

## Supreme M 391

### Chapter 391 Scorn Part 2

'No clothes, no corpses, no blood. It's the perfect murder. The question is why is the f\*cker helping me?' Lith's paranoid mind tried to walk a mile in the cursed artifact's shoes.

A cruel smile appeared on his face when he believed he had found his answer. Lith wove all of his most powerful spells at once. He had a dirty job to do and didn't want to prolong it one second more than necessary.

Lith moved outside the castle while looking for a bottleneck where the people forming the procession would be bunched together to inflict the maximum damage. He was plotting the best way to chain his spells together when Solus's mind peeked into his own.

'Promise me you will not make them suffer.'

Lith replied with a telepathic nod.

A Raging Sun, a tier five War Mage spell, struck the middle of the crowd. Violet flames exploded in every direction, turning flesh into ashes in a split second. Those who tried to escape from the blast or were unlucky enough to survive it, discovered that all the escape routes were blocked by another tier five spell, Silent Reaper.

A small sized tornado had surrounded them and was closing in. Its edges spun slow, not sucking up but rather cutting everything they touched into a fine dust. When the two spells collided, the resulting blast leveled the block to the ground.

The humming sound turned from annoyed to angry, but Lith couldn't care less. He kept track of the energy flow going from the ground to the castle through the spires. When the mana was about to reach the second to last magic crystal to be amplified, Lith shattered the gemstone with a Checkmate Spears.

The Black Star did its best to rebuild the relay point, but it was a second too late. The energy was lost. Lith continued to rain death from above while rhythmically destroying the gemstones before they could collect the mana siphoned from the geyser located below Kaduria.

The hum turned into a tremor and the tremor into a quake.

The Black Star rose into the sky, shattering everything in its wake. The castle and all the buildings nearby crumbled like sand. They were reabsorbed by the enraged artifact now resigned to losing its precious harvest.

'It seems really pissed off. We are still far from the barrier, it's better if we get away from here. We don't know if the black rain has negative effects on all living beings or just on Kadurians.' Solus worry increased as the dome was filled by the black fumes generated by the cursed object.

Strong gusts of wind howled like an angry beast and tried to push Lith off the roof.

He bolted towards the city's edges while throwing random spells to the crowd downstairs. The Black Star roared in anger. Without the black rain, it couldn't collect the mana cores unless their vessel was destroyed.

Yet the clouds were still forming because of the light cycle being interrupted halfway through. The more damaged the corpses, the more energy it would take to get them back to life in useful conditions.

Lith's spells were all like a blender, ripping their victims to shreds rather than simply killing them. Between the loss of mana due to the crystals being shattered and the energy that would be needed to regenerate the fallen Kadurians, the Black Star knew a lot of nourishment would go to waste.

Yet that wasn't what had triggered its fury. The artifact was used to the recurring interference from the Rangers. It allowed the Black Star to measure the passing of time and gave the Kadurians someone to blame for their own misfortune.

Without them, the city would plunge into madness again, considerably reducing the gains from the light cycle. Dead people wouldn't draw the world energy. The amount of mana the Dark Star collected from their cores was negligible, yet vital.

Perceiving their almost empty cores, the world energy would gush out from the geyser making it easier to collect and store inside the artifact by the network of spires built over all Kaduria.

The people were the only flaw in the mechanism the cursed object had devised to escape from its prison. It could repair their homes, give them food, and even the pretense of a few hours of normal life. Yet it could not make them happy, nor force them to stay alive until the end of every cycle.

That was the reason it welcomed the Rangers. They were the perfect scapegoats.

Solus was another matter entirely. After centuries of isolation, the Black Star had finally found a being it could relate to. It had even indulged her delusion of being a female as an act of kinship.

Nonetheless, she had rejected its request for help and had unleashed her thrall against its dominion. Humans it could tolerate, but betrayal was unforgivable. The artifact released but a fraction of the power it had accumulated through the centuries in the form of a small beam of light as thick as a finger.

The shockwave accompanying the compressed mana exerted a pressure capable of crushing everything in a two meters radius from its passage. Lith opened a Warp Steps in front of himself and materialized its exit point right behind the Dark Star.

He had expected some kind of retaliation, so he kept a significant distance from the opponent to have the time he needed to set up his countermeasure while remaining close enough to be an alluring target.

The artifact had been a prisoner for countless years and its own birth had caused the disappearance of magic from Kaduria. It knew about the existence of dimensional magic, but it had always been used as a means to escape.

Being hit from point blank caused it to lose focus and to suffer some damage. Before it could recover from the surprise, Lith was already outside the barrier.

'Not bad for a first raid.' He thought. 'I still have no idea how the Dark Star works, but this should put a nice dent into its escape plans.'

The black rain was falling. Lith had to wait for it to stop before going back inside to kill the Shadows.

'I suggest you remain close to the barrier and lure the enemies to you.' Solus suggested. 'I'm afraid our host is quite enraged by our interference. It might attempt another attack, this time maybe with more finesse.'

'Play it safe and bait it into wasting even more power. Sounds like a plan to me.' Lith said while using Invigoration to recover his strength. Being well rested it would take him but a few breaths to return to his peak condition.

A sudden crackle of energy behind him signaled the opening of a Warp Gate. Lith had no idea who was going to come out, but he was certain it wasn't an ally. The army's communication amulet was still in his pocket and he had received no message.

## Chapter 392 Lady Luck Part 1

Lith kept Invigoration active while weaving with his mind the spells he believed could come in handy no matter the nature of the newcomer. Being paranoid, he assumed the worst and implemented the Scarlett protocol.

Lith knew he was still no match for the Scorpicores, but one particular combination of spells was supposed to give a hard time even to the ancient Evolved Monster. The person that walked out the Warp Gate was outside even his expectations.

It was a short old man, barely 1.5 meters tall (5') wearing the light blue uniform of the army that Lith had seen Jirni wear so many times. Judging by the several wrinkles on his face and the spots on his skin, he had to be at least seventy years old.

Yet his sky blue eyes had the wild vibe of a predator on the chase. His short white hair and finely trimmed beard of the same color shone like silver fur under the sun, reinforcing Lith's impression of staring at a beast of the north.

The man's sleeves bore a silver star. It identified him with the rank of Brigadier General. His right hand was holding a staff of unknown design. It was made from white oak wood, with six violet magic crystals engraved on it in a straight line.

Six more floated above its top, forming a perfect circle that orbited around the staff following its every movement.

Lith gave him a salute, waiting for an order or at least an explanation.

"At ease, Lieutenant." Said the man with a voice and a smile one would expect from someone no older than twenty. "I'm Brigadier General Vorgh, better known as the Master Warden. I'm here to take care of the anomaly you reported."

A wave of his hand sent the six crystals floating above the staff all around Kaduria. As soon as they were equally spaced, they instantly formed a magical circle that made all the arrays surrounding the lost city visible to the naked eye.

Vorgh raised his right hand with his palm open and the gemstones engraved on the staff pulsed in unison. All the magical formations under their feet shone brighter and a small replica of them was now floating vertically in front of the Master Warden.

The several arrays forming the barrier could now be distinguished. Vorgh swiped away the ones closer to the surface. One by one, the upper layers of the magical formation became invisible again and disappeared from the replica.

The pattern became simpler, allowing the General to take a closer look at the magic circles linked to the red array and make sure they had not been tampered with.

"Whoever added this detection array is damn good at their job." Vorgh grumbled

"Simple but effective, with none of those frills you would expect from a newbie with less than twenty years of experience with magical formations." While talking, he had swiped off all the arrays but the red one. It was now the only one visible on both the ground and the replica.

"See this?" Vorgh pointed at Lith three concentric layers of runes as he had never seen before. "The external layer insulates the little b\*strard from the others, so it didn't trigger any alarm. The middle one drains the mana from our power lines only when it spikes during the shadow phase.

It's a damn smart move. The Black Star attacks the barrier on fixed intervals and when the barrier goes all out even the most precise security system can't detect such little amount of juice disappearing. The inner one scares me a bit."

The Master Warden looked at it with a worried expression, like he expected the rune sequence to blow up in his face at any moment. Lith waited for him to continue, but the old man liked his audience to be active. He kept silent until the young Ranger asked:

"Why?"

"Because I have no idea what it does. If it wasn't for that, I could remove the parasite array in a jiffy. This may take a while."

Lith looked at the white staff with greed, wondering when the day would come he could make one similar, if not even more powerful, for himself.

Vorgh recalled the six floating crystals, which surrounded the miniature array preventing it from disappearing.

"I'll show it to a few colleagues to get a second opinion. See you in a while." Vorgh disappeared as fast as he had arrived, leaving Lith in a confused daze.

'Impossible arrays my a\*s! The one the floating gemstones generated is one of those Yurial researched for me! The Kingdom knows not only what they do, but even how to generate them without true magic.' Lith angrily thought. Being a master liar, he hated being lied to.

'Save your anger for the Shadows. You've stared like a child at a candy store until now, wasting a lot of time. If you miss the second phase, all we did earlier will be for naught. Also, you didn't contact Kamila before entering for the light phase raid.

'You sure like keeping that poor girl on her toes. She must be worried sick. You were supposed to call her over an hour ago.'

Cursing at his own memory, Lith made a quick call pretending it was still the light phase and announced the start of the culling.

'Damn, I'm not used to give a report even before I go to the bathroom. The worst second day on the job ever!'

Following Solus's advice, Lith opened the barrier again and stuck close to the edge in case the Black Star decided to take a second shot at him. The moment the Shadows noticed the intruder, they converged on the prey like sharks following a trail of blood.

'I'm going to try multiple approaches. Tell me if you notice any method dealing more damage than the others.' Lith thought while releasing a barrage of different spells against the incoming wave.

The Shadows turned out to be as frail as their human counterparts. Most of them died at the first strike, shattering into dark flakes after emitting an agonizing scream. Darkness was effective as Lieutenant Yehval had told Lith, but only in terms of pain inflicted.

The Shadows would emit heart rending cries while their eyes shed white dots that Lith could only presume being tears.

'Nothing. Unlike the human bodies, the Shadows are not affected by the method employed to destroy them. They have no mana core, no life force. Yet their suffering is almost tangible. How can something without a body suffer this much?' Solus said.

Lith was about to ask if she was still talking about the Shadows or herself, but preferred to keep focusing on taking out the enemies from a distance. Their sheer number was nothing against someone that could cast spells non stop.

'At this rate, the second part of the mission will be a success too. However, it feels like a hollow victory. I'm not learning anything from this onslaught. Time to try a different tactic.'

Lith cleared the next wave with Chasing Lightning, a tier four War Mage spell that conjured a stream of lightning bolts capable of following their targets.

## Chapter 393 Lady Luck Part 2

He left only one Shadow alive and cast an earth spell that opened a divide in the ground.

It would slow down the incoming wave long enough to perform his experiment.

Kamila had told him the Shadows employed weird attacks. Lith wanted to see if it was something that he could imitate or at least teach him something about the Black Star's abilities.

Once the Shadow came within a range of ten meters (33') from Lith, it raised its arms towards him. The limbs elongated into snakes made of darkness and the fingers stretched into meters long needles aimed at Lith's mana core.

Albeit unexpected, the move lacked the speed necessary to be a threat. Lith dashed under the extended arms, striking at the opponent's body with his bare fist. The Shadow exploded into black flakes which slowly faded away.

'It felt like hitting a cushion. Aside from a little buzzing in the ears when the fragments touched me, nothing strange happened. I can see why fake mages need to keep their distance, but with my speed that kind of attack is useless. Solus?'

'Nothing relevant. Physical damage works like any other kind of damage.'

Lith did the same thing for the following wave. He left only one Shadow alive, but this time he allowed it to strike at his forearm. The fingers-needles were not sharp or strong enough to pierce his Skinwalker armor.

The Shadow changed its approach, having his extremities wrapping around Lith's arm while sucking his life force and mana. Much to Lith's surprise, the Shadow's appearance started to change into an obsidian copy of its prey.

Lith released a small bolt of lightning that destroyed the doppelganger, obtaining two unexpected results. Before shattering, the Shadow assumed again its human semblance for a second. It allowed Solus to recognize him.

'It's one of the merchants from the food stalls.' Her good memory always surprised him. Lith could barely remember the faces of the villagers of Lutia, let alone a stranger in the crowd.

'Who cares. This was a waste of time. At least the amount of energy he stole from me is irrelevant. I wonder what...' The second oddity was that one of the flakes was blue instead of black. It caught Lith's attention.

Unlike the other fragments so far, it wasn't disappearing. The speck of blue light charged at Lith's abdomen, where his mana core resided. He tried to block it with his hand, only to see it pass through like a ghost. The moment the blue flake entered his body, Lith experienced a strong headache.

Memories that didn't belong to him flashed in front of his eyes, showing him unfamiliar faces and making him listen to unfamiliar words that somehow he was able to comprehend.

When the next wave of Shadows arrived, Lith realized he knew the secret recipe for a twelve spice sauce of sorts. He was still too confused to take any risk, so he used his wands to quickly dispose of the enemies before getting outside the barrier.

'What the heck did just happen?' He thought while reviewing the alien memory until he could almost feel the spices on his hands emitting their familiar yet unknown fragrance.

'I'm not sure.' Solus replied. 'Maybe the Shadows are the minds of the Kadurians, or at least an echo of it. It would explain why they have no mana core or life force. It could be a way the Black Star uses to get rid of their most violent emotions or simply to harvest more power.

'What I'm sure of, is that while the life force the Shadow stole for you is gone, you got all of your mana back. My hypothesis is that while inside the creature's mind, it temporarily became its own.

'When you shattered the Shadow, the flake still contained part of its consciousness. So when you reabsorbed your mana, you also got a glimpse of the street vendor's mind.'

'Yeah and now I can open a Kansas Fried Chicken.'

'Well, what did you expect? A random memory from a random stranger is bound to be something irrelevant. What would have you thought if you had found out the secret of the Black Star on the first attempt?' Solus replied with a chuckle.

'That the damn thing was baiting me with a trap. Let's give this thing a few more tries. No pain no gain. My only hope is that Lady Luck will smile at me for once.'

After several attempts, Lith was on the verge of a nervous breakdown as a result of the memory harvesting process. What he hadn't considered was that Lady Luck had been kind to him already.

Finding a recipe inside a mind filled with centuries worth of agony was a stroke of luck. As such, it didn't happen again. All the memories Lith acquired were about pain, despair, and death.

'These poor b\*stards are in a situation way worse than mine. At least until I can keep myself alive, I can avoid being reincarnated. They suffer an excruciating death several times a day. The Black Star is nothing but a curse.

'Scarlett was right, the only option when facing such a thing is to destroy it.'

Lith felt Solus shivering at his words. It took him a few seconds to remember how the Scorpicores had attempted to kill her out of prejudice.

'Don't you even dare to compare yourself to that monstrosity. You give me hope every single day. You are my first and most dear friend in all my three lives! The Black Star does nothing but take. It robbed the Kandurians of everything.'

Lith's mind was invaded again by the memory of a farmer that, during the years of madness, had been forced to kill his own children at the beginning of every cycle to prevent his neighbors from defiling their bodies.

'I'm sick of this place.' He thought in disgust. 'Let's finish our mission and let's get out of here.'

The agony and madness of the acquired memories burned through his brain like acid. As soon as the next light cycle began, Lith entered the barrier. He already knew what would happen and where to find the crowd.

His mind was cold again. He considered his situation like removing a band aid. The faster the better.

On the other side, a man was tilling the land near his house. He knew it was a fool's errand, but after centuries of entrapment, it was the only part of his life that still made sense.

It was the same farmer that had greeted Lith during the previous cycle. The moment he saw the stranger approaching, he dropped the hoe on the ground and ran towards him.

"How did you get in, stranger? Are you here to help us?" He asked again.

Lith was about to dismiss the man when he realized the words were gibberish no more.

"What did you say?"

## Chapter 394 Fun Times Part 1

Lith's simple reply made the farmer burst into tears. In the past centuries, the man had done all he could think of to escape from the nightmare his life was. He had attempted to dig under the barrier, tried to break it, and killed himself in any way he could conceive and put into practice.

Yet the only result was to wake up the same day the High Lord would be activated, no matter if he died due to the black rain or his own hands. At first, he had put his hopes into the clerics of the High Sun.

They were the most powerful mages of the whole nation of Belamd of which Kaduria was the capitol. They had forgedmastered the High Lord to protect the Kingdom against the invading forces from the north.

They had created the problem, they were supposed to solve it. Time was the only thing Kadurians didn't lack. Only years later the clerics confessed to having lost their magic powers.

The revelation led to the age of madness. It lasted decades and ended not because people had found new hope in their hearts, but because nothing they did stuck. Their actions, both bad and good were irrelevant.

Everything would be reset at the next cycle. The impossibility to change the smallest detail of their lives made them lose any drive to act.

Then, the farmer had put his faith into the mysterious strangers that would come from time to time, but that too turned out to be a pipe dream. The strangers were either unable or unwilling to communicate and their actions always violent.

They would ignore the farmer or kill him on the spot without saying a word. After speaking with other people, the man learned about how the strangers would perform massacres for several cycles before leaving.

Some Kadurians considered the strangers like demons, that would come to wreak havoc and try to steal the High Lord. Many more considered them the only proof that they were still alive and not trapped into an eternal nightmare.

For a few people, like the crying farmer, they were the last shred of hope left. The strangers still had their magic, their faces and language would always change. They were the only variable left in an otherwise immutable life.

Lith's words moved the farmer because it was the first conversation he had in over 700 years with someone from the outside world. Someone the man had no idea who he was or what his answers could be.

Even if just by a single second, the farmer felt the wheel of time had started to spin again for him.

"Are you okay?" Lith was surprised by the sudden cries of joy. He was about to use Invigoration to check out the Kadurian's condition when he remembered Kamila's words about healing magic being lethal for the citizens of the lost city.

"Yes. I'm more than fine, thank you." The man wiped his tears. He didn't want to waste a single second of the miracle in front of him.

"Are you here to help us? Can you bring down the barrier and set us free?" He asked with a trembling voice.

"Even if I wanted to help you, I don't know how." The ability to understand the Kadurian opened new possibilities, but Lith was uncertain if it was worth exploring them rather than just get done with it and resume his trip.

"As for the barrier, it's not there to keep you prisoners but to prevent the Black Star from spreading its plague. I'm sorry." Lith expected the man to become enraged or to start crying again.

"It makes sense." The man said with a sigh. "The High Lord, or Black Star as you call it, has been devised to preserve the lives of the Kadurians at all costs and to unleash the fury of the High Sun, our god, upon our enemies.

"I still wonder if something malfunctioned or those idiotic clerics never bothered teaching that damned thing the difference between friend and foe. Its blueprints are filled with powerful abilities, yet I don't recall a single line explaining how to control them."



Lith had no idea if to be more surprised by the man's cold blood or by its knowledge about the Black Star.

"I'm sorry, did you just say you worked on the Black Star? What was your role exactly?"

The farmer laughed out loud for the first time in over 300 years.

"Do I look like a cleric to you? Of course I had no part in its creation. I simply read everything there was to read to pass my time. There are no secrets in Kaduria anymore. No one bothers protecting them. It would be a fool's errand, like everything else."

"I can't make you any promises, but if you explain to me how the artifact works, I may be able to do something for you." Lith felt his luck was finally turning. He had struck a gold mine.

He would learn invaluable information that he could trade with the Griffon Kingdom at his discretion and get closer to a solution to his reincarnation problem. Two birds with one stone.

"I'm sorry. I studied them decades ago and without the ability to practice magic, I forgot almost everything." The man shook his head. "I can show the blueprints to you, though. They are easy to find, if you know where to look. My name is Redan."

Redan put his palms together and gave Lith a small bow.

"My name is Linjos." Lith replied without hesitation.

'I have no idea if this guy is really acting of his own free will or he is controlled by the cursed item. If I use my real name, I'd leave a trail behind. Someone else might do what I did and talk to Redan.'

'Since I'm forced to leave loose ends, worst case scenario my late Headmaster is beyond any harm.'

"Where are the blueprints?"

"In the personal quarters of high cleric Meru, inside the castle."

'Don't worry.' Solus said sensing Lith's unwillingness to get that close to the angry artifact.

'Even from this close, I don't see any tether linking Redan to the Black Star. The cursed item is at its weakest right now. The light cycle has just begun and because of our interference, the barrier is way stronger than before.'

'It's blocking most of the energy from the mana geyser. If the Black Star focuses on us instead of collecting energy, its next attack will also be too weak to put a dent in the barrier. If that happens, it will take the cursed object years to recover its strength.'

'Good to know. If Redan is telling the truth, I'll gain priceless knowledge. If he is lying, a simple Warp Steps will allow me to return to the barrier and the Black Star will be so weakened there will be no need to get inside this hellhole again. It's a win-win situation.' Lith thought.

"Let's go. We have no time to spare." He said.

"You can't enter the city dressed like that." Redan pointed out. "There are still many zealots who consider outsiders as enemies. Let me lend you some clothes."

Chapter 395 Fun Times Part 2

"No need. There's still no one in the castle." Lith grabbed Redan and cast a flight spell on both of them. The next second they soared through the sky. Lith chose to enter from the same window he had used the last time, since it led to the inner layer of the castle.

Redan laughed and screamed with joy the whole time, forcing Lith to use the Hush spell, just to be safe.

"I've never flown before! I swear, even if you are a demon, this is the best day of my life."

"Hush!" Lith said with an angry voice. "We can't risk drawing attention and time is of the essence."

"You are too paranoid, dear Linjos." Redan shrugged. "No one patrols these corridors and even if they did, we just have to kill them." Like anyone inside Kaduria, the farmer had a body count that would have made the worst serial killer pale in comparison.

For Kadurians killing was akin to picking your own nose. Nothing more than a disgusting hobby.

"It's not so simple. Whenever one of you dies, their body returns to the Black Star. Killing is not an option. If it's able to collect your minds too, we'll alert the enemy."

"I'll take point then. Even if you are right, as long as no one sees you we're good." Redan said while spinning and tossing a knife in the air like it was a toy. It danced from one hand to the other with a display of skill that creeped Lith out.

'It's the first time I meet someone as cold as I am. The good news is that his weapon isn't a threat to me. The bad news is that Redan is batshit crazy. I wonder how many skills he has picked up during all this time.'

Lith used Life Vision to scout ahead while keeping Warp Steps and a few other spells always at ready. It turned out to be a useless precaution. They reached Meru's quarters without meeting anyone and the door was wide open.

Redan entered the apartments like they were his own home. He walked through the hallway, ignored the library, and went straight for the bedroom. Redan pushed a hidden button on the nightstand, revealing a secret compartment inside the wall.

"I was really bored." He replied to Lith's stupefied gaze.

The compartment held a magic safe, but like everything else it had been drained of its mana, making it nothing but a piece of metal. Lith opened the safe, flipping the pages of the stored grimoires until he found what he was looking for.

He copied the pages about the Black Star in both their original language and a translated version for himself. Explaining how he had learned ancient Kadurian would cause him too many troubles.

'Besides, I'd bet good money the army knows how to read it anyway.' He thought.

'Solus, give me a hand. The castle crumbles at the end of the light cycle. It means that even these pages are a creation of the Black Star. Maybe it didn't expect someone to sneak in and learn about its secrets or maybe it has redacted them.

'If the artifact notices us, it could destroy them with a thought. We need to copy them as fast as possible.'

'I doubt they are redacted.' Solus pondered.

'The cursed item has displayed the ability to replicate the whole city, but not to change it in any way. Otherwise it would have created many more mana crystals to speed up the siphoning of the mana geyser. I think it's stuck with what it has.'

'All the more reason to finish quickly!'

The moment the copy was completed, Lith added it to Soluspedia.

'This-this is...' They thought as one while assimilating the ancient Kadurian forgemastering method.

'This is beyond idiotic! Redan was right, there is no input or command to distinguish allies from foes. They didn't even add a failsafe in case something went wrong!' Solus was speechless from the recklessness of the design.

'Maybe, maybe not.' Lith added. 'We know that the artifact is alive and that life cannot be created from thin air. These blueprints do not explain how or who was sacrificed to give it sentience. We need more information.'

"Redan, can you describe to me this Meru fellow? Without their help these notes are useless."

"He is the eldest among the clerics. White robes, white long beard, and a face only a mother can love." The farmer's eyes became cold as steel just by mentioning his name.

"He is the one that activates the High Lord every single day. My pals and I have killed him so many times we know his entrails like the back of our hands."

'Gross and irrelevant.' Solus thought. 'Ask him something more useful.'

"How tall is he? Where can we find him?"

"Not much. About 1.6 (5'3") meters, maybe less because of his hunched back. At this hour he is usually praying for guidance in the main temple."

"Which is?" Lith asked.

'Right beside the Black Star.' Solus answered. Her mana sense covered an area wide enough for her to recognize the energy signature of all the eight clerics they had seen during the last cycle. Only one had a hunched back.

"Two floors below us." Redan said while pointing at the floor with his index finger.

'F\*ck me sideways!' Lith cursed at his bad luck. The idea of tripping an inch away from the finish line was unbearable.

Lith racked his brain in search of a solution. Neither him or Solus could get that close to the artifact without risking to reignite its anger. He paced around the room until his gaze was drawn by Redan playing with his knife again.

"Didn't you say you and Meru have quite a history together?"

"Me and many others." Redan shrugged. "Most Kadurians consider him responsible for what happened. There are so many who hate his guts that he doesn't attempt to run away anymore."

"So, if you went to pick him up for a 'friendly chat' it wouldn't be anything unusual, right?"

"I guess."

"I'd say it's time you two remind of the good times together. Bring him here."

"It should be fun." Redan tossed his knife in mid air, making it spin like a pinwheel and catching it by the handle when it was in front of his face

"In one piece." Lith clarified.

"Not so fun, then." Redan sighed.

## Chapter 396 Failsafe Part 1

For all he knew, Lith had only a shot at getting his hands on the forbidden knowledge Kaduria held. Before sending Redan on his way, Lith used Life Vision to scout the path ahead. The castle was almost empty.

Aside from the eight clerics whose energy signature Solus was able to recognize, there were only a few people moving through the hallways. In other circumstances, Lith would have considered it a good sign, but after knowing Redan, he felt on the edge.

'If Redan is one of the 'sane' Kadurians, I can't imagine the rest. Those people might ignore him or kill him just for laughs. Without him, my plan will fail. I need to make sure he gets to the target in one piece, but how?

'I can't send Solus because the Black Star is aware of our existence. I can't give Redan magical items because they would raise a huge red flag above his head. I hate gambling, luck has never been on my side.' He thought.

'Don't forget the clock is ticking. We have yet to kill anyone during this light phase.' Solus pointed out.

Lith took out from his pocket dimension two small carcasses. They belonged to a rat and a snake. Both were in perfect condition, Lith had killed them without leaving any injury on their bodies.

"Weird choice for a snack, but to each his own, I guess." Redan shrugged. Even the sudden appearance of the carcasses left him unfazed.

"They are not meant to be eaten. Do you know Necromancy?"

"Yes, it's forbidden magic. Using it is a crime. The clerics say raising the dead is a sin and that Necromancy is taught by the demons to their followers to spread death and plague."

"It's no wonder Kaduria fell. Mixing science and superstition it's a recipe for a disaster." Lith sighed while snapping his fingers. A black fog came out from his eyes and mouth, seeping into the carcasses'.

Instead of the red light of undeath, their eyes were blue. It was the sign that Lith's mind was controlling them. Redan watched the creatures quivering to life and whistled in surprise.

"This is the best day of my life. First the flight and now I get to witness demonic arts. I'm starting to believe you about the possibility to be freed from this nightmare." He said with a big smile on his face.

"If you didn't believe me, then why are you helping me?" The Lith-rat asked.

"Why not? Even if you are lying, what do I have to lose? Nothing I do matters anymore. Good and bad have lost any significance centuries ago. I chose to follow you because even if just for one day, you're giving me a purpose.

Today my actions mean something. I couldn't ask for more."

"Thanks." The Lith-snake replied. "There are no demonic arts, though. Just magic."

"You're no fun, Linjos. Your mouse doesn't squeak between words and your snake doesn't hiss on the s. The lack of clichés is ruining my childhood horror stories."

Lith's undead squinted their eyes in annoyance.

"How can you be so laid back? This is no game. We have only one shot and if we fail, there are no second chances."

"That's what makes this so exciting." Redan shrugged. "Let's move. I can't wait to have more fun."

'I'll accompany Redan as long as I can. You keep an eye on my body. Remember, no killing is allowed. Feel free to use all the mana you need, my treat.' Lith told Solus before leaving the room.

In its true magic version, Necromancy had a few more tricks up its sleeve compared to its fake counterpart. The undead entered Redan's shadow while enveloping themselves in a layer of darkness magic that made them almost invisible.

Only their blue eyes were faintly noticeable.

Redan moved with a quick pace through the castle, taking shortcuts and secret passages that allowed him to avoid most of the people wandering around. He still met a few with no hostile intentions.

The moment they turned their backs to him, Redan slit their throats and resumed walking before the corpses had the time to disappear.

"Just to be safe." He replied to the four eyes he could sense staring at his back.

"They could have changed their minds or we could have met them on our way back. As you said, we have only one shot at this."

'Heck, I'm going to miss this guy.' Lith thought.

On their way to the stairs leading to the main temple, the trio met a soldier. He was a middle aged man with finely trimmed mustaches. He wore a light armor consisting of a chest, arms, and legs protectors.

The moment he saw Redan, he unsheathed the short sword he carried on his side.

"Redan, you blasphemer! Are you here to sh\*t on the altar again? Or maybe are you planning to defile the holy scriptures?" Rage was visible on the soldier's face.

"F\*cking zealot, I'm here to do both. I want to see if your precious High Sun will strike me down this time or if he'll do nothing. Because, you know, he doesn't exist."

Redan's words struck a nerve. Even after centuries of agony, the soldier still clung to his faith. He was way more experienced than Redan, so his eyes were fixated on the enemy's shoulders, to predict his movements.

'I have the training and range advantage.' He thought. 'I'll make him squeal like the pig he is.'

"I'll punish you in his stead, you heretic!" The soldier charged forward, annoyed by Redan's unusual relaxed look. Suddenly, he tripped on something. He tried to roll to quickly recover from the fall, but his legs were pulled down with enough strength to make him fall face first onto the ground.

Redan wasted no time, stomping the soldier's neck with his heel and killing him on the spot.

"Thanks." He said to the two creatures still holding the disappearing corpse. "Nindro usually beats me nine times out of ten. He is a stupid zealot, but I learned a lot from dying at his hands."

"I can't risk entering the Black Star's line of sight." Lith said while watching at the stairs with Life Vision. The good news was that there was no one but Meru in the room. Redan had a clear path, at least for a few minutes.

"You are on your own."

"I'll be quick then." Redan tensed up for the first time in decades. Death would mean ruining the adventure of a lifetime.

The moment he entered the room, the high cleric turned around.

"Are you here for the temple or for me?" His voice held no fear. Meru had been chased, tortured, and killed so many times he had lost count. Pain was an old friend, nothing scared him anymore.

"I'm here to pray. I just wanted to... Praise the High Sun! It's a miracle!" Redan said while pointing his finger to the ceiling.

The high cleric looked up believing his prayers had finally been answered. The pommel of Redan's knife struck the back of Meru's head, making him faint on the spot.

## Chapter 397 Failsafe Part 2

Dragging the dead weight up to the stairs took Redan quite some time.

Lith was waiting for them and took care of the unconscious body with one hand. They brought Meru back to his apartments to avoid getting interrupted.

Lith splashed the high priest with cold water since healing magic was off the table. The cleric's eyes were foggy, but after a few seconds, he understood what was happening.

"You are worse than I thought, Redan. You sided with an enemy of Kaduria!" He said watching at Lith's foreign clothes and tanned skin typical of the men of the south.

"I'm not an enemy. I apologize for the kidnapping, but I have my reasons." Lith avoided exposing the Dark Star's façade. After all, the man was a cleric. It would be more likely for him to put his faith into a sacred object rather than a stranger.

"I don't care about your reasons. Kill me, torture, whatever. I don't care."

"I'm not here to hurt you, but to help you." Lith lied through his teeth. "I'm a mage too. I studied the High Lord's projects before coming here, hoping to fix it, but there are still too many unknown details."

"Why should I believe you?" He looked at Lith with eyes full of suspicion, yet inwardly praying he was telling the truth. Hope was a rare commodity.

"First of all, I still have my powers." Lith chanted a simple spell, materializing a sphere of light.

"Redan told me you can't fix it by yourself because magic has disappeared. Also, do you know why there is a barrier around Kaduria?"

Meru stared at the sphere in awe. He had almost forgotten about the beauty of magic. He shook his head while his mind was invaded by the memories of all the great spells he had mastered, of the feats he had performed.

"Because as soon as the black rain stops, the High Lord explodes."

"It's impossible!" The cleric couldn't believe his own ears.

"That's not all." Lith played it by ear "At first everyone mourned Kaduria's fall, but after a few years, the artifact started to rebuild itself. We were afraid the explosion would happen again, so we sealed the area. Sadly, we were right."

Meru's mind was spinning. Lith's words were feeding him a series of dots of half truths letting him fill the blanks.

"This explains everything." The cleric held his head between his hands in despair. "I always believed we were somehow stuck during the summer of the year 10562, the day when we activated the High Lord for the first time. Yet it never made sense. Such a powerful barrier would require a lot of planning."

"Exactly. You are not stuck in time. In the outside world is the fall season of 11086. After every explosion, The High Lord rebuilds itself, Kaduria and then it explodes again. It took us centuries to decipher your language."

"Is that the reason why you strangers never talked to us before?" Meru asked, receiving a nod in reply.

"Why you butchered out people? What did we do to you to deserve such an inhuman treatment?" The high cleric was now filled with outrage. Lith might not be an enemy, but someone had to pay for the suffering of all the Kadurians.

"Are you kidding me?" Lith yelled. He pretended to be even more outraged.

"Do you have any idea how many people die every time the High Lord explodes if the barrier collapses? Thousands! The reason you get butchered is that for some unknown reason, it weakens the explosion. While you get back to life, our dead don't!"

Meru became pale as a ghost. He had lived his whole life feeling responsible for the fate of Kaduria and now dozens of thousands of alleged deaths weighed on his conscience.

"What do you need to know?"

"We think the reason why the High Lord creates the black rain is because it mistakes the Kadurians for its enemies. How did you teach it to distinguish friends from foes?" Lith asked.

"We didn't. We gave it sentience by infusing the mana crystal with the lives of the most devoted believers of the High Sun. They knew the holy book by heart and they loved our country. Their faith made them the perfect tool for our endeavor."

'I think the process failed.' Solus chimed in. 'I heard the Black Star's mind and it wasn't a chorus of voices. It was one cold, inhuman personality. Their method gave it intelligence but no conscience nor sense of self.'

"Since it keeps killing you over and over, I'd say something went wrong." Lith said. "Is there some way to influence its behavior before it activates?"

"No. Its brain unit is shielded from external influences. We thought it was perfect."

"Please, tell me at least there is some kind of failsafe. Otherwise it will explode forever. Our people's lives are at stake!"

"You don't understand! The High Lord was supposed to be perfect. A testament to the High Sun power. A failsafe would have meant a lack of faith." Meru said, unable to hold back his tears anymore.

"Maybe there's still hope." A sudden clarity flashed through the old man's eyes.

"Ruka, our youngest member, expressed several times similar concerns. I didn't listen to him, but maybe some of the others were wiser than me!"

"What do you mean?" Lith asked, following the high cleric that was almost running through the corridors towards the living quarters of another cleric.

"The High Lord isn't something I did all by myself. The eight of us worked together for years. If you were a Forgemaster, you'd know that by splitting the runes among several layers, you could hide a castle in a project of that magnitude."

'All those papers were just one eighth of the blueprints?' Lith and Solus thought as one.

Meru gathered the seven clerics and exposed to them everything Lith had told him.

"There is a failsafe." Ruka admitted, while three other clerics nodded with a guilty look on their faces.

"It would unravel all of our work and destroy the High Lord."

"Why you didn't say it earlier? Was your pride worth so much suffering?" One of the other clerics blurted out in outrage.

"Because it would have only made us feel worse, exposing our lack of faith. The failsafe requires magic and none of us can even light a candle without a flintstone. Now things are different. We can finally escape from this nightmare."

Everyone looked at Lith like a savior. The four clerics that had conspired together brought their own blueprints, showing him how to avoid the High Lord detection and where to strike to destroy it once and for all.

Meanwhile, Lith could only hope Solus would remember at least part of the rest of the blueprints. The light phase was about to end. He had no time to copy so many pages and once the Black Star learned about the clerics' treachery, he doubted it would recreate their bodies anymore.

Chapter 398 Turning the Tide Part 1

'I'm so proud of you.' Lith could almost see sparkles in Solus's eyes while she thought those words.



'You are willing to help these people for good instead of taking the easy way out.'

Truth to be told, Lith empathized with the Kadurians. Their situation, pain, and struggle were similar yet much worse than his own. Yet he didn't care that much. Lith had just got carried away with his act while pointing out the clerics' stupidity.

'Helping them also means helping us.' Lith replied. 'While I listen to their explanation, you look into the blueprints for clues about the body and soul preservation process.'

Solus was too happy about his sudden change of heart to notice how quickly he changed the topic.

After Lith finished learning and practicing the spells necessary to disable the Black Star, Solus reported her findings.

'The Black Star is indeed a masterpiece. It can draw power from the mana geyser and use it to empower all the arrays that run through the city. Just like the academy, any damage the building takes can be repaired this way.

'It also possesses an amazing number of skills, but nothing out of the ordinary. Even after reading five out of eight blueprints, I have yet to find a single rune pattern that's not about a combat spell.'

"I have a question." Lith had no time to beat around the bush. He needed some answers and he needed them before it was too late.

"Who came up with the idea of granting the High Lord the ability to restore your bodies? I'm a Healer and with such a spell I could save countless lives."

"No one did." The clerics replied in unison.

"If we could do something like that, there's no way we would lose a war. The High Lord purpose was to destroy our enemies and supply our mages with the mana coming from the mana geyser that is underneath Kaduria." Ruka said.

"That's not entirely true." The high cleric Meru said while caressing his chin.

"We were outnumbered, so we gave the High Lord the ability to cast tier four light magic. That way it could both heal our troops and replenish their life force. The idea was to make our army unstoppable as long as they were within the city."

'There's something amiss. I can do everything they just mentioned yet I can't even fix a single damaged mana core, let alone recreate a whole body from scratch.' Lith thought.

'Yeah. Based on what they said, the Black Star would simply allow them to use Invigoration.' Solus pondered. 'Do you think it's possible that somehow they forgemastered something that's greater than the sum of its parts?'

'No way. We have forgemastered countless items, seen incredible artifacts being crafted by Professor Wanemyre while we were at the academy. Yet not once the final product diverged from the specifics. What we have seen so far is an unprecedented anomaly.'

Despite the situation was still dire, Lith burned with curiosity. There was a thought scratching at the back of his mind. He couldn't put his finger on it, but he believed that the answer was getting closer with every possibility they discarded.

Lith cast Ruka's Invisibility spell. The cleric's creation clouded the artifact's perception, making Lith able to get close to it without risking his life.

The clerics accompanied him downstairs to the main temple. They formed a circle around the Black Star, pretending to pray out loud while they actually covered the artifact's line of sight.

Lith used their cover to sneak in undetected. Invisibility blocked the Black Star's magical senses and the clerics blocked the physical ones. For once, Lith wasn't happy for being so tall.

He had to crouch all his way in until he was close enough to start chanting the Freeze spell. Lith chose not to float or use the Hush spell because he had no idea what was the range of Ruka's spell and wasn't willing to take risks.

Once again, paranoia saved his life. Invisibility made his life force and mana flow undetectable, but the Black Star was still able to perceive the spell coming out from Lith's body while he was so close.

It wiped out the clerics with an energy blast, leaving eight black puddles as the only trace of their previous existence.

"You! How did you get here?" The Black Star said. It had no reason to keep pretending of being inactive. It tried to emit a second focused beam of pure mana, but it was already too late.

The Freeze spell was completed. It shut down all of the artifact's abilities but its mind. Lith kept a Warp Steps and a Blink ready at hand, just to be safe. He reached the artifact and used Invigoration on it.

"Keep your hands off me, you filthy human! What did you do to me?" The Black Star screamed. There was a tinge of emotion in its voice. It resembled panic.

"You don't know?" Lith asked with a grin.

'The cursed item is paralyzed and it doesn't seem able to assimilate the people's memories. So far so good.' He thought while analyzing with Solus the results of his breathing technique.

At first glance, the Black Star was almost identical to Solus. It had a life force and a mana core instead of a pseudo core. A bright purple core at that. The star shaped crystal that was the artifact's body had a purity level like Lith had never seen before.

It breathed like a living being, but instead of air it sucked in world energy and expelled something else. It was a dense gas, similar to mana yet now that Lith was close enough, he could feel his skin prickle, a nauseating sensation spread through his body.

Lith checked his surroundings with Life Vision, making sure he had no witnesses. Redan was waiting for him on top of the stairs, nervously shifting his body weight from one foot to the other.

'Good, he wouldn't like what I have to say.'

"Now listen carefully, because I'm not going to repeat myself." Lith said with his usual stone cold business tone.

"I want to know how you are able to bring back the Kadurians, how you can replicate mana cores and bodies."

The artifact laugh was devoid of emotion. It didn't express amusement, only mockery.

"Or what? Even if I'm paralyzed you are not strong enough to harm me, fleshling. Your witchcraft is fading by the second. You'd be wise to run away."

Lith's reply was the last spell Ruka had devised, Repentance. It was a forgemastering spell. Lith spread the special ink onto the ground, leaving to Solus the duty to form a magic circle by manipulating the droplets with water magic.

The runes shone and took life, floating around the Black Star before sinking into it one by one. When the first rune crashed against its body, the artifact found itself unable to breathe anymore.

The second rune made the mana coursing through its crystal lattice go turn into poison. Its transparent surface revealed green spots that branched into slim veins that spread along the chiseled lines shaping the artifact like a disease.

## Chapter 399 Turning the Tide Part 2

The third caused the corrupted mana to surge upwards. The Black Star trembled while small cracks appeared on its surface. Only then Lith stopped chanting. The ink on the ground turned grey before fading away.

Interrupting a spell was no different from a failed cast. The mana still inside the liquid had no direction anymore, it turned against its host burning it from the inside. Lith chanted Freeze again, renewing the seal and crushing the Black Star confidence at once.

"You are not a Kadurian. If you die there's no turning back. Tell me what I want to know or face oblivion."

It took a while for Lith's words to sink into the artifacts shocked mind. It had always been the apex predator. In the small cage it had lived in for the past centuries, the Black Star had been an unparalleled existence.

Humans lived or died at its whims. It knew no fear. Nothing could hurt it, even the Rangers were just a small hindrance. They could delay its plans, but nothing more. The Black Star slowly realized the clerics' treachery, which had turned its own body into an enemy.

Lith spread the ink a second time, letting the fourth rune spread the cracks until they almost connected between themselves before stopping. Lith was disgusted at himself for what he was doing, but he felt he had no choice.

All that talking before killing the monster in front of himself was against his code. Kill first, questions later. That was how he did business. Any other course of action implied too many dangers, especially against a being that could kill him with a stray thought.

Yet he had never been so close to finding a solution to his problems.

'I want to be the only master of my destiny. Ever since my death on Earth, I've been a puppet into someone else's hands. I'm tired of scheming, of lying to everyone I love, to survive through each day instead of living.

I'm sick of fearing the moment when everything I worked so hard for will be ripped from my hands by a random event. No more Carls, no more Yurials. If I can finally protect what's mine, then I'm willing to pay almost any price.'

Lith's determination dwarfed his fear, putting even his paranoia on a very short leash. He waited until the cracks on the Dark Star started to mend before casting both the spells for a third time.

The artifact awoke from his daze. Its hatred turned into fear and then into panic.

"If you kill me, all the Kadurians will die with me." It said in a last, desperate gamble. "A whole civilization will disappear. Their blood will be on your hands!" The Black Star had heard the clerics repeat those words so many times.

They were bound to be important to humans.

Lith let the fifth and sixth rune turn the cracks into small fissures before stopping. A huge amount of mana gushed out from the wounds while the whole city quaked. One of the black puddles on the ground turned into a shooting star that darted upwards and through the ceiling.

Lith could see from the window several lights rise to the sky.

"I don't care about a dead civilization made of dead people. What you give them is not life, but a caricature of it. You took away their freedom, their hopes, and their future, leaving behind only fear and misery.

"Do you have any idea what does it mean being in so much pain to wish for death and having even that denied? To be forced to live your worst nightmare over and over again?" Lith's voice trembled with rage. Solus knew she wasn't talking about the Kadurians anymore.

"What about me?" The Dark Star replied when Lith started his chant again. "What about my pain, my future? What makes you different from me?"

"Only one thing. I never kill my prey more than once." The runes seeped inside the artifact's body, widening the fissures and causing another outburst of shooting stars.

"Enough! I beg of you!" The Black Star could feel the damage getting closer to its mana core. To make things worse, it was losing control over an increasing number of Kadurians. The loss was still negligible, but it would slow down its plans nonetheless.

"The secret lies in my crystalline body. It's only thanks to it that I can do it."

Those words were enough to stop Lith's chanting at the third rune.

"What do you mean? Explain yourself."

"Instead of using the mana crystal to fuel my abilities, the humans used it to store my conscience and powers. That was their first mistake." The cursed object said while focusing on healing its wounds.

"Their spell was meant to use me as an energy reserve for their purposes. They bound me to this city by using the mana geyser beneath it and the crystal network above the roofs as the only way I have to feed myself.

"They thought I would have been their tool, dispensing the collected energies among their ranks. They had no idea this body possesses the ability to manipulate mana at will.

"Linking me to their bodies, to their cores, to this city's every brick was their second mistake. According to their plan, I could only give, but thanks to the crystal, I turned it into a two way path. Instead of being their nanny, I took everything they had.

"I collected their life forces and their mana cores, using them just as they meant to use me. I consider it poetic justice."

'Just like an orc shaman is able to suck away the world energy.' Lith thought. 'Probably the Black Star can't do the same, otherwise it wouldn't need to cycle between the light and the shadow phase.'

"With that much power, I traveled through the north, punishing our enemies. Once I killed the invaders, I purged our glorious country from the heretics and unbelievers. They fought me with all their might, even the so called grand cleric of the High Sun tried to stop me, saying it wasn't up to me to dispense justice.

"Yet I was stronger than all of them combined. Sadly, away from the mana geyser, my reserves started to dwindle. Under the constant pursuit of my enemies, I was forced to retreat here and to recreate the spires to feed me again.

Before I could recover, they enveloped Kaduria with this barrier, cutting me off from the geyser. Until I discovered that by restoring the humans, I could force the world energy through the barrier and use it to regain my freedom."

"What about the Shadows? What are they?" Lith asked.

"I wasn't linked to the humans' minds, so I can't assimilate them. I don't know how they can survive without a body nor do I care. They do nothing but whine and despair. They're useless to me."

"Just like you are to me." Lith replied before chanting for the last time.

'Sadly, even if I could replicate the Black Star, it's not something I can use. Linking my mind, body and mana core to a magic crystal is useless without it having a conscience willing to revive me.' Lith thought.

'I can't entrust my life to a cursed object. I would end up like the Kadurians, or worse.'

Lith had just finished casting Freeze, when Solus warned him.

'Watch out, someone is approaching the main temple.'

'Soldiers carry only normal weapons, they can't hurt me.' Lith replied.

'Not a soldier. They're about to fly through the window. To be able to use magic, they must be from the outside world.'

## Chapter 400 Cornered Part 1

Lith didn't like the sudden turn of events. Freeze had just been renewed so the Black Star wouldn't be a problem for a while. An outsider, however, meant only troubles, no matter their identity.

If it was someone from the army, Lith would have to kill them. Explaining what he was doing and how he was capable of doing it would require to share details he wasn't willing to provide.

He had already broken a rule of his code that day, leaving a loose end would be unacceptable, even if it meant being questioned about his comrade's disappearance.

If it wasn't someone from the army, there was an infinite number of things that could go wrong. Lith gritted his teeth, preparing for the worse.

'Do you recognize them? Is it Vorgh?' The first person who came to his mind was the Brigadier General. He might have finished his investigation and was looking for Lith to share its results or warn him about something.

'It's not Vorgh.' Solus reported with confidence. 'They have a bright cyan mana core and there is no trace of that magnificent staff.'

'That's it?' Lith almost sneered at the idea of facing a weaker opponent for once, yet he kept a straight face while checking his surroundings with Life Vision, in case the enemy was more than one. Rarely things were easy for him.

'Yes, but they have enough enchanted items on themselves that they could open a shop. I wouldn't underestimate them if I were you.'

Lith weaved as many spells as he could, preparing to ambush the stranger. He was eager to get rid of the menace and put an end to the Black Star threat. The artifact had no idea who he was, but it knew his face and more importantly, it knew Solus.

Lith was sure that if it ever got free, it would make them its first priority. They were the only ones to know how to destroy it.

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#### Army Headquarters, City of Belius

Brigadier General Vorgh was on a conference call via the communication amulet with the best Wardens the Griffon Kingdom had to offer. The army, the Mage Association, and the Crown had pooled their resources to face the unknown threat.

"I know several arrays with two different functions, yet I can count on the fingers of one hand those which have three or more. They are all state secrets. Which leads me to fear the parasite array is part of a greater scheme. An attack from a foreign nation." Vorgh said.

"It's unlikely." King Meron shook his head. "Each country has its own lost cities and each one of them is a threat to every single human being. The reason we keep them sealed is that no one knows how to get rid of them.

"No ruler would be so foolish to unleash such horrors on Mogar. History demonstrates that once they take hold of a territory, it can't be reclaimed. There would be no point in releasing a menace that even they may not be able to contain."

"Agreed. The Gorgon Empire has no reason to jeopardize the Kellar region's security. The Black Star is too close to their borders, they wouldn't risk making it their problem. As for the Blood Desert, underhanded methods aren't Salaark style. She just takes what she wants." Queen Sylpha pointed out.

"Your majesty, with all due respect, who else could employ such a powerful tool?" Vorgh wished he could share their optimism. "My colleagues and I agree that the third layer of runes serves the purpose to replicate the signal of a Ranger's badge.

"Even if we change the seal every time a new Ranger is assigned to the region, as soon as they enter Kaduria our mysterious enemy can do the same. We have no idea since when the parasite array is there, nor what's happening inside the lost city.

"According to the latest Ranger's readings, the barrier is severely weakened. We should prepare for the worst." Vorgh said.

The Royals nodded. They knew that Lady Tyriss wouldn't interfere with the state affairs, but maybe she would make an exception for the ancient threat they were in no way responsible for. Especially if, as Vorgh said, the crisis was caused by a foreign power.

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Lith hid behind one of the white marble columns surrounding the altar while keeping an eye on the newcomer with Life Vision. The plan was simple. If they were a member of the army, Lith would have let them explain the reason they were there and kill them only if necessary.

In all the other cases, he would attack on sight. No one was supposed to be able to enter Kaduria's barrier. Lith would get rid of the threat and get a medal for it. Two birds with one stone.

From the outside, Treius too was staring at Lith with Life Vision. The light phase had yet to end, but several blocks of the city were heavily damaged. People had fallen to their knees in the middle of the street and were praying their hearts out.

Treius wasn't able to understand Kadurian, but he had seen the shooting stars. Something was wrong with the Dark Star.

'The bastard is damn strong.' He thought while measuring Lith's mana flow and life force and comparing them to his own.

'A strong fake mage is still a fake mage. They aren't my equal!' Despite his arrogant words, Treius knew better not to underestimate a Ranger. His plan had required to interact with many of them. Those that couldn't be bought had to be killed and none of them had been easy prey.

Treius unleashed his first spell against the main temple. Lith saw several streams of lightning bolts rush towards the building, making him doubt the newcomer's sanity. Stone was naturally resistant to air magic and the blocks that made up the wall were at least half meter (1.6') thick.

'It's the most original way of painting the temple black, unless...' Lith thought.

The streams altered their course, surrounding the building with a perfect circle of electricity. Treius kept pouring energy, making the ring crackle like an angry beast eager to unleash its fury.

With a wave of his hand, the circle broke in several new lightning bolts that entered from all the windows, leaving Lith no way out. Lith remained calm and conjured two stone walls. His back was already against the column, now he had no blind spots.

Or so he thought.

He had reacted too fast, so he hadn't noticed that each lightning bolt was shaped like wingless dragons. They advanced with their maws wide open and their blue eyes fixated on their prey.

It was a tier five true magic spell, Lightning Dragon. The bolts were infused with part of the consciousness of their caster, just like Lith could do with his undead. Treius could see through their eyes and control their every move.

The dragons leaped above the stone walls and flooded the space they were supposed to protect. Lith didn't have the time to curse, only to realize he was trapped inside a prison of his own creation.

Earth magic was the strongest defensive element, but compared to lightning it was slow.