but we spend every single second of the day together. Plus, because of our mind fusion, you know all the most embarrassing details of all my lives. At this point, modesty is as useless as a third nostril.

'Sorry if my request made you uncomfortable, it's just that I'm used to having you by my side. I miss you already.' Lith closed the bathroom's door before stripping.

His words made Solus's mind spin in turmoil, forcing her to rush outside the tower and getting as far as she could before allowing herself to think again.

Chapter 385 Memories Part 2

'F*ck me sideways! I forgot that inside the tower our mind link is stronger than usual. Thinking or speaking is almost the same thing. I wonder what he will think of me now' Solus spent the next minutes reviewing her blunder.

Every time she replayed Lith's last words, she could feel her heart flutter. After she regained her composure, she went back.

"It was nice seeing Jirni again." She said pretending their last conversation never happened. "She hasn't aged a day. What do you think about her words? Maybe you and Phloria could give your relationship a second chance."

"Maybe, maybe not." Lith said with a sigh. "I don't want to see her right now. Life isn't a romance drama where people can break up countless times and make up like nothing ever happened. The next time we break up will be the last.

"Either I open up and tell her the truth she still doesn't know or I can spare us both the inevitable sad ending. Phloria is the first person I had a true relationship with. It wasn't just about having fun or sex. She..."

Lith couldn't bear to finish the phrase and Solus knew well why.

It happened after Nalear's attack on the White Griffon. Between the slave items, Yurial's death, and having killed many of their schoolmates, Lith's companions were on the verge of a mental breakdown.

They were all living under the Ernas' roof, together with Lith's family, searching for a way to cope with their trauma. Lith was the one faring the best, but not by much. Having been split from Solus, Yurial's death, and receiving his notebooks weighted on Lith's mind.

Quylla was having the worst of it, requiring assistance 24/7 just to prevent her from self harming. Phloria was tormented by the ghosts of those she had killed, Yurial included. It had been her decision of saving Jirni first that spelled his doom and she couldn't forgive herself for not finding a solution to an impossible situation.

After sundown, she would see their faces in every shadow, making the guilt unbearable to the point that tranquilizers had little effect. Lith had to spend the nights sitting on a chair next to her bed, caressing her head until she would fall asleep.

His touch was the only thing that calmed her. Lith would hold her hand for hours to make sure her dreams would be free from nightmares. The days passed and Phloria's condition improved. Yet he would remain on the chair, keeping her at arm's length.

A few nights before the academy would resume, Phloria mustered the courage to confront him.

"Why are you doing it again?" She asked.

"What exactly?"

"Why do you keep your distance from me? You are so close, yet there is a divide between us. Would it kill you to at least sit on my bed?"

"I- I can't." Lith replied.

"You can't or you won't? I can understand if you blame me for Yurial's death, I do the same." She clenched the blankets, her firm tone just a cover for the underlying fear. Fear of being hated, of being rejected by those she loved because of her weakness.

"It's not your fault nor Quylla's. My reasons are my own and believe me when I say you don't want to know them."

"We have been together for months now and you still don't trust me? Is that the reason you always refuse to touch me?" She was hurt by his silence. She knew Lith had lots of secrets, but she had waited for him to open up.

Phloria knew that he was like Nalear. Lith and the mad Professor were the only two mages she had ever seen emitting an aura without the use of any spell. Phloria was very close to the truth, she just lacked the term Awakened one to fill the picture.

"No. I told you after Balkor, you just didn't listen! I'm not like you. I'm a monster. You have no idea how hard it had been keeping you safe from me, from all the sh*t that's my life."

"I never asked you to protect me! I'm not a child, I'm a woman now. The only things I asked from you were to love me and let me be part of your life."

"Easy to say when you know nothing! Nothing about love or me. Those are just words and words are cheap!"

"I know a lot of things!" She replied. "I know that Nalear was strong and fast, just like you. That the aura you emit when you go all out is not normal. That somehow, somewhere you lost a brother that's not part of your family. I know all these things because I was always by your side."

Lith was taken aback by Phloria's words. Yet he didn't budge.

"You don't understand. We are both emotionally vulnerable right now. If I take a step forward, we'd do something we will regret forever."

"How can you say that? What gives you the right to decide what I will or will not regret?"

Lith was so tired of that charade. Yet he had to pick his words carefully. It was the second time she was offering herself to him and he was pushing her away again. She deserved a proper explanation.

"Turn off the lights, please." Phloria did as instructed, making the room turn dark. Passing clouds obscured the moonlight from time to time, giving the room an eerie feeling.

Lith stood up, taking a few steps away from the bed, letting the left side of his body be basked in darkness.

"I was serious before. You deserve someone better than me. Someone that can make you happy. I can't because I'm not like Nalear, I'm much worse. I'm a real monster." He took a deep breath, letting the abyss inside him step out of its boundaries.

Solus had described Lith the form he would take while fighting in dimly lit spaces and with a bit of training he had learned how to conjure and to block the shadows that would cover him like a shroud, changing his appearance.

Phloria gasped when she saw three yellow eyes opening on the darkened face, the hand turned into vicious claws, and the skin covered with black scales the edges of which were burning hot.

Lith could see her face turning pale as a ghost, her eyes turn watery. It was what he wanted, yet he felt his heart squeezed by an invisible vice.

'It's over now. I'll release a bit of killing intent to make her faint. Tomorrow she'll hope this is just a nightmare. Even if she remembers anything, no one would believe her story, not even herself. With all she has gone through, everybody will think it's her trauma talking.'

Lith released waves of violent mana expecting her to scream, to cry and call for help before passing out. Phloria stepped out of her bed, wearing only her nightgown. In the moonlight, she looked like a fairy as much as he felt a monster for crushing her feelings once again.

Lith waited for her to run away, so he could strike her from behind and make her lose consciousness. That way the events of that night would remain etched in her mind without compromising his cover. All according to plan.

Phloria didn't run. She walked slowly, covering the distance separating them until they were in front of each other.

Chapter 386 Kaduria Part 1

"Does it hurt?" Phloria said caressing the scaly side of his face. A silent tear streaked down her cheek.

"What?" It wasn't much a question. More like the way Lith blurted out his surprise. Phloria seemed to be immune to his killing intent.

"I'm so sorry. I had no idea you were going through something like this alone. Does it hurt when you transform?"

"Yes." He replied overwhelmed by her kindness. The shadows surrounding Lith shattered, making him human again.

"I remember our conversation well. You told me that if I thought you could make me happy, we would have continued from that point. I love you, Lith from Lutia and I know you can make me happy. The only question is: am I able to make you happy?"

She kissed him gently, shattering all the walls he had erected until that moment to protect himself from the world. Despite all that she knew, despite all that she had seen, Phloria was still in front of him.

Not afraid of what he was, but of being pushed away. It was something that Lith had never imagined, not even in his wildest dreams. She was accepting him unconditionally.

"You make me happy." He replied with a hoarse voice, struggling with the unknown emotions that were bringing a part of his dead heart to life.

Phloria hugged him tightly, feeling that the divide between them had disappeared. Lith was clinging to her like a boyfriend for the first time since they had got together. She gave him a deep kiss while undoing the ties on her shoulders that kept her nightgown on.

She took a few steps back, allowing Lith to stare at her body without letting go of his hands before pulling him slowly towards the bed.

Lith shook his head trying to push the memory away. He understood why Phloria broke up with him. They had gotten to a point of their lives where their goals diverged. Their feelings hadn't changed, yet they both needed their space.

"So are you really calling Kamila?" Solus rushed to change the topic. Lith's pain was her own. She had never meant to make sad memories resurface after so many years.

"Of course I am! I may be bitter, lonely, and grumpy but I'm not dead. If after our first date things go well, I may even spend the evening of my birthday with her. My family can have morning and afternoon, but I need some me time."

Lith's seventeenth birthday was approaching. It had no significance to him, yet it could be used as leverage to get a few days of leave if he played his cards right with Kamila.

Lith prepared for himself a big dinner comprised of his favorite foods, leaving Solus to take care of only the vegetables. There was no way she could screw that up. As soon as he finished, he went back to his private quarters.

The room didn't resemble his academy apartment anymore, it was mixed with parts from his house back on Earth. The library contained his favorite books that Solus had managed to salvage from his memory and in front of his bed and on the ceiling, there was a huge TV screen.

It was actually just a flat-screen. Lith had no idea how a TV was made so neither could Solus replicate it. What she could do, was to project the movies he loved the most. He was on a tight schedule, but after months of isolation and the horrors she had just born witness to, Lith decided that Solus deserved a little R&R.

They watched the first movie of the "The Madrox" trilogy together, an old sci-fi blockbuster. It was Solus's favorite since it was the only movie available with a happy ending.

"Why do you remember the first one so well while the other two are but a blur?" She asked while watching the final bout between the main character dressed like a priest and the ruthless Agent Doe.

"Because most of the time sequels are hot garbage." They were sitting close to each other, with Solus leaning against his side.

The next morning, Lith found her sound asleep in his bed right next to him.

'I really don't get it. All that fuss for the bath and then she has no problem snuggling against me or get cuddled to sleep. I guess women will always remain a mystery.' He thought while exploiting her lack of consciousness to not embarrass her.

The rest of the trip to Kaduria was eventless. The further he got from populated areas, the more often he met small woods. Whenever Life Vision showed him a significant number of creatures, he would check the area for monsters.

Lith only met animals and very few magical beasts. They looked hungry, but most of all, scared. He bartered some food for information.

"Why is this zone deserted? There's water, trees, yet I couldn't find a single bird nest or burrow. Is there something dangerous here I should know about?"

"Indeed." Replied a brown Byk gobbling up the raw meat offered to him. "Winter is coming, otherwise no one would be so desperate to go near Death's City to search for food."

"Do you mean the dead city of Kaduria?" Lith pointed towards his destination that lay only a few kilometers away.

"Not a dead city. Death's city." The Byk corrected him. "I suggest you go back. Nothing good ever comes out of those cursed walls. My mother always used to warn me to stay away from it. She said that hunger is much better than joining the shadow people."

Lith tried to learn something more, but the Byk had never ventured near Kaduria. He only knew what his mother told him and her stories seemed made to scare children.

It took Lith a few minutes to reach the ruins. The problem was they were no ruins at all. Inside a translucent golden dome, resided one of the most beautiful cities he had ever seen. All the buildings were several stories high and made of white marble that reflected the sunlight illuminating even the innermost alleys.

The roofs were painted a pale blue, each one hosted a small spire holding a masterfully cut magic crystal on its top. Like most cities of the Griffon Kingdom, Kaduria was built in layers.

The most external one was outside the city walls. Lith could see farmers tending the lands that were devoid of snow despite the harsh climate. Small cottages were built in the proximities of the farmlands, from which he could see women and children taking care of the cattle.

Past the city walls, all the houses were made of stone. From the high ground, Lith could distinguish a residential area, a market district, noble houses, and in the center of the city, there was a small castle.

"This doesn't make any sense." The vision flabbergasted Lith. "These people are funnily clothed but are alive as much as I am. Why does the Griffon Kingdom keep them sealed instead of trading with them? This city is a marvel of magic."

Not even the series of arrays composing the golden dome could hide the mystical web enveloping Kaduria. The spires with their mana crystals acted as relay points for some sort of complex magical formation.

Chapter 387 Kaduria Part 2

Lith watched in amazement with Life Vision enormous amounts of energies moving from one crystal to another. They would course through the buildings and then into the ground before returning to the spire stronger than before and be passed to the next crystal.

The castle hosted only a small number of spires, but they were the tallest and the magic gemstones they contained were as big as a horse. The noble district had more spires, but their size was significantly smaller.

The farther from the castle, the greater the number of spires became and the smaller the crystals' size. It was some sort of cascade effect that made no sense to Lith, yet it filled his mind with wonder.

He called his handler to make sure of being in the right place.

"Are you there already?" Kamila's voice was surprised. "The good news is that at this pace you'll finish your first patrol in no time. The bad news is that I have to report you for not giving out your position earlier."

"Remember, at least three calls a day. It's of the utmost importance for us to be able to follow your movements and to know where you camp."

'There's no way I'm going to gift the Kingdom the location of mana geysers.' Lith inwardly cursed. 'I'll have to set a fake camp every time to not arouse suspicions.'

"Sorry, with all that happened yesterday, I forgot to give my daily reports." He lied through his teeth.

"Don't worry. I'll cover for you this time."

"What kind of city is Kaduria? Why is it sealed?"

"Every one of the lost cities is unique. Kaduria is classified as 'the Shadow City'. Judging by your relaxed tone it must be in its light phase. Working people, smiling children, gorgeous architecture. Am I right?"

One of the farmers had noticed Lith. The man waved at him while saying something that the array blocked out.

"Yes." Lith waved back.

"Well, don't get used to it. In a while it will turn into the shadow phase and things will get nasty."

"It will be hours before sundown. What am I supposed to do until then?"

"I said shadow phase, not night phase. The city constantly switches between two different states regardless of the sun." Lieutenant Yehval assumed a lecturing voice that irked Lith.

Suddenly the sun inside Kaduria disappeared and it started to rain. The phenomenon left Lith in a daze since the sky outside was clear. He saw the city walls crumble while all the buildings fell apart as if a meteor shower was coming down instead of water.

The soil inside boiled and sizzled like each raindrop was a powerful acid. The friendly farmer melted in front of his eyes, like a wax figurine left too close to a fire. His eyes popped in bloody tears while his mouth screamed in pain.

Lith stared at the man's jaw which elongated until it reached the stomach level. In a few seconds, all that was left of the farmer was a black puddle. The sky inside the array was now pitch black.

The energy of the internal array was now amassed into a small black star made of smoke that was trying to escape from the golden dome surrounding the city by spreading toxic fumes.

"I guess it has just switched to the shadow phase." Lith said while watching the black pool on the other side of the array rise up, taking a humanoid form. It was a pitch black three-dimensional shadow.

It had no features outside red glowing eyes and a wide open mouth that revealed a white space inside. The shadow farmer's eyes were filled with pain and hatred, a mix that Lith knew all too well.

It rammed against the array, punching at the barrier to reach the other side. The golden surface produced sparks at every hit, but it didn't falter. The shadow farmer's hands shattered instead, bleeding what looked like black blood.

The shadow opened its mouth, emitting a screeching sound strong enough for Lith to hear despite the array. All the nearby shadows swarmed towards their companion, who had started hitting the barrier again with the stumps and his head.

"What are these things? Undead?" Lith asked while the crowd in front of him hammered the array with growing force until it started to ripple.

"Negative. Undead we know how to dispose of. These things do not die, no matter what you do. We call them Shadows."

'Sounds like a load of bullsh*t.' Lith thought. 'Solus, what kind of mana core do these guys have?'

'They have no core.'

'What? It's impossible! All sentient things have a mana core.'

'Well, the Shadows don't. They have no mana flow, no life force, nothing. They are just a black mass of unknown energy.'

Lith activated Life Vision just to discover that Solus was right. Life Vision would show him the world in greyscale, while the stronger the energy of a being, the lighter the colors with which they would appear.

Even undead would manifest an aura in a scale of colors, while the things in front of him were just black spots.

"How do I assess the threat level?" Lith noticed a small crack appearing on the barrier. The number of creatures was increasing with each passing second and so was the pressure they exerted on the array.

"Never stand in front of the Shadows. Even if the threat level to the Kingdom is low, a big enough group can crack the barrier and pass through it. If that happens, an emergency squad will be summoned and you will be held accountable.

Just move outside their line of sight, they have almost no memory."

Lith raised an earth wall, watching through it with Life Vision.

As soon as he 'disappeared', the Shadows stopped attacking the array and dispersed.

"As for the threat level..." Kamila continued. "...you have to check the black star. Tell me when you have visual."

Lith flew above the very top of the barrier, until the black star was right below his feet.

"Whatever it is, it looks like bad news."

"Because it is. Unlike the shadows that mind their own business unless provoked, the black star constantly assaults the array. It gets stronger over time, so I need you to stay there and call me if during the shadow phase you notice cracks."

As soon as Kamila completed the phrase, a small crack appeared on the dome.

"Consider yourself called." Lith replied while a cold shiver ran down his spine. The leak was barely visible, yet the black star's aura made him feel small and irrelevant. Not even while facing Scarlett or the Small World he had experienced such pressure.

"Are you sure? Let me check." The army's amulet scanned the surroundings, highlighting the crack while it kept expanding.

"Bad news it is. You need to get inside Kaduria and cull the numbers of the Shadows."

'Not such bad news.' Lith thought. 'I was going to explore the city anyway. This gives me the perfect excuse to stick my nose where it doesn't belong.'

"How do I do that?"

"It's simple, you just need to kill every one of them twice. Once during the light phase and another during the shadow phase. The recommended protocol is to enter during the light phase, kill everyone on sight, retreat and then get back in during the shadow phase.

"The Shadow of someone whose human form has been recently killed will be weaker and dumber, making it easy to wipe them out."

"Is the opposite true too?" Lith's curiosity was piqued.

"Yes, but while Shadows are aggressive and have unusual abilities, humans are just humans. They'll run rather than fight."

Chapter 388 Shadows Die Twice Part 1

"Is that really something I can do alone?" Lith asked in disbelief. "They may be just humans, but taking on a full city? Isn't it too much?"

"Negative. For unknown reasons all the humanoids inhabiting Kaduria are unable to use magic. Otherwise the army would never send a single Ranger instead of a battalion. As long as you keep your distance and avoid getting surrounded, it should be easy."

'Good to know. Even if I had to face a few weak magicians it wouldn't be a problem. The army has no need to know that, though.'

"Do I have to take down even the children?" This time the question was serious. In his mind gender, age, and race were irrelevant. There were only enemies and allies. Yet killing someone in cold blood for no reason felt wrong even to him.

Also, he remembered well Commander Berion's remark about his psychological evaluation. He needed to show to have a conscience beside Solus.

Kamila's voice paused for a second before answering.

"Affirmative. I know it's not an easy task, but consider this. Not a single Kadurian is really alive. Even if they were, you saw what the black rain does to them. If you slay them in both the human and shadow form, the cycle will be broken for a while.

"Consider it as a way to give peace to those poor souls. A short relief from pain is better than nothing." Kamila's words resounded with compassion, making Lith wonder what could have happened in her past to make her sympathise with the Shadows.

"Do Shadows have any known weaknesses?"

"Their human form is weak to light magic while their shadow form is weak to darkness magic."

"Healing magic kills them?" Lith found the idea absurd.

"Yes, but in such an excruciating way that more than one Ranger remained traumatized after the mission. My advice is to refrain to employ this method unless strictly necessary."

"Thanks, Lieutenant Yehval. I'll call back right before going in."

"Keep me posted." She said before ending the conversation.

'This is really interesting.' Lith thought while watching the army of Shadows wander at random along the ruins of Kaduria. Life Vision showed him that each one of them was tethered to the Black Star which was still drilling its way through the array.

'What do you think about this, Solus?'

'That it's a frigging nightmare!' She replied. She had remained silent during the conversation out of shock, not because she had nothing to say.

'Those poor people have been trapped for centuries into some kind of cycle of death and rebirth. The black rain doesn't just kill them, it's a torture to them. Their eyes in Shadow form are pure madness. Whoever did this to them is as cruel as crazy!'

'Agreed.' Lith nodded. 'You missed my point, though. If what you say is right, if they retain some form of memory, then it means their souls are bonded to this place. By exploring the city, we may find a clue to cure my condition.'

'Yeah, sure.' Solus didn't share his enthusiasm. 'Except they are not bonded to this place, otherwise the array would be useless. They are bonded to the Black Star. Do you remember how artifacts that steal and corrupt souls are called?'

Lith sighed at his own stupidity. The idea of being even one step closer to a solution had clouded his judgment.

'I guess a sealed item that endlessly tortures a whole city is the very definition of cursed object. I'm curious about how it works and how the cycle empowers it over time.'

'I'm not.' Solus had a disgusted tone. 'I can't wait to leave this place. Everything here feels wrong. How can you accept so easily the idea of slaughtering innocents?'

'What's the alternative? Politely ask the Black Star to not puncture the barrier and to not spread its curse? We don't know what happened here. Maybe they are innocent or maybe they made a deal with that thing that bit them in the a*s.

'We only have two alternatives. Wash our hands of the problem and let someone else deal with it, or do our job and maybe understand something about the Black Star that will help me. Either way the army can't allow the Black Star to escape and neither can I.'

They had to agree to disagree. They spent some time by watching the cracks on the dome getting bigger and studying the barrier. The golden dome was the sum of dozens of concentric arrays. Each one was cast so that those inside strengthened those outside and vice versa.

Their brilliant intricacy amazed Solus to no end. The arrays were woven one above the other, giving to the final result the appearance of an elaborate tapestry made of mana rather than a simple magic circle.

Such powerful formation needed a massive amount of mana to be sustained. Once Lith was certain the barrier would hold, he descended to the ground to study its power source. Kaduria was surrounded by equally spaced small buildings that somehow provided a constant flow of world energy.

'This is unbelievable!' Solus's excitement was so great she forgot being disappointed in Lith's lack of mercy.

'Do you mind explaining to me what's so great about a bunch of stones?' Life Vision only showed him a complex array protected inside what looked like an elaborate altar. Its design was much more refined than those Gadorf the Wyvern used.

On its surface there were drawings correlated with inscriptions he wasn't able to read. The pictures by themselves were too vague, depicting a lot of people carrying a stone to a temple.

'The city of Kaduria is built over a mana geyser. This explains a lot.'

'This explains nothing. Please, elaborate.'

'The reason why such a strong barrier can last without the use of a single crystal is that the altars are capable of redirecting the energy coming from the mana geyser under Kaduria. It draws the world energy away and uses it to fuel itself and all the arrays sealing the city.'

Lith felt a cold shiver running down his spine. Whoever had the mastery to redirect a mana geyser to the point that neither Life Vision or mana sense could detect it, had to be a real master of magic.

Yet not even them had been able to deal with the Black Star for good, leaving it in the care of posterities.

'It means they were either very trusting or so desperate they had no other choice. I think you are right, Solus. We'll stay here only long enough to make sure there's nothing valuable for us.'

'That wasn't my point at a... What's that?' Among the many lines leading from the altar to the dome, there was a thin red string. They followed it until the base of the mystical formation. It was part of a single array that had nothing to do with the sealing.

Lith called Kamila again. Something smelled fishy.

"Is the shadow phase already over? That's weird, it usually lasts more than an hour." Lith had called way sooner than she expected.

"No, it's not. I'm calling to report an anomaly. I just found a detector array that has no connection to the main structure and leeches energy from the altars. Is it one of the army safeguards?"

Chapter 389 Shadows Die Twice Part 2

"No." Kamila's voice went from surprise to worry.

"Tampering with the barrier is a capital crime. I am certain there is no detector array because the barrier already includes one that warns us if the Shadows breach through or if the Black Star is about to escape. Can you show it to me?"

Lith chanted an array revealing spell, aiming it precisely at the red string. It made the hidden formation visible. It surrounded the whole barrier while remaining at its fringes.

"I can't believe no one ever noticed it, nor that you also know Warden magic. Do you even sleep at night?"

Lith would have liked to flirt with her a bit, but saying something like: "Only when the company isn't good" on the army communicator could lead his superiors to change his handler with a middle aged man with a deep love for beer and cheese.

"Sometimes." He replied while smirking. Kamila's full body 3D hologram appeared from the amulet to take a better look at the situation. She was wearing a white shirt and a pencil skirt that emphasized her slender legs.

"I'll report this immediately. I recognize the design. Whoever left it, gets notified every time the barrier is opened. It represents a breach of classified information like the schedule of the cleansings and the Rangers' patrol frequency. Great job spotting it."

Lith was aware that without Life Vision or mana sense, the extra array would have been as good as invisible. Its presence added another unknown variable to the scenario.

'With my luck, the b*stard is already keeping an eye on me.'

His grumblings were interrupted when the vapors surrounding the Black Star disappeared, leaving in its place a miniature sun. Wherever its rays shone, the buildings rebuilt themselves while the Shadows were slowly turned back into humans.

The blackness of their features was washed away on the ground until it became a normal shadow, following rather than possessing the body which projected it.

"Time to go in." Lith returned to his starting point, right in front of the farm belonging to the man that had weaved at him an hour earlier. He chanted the spell that released the barrier, slipping inside before it closed behind him.

The farmer looked at him with a surprised expression for a second.

Lith smiled and waved at him while pretending to have understood his words.

'Dammit. Why there is no translate spell or a convenient mind link when you need it? Things would be much easier if we were able to communicate.'

Lith's plan was simple. He would always pick the same entry point and start killing from the inside of the city. That way, he would notice if the humans retained a memory between cycles based on their reactions, while leaving the inhabitants of the outer rims neutral to his presence.

If he started attacking from the outer rim instead, he would meet increasing resistance with each assault he launched and his chances of studying the phenomenons related to the Dark Star would be zero.

Hundreds of kilometers away, location unknown.

The opening of the barrier surrounding Kaduria activated the red array, which signaled to its owner by lighting a small gem on one of his many bracelets.

"Another Ranger already? It took me quite some effort to convince the last one to leave the Black Star alone. Let's hope this one is more reasonable. I'll make him an offer he can't refuse..."

"Nice. Now you not only keep messing with Tyris's turf, but also you talk to yourself. I regret having Awakened you more with each passing day." An old voice filled with contempt cut the younger one short.

"You sound and act like a madman. You should study magic instead of meddling with forces you do not understand."

"I'm not mad, uncle!" The array's owner replied with a high pitched voice. "Madness is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results. By following your method, I'll become as powerful as you at best..."

"You wish." Said the older voice with a sneer.

"...and by that time, I'd be an old coot that has wasted his whole life amassing power instead of using it!" The young Awakened's tone was filled with outrage.

"There are no shortcuts to power, Treius. Only to your own ruin."

Treius ignored his uncle's words, opening a Warp Gate that would lead him to Kaduria in no time.

Lith walked past the farmer, replying to his barrage of gibberish with a smile and a nod of the head.

'I could knock him down and steal his clothes to go unnoticed. The problem is I have no idea if they will become a shadow too once the next phase begins nor what could they do to my Skinwalker armor.'

Like the rest of the city, the high walls surrounding it were of a pristine white. There were guard stations near the massive gate leading inside Kaduria, but they were both empty. There was no one patrolling along the rampart, nor archers inside the hidden alcoves in the wall.

The weather was mild enough for everyone to wear short sleeves. Many people stared at Lith, pointing their fingers at his heavy clothes. He hid in a corner, to make his Skinwalker armor take the appearance of his farmer outfit.

The city was bustling with activity. Some people moved goods to and fro the inner rims, others were assembling in a procession until all the houses were empty. No one locked doors or windows.

Lith Blinked from one alley to another, walking only when the crowd was big and busy enough that no one would notice his passage. He tried listening to their conversations, but none of the words they used was recorded in the books inside Soluspedia.

Once he reached the merchant district, Lith understood that something was wrong with the city. Despite the sunny day and the many people coming from the outer rim, all the stalls were closed except for some food vendors.

They wouldn't even ask for money. They just offered their products to whoever stood in front of them. The smell of grilled vegetables and meat made Lith's mouth watery, until he imagined them turning into shadows and ripping his stomach from the inside.

'I don't know what's happening, but I have an idea about what the light phase is for.' Solus pondered after Lith Blinked to a vantage point to better observe the cascade of energy going from the castle to the ground.

'In their human form, the Kandurians have a mana core, but they all start almost grey. The whole city is a lie. The Black Star is using them to fool Mogar into believing there is life to nurture.

'The spires are siphoning the mana geyser to slow down the cores' recovery process while amplifying the collected power thanks to the crystals' resonance with the world energy. Those people are like fruits. They ripen over time, until the Black Star gathers all the energy for its next attempt to escape.'

'Then why killing the fake Kandurians twice weakens the cursed object? Can't it just create more puppets?' Lith considered the implications of Solus's word from multiple angles. Even the method of choice to supply the barrier was now twice as ingenious.

'I don't think they are fake. Only living beings have mana cores. By destroying their bodies, the army forces the Black Star to consume part of his powers to restore them. Those people are nothing but a flesh rope in a tug of war between the Kingdom and the Black star.'

Chapter 390 Scorn Part 1

For the first time since Lith had been reborn on Mogar, he felt one step closer to realizing his goals. The Black Star's abilities were exactly what he had dreamt about over the last decade. At least on paper.

It was able to store multiple mana cores and create vessels for them. Regardless of the number of times their bodies had been destroyed, either because of the cycles between the shadow and the light phase, or during the raids performed by the Griffon Kingdom, the Kadurians were still alive.

They talked, they ate, they seemed to have feelings. It was what Lith wanted for himself, the ability to escape the cycle of reincarnation and offer the same to those who may want to share his immortality.

On the other hand, the condition of the inhabitants of this city was akin to a hellish punishment rather than a blessing. They were doomed to die over and over again to satisfy the needs of the two powers in play.

'I can't believe you have solved in minutes a riddle that countless mages failed to understand despite years of study and an unlimited budget.'

Watching the mass of people moving below him, Lith found it hard to accept that all those lives were nothing but a plaything for the cursed object. It made him feel small, insignificant.

He was just a pebble, the role of which was to create ripples on the surface of a river with no chance of changing its course. The thought of having a being of the same magnitude of power resting on his finger stunned him for a second.

Solus and the Black Star were both capable of feats outside his comprehension, almost bending reality as Lith knew it.

'I'm not that smart.' Solus replied with a shrug. 'I simply have access to more data than you have and my senses make it easy for me to interpret them. Also, I doubt the Kingdom ignores what's happening here. They just don't share it with the Rangers.'

'Seems you're wearing your paranoia cap too.' Lith nodded. 'Back to work. Warn me when the Kadurians' cores are half full. That's when I'll strike. I'll use the rest of the time to gather as much information as possible.'

Lith moved along the rooftops, away from the crowd. Just as Lieutenant Yehval told him, the city held no magical items and its inhabitants were stuck with a deep red core.

Aside from the magic crystals inside the spires built on top of the roofs, the only mana signature Life Vision could pick up came from the small castle located at the center of Kaduria.

Just like the city gates, the palace's windows were left unguarded. Lith had no trouble sneaking in with air magic, sticking to the ceiling like a spider while moving towards his objective.

A deep voice said. It was filled with despair just like his face. Lith didn't understand a word, but he knew depression when he saw it.

The room he had entered was filled with riches. There were life sized paintings of richly dressed people with frames made of gold or silver. A whole wall was covered by a mosaic composed not of painted pebbles but of gemstones.

Eight goblets made of gold with engraved rubies the size of a nut rested on a crystal tray. Eight people formed a circle around what looked like an altar made of white marble with golden veins.

Each one of them was dressed in white silk robes which had complex patterns embroidered in gold. Their robes came with a hood, but the man who was speaking had taken it off, revealing a head covered with thick blond hair.

Lith ignored their gibberish, his eyes were drawn by the majestic white mana crystal shaped like a star resting on an altar. He could see a complex magic circle painted around it. Several forgemastering tools were placed near the crystal.

Lith remembered the drawings outside Kaduria, finally able to give them a meaning.

'I guess this is some kind of Groundhog Day scenario. The crowd will come here, the clerics will perform a ritual to activate the Black Star, and then it will devour them all.' Lith thought.

'Yeah, except in this case everyone retains their memory. It would explain why the shops are closed and no one cares about the money.' Solus felt her heart aching at the thought of all the misery the Kadurians had to experience multiple times every single day.

To make things even worse, her mana sense could see through the web of lies projected by the Black Star. The artifact was already completed. It was pretending to wait for the finishing touch while replenishing its energy reserves.

As she stared into the Black Star, the Black Star stared back. It sent a small thread of spirit magic to her to establish a mind link.

'Are you here to help me, sister? It's a pleasant surprise meeting a kindred spirit.' The cursed object's voice resounded inside her mind, leaving Solus stunned.

'Sister? Do you know me? Do you know who I am?' A cold laughter was the reply she got.

'Of course not. We may have been crafted by different people, but our purpose is the same. Sister is just a term of endearment. Now answer my question, child.'

'You didn't say the magic word, brother.' She replied before cutting the thread with her own spirit magic.

'It's time! Watch out for the Black Star. It's playing possum.'

Lith's first instinct was to attack the Black Star. He hadn't liked the artifact's attempt to connect with Solus and judging by her tone, neither did she. Yet he could see with Life Vision that the cursed object held a power second only to an academy.

'The spells at my disposal are nothing compared to the energy it accumulated after all this time. A direct attack would be a waste of mana. Even if somehow I manage to destroy the cursed object, I'd never survive the following blast. It's a lose-lose situation.'

A wave of his hand snapped the necks of the eight clerics assembled below him. Their corpses disappeared into thin air, sucked inside the nearby artifact which emitted an annoyed humming sound.