

## Supreme M 531

### Chapter 531 Leaving Part 2

Lith resumed his duty as a Ranger and since he had used most of his free days preparing for the gala and recovering from the clash with Tezka, his schedule was very busy.

Qinyu, Friya, and Quylla would have to wait for their turn before he could help them. Weeks passed and soon the entirety of the north was covered in snow.

Most of the time he was called to quell the riots caused by the lack of food in poor neighborhoods, or to discipline merchants who ignored the tiered food prices imposed by the Crown thanks to the support of local mercenary guilds.

The insides of Solus's tower had been completely redecorated with the coat of arms Lith had chosen for his Household. It depicted a black and red dragon coiled around a tower. A magic staff and a sword were crossed below the tower.

Now it was embroidered on every carpet, curtain, and tapestry in every room.

"You really have great taste in coat of arms." Solus was proud of her complete form standing proud in the middle.

"Why the dragon? Is it because of what Phloria said?" She asked feigning simple curiosity.

"No. It's because dragons are symbols of power while demons are a symbol of misfortune. I already have the reputation of being bad luck, there's no reason to give more fuel to those rumors. Can you please remove some of the banners? I find them tacky."

"How can you say that? I even mimicked the positioning they have inside house Ernas and you've always said their house is classy!" Solus was outraged at being called tacky.

"It's classy because with so much space and high end furniture you can ignore those tacky coats of arms. Maybe it's because you are a shorty that you don't realize that the tower feels cramped with so much crap." He chuckled.

Ever since he had seen her light body after they merged for the second time, Solus had become sensitive about height issues. It had gotten even worse after Lith had grown so tall.

"I'm not short, you insensitive jerk! I'm petite, there's a big difference..."

Lith's army amulet interrupted their quarrel.

"Ranger Verhen, what's your status?" Kamila's voice was worried.

"I'm still a bachelor, but who knows what the future holds?"

"I meant your position! There is a huge snowstorm approaching the spot of your last report."

"Don't worry, I've created an underground cave as shelter." He said as Solus warped them from Lutia back to the north and modified the appearance of the tower entrance to resemble an actual cave.

Lith gave Solus thumbs up for her excellent work and activated the hologram function.

"How are you? Do you have enough food? The storm may last a few days." Kamila was relieved that the cave was deep enough she couldn't even hear the wind.

"I have plenty of food. Anything else?"

"Yes. As soon as the snowstorm ends, you're expected in Jambel. They have a problem with a dungeon."

"A dungeon? This time of the year?" Lith didn't bother to hide his disbelief. Unlike in Earth's videogames, dungeons didn't magically appear out of nowhere.

Monsters were chaotic and bloodthirsty creatures, unwilling to cooperate even with members of their own tribe, let alone with other species. Sometimes, however, a monster with great power and intellect was born.

That kind of creature was capable of enslaving all the other tribes in the surroundings and create an underground fortress thanks to earth magic. Such places were called dungeons or labyrinths and they were chock full of monsters and traps.

Any sane person would stay far away from them and call the army the moment people started to disappear.

"Yes and yes. It's odd because there has been no sign of monster activity for months there, yet the town has been already attacked twice during the last week by a group composed of different creatures."

"How did they survive the encounter?"

"Winter is a great shield. Deep snow slowed their movements and the strong chilly winds sapped their strength. Monsters don't wear warm clothes, so whenever they attempted to climb Jambel's high walls, the guards only needed to throw buckets of water on them to kill or incapacitate them.

"The problem is that the second group was stronger and better equipped, otherwise they wouldn't have called for our help. The people of Jambel are proud of their strength."

"Is that a polite way of saying that they're a bunch of pricks who despise outsiders?" Lith asked.

"According to army regulations, my answer is no." Kamila said while nodding.

"Great. I can't wait to experience the local hospitality." Lith smiled while banging the back of his head against the wall. He was tired of being treated like crap just because his skin wasn't pale white or his hair being black.

"Your next report is due tomorrow morning. Over and out." His handler closed the communication too hastily, making Lith inwardly gripe in advance.

"What did I do wrong this time?" He waited a few minutes before calling her with his civilian amulet. Their daily routine involved at least two calls a day, one during breakfast, while they were both off duty, and one at the end of her shift.

"Only one way to find out." Solus sighed.

"Hi, Kami. Are you excited about tomorrow? It's your first day as field assistant, after all." Lith opted for a soft approach. No flattery nor small talk, asking her about something she cared to show her that it mattered to him too.

"You remembered! Yes, I'm very nervous but also very happy. It's a dream come true." Her frown turned upside down, bestowing upon Lith one of her warm smiles he loved so much. Sadly, it didn't last long.

"But let's talk about that later. Why didn't you tell me that Quylla had a huge crush on you back at the academy?" She pouted with her arms and legs crossed. That day she was wearing a black pencil skirt, so that pose exposed and emphasized her slender legs.

Unfortunately, Lith didn't have the opportunity to enjoy the scenery.

"Why would I tell you something like that? It was just puppy love from a small girl. It was as irrelevant back then as it is now." Lith pinched his nose in frustration.

"First, because I'm your girlfriend and I would like to know when I meet one of your exes to avoid embarrassing situations. Second, it's not irrelevant at all since she's one of your best friends!"

After exchanging their communication runes, Quylla and Kamila spoke often. They could both use a good friend.

Also, Kamila wanted to learn about Lith's past while Quylla was curious about life in the north and wanted to make sure Lith was alright. Jirni's birthday had been their first meeting since he had joined the army. Quylla missed him dearly.

The issue had come to light while talking about their respective past relationships. It had made Kamila fear she had overshared with Quylla, embarrassing her in their previous conversations.

"She's not an ex. Quylla has never been anything more than a friend, period. Do you want to know about my days with Friya and Yurial too while we are at it?"

His retort sounded too much like "Do you feel also threatened by men?" to Kamila's ears, but she didn't budge and rose to the occasion.

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"Actually, yes. I would love to. If these things are so irrelevant, why are you so secretive about them? We've been together for quite some time now. You can't keep me out of your life like that."

Lith recognized this moment and hated it with all of his heart. It was the moment when things in a relationship went from simple fun to serious. Back on Earth, it was his cue to dump or wait to get dumped.

Lith called it "the nagging point" and it put him at a crossroad. He could turtle up, making their relationship turn sour, or open up with the risk that one question would lead to another until Kamila asked about something he couldn't share.

Lith knew that she cared and she was trying to make things between them work, yet he was scared of the consequences the nagging point could have.

He would have found it easier to fight and kill several Abominations rather than facing that choice. Until this point, their busy schedule and being apart for extended periods of time had made Kamila be patient, avoiding sensitive issues.

For a moment, Kamila's image was replaced by Phloria's. She had asked him to open up too, until she had given up. Back then he had been happy about it, mistaking it for acceptance. Now he knew better.

"Can this please wait for my return? There are things I'm not comfortable talking about from a distance."

"It's fine if you don't feel ready to share your past, I just want you to be honest with me." Kamila's voice lost its edge, turning sweet again.

"We'll talk once I'm back. I promise."

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The following day, Lith had Solus Warp as near as possible to Jambel, reaching it a few minutes after sunrise. Jambel was a medium sized fortress city, entirely built of stone.

It was too far from the commercial routes to depend on merchants, so it was designed to be self sufficient all year round. The city was built near two big lakes, which provided fish and fresh water, while cultivated fields surrounded the city walls until the woods begin.

They were the main source for game and wood, so the inhabitants of Jambel treated it with great respect. They planted two trees for each one they cut down and used turnover to give them time to grow.

Unlike Maekosh, there were no slums. Even the poorest houses were solid, the only wood buildings were tool sheds. Jambel's walls were five meters (16') high and wide enough that two armed people could easily walk side by side.

They were made of grey stone and smoothed so that during the day they would partially reflect the sunlight and blind the aggressors. Lith landed a few hundred meters from the city gates, so as to not scare the guards.

He was very surprised when he reached the gates without anyone ordering him to halt or identify himself. Even more when the city lord came out to greet him while the soldiers stood at attention.

"Ranger Verhen, thanks for coming so quickly. We were starting to fear that we would have to face the third wave of monsters alone." Baron Eiros Wyalon was a man in his late thirties, about 1.78 meters (5'10") tall.

He had red hair and a finely trimmed beard, with blue eyes as clear as the twin lakes in front of the city. He was wearing a light armor that emphasized his lean but muscular build.

Even the city guards had clean and proper uniforms. Each one of them was physically fit and their equipment well cared for. The Baron looked more like a soldier than a noble, just like his men seemed to be veterans.

"A third wave? What makes you think they will be back?" Lith shook the Baron's hand. His grip was vigorous but friendly. The noble wasn't trying to test Lith.

"After the second one, I sent some scouts to follow the survivors back to the dungeon. There's a lot of them and they're damn hungry. When they noticed their companions coming back empty handed, they killed and cooked them on the spot."

"That's one heck of a hunger." Lith was more surprised at the scouts' willingness to risk their neck. So far, every city he had been to, was full of people who just whined and waited for his intervention.

"My point exactly." Wyalon nodded while offering Lith a mount. There was one horse for each soldier, no stagecoach waited for the city lord. Thankfully, Lith had learned how to ride during the boot camp.

"Monsters cannot fish and most animals ran away when the creatures first appeared. We are the only thing they can feed upon for miles."

With so little practice he was a lousy rider, but between his physique and the well trained horse, he had no problem reaching the Baron's Mansion. It was a two storey manor, something Lith would have expected from a merchant, not a city lord.

Each floor was barely as big as the Ernas' Ballroom. Only brickwork and a small garden separated the Mansion from the surrounding houses, and there was none more luxurious.

"Only a fool would waste money to build himself a castle if the whole city around him easily burns." Baron Wyalon answered Lith's silent question.

"I prefer spending the gold from the taxes to make the whole of Jambel safe. People with a roof over their head and an honest day job don't turn to crime. Besides, my missus and I don't need much. Hungry?"

"Yes. Can I be completely honest with you?" Lith walked through the front door while a butler welcomed them home. The hallway was about 20 square meters (215 square feet), with walls and floor covered by white painted wood.

There was a cabinet for the clothes and a small fireplace above which was a series of hangers to dry coats drenched by snow. A soft carpet led to the other rooms, covering most of the floor and keeping the house warm.

"Absolutely. You're about to risk your life for my people and my city is under siege. I'd much prefer for us to drop the formalities rather than waste our time with pretty words."

The butler took the Baron's mantle while the noble sat on one of the chairs near the door to take off his dirty boots and replaced them with clean ones. Lith shapeshifted his clothes to show the man he didn't need his help, making him flinch in surprise.

The furniture in every room was made of high-quality materials, but its design wasn't ostentatious.

"This isn't the kind of hospitality I was expecting. I heard things about Jambel. Unpleasant things." Lith took a mental note of everything.

The Baron's house wasn't great, but it definitely was a home. It was warm and cozy. Each one of its rooms was lived-in, not just designed for impressing guests. It was like he wanted his own house to be.

"They are all true." The Baron said with a smug grin.

"We have little patience for outsiders who come into our homes and expect to be served like lords. We bow to no one just because of their wealth, status, or rank. So, rest assured, here you have only friends."

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"Meaning?" Lith was starting to understand the Baron's way of life.

"You're my equal, but not because you too are a Baron, but because you earned your title. I've heard a lot about you and so have my people. You slew a wyvern as a boy and a dragon as a man. We respect strength here."

"It was just a man in dragon form." Lith pointed out.

"Strong and humble! Tell me, lad, when do you plan to start your hunt?"

"When you point me the way." Lith shrugged.

"See? That's what I'm talking about. Come, there's a lot to eat and even more to discuss before you leave. Failure's not an option."

Lith followed the Baron to the dining hall, where the Baroness and their children were having breakfast. The Lady stood up to give their guest a proper greeting, quickly followed by her children.

"Baron Verhen, this is my wife, Mirias and my children, Kotu and Iriel." The Baroness was a woman in her mid thirties, with blonde hair and green eyes.

She was a good head shorter than her husband and Lith would have considered her pretty, if not for the milky white skin typical of the north, that gave her a sickly look in his eyes.

The siblings had to be twins, both with the red hair of their father and the green eyes of their mother. They too were so pale that Lith's Healer instinct brought him seconds away from casting a diagnostic spell on the whole family.

He gave them a bow, before sitting at their table, next to Baron Wyalon. Only then did Lith notice that the table was actually an enchanted item. While the maids served them fresh white bread and porridge, a holographic map of the area appeared in mid air.

Lady Wyalon's eyes narrowed in annoyance for a split second, but she said nothing.

"The dungeon is here." The Baron pointed at the base of a small mountain range a few dozen kilometers from Jambel with his fork, making the hologram zoom in.

"My scouts spotted three entrances before the monsters discovered them and attempted to have them for dessert. Here, here, and here." Wyalon drew three circles with his knife and the hologram opened as many small holes in the ground.

"There could be more. Also, I wouldn't be surprised if after finding my men lurking around, they put out some guards. If you need a distraction, my soldiers can accompany you and draw the attention of the monsters until you get inside."

"No need." Lith replied after gulping down some porridge. Both it and the bread could have used a pinch more of salt for his tastes.

"I prefer working alone. What I'm more interested in is what kind of creatures attacked the city and a rough estimate of their numbers, if you have one."

"I'm sure that when I tell them, my men will buy you all the beer you can drink. They hate dying." The Baron laughed heartily.

"Dear, put down your cutlery when you speak. You're spilling food everywhere." The Baroness' tone was warm and her smile gentle, yet her eyes were icicles. Iriel too glared at her father, until she noticed Lith watching them.

She lowered her gaze and blushed violently, giving her face some color as Lith's lost his own.

'Oh, fuck! Another: "please be my ticket out of nowhere" girl. I need to get out of here.' He thought.

"I'm sorry, dear, but I'm sure our guest doesn't mind." Wyalon was an ex soldier, who had risen in the army ranks until he had exchanged his merits for a noble title. Even years after he had retired, he was still used to eating and speaking as fast as he could.

"Well, maybe some of us do." The Lady's silvery voice struck like a fist, making the Lord regain his manners and put the silverware down.

"The first wave was comprised mostly of small fry. Forty goblins, thirty two ogres, and a dozen empowered orcs. I suspect the ruler of the dungeon might be a powerful shaman."

Lith nodded him to continue.

"The second wave was way worse. Fifty ogres, twenty three empowered orcs, and a few trolls. As for their numbers, I have no clue. The fact they have dispatched almost a hundred of them each time makes me think we are talking about at least one thousand creatures.

"Are you really sure you want to go in there alone?"

"Positive." Lith replied. "Numbers mean nothing in enclosed spaces and I can wipe out any number of non magical creatures on my own. I can always fly or Warp away if necessary."

"Can you really use dimensional magic?" Iriel's eyes shone like emeralds, making Lith bite his tongue.

"That's the reason I arrived so fast." Since the horse had already bolted, instead of shutting the barn's door, Lith decided to follow suit.

"Thanks for the meal and the information. Your men's bravery has saved me a lot of time. I'll take care of the dungeon immediately."

"Wait. There's one more thing you should know before you go. One of my scouts says he saw a Balor flying around the mountain."

"A Balor?" At those words, Lith flinched in disbelief. Such creatures were considered the nobles among the monsters. One of the few Fallen Races to have retained part of their ancient wisdom and power.

"I'm sorry, Baron, but if that was true Jambel should've already fallen. A one thousand strong army of monsters with a Balor at its head could easily conquer this city. Also, didn't you say you suspected an orc shaman to be their leader?"

"I agree it's odd, but only one of the scouts saw it. Maybe he's wrong, or maybe the attack on Jambel is just a diversion." The Baron nodded.

"I suspect an orc shaman because there is no other explanation to empowered orcs and because they would never submit to an Evil Eye. Balors and orcs are sworn enemies, they would never cooperate."

The truth was that with their demonic appearance, Balors resembled the fabled creatures that according to orcs' lore had caused the fall of their race. Balors had no grudge against the orcs that they didn't share with the whole of Mogar.

"Do you have any idea how so many creatures managed to spawn so close to your city without anyone noticing?" Lith could already smell a lot of troubles. In his experience, the more things didn't add up, the bigger the underlying mess was.

A mess he would have to survive first and clean later.

"None, it's indeed a mystery." The Baron sighed, well aware of how silly his words sounded.

Before leaving, Lith used the holographic table to carefully study the region and plan his next moves.

'I'm afraid this will not be a simple clean up. An orc shaman can cripple our strength and a Balor might even be my equal.' Lith regretted not understanding orcish language. Otherwise he could have learned many things from the shaman.

Back in Othre, Jirni had given him plenty of tips on how to loosen the tongue of a captured enemy, both literally and metaphorically.

'Do you think an Abomination is behind the dungeon?' Solus was triggered at the thought of experiencing the event of Maekosh again.

'No, unless it's the dungeon master.' He replied. 'The anomaly here is the creatures' behavior, not their abilities. Only time will tell us how deep the rabbit-hole goes.'

#### Chapter 534 Unexpected Turn Part 1

Lith left before the Wyalon family was done with their breakfast, leaving Iriel no time for small talk. He took off, taking the quickest route to the Broken Spine, the discontinuous mountain range where the dungeon was located.

Lith flew at an optimal altitude, which allowed him to safely scout the area around him with Life Vision and identify underground monsters' nests. He had to make sure the creatures weren't preparing a big attack, otherwise he might have been forced to retreat during the raid to protect the city.

For a Ranger the number of slain creatures was but a secondary achievement, the real source of merits was the survival rate of those they are tasked to protect. Monsters needed only days to become fully grown, while a single artisan needed decades to be trained.

'Another good thing about Kamila, is that ever since we got together you've stopped pushing me toward every girl we meet.' Lith inwardly grinned.

'Well, that doesn't mean I don't feel bad for Iriel. For once you could help someone without getting laid as your hidden agenda.' Solus rebukes.

'Yeah, right. Going from princess of nowhere to a big city would be a death sentence to her unless someone takes care of her. I can already picture how any sane woman would react if I brought home an 18 year old girl.'

Solus couldn't retort anymore. Even if Solus could read Lith's thoughts, in Kamila's shoes she would still kick his ass.

The area was clear of any life form, monster or otherwise. Like the Baron had reported to Lith, animals and magical beasts had left the area. Those who had failed to notice their presence because of hibernation, were all dead.



Once Lith reached the Broken Spine, he didn't head directly towards the known entrances, but scouted the area to determine how smart and powerful his opponents were.

'I don't like this.' Solus thought. 'My mana sense detects a series of powerful arrays both above and below the ground. Not only have I never seen most of them, but they also form an elaborate framework.'

'Monsters aren't supposed to be able to craft something so complicated, let alone in such a limited time frame.'

Lith nodded as he read the floating runes, trying to make a sense out of them.

After moving all the Warden books in their possession inside Soluspedia, they were able to identify at least the function of the unknown arrays.

'Their design is very old.' Lith pondered. 'None of them are designed to be offensive or defensive. I can see cloaking, containment, and even amplifying arrays.'

'The kind which are used for a secret lab, not a fortress. I can't short circuit them and get rid of the monsters in one fell swoop, they are all the permanent kind. To do that I'd need to tamper with the mana crystals fueling them, but they are likely to be scattered all over the Broken Spine.'

'Judging by the size of these arrays, the dungeon extends throughout the whole area. I don't think that even a Balor could perform such monumental work.'

'Do you want to call for backup?' Solus asked.

'And lose my loot?' Lith sneered. 'If this really is the secret lab of an ancient mage, finders keepers. At least as long as I'm the only one who knows it.'

Thanks to his exploration, he found several entry points to the dungeon, most of which were unguarded. Lith noticed that while the edges of the caves were rough and so was the surface of the corridors leading inside, the tunnels were smooth and flawless.

'To dig through so many meters of rock with their bare hands must have taken them months!' Solus was horrified noticing the claw marks and bloodstains along the exits.

'The most likely hypothesis is that they must have been imprisoned here for a long time and they only recently managed to escape.'

'Then why are they still holed up in here?' Lith thought. 'More importantly, what the heck did they eat until they escaped? Both an orc shaman and a Balor could easily dig their way out. Why did neither of them take care of the exits?'

There were far more questions than answers, but Lith's loot sense was tingling. An orc shaman meant another huge mana crystal, while a Balor refusing to leave could only mean that the creature was after something precious.

Balors were smart enough to collect magical items to compensate for their innate shortcomings, but like all monsters, they had no dimensional items. They couldn't easily transport something fragile or huge, whereas Lith had no such problem.

Lith kept his greed in check as Solus's words about the Abominations echoed in his head. He found a guarded entrance and unleashed a pack of undead wolves on the unfortunate goblins on duty.

They screamed and died like common goblins, without showing any sign of mutation or special abilities. Lith remained hidden in the shadows as his minions feasted on the corpses.

'If those goblins are like the wargs, the Abomination inside of them should react to their deaths and call for reinforcements.' Lith thought, but even after several minutes, no one appeared.

During that time, he studied the goblins' clothes and equipment. They were well dressed, wearing cotton shirts, leather pants and shoes. The most intriguing thing was the coat of arms on their clothes, representing a black tower set ablaze with a golden crown on top of it.

Even their weapons, lances and bucklers, were made of good quality metal. Their master had even had them customized to a goblin's proportions.

Once Lith was certain that no enemy was coming his way, he sent the undead pack inside as a diversion while he entered from one of the unguarded entrances. The corridor went deep underground, leading to what was definitely not a dungeon, but rather a home.

Monsters had no use for doors, magical lights or tags to identify each room. There were even signs at every crossroad, pointing toward different zones.

'If only I could read this gibberish!' Lith inwardly griped after following one of them at random and finding the biggest glass workshop he had ever seen. There were vials, beakers, and many components for alchemical apparatus of every shape and size.

His anger faded after noticing they were all of the highest grade and storing some of them inside his pocket dimension.

Suddenly, the link between Lith and his minions disappeared. What worried him was that they didn't die fighting, someone had slaughtered them all in just a couple of seconds.

'Undead are hard to kill and monsters are dumb. Could they have been so unlucky to meet the shaman? If so, he could have drained the darkness element from them for an easy kill.' The explanation worked, yet it wasn't enough to put Lith's paranoia at ease.

He moved toward the direction from which he had last sensed the undead wolves, checking every door on his way. Unluckily, most of them were locked and even more unluckily, not by a simple lock.

Lith had no time to crack them open one by one, not with so many enemies roaming around nor with Life Vision telling him that there was nothing inside that had a strong magical aura.

## Chapter 535 Unexpected Turn Part 2

Whoever had built the lab wasn't one for furnishing it. Every corridor was identical on every floor. The ground and the walls were constructed with a honey hued mix of stone and soil while the importance of every door could be determined by their silver-wood ratio.

Silver was the best mana conductor, making it possible to store and amplify all the spells it was enchanted with. The corridors were wide, but offered no cover to move stealthily. Lith had to rely on Life Vision to spot his enemies from around the corners and kill them quickly after conjuring a silence zone.

All of them wore fine clothes with a faint magical aura, yet it wasn't enough to explain how they could be so spotless and in mint condition after being allegedly worn by prisoners for years.

'Around the next corner there is a group of four orcs coming from the direction your wolves died.' Solus warned Lith. 'One of them has a bright green mana core and a powerful life force. He must be the shaman.'

'What about the crystal?' Lith's Life vision confirmed Solus's reading but at the same time, it made him worry. There was no trace of the mana crystal and the shaman appeared to have an incredibly strong mana and life flow for his green core.

'I can't see it either. He has no magical equipment.' Solus couldn't explain how such a small group of orcs could have killed a whole pack of undead so fast.

Lith charged forward with the Gatekeeper bastard sword in his hand, using gravity magic to run on the ceiling rather than the ground.

Orcs were humanoid creatures, with an average height of 1.8 meters (5'11"). They were gifted from birth with a physique similar to that of an Awakened. They were stronger, faster, and sturdier than humans.

Their bodies were naturally resistant to most elements and they would rarely get sick. It was uncommon for an orc to display a talent for magic, but when it happened, the creature would always be born Awakened.

They were all bald, with skin as brown as tree bark and almost as hard. Orcs also had enhanced senses that made it difficult to take them by surprise and were able to display short bursts of fire or air fusion, but not both at once.

The creatures paid no attention to the noise of Lith's approach until it was too late. A Hush zone prevented them from calling for help and the attack came from above while they were still searching for the source of the footsteps.

The echo of the corridors confused their enhanced hearing, making them look left and right. Thanks to water fusion, Lith's arm was able to move like it had no bones.

The Gatekeeper avoided the orcs' thick arms that were guarding their vitals and killed three of them with as many quick thrusts.

'The fuck?' Lith thought as the alleged shaman deflected the tip of the blade with the back of his hand while taking a few steps back. Lith's surprise turned into amazement when he noticed that the orc didn't look like an orc at all.

It had shoulder length snow white hair, a lean but muscular physique like that of a professional athlete, and long pointy ears. There was no trace of the orcs' characteristic bloodlust in the delicate, almost feminine, features of his face

Thanks to his brown skin it would have been easy for him to go unnoticed in the woods, but inside the stone corridor, he stood out like a sore thumb.

'Why does this guy look like an elf?' Lith suddenly remembered how according to the lore orcs were a Fallen Race descending from the elves.

'Beats me, but his life force is definitely that of an orc.' Solus pointed out. 'Do elves really exist? Are they all so hot?'

Their enemy was indeed good looking, but Lith had other things to worry about. The orc was infused with all the elements and had conjured a sword made of ice from the humidity in the air.

Both things were supposed to be impossible for members of a Fallen Race.

"It was you who sent those undead! Your corpse will make a fine dish. I'm tired of eating goblins." A cruel hunger deformed the orc's face at the idea of tasting human flesh again after so much time.

Suddenly Solus didn't find him hot anymore.

"You can speak!" Lith replied enthusiastically as he unleashed a Plague Arrow with each thrust of his sword. The orc nimbly deflected the blade, but the spells messed up his amateurish footwork by forcing him to dodge while he parried.

Their physical abilities were similar but the orc had no training in any kind of martial arts and was relying on his natural talents. The first thrust of the Gatekeeper cracked the ice blade, the second and third injured the orc's legs.

Lith could have killed him easily, but dead men told no tales.

To make matters worse for the orc, he was not used to the abilities of his ancestral form. He tried multiple times to conjure a spell just for Lith to tamper with it and make it blow up in the orc's face.

Soon the stone sword broke into pieces and the orc's body was bleeding from many deep cuts. Lith struck his enemy with a fist containing a healing spell that mended all of the orc's wounds, sapping a great deal of his remaining stamina.

His knees buckled and Lith grabbed him by the throat, lifting the orc up as if he was just a stuffed animal.

"Tell me who you are, what is happening here, and how you killed my minions so fast." Lith used Invigoration to find the nerve bundles Jirni had taught him about and pressed them with his free hand, causing the orc to writhe in agony.

"I won't tell you anything." The monster managed to smile in defiance.

"It's much better if I show you."

The creature used a breathing technique that closely resembled Invigoration, but instead of absorbing the surrounding world energy, it was accumulated on the orc's right hand.

"You can cast tier four spells without consuming your mana? Not bad, Hannibal Lectolas." Lith reacted before the spell was fully formed by clenching his hand around the orc's and crushing it along with the suicidal attack.

The orc screamed in pain for the first time as his hand imploded under Lith's grip and exploded due to his own spell gone wild.

'Interesting. Such a breathing technique is as powerful as it is flawed. It saves the user the strain of handling the mana, so they can cast even spells above their level. Yet because such spells are only made of world energy, they can still hurt their caster.' Lith thought.

'Why does he not fear death?' Solus pondered. 'Even now, he is still smiling.'

Lith had to squeeze the orcs' throat to stop him from making a second attempt. Lith crushed the creature's remaining limbs and knocked him unconscious before dropping him onto the ground.

'Well, if he doesn't talk, let's see what I can find out on my own.'

Scanner and Invigoration revealed that there was something odd with the reverted orc. His life force was unnatural, squeezed in its actual form by a second life force wrapping the orc's like a shroud.

### Chapter 536 Unexpected Turn Part 3

'Undead life force?' Solus was flabbergasted. 'Could he have evolved after absorbing the darkness magic animating your wolves?'

Lith had no explanation for the phenomenon, yet he noticed that the orc's clothes were too big for him. They were sized for a regular orc, which meant that either his transformation really had just happened or the creature didn't care about having them fixed.

After a throughout body scan of the fainted elf-orc, Lith and Solus had no idea what events could be unfolding in the underground lab. The creature's anatomy was almost identical to its corrupted counterpart.

The only anomalies were the slightly different shape of his organs and his mana core resonating with the world energy, making him recover his mana faster than a human would.

After waking the orc up, Lith discovered that all the means of interrogation at his disposal were useless.

The creature would cut off his pain receptors at the first opportunity he got, and even if Lith could easily undo it, the orc proved to be resistant to pain beyond reason. Since more monsters were approaching, Lith killed the orc while he still had some time left before being discovered.

Just as he expected, death reverted the monster to his original form. Life Vision revealed the undead life force leaving the body, but unluckily it moved as fast as lightning and passed through the ground.

Lith had no opportunity to follow it before it disappeared from his sight.

'It was definitely not from your wolves.' Solus pointed out. 'Otherwise it would have just faded.'

Lith nodded and hid around a corner to avoid the next patrol. It was composed of five ogres. They were all very tall, above 2 meters (6'7") with muscular bodies that could have passed for humans if not for their greenish skin, their spiky red hair and the long, pointy fangs protruding out of their lower lip.

Once again, one of them was very different from the others. He had no fangs and his hair seemed to be made of red autumn leaves. There was a calm, solemn light of intelligence reflected in his eyes, that deeply contrasted with the brutish appearance of his peers.

'Is it me, or does this guy resemble the dryads we met years ago?' After meeting the wargs, Lith had started to wonder if even plants and magical beasts were part of the Fallen races. The reverted ogre's appearance seemed to confirm his suspects.

"What happened to Caliel's unit?" Said one of the ogres. He stuttered every word with a pained expression, as if using human language poisoned his tongue.

"There is no sign of struggle." The dryad-ogre calmly observed. "And none of us would have wasted so much meat. Either Yozmogh himself or one of his elite units must have breached the barricade."

"We need to split into two teams. One will bring the corpses to the kitchen and give the alarm while the other will try to slow them down. I'll do the tracking."

The ogre started chanting in an unknown language as two of his soldiers picked up the bodies and stored them inside huge sacks.

'A barricade? Then the monsters are infighting, which would explain why they eat their own. How did they survive so long, though? To spawn fast they need to eat so much that they should have died of starvation long ago...'

Lith's musing was interrupted the moment the ogre-dryad finished his chanting. Based on its length, it had to be a tier one spell. Lith cursed when he noticed red marks appearing on the floor, the ceiling, and wherever the bodies of the fallen orcs had touched the walls during the previous fight.

Among the red marks, there was a clear series of footprints leading to his position.

"Ambush!" The ogre warned his soldiers a second too late. Ice lances pierced their heads and hearts, killing the regular ogres on the spot. They would have done the same to the ogre-dryad, if not for two holes opening where the lances were about to hit.

Instead of flash and bones, the creature was made of vines that normally were wrapped together so tightly that they gave it a humanoid appearance.

'An ogre's body is actually made of fossilized plants!' Solus's scientific curiosity was on cloud nine. 'That's why they are green.'

'I don't really care about that right now.' No matter if Lith's attacks were magical or physical in nature, in its vine form the ogre was as able to split at will and dodge every one of them with ease.

"You don't chant, which means you're an Awakened!" The creature's voice was filled with surprise and envy. His body split into five bundles of vines, four of which dug their way into the dead ogres' bodies and reanimated them.

Lith could see thanks to Life Vision that they were no undead. The vines were taking root, turning the corpses into clones of the original. Both their mana cores and life force had an energy signature identical to those of the original body.

Lith struck at them with several flaming darts, discovering that the clones were incapable of turning into vines as well. The darts left behind burn marks and produced a pungent smell, yet the fire didn't take.

The clones' life force was unchanged, while their bodies shrunk slightly, as if they had been starving for days.

'I think I know their weak point.' Lith's smile disappeared as he heard five identical voices chanting as many different spells.

He conjured a blizzard, but unfortunately neither the wind nor the injuries opened by the razor sharp hail his spell produced could stop the enemies' casting. Vines had no mouths and even if somehow they experienced pain, it didn't show.

A small tornado formed around Lith, blocking his sight and restricting his movements. Wind blades were randomly mixed with the chaotic air currents surrounding him. Black clouds formed on the ceiling with a low rumble announcing a thunderstorm.

Lith used Life Vision to detect the otherwise invisible air blades, and Full Guard to avoid the other spells incoming from his blind spots. The enemies had a limited choice of attacks, which he exploited to make them predictable.

His blizzard was still ongoing, making most fire spells lose their effectiveness, while the whole underground complex was shielded by arrays which made it immune to earth magic. It explained why the creatures had been forced to dig with their hands.

Lith stood his ground as long as he could, strengthening his magical storm by the second. He Blinked away only when the lightning bolts from above or the darkness spells the enemies threw at him from the sides would force him to walk into the air blades.

"It was a stupid move to use water magic against me!" The ogre roared as it relocated the tornado for the third time. "You should have used fire instead."

Lith ignored the taunt and focused on defense as he gave his spell one last push. All of the enemy attacks disappeared at once when the extreme cold froze the abundant water inside the vines and turned them into popsicles.

'What a moron.' Lith thought as he crushed the ice sculptures that once were the ogre-dryad. 'I was right about the reverted monsters not knowing anything about their own abilities.

'Fire is only good against dry wood, whereas wet vegetation would only produce a lot of smoke and hinder the only one who actually needs to breathe. Me.'

#### Chapter 537 Unexpected Turn Part 4

'Why was he scared of fire, then?' Solus asked.

'Probably because he was a normal ogre until not long ago. All living beings are naturally afraid of fire. He had yet to realize that with no vitals and with light magic at his disposal, fire is a small threat for a water based creature like he was.'

"Stop wasting time. You strong, master can use you." Lith turned toward the source of the voice, yet neither Life Vision nor mana sense showed anything. At least not until a hunched figure literally emerged from the shadows.

The creature didn't resemble anything Lith had ever seen before, nor was it listed in any of the bestiaries he possessed. It was a small humanoid, barely 1.3 meters (4'3") tall, with pale grey skin and thick grizzled hair.

Judging by his appearance and his voice, he seemed to be a male. He had small pointed ears, pitch black eyes, and was wearing a mage's robe. Despite his jagged teeth and the claws at the end of his limbs, it didn't look menacing.

The creature's life force was slightly better than the average adult man, while his blood core was almost completely black. Lith didn't underestimate him and silently weaved more spells in case looks were proverbially deceiving.

'How the heck did he escape our senses?' Solus kept an eye on all the remaining shadows of the corridor, in case the creature was just a distraction.

Lith had no answer to offer. His senses were all focused on his surroundings, since things were getting weirder by the second. The corpses of the ogres he had just killed turned into smoke and

dived into the ground, closely followed by the undead life force which had restored the dryad-ogre's ancient might.

"Tell me who you are, what is happening here, and what you mean, wasting time." Either the creature really was harmless or wanted to manipulate him, at least he seemed to be willing to communicate.

"Me Ratpack." The creature shrugged. "War is happening, but fighters waste time, just like you. None can die. We banished from death thanks to master's power."

Lith stared at Ratpack, waiting for him to continue his explanation, but the creature just stared back in annoyance.

"You deaf? Stop wasting time. Soon Caliel and Draga will be back. With reinforcements! You soldier." Ratpack pointed his grey finger to Lith's uniform.

"You act like one and obey!" His voice was deep and rough. It was filled with an underserved pride which annoyed Lith almost as the vague answers he had just received.

"I obey no one." Lith replied while using spirit magic to lift the creature off the ground and slam him against a well lighted wall. Choking an undead was useless, if not to prove a point.

"If you want my help, you'd better give me a good reason. Start by making sense, otherwise..." Lith's threat was interrupted by Ratpack turning into a puff of smoke. It lasted only one second, but it was enough to escape from spirit magic's grasp and reach the nearest shadow.

"No, you don't!" Lith snarled. He extended his arm to direct his tendrils of mana toward their target, who turned once again ethereal the moment Ratpack touched the edge of the shade.

"Only master can harm Ratpack. Even Yozmogh and Dann'Kah, even their armies couldn't catch Ratpack. Obey or die!"

Lith didn't reply, redirecting the mana from spirit to darkness magic. He had learned a couple of things while fighting Thrud Griffon, it was time to put them to the test. Lith's shadow came to life as two blazing yellow eyes appeared on its face.

The shadow's extended right arm stretched along the floor until it reached Ratpack's hiding place. Neither Lith nor Solus liked how his darkness magic infused shade resembled more his demonic life form rather than his human one.

The shadow's hand rummaged for a while before retracting. The elongated arm was coiled around the small undead like a snake. Ratpack screamed in surprise as soon as he felt something touching him.

His master's Coward's Mantle was supposed to protect him from any harm, yet the Ranger had been able to ignore its protection. To make matters worse, Ratpack could feel his strength getting slowly sapped.

Not even undeath could ward off darkness magic.

"Are you ready to talk?" Lith said while pointing the Gatekeeper at Ratpack's throat. The creature's eyes were filled with fear, which made him nod like a parrot having a seizure.

"Then explain things properly." Lith snorted.



"Me has many names. Squirm, Plague, Worm. Ratpack is master's favourite because he says me very annoying..."

"He is right, dammit! I don't care for your names. Tell me what's happening here."

"Servants rebelled against master and took master prisoner. After that, they fight each other. Two great leaders emerge. Dann'Kah the orc shaman and Yozmogh the Balor. All servants join one or the other, forming two armies. They fight for..." Ratpack stopped, not knowing how to explain.

"For?"

"Freedom. And also for power." Ratpack clapped his hands, congratulating to himself for being so precise. Unluckily, Lith didn't share his enthusiasm.

"What freedom? If your master is already being held prisoner, they can just walk away. What power are you talking about?"

"They can't leave." Ratpack nervously licked his lips, revealing such a black tongue that it resembled a slimy piece of charcoal.

"Master made them like him. They have no freedom. As for power, it's the master's, but they found a way to use it. To make them pretty again. Like- Caliel and Draga! Yes, like them." The creature nodded again like crazy, feeling someone was approaching.

"What do you want me to do, exactly?" Lith dilated his nostrils in annoyance. He didn't know whether to find more bothersome Ratpack's ramblings or the idea of monsters like a Balor regaining their full powers.

"Follow me to master. Master explains better. You free him, he stops servants." Hurried footsteps were perfectly audible and quickly approaching, yet the Ranger didn't seem to care.

"Why would I? If your master has already been defeated once by his servants, they can do it again. They have even robbed him of his power. What use do I have for him?"

"Yes, he's weak, but he still strong. You can't defeat all master's servants alone. Enough talk, we run now!" The ogre-dryad and the orc-elf appeared from a corner, running at full speed closely followed by several members of their own kin.

Lith raised the index and middle fingers of his right hand, unleashing the tier four spell Death Zone. A black cloud comprised of darkness element filled the corridor in front of them the moment the monsters were halfway through.

No matter the direction they turned to, all of them died after taking a few steps.

"What were you saying?" Lith's eyes were blazing with blue mana which deeply contrasted with his shadow's burning yellow eyes. It was still seemingly alive and moving around on its own, even though its main body was standing still.

Ratpack shivered in fear, wondering how powerful humans had become during the decades he and his master had spent in isolation.

"You- too strong! Why you struggle earlier if you can just..." Ratpack stuttered so much that he preferred to slam his fist onto his palm to stress his point.

"Struggle?" Lith sneered. "I was saving my strength and making a few experiments. Finding a reverted monster is a rare opportunity. I just wanted to see what they were capable of."

Lith had learned enough about magic to know that as long as he understood the underlying principles of the so called "innate abilities", he could find a way to replicate them and add them to his arsenal.

"Experiments?" Ratpack echoed, swallowing a lump of saliva. The word brought to memory countless unpleasant experiences.

"Master and you peas in a pod."

"You have yet to answer my final question." Lith pushed the Gatekeeper's tip against Ratpack's throat.

"Why should I free your master? What use do I have for him?"

"Maybe you can slay all." Ratpack licked his lips again.

"Maybe you can break master's device, but can you do both? You slay, but they return. The closer you get to the device the faster they return. Master can shut down device with one finger. Master is its master."

Ratpack made little sense, yet Lith considered he still had a point. If this master had been a quiet presence for so long, there was no reason for him to stir trouble, whereas the same couldn't be said for his rebellious servants.

'Why should I waste time cracking locks and arrays if he can just pass through them with a flick of their switches? Also, exploring the whole complex would take me months while I have days at best before the army sends reinforcements to "help" me.'

Lith couldn't afford the underground lab to be discovered. The Kingdom would snatch the good stuff and leave him the crumbs.

'If this master is willing to compensate me for my troubles, I'll get what I want without wasting my time. Otherwise, I can always kill or imprison him again and test my luck with the doors. First things first, though.'

"Does this master of yours experiments on Abominations too? Is he the Master?" The title was so trite that it was likely that they were two different people, but Lith preferred to be sure who he was about to deal with.

"Master experiments on anything." Ratpack sighed as even more bad memories resurfaced. Being undead didn't mean being spared from pain.

"My Coward's Cloak made from Abomination skin." His words made Lith open his eyes wide in surprise. As far as he knew, Abominations had no skin. He touched Ratpack's clothes, using Invigoration to observe its pseudo core.

'I got it, but I'll take some notes, just to be safe.' Solus's memory was peerless, but she could also access to Lith's like it was a library. A messy and chaotic one, but after so many years, she knew her way.

"No, I mean, does he help Abominations? Does he work with them?" Lith tried to be clearer.

"No. Master helps only himself. Master works only with Ratpack. Me assistant." The creature said with a proud voice.

"Then make way." Lith nodded. "Be careful, we must move unnoticed. I want to avoid useless fights."

Ratpack knew the underground complex like the back of his hand, while Lith could detect enemies from afar with Life Vision. By putting together their resources, the duo quickly reached the lower levels of the lab.

Along the way, Lith asked Ratpack what the various signs meant to achieve a basic understanding of the ancient language. Just in case things with the master went sour and he had to explore on his own.

Ratpack was annoyed by his questions, but he didn't dare to displease Lith. The creature needed the Ranger as much as he was afraid of him. Every time they were forced to fight, Lith would go all out, killing whole units of powerful monsters in the blink of an eye.

The moment the monsters realized to be under attack, they were already dead. Ratpack didn't like the human because he reminded him too much of the master. Ratpack's undead senses could hear Lith's heart beating like they were just taking a stroll.

Even though they were surrounded from every side by enemies, there was no sweat on his body nor emotion in his movements. Walking to his side felt exactly like when he accompanied the master before his fall.

Ratpack had the impression of being a mouse riding on the back of a dragon.

When they reached the eight underground floor, the creature signaled Lith to stop.

"We arrived. Trouble is here." Ratpack pointed at the many reinforced doors along the corridors. Each room was bigger than those on the other floors and was enveloped by multiple unique arrays.

"What is stored in the lower levels?" Lith had expected the prison to be on the last floor since the deeper they got, the stronger the magical aura he detected became.

"Bad stuff. Horrible stuff." Ratpack shuddered.

"Master love experiments and hate failures. He always destroy failures, but some he can't get rid of. Either because they don't die or because too valuable. Those master stores below, where array keep them in another space ready to collapse."

Thanks to all his questions about the road signs they had met along the way, Lith had understood what each floor was for.

The ground floor was a storage area for non magical equipment, the equivalent of a broom closet. The master's living quarters took all the first underground floor, while the servants' quarters were on the second one.

Lith was amazed by how someone could be so conceited that he had taken for himself the same space one thousand minions did. The third and fourth underground floors were the lab, the fifth was the ingredient deposit, the sixth was the treasury, and the seventh was a silver mine.

According to Ratpack, his master had chosen the Broken Spine as his residence because of the rich silver veins he had discovered. It was the only way to satisfy his need for the precious metal without the need for an external supplier.

"Is it normal for those doors to be opened?" Lith pointed at the unlocked door of some cells. He already knew the answer, since the owner of the lab was the kind of guy to keep even the cleaning products deposit tight shut.

"No." Ratpack hissed. "Dann'Kah and Yozmogh must have freed them. They desperate to seek help from those who could replace them."

'Solus, can you see what's inside? Life Vision is blurred by all the locks and arrays enveloping the cells. The doors must be made of solid silver, because I've never seen so many spells stuffed inside a single object.'

Lith would have loved to take a peek at their cores with Invigoration, but they were infused with too many deadly spells, and he already had too much to do. Lith had already planned to raid the treasury and the ingredient deposit before calling for backup if things went south.

'Sorry, but mana sense is useless here. The whole floor is so bright that is like staring into the sun. A whole army of Awakened could hide behind a corner and I wouldn't even notice them. Those doors are... just wow.'

Each one of the doors had a blue mana crystal the size of a fist at its four corners and a different magic circle formed by small purple mana crystals the size of a nut.

## Chapter 539 Trouble Part 2

Thanks to Life Vision, Lith could see that every inch of their surface was covered in mystical runes.

"Wait a minute." Lith snapped out of his reverie. "How did they open those doors?"

"They master assistants, just like Ratpack. They have codes for all doors. Eighth floor is for specimens."

"If you can open your master's cage, what do you need me for?"

"You really deaf. I need you deal with Trouble." Ratpack whispered while pointing at the next corridor to their right. Lith peeked behind the corner, noticing a Balor standing guard in front of the most complex door they had met so far.

The creature was over 2.5 meters (8'2") tall, with a humanoid body covered by small blood colored scales. His head had three eyes arranged in a vertical line. A red one was in the middle of his forehead, a black one was right above his nose, and a blue one was between his lower lip and his chin.

Three sets of black curved horns emerged from his head, his cheekbones, and the sides of his chin. His massive upper body was completely exposed and seemed to be comprised solely of bulging muscles.

His legs were reverse jointed like those of a cat, and were covered by a black armor that only left the talons extending out from his toes and heel exposed. Two flaming red membranous wings were folded around his neck, almost looking like a mantle.

"That's not trouble, that's a Balor!" Lith cursed at Ratpack with a whisper.

"You wrong. He call himself Trou'Bleskamuz the Fierce, but master call him Trouble because he escape three times before master could find a proper door to contain him. Trouble hate master's experiments and hate master even more."

Lith ignored Ratpack's ramblings and prepared a set of spells according to the information he had about Balors and his full blown paranoia. Despite their appearance, they were no demons.

According to the lore, before their fall they had six eyes, one for each element and colored accordingly. Their eyes granted them mastery over all the elements, but they were also their weak point.

Losing an eye meant losing the corresponding element and since magic didn't flow through their bodies, they were incapable of mixing together different elements, leaving them stuck with the equivalent of tier four magic.

After their fall, Balors could have from one to three eyes, while the others were allegedly fused within their bodies by the failed attempt to evolve and force the mana to flow freely.

'Any advice?' Lith had never faced one, but could see via Life Vision that the creature's vitality was on par with Scarlett the Scorpicores. Luckily, its mana flow was way worse than the Lord of the Forest's.

'If he wasn't stand in front of that fucking door, maybe.' Lith was flabbergasted by Solus's swearing.

'I'm almost blind, so take my words with a grain of salt. The Balor seems to have four mana cores. A bright cyan one in its usual place, right below his solar plexus, and three green ones inside his eyes.'

'Got it. The good news is that he can't use light magic, so if I manage to destroy one or more of his eyes, he can't regenerate them.' Lith was done with his preparations. He was about to step in the corridor when he felt Ratpack tugging at his leg.

"Master told me that Trouble has weakness, that even Ratpack can face him if I wear magical protections. Master gave it to Ratpack, Ratpack give it to you."

The small creature took out a bundle of shackles linked to several envelopes from his pocket, which was actually a pocket dimension. It made little sense to Lith, more so since according to Life Vision they were not enchanted.

"What's this supposed to be?" He asked.

"Isn't it obvious? It's a chainmail!" Ratpack puffed out his chest with pride while Lith opened one of the envelopes.

"If you're reading this, you're not the moron I always thought you were. Happy deathday, Zolgrish."

Lith had no time to waste explaining to the moron what a pun was, so he returned the gift and launched himself against Trouble while infused with all the elements.

The Balor gave no sign of being surprised by the sudden attack. Trou'Bleskamuz's middle eye ignited with mana and what looked like a two handed scimitar made of black smoke appeared in his right hand.

Much to Lith's surprise, the Gatekeeper clashed against the black smoke and the sudden impact threw him off balance allowing the Balor to send him flying away with but a flick of his wrist.

'How is that possible? Darkness magic is supposed to be ethereal. I was expecting him to attempt to trade blows... What the heck?' Only then did Lith notice that the blue eye was lit too, meaning the sword was composed of black ice.

'Seems that Balors can mix elements after all.' Lith inwardly cursed at the army bestiary's author as the red eye too was set ablaze with mana, generating a pillar of cyan flames that filled the whole corridor leaving Lith no way out.

Lith encased himself inside a massive ice coffin to protect himself and seal the corridor. His own spells couldn't harm him exactly how the Balor's flames had no effect on their caster after rebounding on the enemy barrier.

Soon the fire consumed all the air in the corridor, forcing the spell to disappear, the red eye to close, and the Balor to fall to his knees gasping for oxygen.

The creatures' black eye lit up again, unleashing a pillar of darkness so powerful that the arrays protecting the lab became visible to the naked eye as they prevented the Balor's spell from turning the walls into debris.

Their positions were now reversed. Lith was stuck inside the ice just like the Balor was trapped in the small corridor a second ago. To not lose his life, Lith was forced to lose his advantage and shatter the ice to Blink to safety.

Fresh air filled both the corridor and the Balor's lungs as he unfolded his wings to chase his opponent. Trou'Bleskamuz flew in a spiral pattern, to prevent Lith from predicting his trajectory and using dimensional magic to stab him in the back.

Contrary to his expectations, no attack came until he reached the T junction where the two corridors met. Only then did he realize he had fallen into a trap. Lith knew that his enemy's physical prowess was way above his own.

He had considered using spell sealing arrays, but they would cripple the only edge he had. Arrays worked both ways, affecting their caster along with their target. Hence, he had decided to stay at a safe distance and play it smart.

Two Death Zones were waiting for Trou'Bleskamuz, one at each side of the junction. The darkness spells resembled two small thunderclouds, which completely engulfed the corridors as they converged on the Balor.

Trou'Bleskamuz exploded in a wild laughter and opened his middle eye again. A second pillar of darkness clashed with Lith's Death Zone with such violence that the entire corridor trembled and all of the arrays protecting the cells became visible.

Lith was amazed by how a simple cyan core could emit such power without a moment's notice. His surprise only increased when, even as it was powered by his blue core and boosted by a continuous flow of mana, Death Zone was overpowered by the black pillar.

Chapter 540 Evil Eyes Part 1

The sudden turn of events would have reversed the trap, turning Lith into the prey if he hadn't positioned himself in front of another junction, just to be safe. The moment he understood he was on the losing side of the battle, Lith gave his Death Zone one last push and rolled around a corner to safety.

'What the heck? They were both tier four spells, but I'm the one with a blue core. How could I possibly lose the confrontation?' Lith's question was rhetorical, since the bestiary provided no answers to that impossible situation.

Yet Solus knew better.

'His cyan core is indeed weaker. The problem lies in the support the green core inside his eyes provide.'

'If a green core could do that much, together we would be invincible!' Lith griped.

'Let me finish, dummy! Unlike a normal mana core, the ones in his eyes are able to draw the world energy and use it to empower his pillar-like spells to no end. It wasn't a blue core versus a cyan plus a green one, it was you versus Mogar.'

'Let me get this straight. Thanks to his eyes a Balor can basically use Invigoration non stop even while attacking?' Things were starting to make sense, and thanks to that Lith could adapt his strategy.

'Yes and no. Like Invigoration, the eye provides a constant flow of world energy and also puts stress on the user. After using a pillar, the creature closes the corresponding eye. Unlike your breathing technique, it didn't heal him nor replenish his mana.'

Even a half blind Solus was worth several Balor's eyes in boosting Lith's understanding and battle prowess.

Lith Blinked away the moment Life Vision showed him Trou'Bleskamuz was around the corner. The Balor blocked the corridor with his massive body as his blue eye emitted a pillar which turned air into rock solid ice at its passage.

The attack had a double purpose. If Lith was still there, he would have been frozen solid into an easy prey. If he had Warped away as Trou'Bleskamuz expected, by sealing the corridor the Balor was forcing the Ranger into a head on fight that he couldn't possibly win.

Lith appeared in the middle of his second Death Zone. The mana thread which linked him with his spell gave him its exact position.

'You're right! He wiped out only one Death Zone, which means he can't use his eyes as often as I use my spells.' Lith used Invigoration to fill the remaining darkness cloud with endless mana as it moved inexorably toward its prey.

Trou'Bleskamuz cursed both the Ranger's shrewdness and his own stupidity in a language that sounded like a choir of tormented souls. Lith had no access to the corridor anymore, but neither did he.

The Balor flew away, trying to buy as much time as he could. Unfortunately, the only passage remaining led to a dead end and even though darkness magic was slow, it only took Death Zone a couple of seconds to reach the cornered creature.

Trou'Bleskamuz used sheer willpower to force his black eye open, fighting the excruciating pain that moving the eyelid caused him. If Solus's mana sense worked properly, she would have seen that after conjuring the second pillar, the green core had turned grey.

Balors didn't really have four mana cores, just one like every other natural being. What she had mistaken for extra mana cores were just masses of world energy that a Balor would refine into his own mana and store it ready to be used.

Balors' eyes had an effect similar to Invigoration, allowing them to draw the single elements which composed the world energy. Drawing so much and so fast came at a price.

Tears of blood streamed down Trou'Bleskamuz's chin as the raw world energy he was forcing to flow through his eye damaged his whole body. The pain was unbearable, but he knew that it would be fleeting, whereas death was permanent.

"I haven't lived this long just to die like this!" He roared.

The two spells clashed again, but this time Lith boosted his own with a steady flow of mana until the last second before taking cover. At first, his precaution seemed to be unnecessary.

As soon as Lith's Death Zone started to fade, Trou'Bleskamuz closed his eye with an agonizing scream. Its pupil was almost completely white and a small pool of blood had formed under the Balor's feet.

His breath was ragged from the effort of forcing so much world energy through his already exhausted focus and of withstanding the pain that such a desperate move involved.

Yet Trou'Bleskamuz didn't wait for the enemy's next move and sought to regain the initiative. A suit of ice covered his upper body as he launched himself forward as fast as a freight train.

'My flaming eye is almost out of mana. If that scum forces me to use it a third time, I'll be as good as blind. Awakened or not, he cannot cast spells if I manage to corner him.' He thought.

Lith was waiting for him with his arms extended, drawing in the air mystical lines that were taking the shape of a small array. Trou'Bleskamuz recognized its runes and rushed at breakneck speed to interrupt the casting.

'Fire and water are all he has left. The best combo he can achieve with them would allow him to cook pasta, but it's a risk I'm willing to take.' Lith inwardly grinned at his enemy falling for his third trap in a row.

The forbidden array he had apparently almost completed was just a hologram. Lith couldn't afford to waste so much mana on a single enemy who was likely to respawn like in a badly balanced ARPG.

When a Gate suddenly opened in front of Trou'Bleskamuz, he was going too fast to change his direction in time. With only wings propelling him forward and no air magic, the faster he moved, the less precision of movement he had.

The Balor crashed against one of the most massive among the cell doors, triggering its defence mechanisms which unleashed a series of spells against their aggressor. Unfortunately, Lith wasn't aware that after decades of imprisonment Trou'Bleskamuz knew them like the back of his hand.



The owner of the lab not only lacked imagination in decorating his own house but also in forgemastering. All the doors were imbued with the same base set of spells plus a few specifically designed against the prisoner they were meant to hold.

The Balor managed to avoid most of the damage and move away from the door before the most powerful ones could activate. Even on foot, the creature was as fast as a cheetah, reaching the Ranger in the blink of an eye.

Lith could've Warped away, but between the confined space and the Balor's speed, his exit point was bound to be easily predictable. With the closest junction still sealed by the ice, he could only Blink inside the dead end the Balor had just escaped from or move back in an almost straight line.

The former option was beyond idiotic, while the latter would buy him a second at best.