

## Supreme M 421

### Chapter 421 Agenda Part 2

"It happened a few years ago." The man from the desert explained.

"Some Abominations had killed most of her Feathers the borders were overrun by invaders from all the neighboring countries, and she was on the hunt for the one staging the crisis. It was a real mess.

"The Overlord ordered Ruria, my predecessor, to cull the monster tribes during her absence. Ruria was over seven hundred years old and had a bright purple core. She believed that she was on the verge of another breakthrough."

"The fabled white core of immortality?" The woman from the Empire sniggered along with most of those present.

"That's a legend. No one has ever achieved it."

"Yeah, a legend. Like Awakened ones, Mage Towers, Dragons, and Elves. Yet..." He didn't finish the phrase, he simply waved at his peers.

"Anyway, Ruria was certain that with more life and death battles she could finally evolve. She defied Salaark and told her to shove those bullshit orders up her feathery ass, wishing her to enjoy the experience. And here I am."

"Wait. How did you get a territory without anyone challenging your claim? I'm sure this is the first assembly in decades."

"Because I didn't claim it, Salaark gave it to me. Back then, I was a wandering Awakened who had agreed to help her. She gave me Ruria's territory as a reward for my services. Not before taking most of Ruria's treasures and books for herself."

The man sighed at the memory. Salaark had left him the crumbs, yet even those were more than he had ever dreamt about. He couldn't even imagine how powerful the Guardian had to be to berate such knowledge to the point of gifting it away.

"This is unacceptable!" An old woman from the Kingdom yelled in outrage. "How can you bow down like sheep to a bloodthirsty tyrant? Why haven't we killed Salaark already?"

At those words, the hall fell into silence. Raagu looked at the woman like she was insane.

"Sure, we can beat her, but at what price? How many of us are willing to die in the attempt?" Not a single hand was raised.

"Let's suppose for a moment that we kill Salaark, that the other Guardians don't decide to avenge their fallen comrade. Then what? Who is willing to assume the duty of a Guardian? To prevent the chaos that would ensue after her death from triggering a war that could destroy all of our territories?"

Under the disgusted gaze of the other Awakened, the woman understood the foolishness of her words and lowered her gaze in embarrassment.

"If I ever hear such nonsense from you again, Xola, I'll think you've become senile and take you out myself. Enough wasting my time. Who's still interested in Clein's territory?"

Those who already had a territory in another country lowered their hands. They didn't want to become Salaark's underlings. Only the wandering Awakened remained. Even if they had to pay their due to Salaark, it was better than the alternative.

"Very good. Before proceeding with the Spirit Duel, the second item on the agenda. Treius Clein wasn't killed by Salaark, but by a seventeen years old Ranger. I suppose you have heard about Lith Verhen."

Raagu was discomfited noticing that only some of the Awakened from the Kingdom recognized the name. She distributed pieces of papers with all of his known achievements.

"He must be an Awakened too." Said Xola trying to regain a part of her credibility. "Treius was a lazy idiot, barely twenty years old, but Glamus Awakened him when he was still a kid and provided him with his best equipment.

"A street urchin Awakened like Nalear managed to kill Linjos, one of the best mages of the Kingdom. I can't believe a Ranger still wet behind his ears could defeat Treius with fake magic."

"Agreed." Raagu nodded.

"Fine, but who cares?" Said the young woman from the Kingdom.

"He's playing by the rules, pretending to be a 'genius' and minding his own business. Heck, we should send him a thank you card for getting rid of the Black Star." Many agreed with her.

"You are all idiots. It's no surprise many of you are stuck at a blue core even after centuries." Raagu stared at them like they were trash.

"I just told you that a twenty year old Awakened, backed by one of the most powerful men of the Desert and with a bright cyan core has been defeated by someone even younger with no background. How can your answer be 'who cares'?"

The revelation amazed most of the younger Awakened, while the others were simply interested enough to be relieved of their boredom.

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Gorgon Empire, In Magic Empress Milea's throne room.

After months spent wandering the Garlen continent, Scarlett the Scorpicores was fed up with failing at everything and had decided to ask for Leegaain's help. The problem was she had no way of contacting him.

The rune of his communication amulet had been offline for weeks, forcing her to meet him in person. Luckily, Milea knew about Scarlett and her most notable aliases, so getting an audience with the fabled Magic Empress hadn't been too hard.

"Good morning, your Majesty. Thank you for receiving me with such short notice." Scarlett's human form gave her a deep bow. She looked like a woman adventurer in her thirties. Her ashen gold hair had red shades and she wore a gold rimmed pince-nez on her nose.

Unlike the Guardians, she had chosen an inconspicuous human form for her travels. She could barely stand humans as it was, she had no desire to have flocks of admirers pestering her.

"Any friend of Leegaain is also my friend. It's an honor to meet one of the Lords of the forest." Milea allowed Scarlett to stand up and shook her hand.

"I relinquished that title. Now I'm simply the first of my kind." Scarlett didn't like the idea of being called "the Mother of all Scorpicores". She found it pretentious and it made her feel old.

"What can I do for you?" Milea asked.

"Thank you, but I just need to talk with the old lizard."

"Coming here was the right move. He's been very busy of late. Without a mind link, it's impossible to reach him." Milea closed her eyes for a second and a humanoid Warped next to her.

"Scar, you haven't changed at all." Leegaain said with a disappointed voice.

He had the appearance of a lean albino man, 1,75 meters (5'9"), with snow white hair and skin. His eyes were purple with vertical pupils. He was wearing a lab coat over a set of pitch black clothes.

"It's nice to see you too." Scarlett replied with an inhuman growl.

"Since we are both busy, I'll get straight to the point . After Salaark saved Balkor, and Linjos's death, I've decided to step up my game and become a Guardian." After failing to avenge her comrades, losing her only human friend had been the last straw.

"Yet no matter what I do, ever since I fought your feathery lady friend in the desert, no world tribulation has occurred. I left my forest because I knew that a quiet life also meant no challenges and no tribulations.

#### Chapter 422 Present Part 1

"I've slain countless Fallen, righted several injustices, helped those in need, but to no avail. To add insult to the injury, my core is still blue. For the gods' sake, I'm over 300 years old. What am I doing wrong?" She said looking at Milea with envy.

The Empress was in her early thirties, yet she already had a deep purple core and a body powerful enough to fight on par with an Evolved Monster.

'I wonder how the heck did he did it.' Scarlett pondered. 'It's too bad not even my artifact can see through a Guardian. I always wondered what kind of core they have.'

A wave of Leegaain's hand made two armchairs appear, one for himself and the other for his guest.

"Excellent question. The short answer is: everything. If you want the long one, you'd better sit down. It will take a while."

Scarlett rolled her eyes and prayed for a swift death before doing as instructed.

To Scarlett, Leegaain asked: "First of all, since when were you a hero? Why would helping others trigger a tribulation?"

"Tyris explained to me how tribulations work. The last one happened while I was seeking justice for my friends, so I thought that what Mogar wants from me is to do the right thing." She replied.

"That's absurd! What happened to Balkor was an injustice, yet he never experienced a tribulation. When the anomaly fought Nalear he did the right thing, but again, no tribulation.

"They happen when something deeply rooted inside of you resonates with what Mogar wants. Mogar couldn't care less about right or wrong, fair or unfair. The only right thing you did was to leave your turf. Without hardships there's no growth."

"Then tell me. What does Mogar want from me?" The idea of having wasted months of hard work frustrated her to no end.

"If I tell you, having a tribulation will become nigh impossible. Once you know, you would do the right things for the wrong reason: getting your prize. I suffered seeing Mogar's wonders disappear and so did Mogar. That's how I became a Guardian.

"If I started hoarding knowledge and creatures just to please the world, there would be no resonance between us. The feeling must be sincere, not cynical."

"Okay, fine! What about the blue core? Why am I stuck?" She snarled.

"A blue core is the natural apex for most bodies. Very few can host a purple core because the mind, body, and mana must be in perfect synch. Up to the blue core, you only need to refine your body and lower the resistance it offers to the mana flow by removing impurities.

"A purple core, however, requires that even the mind must not be a hindrance. Using magic must become akin to breathing to you. Moving a finger or casting a spell should require you the same focus.

"Humans have a hard time getting a purple core because of their flimsy bodies, beasts because of their powerful bodies. We naturally tend to be reliant on brute strength just like humans use magic even to wipe their own asses."

"So, it's just a matter of practice? Because I have studied magic for centuries!" Scarlett was still confused.

"Not of practice, but of understanding the nature of magic. You make it flow instead of letting it flow." Leegaain shook his head.

"Okay, I give up. Can you help me like you did for her?" She pointed at Milea.

"I could, but that could hinder your path to Guardianhood. You would learn my way of using magic instead of discovering yours. It could alter the way you perceive yourself and the world."

"What about the humans?" Frustration was driving her insane.

"I've met a crazy head at the White Griffon with a purple core. How is it possible?"

"Some creatures are born with a perfect mana body and a twisted mind. Only such individuals if incredibly lucky can host a purple core, yet it comes at a cost. In their case, the impurities left are a safeguard. If they Awaken, they die because their bodies are synched to a static mana, not to a flowing one."

"Any advice?" Scarlett stood up. The whole visit had felt like a waste of time to her.

"Yes, one. Open yourself to the world. Laugh, cry, fall in love, hate, whatever you do, do it from the depths of your heart. Being a Guardian requires staying true to oneself.

"As for the core issue, just stop thinking of magic as if it's not part of you. Every spell you cast, every item you forge, it defines you. Just like the words you say or the decisions you make." Leegaain stood up while offering her his hand.

"I always admired you for never forcing an Awakening, not even for your friends. I don't know if you'll ever become a Guardian, but I'm certain that you'll get a purple core in no time."

"Thanks for your wisdom." Scarlett said while smiling for the first time in months.

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Trawn Woods, inside Solus's tower form.

After dinner, Lith and Tista had left home for the mana geyser that would allow Solus to take part in their conversation. Once inside, Lith told his sister the truth about Kaduria and his fight against the unknown Awakened one.

Then, he told her about his encounter with the Empowered Abomination.

"That thing wanted my crystal. The rest of the family is safe here in Lutia, but once you leave, you may become a target. This Master could try to get you to force my hand." Lith said.

"Are you telling me to stay cooped up home?" Tista was mildly annoyed.

"No, just to be careful. Remember what I taught you about Abominations and keep your eyes open for black cores. If you're in danger, run." Lith was done protecting his sister from the truth. She was old and powerful enough to make her own choices.

"Thank you, lil brother! I'm glad you trust me so much." Tista had feared Lith would give her a paranoid speech to change her mind about her trip.

"You're welcome. Now, I need your advice." Once he had finished telling her about his first date and the blunder he made after being conferred Great Mage, Tista didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"The good news is that she definitely likes you. Otherwise instead of asking you to call her, she would have canceled the date. The bad news is that if you don't handle things carefully, she'll expect a betrothal gift from you."

"I know, right?" Solus chimed in. "I told him to give her a nice present, but Lith's idea is insane."

"Hear me out before calling me crazy." Lith sighed. "I can't give her a dimensional ring because it's too expensive, right?" The simplest of Lith's creations was worth several gold coins, while military officers were paid in silver.

"At the same time, since I don't know what she likes, flowers or sweets would be impersonal and unimaginative."

"Don't forget cheap." Tista pointed out.

"Fine! Cheap too. I don't want to show off nor do I want to screw up again, so I thought about a compromise."

Lith walked towards his forgemastering lab and disappeared for a couple of minutes before returning with what looked like a green breadstick.

## Chapter 423 Present Part 2

The moment Lith imprinted the green stick, a flower made of flames bloomed from its tip. Tista had never seen something like it, mostly because it was a reproduction down to the smallest detail of a double-flowered camellia japonica from Earth.

With a series of mana sparks, Lith made it turn snow white, ice blue, midnight black, sunny yellow, chestnut brown, and red again.

"It's the perfect compromise." Lith offered the flower to Tista to let her examine it.

"It's almost as cheap as a flower but has the cool allure of magic." On Mogar there were no greenhouses. The only available flowers were the wild ones or those which people grew in their own garden.

Only nobles could afford a gardener, and even then, they only cultivated plants that could thrive in their region. It was the reason why flowers were considered a cheap present.

With the money necessary to buy dimensional items or get access to Warp Gates, it would be more convenient to buy a house rather than export plants.

"Also, I used very cheap- I mean, I chose materials that can't hold the imprint for long. In less than a week, the magic stored will dissipate and I made it so that the visual effect will resemble the withering of a flower.

"This way, she has to tend to it like it's the real deal. The idea behind my creation is that if she likes it, every time she recharges it or changes the element stored..."

"She is likely to think about you!" Tista cut him short while moving her hand over the fiery flower. It was ethereal and barely warm.

"Do you like it?" Lith asked with a smug grin.

"This is the most romantic thing I have ever seen! What is it called?"

"Camellia." Lith had no imagination for names, so he stuck with the original one.

"You named it after her? You've known her for less than a week."

'More like I picked a flower that reminded me of her name.' He thought.

"First, if you give her something like this, you might as well add a betrothal gift. This is too much for a second date. Heck, maybe even for a tenth one." Tista stared in awe at the multiple layers of petals and the hues of color each one had.

"I said the same thing, but he is too damn stubborn." Solus sighed.

"Second, I resent that you've never made something this cute for Mom, Rena, or I. Yet you invented this camellia for a complete stranger!" Tista said with an angry voice.

Those words struck hard at Lith, to the point that Solus intervened in outrage.

"That's really unfair of you, Tista. You are the reason why Lith became a healer in the first place. He took care of you when you were ill, gave you the best cuts of meat even if he was still hungry, made sure you always had fur clothes.

"Have you forgotten the toys he made for you? Like the rocking chair? Or that the house you live in, just like the clothes you wear all come from his hard work? He did a lot for you, kid."

Tista lowered her gaze feeling ashamed of herself. Her rage disappeared like a bubble.

"I'm sorry, lil brother. I didn't mean it that way. I guess I'm just jealous of your talent and of Kamila's luck. I've never received anything like this from any of my dates. It's beautiful. Maybe even too much."

"Why are you jealous? It's just a trick." Lith said trying to console her as five different kinds of elemental flowers bloomed on his fingertips while a sixth one bloomed on his palm.

"It may be just a trick, but the thought behind it is quite deep. I wouldn't give it to her so soon." She tried to mimic him, but her flowers either looked like crumpled origami or as someone had stomped on them.

"I've been Awakened since I was four, it's just a matter of experience with first magic." He shrugged. "Okay, let's put the camellia aside. Then what the heck should I give her?"

"I guess you are forced to go with flowers. Everything else would feel like you're showing off your magic or trying too hard. She is from Belius. Based on your stories, there isn't much green there. Bringing her a mixed bouquet is the safest route." Tista replied.

Lith pondered Tista's words while the girls talked about their respective travel plans. He left them alone and went to study the purple crystal stored in the tower basement. The Empowered Abomination's attempt to retrieve it was proof of the crystal's value.

He tried to activate the pathways marked by the Master's device with little success.

The crystal rejected Lith's personal mana even in the form of spirit magic. The only way he had to interact with it was by manipulating the world energy as the gemstone absorbed it to further its growth.

It was a delicate process. If Lith applied too much pressure, the world energy would be tainted by his mana and expelled from the crystal. Too little and it would wander off the pathways producing no effect.

"Good grief. This may take months of focused practice. I don't have that much time, at least not right now." Lith sighed.

After returning home, he finally had the time and the privacy necessary to make the call. Once again, Kamila had the hologram disabled. Lith took it as a bad sign.

"Sorry for calling you this late. I didn't want to bother you again while you were at work." He said.

"Why are you apologizing? I'm the one who asked you to call me." She didn't sound upset or uncomfortable.

"Is everything okay at home? How did your parents react to the news, oh great one?" Kamila chuckled.

"Better than okay. Everyone is happy as a clam. They accepted the change much better than I did. Sorry if I freaked you out earlier. With all I've been through in my life, I've become a hopeless pessimist. The higher a commoner gets, the bigger a target he becomes."

"Sadly, I know what you mean. Let's not talk about sad things, though. I was thinking, would you like to go to a music restaurant for our second date or would you prefer a more classic location?"

'She brought up the date topic on her own. I'm safe!' Lith clenched his fist in triumph.

"What's a music restaurant?"

"It's a new kind of establishment that's becoming quite popular in the north. They offer live music to their customers. The brave ones can even take part in the show. It's more expensive than a regular restaurant, because they have to be magically sound proofed and enchanted so that everyone can talk and listen without going deaf."

'Told you so!' Solus gloated. 'She recognized you from the receptionist's description, my dear Ebenezer Scrooge.'

Lith cursed Xilo's bloodline out to the seventh generation before replying.

"Sounds interesting, I'd be glad to give it a try. My treat this time. I'm the one that got promoted."

"Still daring even after the Hogese fiasco? Sweet." The hologram popped up. Kamila was dressed normally, but she was dabbing her hair with a bath towel. The steam in the background was a clear sign she had just finished bathing.

That and the way her shirt stuck to her body like a second skin made Lith's usually cold heart quicken its pace.

#### Chapter 424 Date Part 1

The following morning, Lieutenant Kamila Yehval was fixing her hair in a bun before going to work, when she received a call on her communication amulet.

'I hope it's not Lith again. Last night we ended up talking until it was really late. I don't like clingy guys much.' The smile on her face disappeared as soon as she saw whose rune was blinking.

"Has something happened to Zinya? Is she all right?"

"Good morning to you too, dear. Your sister is fine. Can't a mother just want to hear from her daughter?" The voice was sweet and caring as Kamila remembered it. Yet she knew it was just a pretense.

After she had escaped from the marriage her family had arranged for her by joining the army, Kamila had cut all ties with them. The last time she had heard from her mother, Kima, was when she had been promoted to the rank of First Lieutenant.

Kima had aimed to exploit her daughter's authority to solve some problems with the local constables. The family hadn't taken her refusal well. The only reason they had exchanged contact runes was that Kamila was worried about her sister.

Zinya's husband wasn't a bad man, but he was cold and uncaring toward her. Their marriage was just a business deal. He considered her nothing more than a trophy wife.

"What do you want this time, mother?" Kamila's voice was cold and detached, but her hands started shaking. She stung her hand with the hairpin a few times before giving up on her hair until the call was over.

"We haven't talked in months. Can't you call me 'mom' at least?"



"What do you want this time, Kima?" Her voice became even colder while stressing her mother's first name.

"Nothing. I just heard that there is this mage courting you and I was worried about you. You know how those monsters are. They think that they can take whatever they want because of their powers. It's awful like some people treat others like objects."

'People like you.' Kamila thought with anger.

"Don't worry, he's very kind. I'm sorry, but I'm late for work. If there's nothing else..." She said trying to end the conversation quickly.

"Oh, my sweet child, you're so naïve. Of course he is kind. He has yet to get what he wants. Despite your age, you are still a beautiful woman. You need to play your cards right."

Kima's allegations of Kamila being dumb and old made her unable to talk back. Kima took her daughter's silence as her cue to continue.

"Young men are hot headed enough to do anything to reach their goals. If you really want to waste your time with someone who will surely dump you for a younger and richer girl, you could at least get something in return.

"A few dimensional items could be of great help for the family business. They would not only allow us to cut transportation fee expenses, but would also prevent our most delicate products from being stolen or damaged. You just..."

"You are dead to me." Kamila cut her short. "When you fail, because you will, don't knock on my door because it will remain shut. You are no longer part of this family. These are the words with which father decided to part ways with me."

"He didn't mean..."

"He sure did, just like you kindly reminded me when I refused to endanger my career to fix your mess. I'm not part of your family and I'm happier this way. Unless something happens to Zinya, don't call me ever again."

She hung up the call and noticed that her favorite hairpin was ruined. Her hand was still clenched around it so hard that it was trembling. The thin metal pin was bent and deformed. Kamila threw it in the garbage bin before taking a deep breath to calm herself.

"They may be your parents, but they are not your family." She said to herself at the mirror. "You didn't let them ruin your life, do not let them ruin your day either."

Kamila fixed her bun with the second best hairpin she had and left for work.

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Returning to Belius proved to be annoying for Lith. Not only did he had to Warp around to get a decent number of flowers for the mixed bouquet, but he also had to take everything out of his pocket dimension before the customs.

Belius's arrays blocked dimensional magic, which meant he had to carry everything by hand.

'I feel like an idiot walking with flowers in one hand and a box of sweets in the other one.' Lith thought.

'Why did you put the camellia in the middle of the bouquet?' Solus asked.

'Because it's either my back up plan in case I screw something up or my forget-me-not if everything goes well.'

Lith arrived early at the appointed place to scout it and check the menu. This time he managed to avoid making faces, yet the head waiter admonished him.

"I'm sorry, sir, but it's not allowed to bring food inside the restaurant." His words and his face didn't match. He looked annoyed, staring at Lith's foreign features with ill concealed spite.

"Look, I would gladly put everything inside my dimensional amulet. Too bad it doesn't work in here." Lith didn't like the man's attitude and was quickly running out of patience.

"Do you really own one?" The man's demeanor turned amiable abruptly. Dimensional items were the mark of big spenders.

"More than one actually." Lith smiled while his Skinwalker armor shapeshifted into his Ranger uniform. "I'm Great Mage and Ranger Lith Verhen. I would really appreciate if you kept the box in a safe place for me."

He said the last part with a snarl, to make it sound threatening. Yet the man didn't seem to notice. His full attention was focused on the badge confirming Lith's identity and the newly appointed Great Mage insignia below it.

"It's an honor to have the destroyer of Kaduria in our establishment!" The head waiter took the box of sweets from Lith's hands like it was a jewel and carried it over to the kitchen.

"Would you like to change your table? One of those near the bandstand just opened up."

"Can you please repeat the offer once my date arrives? Make it sound casual." Lith nodded as his uniform turned into a black suit with a white shirt.

"Of course!" The man said while looking at Lith like he was a huge sack of gold.

Lith tipped the man a few silver pieces as a thank you and to make sure nothing would happen to his stuff. His heart bled one drop for each coin, yet he soldiered up.

Kamila arrived earlier again, wearing a long coat over a red silk shirt and black pants. "Thank you so much! I've never seen so many different flowers at once." She sniffed them one by one.

The head waiter checked the reservation before asking Kamila if she wanted to switch tables.

"Does it cost extra?" She looked at Lith, who became beet red from the embarrassment.

"We'll take it, thanks!"

The head waiter led them to one of the best tables in the room.

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It was close enough to the stage to watch the performance, but also with more free space around it compared to most seats.

Realizing her blunder, Kamila laughed the whole way while holding the bouquet.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to be rude. Where should I put these flowers?"

Before she finished the phrase, a waiter brought a vase while another carried a third chair so the bouquet could spread its fragrance without standing between them. Kamila didn't miss how the staff was too friendly and the table too good for two new customers.

Her mother's words started echoing in her mind and made her face turn glum.

"Be honest. Do I really look like a mortician?" Lith mistook her expression for disapproval and cursed at himself for not following his sister's advice about dressing in light colors.

"What? No. It looks good on you, but in your shoes, I would take off the jacket. You are a little overdressed." She said while smiling again at the odd question.

"How was your day?" Lith asked after noticing that something was off.

"It started pretty bad, but it's getting better. What about you?"

"So far so good. At least today nobody tried to kill me." He said with a sigh while a waiter brought them the menus.

"Today? What about yesterday?" Lith told her about the Abomination in the Trawn woods using the same tone with which he placed their order.

"How can you be so calm? You almost died twice in as many days."

"I told you before. My life is pretty crazy. If you read my personal file, you know in what kind of mess you're getting yourself into." He said with a sad smile as the band started playing what he considered nothing more than rhythmic noise.

"As you always say, let's not talk about sad stuff. What do you think about the music?"

"They are good." Lith's shocked expression at her answer made her laugh heartily. "Why that face? Don't you like it?"

"Not much. The sound is good, but it has no soul."

When their plates arrived, they started talking about their respective plans for the future. Kamila's goal was to rise up the army ranks. Becoming a Colonel was her dream, but she knew that unless she achieved something big it would come too late in her life to matter.

"If life was a fairy tale, I'd say I want to become the first magicless General of the Kingdom. Sadly, the rank of Colonel is the ceiling, even for geniuses."

Lith didn't know how to answer. He had no big dreams or ambitions aside getting rid of his reincarnation problem. He longed for power and money, but only because they were the means to an end.

He would do anything to achieve his goal, yet he had never stopped considering what he would do if he ever managed to make it.

"I'd like to teach in an Academy." Was all he could think about. "First, there's something I need to do, though. It's the reason I became a Ranger. I need the army to obtain the means to cure a dear friend of mine."

Kamila didn't buy the 'friend' part for a second, but she didn't press the matter any further. Meanwhile, the band was offering the customers the opportunity to take part in the performance.

"Why don't you go up there and show them how it's done?" She said it as a joke.

"As long as you promise me that whatever you hear and see, you will not laugh at me." He replied taking her by surprise and extending his hand to her.

"Deal."

Lith stepped on the stand among some mild applause and took the Mogar's equivalent of a Spanish guitar from the hands of a musician. He asked the band to not accompany him and then he started playing.

Or better, he started cheating. Lith didn't know how to sing or play, but he had learned from magical beasts how to use air magic to reproduce whatever sound he wanted.

It took him his full focus to perform a slightly modified version of "The Noise of Silence" by Shimon and Carbuncle. It was one of his favorite songs from Earth. It required only a guitar to be played and it felt like it talked about him.

He didn't look at Kamila not even once. He was too busy trying to pluck random strings while following the rhythm. When he finished, the lead of the band shook Lith's hand and whispered:

"Hope your lady friend doesn't play any instrument because whatever you did, you didn't get a single string right. Good luck."

"I don't need luck." Lith replied before going back to his table.

"Did you like it?" He asked with an expectant look.

"It's beautiful but very sad. I would have never taken you for a poet and a musician." Her eyes were a little watery, she felt like the song talked about her too.

"I'm neither. Someone else wrote the lyrics." Lith chuckled and then explained to her the trick behind his performance.

"Well, you've got some nerve." She couldn't help but laugh seeing how people had fallen for his deception and looked at Lith with admiration.

"There's one thing I don't understand. Why go through all this trouble and then tell me the truth about it?" No matter how flashy a magic trick was, once its secret was exposed it would lose its luster.

"Because I wanted to impress you." He replied with a warm smile. "Magic it's not only about exploding stuff or healing people. The beauty of Mogar is that magic is everywhere. It plays a big part in my life. In a way, it defines who I am.

"That's what I mean when I say that I wanted to impress you. Not through music or rhymes, that's not me. I'm a mage, hence I used magic to share something I like. As for the truth, I learned from experience that starting a relationship on a lie never works."

They spent the rest of their dinner chatting, but this time Kamila called for the check the moment they were done eating. Lith took the box of sweets while she carried the flowers and accompanied her to the nearest Warp Gate.

She fiddled with the control panel for so long that Lith started to fear she was too drunk to remember her own address.

'Weird. We drank even less than the last time.' He thought.

"It's still early. Would you like to come to my place for a cup of tea and a snack?" She asked while pointing at the box.

"I would love to." Lith replied a bit too fast, realizing she was completely sober.

Kamila's house was a two room flat. The kitchen and the living room shared the same space. There were only two closed doors, which were likely to lead to the bathroom and the bedroom.

"Do you mind preparing the tea while I find a place for the flowers, oh great one? Everything you need is on sight."

Lith filled the teapot with water and put it on the stove. Everything worked with magic crystals, making it akin to a modern kitchen.

"Do you like your tea strong or light?" Lith asked while picking the amount of leaves and mint.

"Both are fine." She replied.

Lith turned around, discovering that she was standing right behind him. The first three buttons of her shirt were undone, revealing a fair amount of her bosom.

'That's at least a C cup...'

The moment Lith raised his eyes to meet Kamila's, she took him in her arms. One hand behind his head and the other on his neck, she forced Lith to bend down and kissed him. Softly at first, like a schoolgirl at her first, clumsy attempt.

He didn't let her go, drawing her closer to him while she kissed him with growing passion until she clung to him as a lifeboat in the storm her life was. His mouth managed to part her frenzied lips at the first attempt, sending tremors along both their bodies.

And then, as suddenly as it had begun, she pulled away from him.

"Wait." Kamila said with a quivering voice.

"Too fast?" Lith asked without bothering to hide his disappointment.

"The bedroom is that way." She pointed at the second closed door as her legs wrapped around his waist, bringing their faces at the same level before starting to kiss Lith again.

## Chapter 426 Departure Part 1

After several hours of recreational activities, Kamila fell asleep as soon as they started cuddling. By checking his watch, Lith noticed there was not enough time to reset Invigoration's effects. Besides, he had already slept the night before, so he was still at his peak condition.

He used Accumulation to further refine his core while staring at Kamila's sleeping face. Somehow, she kept grinning even while unconscious. Lith chuckled at the sight. Just like air magic allowed him to cheat at singing, light magic had done its part during the night.

Thanks to Invigoration and some custom made spells, he had an easy time discovering his partner's most sensitive zones, when to stimulate them, and how delicate or not he had to be to achieve the maximum effect.

He kept caressing her head while checking the room with Life Vision. Lith didn't feel comfortable in an alien environment and his paranoia demanded its due. Aside from the lights and Kamila's communication amulet, there was nothing magical in the whole room.

A couple of hours later, he felt her moving.

"Good morning, gorgeous." Lith said while leaning forward for a kiss.

"Good morning, handsome." She replied with a soft, sleepy kiss as she pulled him closer.

"I hope I didn't wake you up." He said while checking at the clock still floating at the corner of his eye.

"Nah, it's because for some reason my face hurts."

"Seems someone had too much fun and smiled even in her sleep." Lith used light magic to give her muscles relief from the stress and injected her a bit of life force.

At those words, Kamila blushed violently.

"Did I?" she pulled the sheets to cover her chest and revealed Lith's in doing so.

"Indeed. I was wondering, since we have the time, may I ask for an encore?" After his performance in the restaurant, the musical reference made her giggle.

"How could I say no to such romantic words?" She was already enjoying the scenery and her body felt oddly full of energy despite the lack of sleep.

"Wait." Lith said before things got too heated and words had no place anymore in the room.

"Just for academic purposes, I'd like to know what was the turning point that led to our current situation. Was it the flowers? The suit? The song? My speech about magic?" The events had escalated quickly.

Lith was both curious and confused about what he had done to hit the jackpot.

"All the above was very cute, but nothing more." She said with a ravenous smile.

'Just cute? All that effort for a frigging cute?' Lith thought but didn't dare to say, afraid to ruin the mood.

"It was the part about starting a relationship with a lie." She was tired of talking and started kissing him with a quick gradation of intensity.

"Honesty, then?" It didn't make much sense, but at least he could understand it.

"No, silly." She giggled so hard that she was forced to stop. "You calling what we had 'starting a relationship'. It made me understand how seriously you are taking our story."

"That's it?" Lith blurted out. "Seriously, what the actual f..." Lith never got to finish the phrase as Kamila pushed him down the bed and shut him up for good.

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After that, there was barely enough time for a quick shower and breakfast. Lith employed magic to prepare the hot water for the tea in an instant and heated the pastries to make them regain a part of their fragrance.

Out of habit, he even cleaned and washed the whole place.

Kamila came out of the still steaming bathroom fully dressed while dabbing her long black hair with a bath towel. It had taken her less than five minutes, so she remained dumbstruck in seeing the pristine room and the steaming breakfast.

"How did you..."

"Magic." He cut her short while removing the excess water from her hair with a flick of his wrist.

"I could definitely get used to it." She mumbled out loud.

They ate in silence, until Lith took a deep breath and then another one.

"Please, don't take this the wrong way, but there's something I have to tell you."

Kamila felt the ground splitting below her feet. Her mother's words echoed again in her mind. She could almost hear Kima laughing at her stupidity.

'I knew it was too good to be true. Maybe he has already a wife or a fiancée waiting for him at home. Or maybe he just wants to dump me now that he has got what he wanted.'

"Yes?" She said while forcing herself to smile while fighting an insistent tear that wanted to be shed at all costs.

"I don't know when I'll get the next leave and I still don't know you or what you really like." Lith took out the green stem from the middle of the bouquet.

"So, instead of buying something that would just be a waste of space, I made this for you. You know, to share a part of me with you and give you something to remember me by until our next date."

Kamila took it from his hands, her smile turned sincere. It was the cheapest, ugliest present she had ever seen, but it was much better than what she had feared.

"It's beautiful." She said with a dazzling smile that left Lith flabbergasted.

"No, not yet." He blurted out in a stupor. "I was saying, don't take it the wrong way. I'm not trying to be clingy or to show off. It's just something I made for you. No strings attached."

Now it was Kamila's turn to be confused. That twisted, badly hammered green piece of metal could hardly be considered showing off.

"Imprint it, please." He said with a chuckle as he watched her dumbfounded expression.

Kamila put a bit of her mana into the stem and a red camellia made of flickering flames bloomed from its tip.

"It's beautiful." She repeated. This time it wasn't just the relief talking.

"Yes, now it is." He explained to Kamila how it worked and how to keep it alive before putting it back into the vase. Much to her surprise, the small flames didn't affect the other flowers.

"How is it called?" She asked while clinging tight to him, wishing for that moment to never end.

"It's still a work in progress." He hastily replied.

'I'm not so dumb to tell her that it's named after her. It's too early for that. I already feel we're rushing things a bit.' Lith thought and Solus approved.

'It's the best way to downplay it. Still, you suck with words.' She sighed.

'You almost made her cry, just like you did with Phloria every time you pulled out your "we need to talk" speech.'

Lith had many objections to raise in the matter, but Kamila interrupted them by hugging him tightly while burying her head in his chest.

"Thank you. It's a wonderful present." This time she was fighting to hold back tears of joy. Kamila didn't want to turn their goodbye into a sad memory.

"I- I don't know what to say besides that it makes me happy."

Lith returned her embrace and they remained like that until the tyrannical nature of time turned two people who were sharing a moment together into two soldiers with a duty to uphold.

## Chapter 427 Departure Part 2

Returning to Kaduria didn't take long. During his travels, Lith had made sure to memorize landmarks at fixed intervals. They allowed him to use Warp Steps to cross dozens of miles in the blink of an eye.

It required a huge expenditure of mana, but nothing that a single use of Invigoration couldn't fix. While using his breathing technique, Lith noticed how despite the ruins of the lost city were exactly as he left them, they felt different.

Brigadier General Vorgh had deactivated the barrier, letting the world energy flow through the land again. There was still no grass, not even insects or small animals had come to reclaim Kaduria.

Yet by looking at the debris, Lith felt a sense of peace spreading through his being. Like he had healed an ugly scar that had disfigured that place for too long.

He took out his army communicator and called his handler.

"Ranger Verhen reporting to base. I'm back to Kaduria already. I'll rest a bit and then I'll resume my travel toward the south. I'm heading to the city of Othre."

"Copy that." No hologram appeared and Kamila's voice was detached and professional. Some of her colleagues thought that things had already gone sour between them.

"Keep the channel open while I mark your position." She said while the amulet emitted a few pings.

"We're done. Your next report is due to noon unless something relevant happens. Over and out."

Lith took off immediately, reaching an altitude that allowed him to scout for miles in every direction. His first days of travels were quiet and boring. Every time he noticed living beings thanks to Life Vision, he had to check them for tribes of Fallen monsters.

The province was still barren because of the long term effects of the Black Star, but the further he got from Kaduria, the more natural resources were available. Enough for a small group of any Fallen race to increase their numbers and become a threat.



Most of his sightings were just animals, wandering humans, or magical beasts. The wanderers were often just lunatics. People who had lost everything and had no place to return to.

They would yell at Lith's arrival demanding to be left alone before he could even offer them assistance. Sometimes he met caravans of merchants that had lost their way after being attacked by bandits or monsters. In such case Lith would point them the way and hunt them down their attackers.

Without mages protecting them, humans and monsters were just lambs led to a slaughterhouse. Lith would kill the monsters with a snap of his fingers. As for the humans, he would stalk them for a while to make sure they weren't part of a larger group or to find their hideout.

Organized crime was a weed that the Kingdom had no tolerance for. Between the sightings and his investigations, Lith's traveling speed slowed down significantly. Mana geysers were scarce, forcing him to sleep on trees or not sleep at all.

'Dammit! Now I understand why a Ranger is forced to change their duty after every tour. This job is as boring as dangerous.' Lith thought during his fourth day of travel, while he was eating his lunch in a patch of woods.

He had underestimated his job and was now paying the consequences for it. Without mana geysers, Solus was just a voice in his head. He had lots of good food with him, but it brought him no solace.

He had to constantly stay alert. Both his training and paranoia made him eat everything so fast he could barely taste his meals. Until that moment, he had always had a roof above his head, a table where to sit down, and people around him.

People he might've despised or not cared about, but joining or avoiding them had always been his own choice. Now there was only silence and isolation. He was tempted to ignore his duty and rush to the nearest city.

He started to hope meeting monsters just to break the monotony of his existence.

'Even without a mana geyser, I can still give you a place where to rest.' Solus offered at the end of the fifth day as the sun was setting.

'Thanks, but the thought that every second I sleep you are literally bleeding your core for me would give me the nightmares.' He replied.

Lith treasured every moment he spent speaking with his family and with Kamila on his civilian amulet. They were his only link to a semblance of a normal life. Whenever one of their contact runes lighted up, he would soar up in the sky, making it impossible to take him by surprise.

Any flying creature dumb or unlucky enough to disturb their conversations would be dealt with extreme prejudice. Be them flying monsters or migratory birds, they would all be turned into mincemeat before they could even get close to him.

Seven days after he left Belius, he was finally able to reach the city of Othre.

'Damn, I would have never thought that chasing small fries would take this long. The presence of Kaduria kept everything at large, otherwise I would have never reached it that fast. Seven days and not a single mana geyser, just my luck.'

He thought while approaching the city's high walls.

'Come on, it was just one long, hellish week with no bathroom and no sleep.' Solus chuckled. 'The good news is we are once again early on schedule. You may get another leave and visit the city with your new girlfriend. What could possibly go wrong?'

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Free country of Lamarth. Beyond the eastern borders of the Gorgon Empire.

Four years had passed since the destruction of the Master's lab located under the Blood Desert. Losing so much equipment and specimens had been a major setback, but at the same time a blessing in disguise.

Unbeknownst to the Guardians, even to Leegaain, one of the arrays had spied the events occurred during the attack, allowing the Master to collect a massive amount of information about how the Guardian could call upon the world energy and to witness the fight between Salaark and their most powerful Eldritch Abomination.

The data collected had finally revealed to the Master a glimpse of the Guardian's true nature. It was the reason why he had sent Gremus, the Rock Worm, to study and collect the orc's purple crystal.

With it the Master would become able to conjure and manipulate the world energy just like the Guardian did, gaining access to an unlimited source of power for both their experiments and minions.

Unluckily, after that stroke of luck, everything had gone south. All the information about Arthan's Madness had become unavailable, even for those with the highest clearance. With the death of Gadorf the wyvern, they had lost one of their main source of income.

Thanks to Balkor, the Guardians had researched a way to more easily find Eldritch Abominations and were using them to track the Master's activities, forcing them to move with even more caution and use their most powerful servants only when strictly necessary.

These events combined had stuck their research in a dead end. To add insult to the injury, the crystal was lost and Jarok, one of his most capable allies, had disappeared.

"The crystal is the real problem. Maybe Verhen has it, but maybe not. I can't kick the Royal's hornet nest just because of a suspicion. Not now that he has become a Great Mage. Let's hope Jarok hasn't made things even messier. Stealth and interrogation are its specialties, after all." The Master said with a chuckle.

"Master, I bring grave news." Xenagrosh, the Eldritch specialized in tracking Warped in front of them.

"Is the crystal broken? It's not a big deal. I have already located a lesser specimen that could still work just fine for our purposes." The Master shrugged.

"No. There is no trace of the crystal. What I found is the evidence that Jarok has been killed."

"That idiot!" The Master roared. "I told it to watch out for the corps and the damned Evolved Monsters."

"Wrong again. It was killed by a single enemy and an Eldritch at that." Xenagrosh's four red eyes were reduced to fiery slits while it made its report. "I'm afraid we have a competitor."

"A competitor?" The Master couldn't believe his own ears. Those two single words alone could mean that decades of hard work were at stake. If another Eldritch was involved in the purple crystal's disappearance, maybe it was an inside job all along.

It would have explained a lot of things. Abominations were fickle and greedy by nature, the only thing they respected was power. Eldritchs were the sum of their best and worst traits.

If any Abomination started to believe that the Master wouldn't be able to deliver their promise, they wouldn't hesitate a second to betray them.

"I believed all Eldritchs living on the Galen continent were on our side." The Master said.

"It could be an ancient one that just awoke from its slumber." Xenagrosh replied.

"Or maybe a youngster that evolved recently. The only thing I know is that the smell was that of a crafty Eldritch. It had distorted its scent by mixing it with several others, but my senses are not easily fooled. Otherwise I would have mistaken it for a human's."

"Let's not rush our judgment." The Master quickly regained their cool. "Maybe it's not a competitor. After all, a purple crystal is an almost endless source of nourishment for an Abomination.

"It allows the likes of you to hide in plain sight without having to harvest energy from living beings. Best case scenario, its actions will get the Guardians off our tail. They can't distinguish between a rogue Eldritch and our own."

"Worst case scenario, it will ruin us all. We don't know how much it learned from Jarok, nor what it will do with such knowledge." Xenagrosh's warning was too ominous to ignore it.

The Master could only sigh and plan the hunting of this new player that threatened to topple their already shaky chessboard.

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The city of Othre.

Lith reached the massive gates made of solid wood and steel as the sun was slowly starting to set. Othre was the biggest trade city in the Kellar region, also known as the Warehouse.

Food provisions were a big issue for cities without Warp Gates. Because of the north's harsh climate, settlements could remain isolated for weeks during the winter months. Blizzards were so powerful that even mages capable of flight would be stuck in their homes.

The cold season was closing in and merchants came from all the Griffon Kingdom to sell the food supplies they could spare for a price way higher than their market value. Every year fear bred crisis, which in turn provided to a few the opportunity to get rich at the expenses of many.

Timing was of the essence, because to avoid panic and rioting the local governor had the authority to fix a ceiling price. If a merchant sold too early, they would saturate the market and earn little, too late and fixed prices would lead to the same result.

"Where is the nearest hotel?" Lith asked one of the guards that were checking the incoming carriages and taking note of all the food entering Othre.

The guard's annoyed gaze disappeared the moment her eyes met Lith's. The Ranger in front of him was way taller, more annoyed, and angrier than the guard. Thanks to darkness magic Lith didn't stink and water magic had allowed him to remain clean.

Yet after a week without a single second of relax, during which he had been forced to do his business behind bushes, Lith would gladly kill anyone standing between him and a bathroom.

"Go straight, then turn left on King's Road. You can't miss it, sir." The woman stepped aside as her survival instinct kicked in.

"A word of advice, sir." Her shift would last hours and she didn't want to see Lith again. "Because of winter, dimensional magic is banned inside the city. Before entering you should take out whatever you may need."

Lith inwardly cursed against all the inhabitants of the north and their hate for dimensional magic. He took out a few coins, the Gatekeeper and both his communication amulets.

'Now I understand why the uniform comes with a utility belt.' He angrily thought.

While he walked towards the hotel, Lith reported his arrival to his handler.

"I'm sorry, sir." Said a kid bumping into him while playing with her brother.

"I'm not." Lith replied while grabbing her arm and dislocating her shoulder to retrieve his pouch which she had just stolen. The desperate cries of the girl drawn the attention of several people who stared at him in anger.

"What was that noise?" Kamila asked.

"An accident. Over and out." Lith replied eager to stop talking with his handler and get in touch with his girlfriend.

"She's just a kid!" Yelled an angry woman. "Fucking Rangers! They should be kept in the wilds with the beasts, where they belong." A man added as several outraged voices joined the chorus.

Lith didn't even slow down his pace.

'Maybe I should rob them and see if their charity extends to their own money or is limited to mine.' He angrily thought.

'She is just a kid. Maybe she was hungry.' The popping sound kept echoing in Solus's mind. She felt terrible about what had happened.

'She could have just begged. I would have refused, you would have nagged me, and I would have given her some copper coins. She played with fire and got burned.'

A pebble struck the back of Lith's head, making him turn around. A small crowd was assembled around the two kids and were staring at him in defiance. Between the Skinwalker armor and his enhanced physique, Lith had barely noticed the hit.

Yet it had been strong enough to make a normal man bleed.

"Who threw that?" He asked with a casual voice and received no answer but middle fingers.

"All guilty, then." A wave of his hand and an earth spell made the crowd fall on their knees while holding their heads in pain. Each one of them had been hit by a small stone, repaying them in kind.

"You are all under arrest for assaulting and slandering an officer." Another wave of his hand made their arms and legs sink into the ground. "If and when I bother reporting this to a constable, they will free you. Have a nice day."

The moment Lith gave them his back, the two kids and their accomplices hiding in the nearby alleys robbed all those present blind.

'Was that really necessary?' Solus had hoped that after Kamila, after being alone for so long in the wilds, Lith would have softened up towards people.

'Poetic justice.' Lith replied. 'Look at the bright side. The girl now has more than enough money to get her shoulder fixed.'

He reached the Swan's Song hotel in less than a minute. It was a two stories stone building with a pitched roof and a banner representing a swan sitting near a maiden who was playing the harp.

The door opened into a common hall the pavement of which was made of hardwood.

Colorful carpets were placed under the wood tables that occupied most of the space. A huge fireplace spread light and warmth for the customers that were enjoying their dinner or simply resting from their daily activities.

#### Chapter 429 Mage Association Part 2

"How much for your best room?" Lith asked the receptionist, a young man about his own age. He was too tired to care about money. A good bed and a hot bath were the only thing she could think about.

"One silver coin per night." The man yelped. It was actually more expensive, but the Gatekeeper at Lith's waist looked mean and the man carrying it even meaner.

"Excuse me, are you Ranger Verhen?" Asked a mage in his thirties. He was of average height, with a lean build and kind chestnut eyes. Judging from his silver robe, he worked for the Mage Association.

"Depends who's asking." Lith gave the receptionist the money and his ID, making sure the stranger couldn't read it.

"I'm Mage Dorian Felhorn. I'm your liaison with the local branch of the Association." Clearly Felhorn had recognized Lith. His earlier question was a formality.

"I'm sorry, but even if I was who you think I am, I work for the army now. So unless you have written orders for me, I've no reason to listen to you." Lith took his room's key and walked towards the stairs leading to the first floor.

"Wait! You don't understand. I may not have an official authorization yet, but I need your help. The Association is in a pinch."

Lith had to admit the guy was brave. Even when pressed by his Sunday killing intent, Dorian didn't flinch. He even had the gall to grab his shoulder.

"I'm sure they are, but unless there's something in for me, I don't care." Lith shrugged the hand away. "Bottom line, I could come with you, it's just that I don't want to."

Lith's annoyed tone achieved what even his meanest glare had failed to. The second Dorian was too shocked by Lith's disregard for whatever news he was the bearer of, the Ranger disappeared upstairs.

Dorian took out his communication amulet from one of his robe's pockets.

"I'm sorry sir, I've failed my mission. Great Mage Verhen was crystal clear in his refusal to even listen to me. The body count is already in the dozens and is bound to getting worse."

"Damn. I hoped that him choosing to be promoted in our ranks rather than in the army's meant he would be more sympathetic to our cause." Said a man voice coming from the amulet.

The Mage Association was in dire straits for years. New and old noble families hated them for wiping them from Mogar overnight, but most of all, because unlike the army it was impossible for non mages to join their ranks.

Ever since the plague event happened five years ago, the Association's reputation was in steady decline. First, they had failed to cure or even contain the plague, leaving all the glory to the army and the White Griffon.

Then, they had been useless against Balkor's attack. Once again, the lion's share of the merits belonged to the White Griffon. The army had at least provided troops, while most mages had run for their lives along with their families.

Last, but not least, the Mage Association had failed to keep Hatorne in check, to find Headmaster Linnea who was still on the run, and even to prevent the mass production of slave items that had led to Nalear's attack.

The Association was on its last leg, its political support dwindled every year. Even the Queen was considering the idea of turning the Association in a branch of the Army and redistribute their funds.

After all, the heroes who had stopped the Mad Professor all belonged to the army. Lady Jirni, Commander Orion, and Captain Phloria. The only exception was Lith Verhen, a free agent at best.

Money or merits could buy his services, but not his loyalty.

"We have no choice. I'll contact the army and have them borrow him to us before the Royal Constable arrives. That way, he will be our player. We need a big victory, failure is not an option. If all else fails, we still have our ace in the hole."

"Technically, it's more like a double edged sword." Dorian didn't like Archmage Kwart's plan. Stealing a dragon's egg could force the beast to compromise, but it would also provoke its animosity.

"If we fail, a Great Mage's wrath will be the last of our problems. I'll keep you posted."

Meanwhile, Lith was having dinner with his family. Thanks to the communication amulet they could share the table even at thousand of kilometers of distance.

"Othre sucks, this work sucks." Lith was complaining to his parents while consuming the food provided by the room service.

"Everywhere I go, people treat Rangers almost like criminals. Despite all the time I spent in the wilds, I'm already sick of this place. I'll leave tomorrow early in the morning."

"I read that the communities in the north are tight-knit." Raaz had bought a book about the Kellar region. He hated studying, but that way he was able to understand what his son was going through. It also allowed them to share a deeper conversation than small talk.

"You can't blame them for being suspicious. Even here in Lutia we don't like strangers or cops. To them, you are both. By the way, Othre is famous for its open market. You might find rare books or ingredients there."

"Good point, dad. Thanks, I will give it a look." Lith had the same book in Soluspedia, but was grateful for Raaz's thoughtfulness.

Elina was proud of her husband going an extra mile for their son and jealous because she felt cut out.

'I need to get hold of that damn book.' She thought.

Lith was dead tired after a week always being on full alert. He fell asleep the moment his head touched the pillow and was awakened a few hours later by an explosion coming from outside.

'Solus?' He asked as his pajamas shapeshifted into his Ranger uniform.

'Yes, you never called a constable. Those poor people are likely to be still stuck there.' She pouted.

'Who cares about that? I meant what was that noise?'

'Something is happening on the other side of the road, but it doesn't make sense.' She replied.

Lith looked through the window in his room and notice that the door of one of the shops in front of the hotel had been blown to bits. A few seconds later, a poorly dressed woman came out of it, carrying bags full of food and money.

'You are right, it doesn't make sense. How can someone so malnourished beat up so many men?' Lith pondered while staring at the scene. Several shops had already been robbed and their owners were out cold in the middle of the street.

'It's not that.' Solus replied with a sigh after noticing that Lith wasn't going to intervene.

'That woman has a red mana core and a human body, yet her mana flow is comparable to a yellow core.'

'How is that possible?'

'She's absorbing world energy at a rate comparable to yours when using Invigoration. She might be an Awakened.'

## Chapter 430 Dragons Egg Part 1

'Why would an Awakened need to steal in such a blatant way?' Lith thought while going downstairs.

'Even a bit of spirit magic would be enough to get her what she wants without drawing so much attention.'

'Maybe she just discovered her powers.' Solus pondered. 'Otherwise I can't explain how she still has a red core. Another thing I can't understand is how she can possibly keep Invigoration active while moving.'

Lith found several guests of the hotel staring at the scene through the windows.

"I told you we shouldn't have picked a hotel in the outer rim, you damn cheapskate!" A middle aged woman was angrily whispering to her husband, like she was afraid of drawing the attention of the crazed thief.

The couple was wearing a grey dressing gown with the hotel's insignia over their clothes.

'One silver coin per night is cheap?' Lith shuddered at the idea of how much money more luxurious accommodations would require.

"Why? Does this happen often?" He pointed his forefinger toward the events unfolding outside.

"Of course, it's the gods damned outer rim." The woman was clearly annoyed at Lith's question which forced her to state the obvious.

"Every year, when winter approaches, all kinds of vagrants and lunatics fill the roads of the city to find shelter until spring. Because of those hungry beasts, the crime rate always spikes. Speaking of hungry beasts, why are you still here?"

"Aren't you a Ranger? It's your duty to uphold the law!"

"Not inside Othre. At the moment I'm just a tired traveler." Lith wanted to investigate the mystery, but the woman's rudeness had almost changed his mind.

"The hotel would greatly appreciate your help in keeping its guests safe." Someone promptly added.

Lith turned around towards the voice. It belonged to a silver haired man dressed like a member of the staff. According to the tags on his chest, his name was Penon and he was the night manager.

'Please, help them.' Solus pleaded him. 'Some of the people outside are badly wounded. They need a healer and you will get your money back. It's a win-win situation.'

Lith didn't care about a single silver coin. Penon's offer was meaningless to him. Solus's plea and discovering how the heck someone of that age with no experience with magic could possibly Awaken was another story.

Lith came out from the hotel and extended his arm, using spirit magic to paralyze his opponent. He didn't expect it to work. To be able to knock down men way taller and heavier than her, the woman had to be able to use fusion magic.

Lith's intention was to check how effective spirit magic would be against such a weak Awakened. Best case scenario, he would manage to slow her enough to hold her in place and get some answers before the city constables arrived on the crime scene.

Contrary to his expectations, his tendrils of mana were sucked by the woman's Invigoration technique and completely nullified.

'What the heck?' Lith thought. 'Invigoration shouldn't work that way. Absorbing someone else's mana is like drinking poison.'

The homeless woman screamed in pain before turning toward Lith and releasing a fire wave the size of a truck. The spell was powerful, but there was no technique or planning behind it. Like a child throwing a tantrum, its energies were violent but chaotic.



Lith needed but a thought to take control of the fire wave and snuff it out. Before he could counter attack, the woman clenched her belly and collapsed to the ground. Lith had no idea what was happening.

He wanted to use Invigoration to study her body, but he knew that if she adsorbed it too, she would die before she could answer his questions.

'Solus?'

'It's just like you think. Your spirit magic has infected her core and it's killing her. It's already half grey.' She replied.

There was nothing Lith could do for mana poisoning. He could only hope the woman's core would recover while he took care of the wounded. All of them were badly burned, some almost to a crisp.

Only because Lith could cure two people at once and was able to use Invigoration to give them massive amounts of life force no one died that night. No one except the woman.

'How is this even possible?' Lith thought. 'Invigoration should be able to absorb only world energy. Plus, the mana I used to wasn't nearly enough to kill her, not even if I poisoned her on purpose. Which I didn't.'

'I know.' Solus replied. 'Normally her mana flow should have countered the foreign mana all the way to her core. It would have caused her pain but would have also weakened your mana to the point that even a red core could resist such measly pressure.'

'Her Invigoration technique carried it directly to her core, making it lethal instead.'

A few minutes later, a couple of constables and a mage arrived to the scene.

"Thanks for taking care of the problem for us." The senior officer said.

"Usually our response time is much better than this, but criminals like this one are popping up like mushrooms and we cannot move without a mage. We have already lost too many people." The officer spat on the homeless woman's corpse.

"It's terrible news." Lith said eager to go back to sleep. "Those people were severely injured. This is what the city owes me for the healings."

The mage took a small piece of paper where Lith had listed the cares given and his fares according to the White Griffon standards. She put it in her pockets without even looking at it.

"What happened to her?" The mage said while pointing at the corpse. Her honey colored eyes looked tired and dispirited, like those of a soldier fighting a lost battle.

"Wish I knew. I used a simple air spell to restrict her and..."

"And she died." The mage completed the phrase for him.

"Don't worry, it's not your fault. It happens every single damn time, no matter the element used. Once the constables managed to restrict one only for the poor guy to die under the effects of a diagnostic spell."

'That's great news. It means that whatever they are, they are not Awakened. Which makes this none of my business.' Lith thought.

Solus would have liked to comment about his total lack of care for the well being of the people of Othre, but she had seen enough in one day to know it would be pointless.

'Maybe this is what that Felhorn guy wanted to talk about. A lot of magic users committing crimes is something the Association would have to deal with. It could fetch you a lot of merits.' Solus tried a subtler approach on the matter.

'Too bad I don't need them. I've already got what I could from the Association after I graduated. Otherwise I wouldn't have joined the army. What I need is to finish my patrol as fast as I can. That way I can obtain a long leave and work on the crystal.' Lith replied.

The following morning, during a sumptuous breakfast served privately on the hotel's terrace for Lith only, he called his handler.

"This is Ranger Verhen. I need some time to restock my provisions and then I'll be ready to leave Othre." He actually had no need for food, his pocket dimension held enough to last him months. His aim was to look for rare books.

"Negative. You are not allowed to leave the city's perimeter. The Commander has received a request for help from the Association. Depending on his decision, your stay in Othre might be prolonged until further notice."