

Supreme M 551

Chapter 551 Eyes and Wings Part 2

The short moment Yozmogh needed to deactivate his elemental beams allowed Lith to feel with his body the change caused by the Balor in the world energy and react accordingly.

He took flight again and activated a second Stormnado which sent Yozmogh crashing against the wall.

'I stand corrected, this guy is less dangerous than a shaman's crystal. He can't deplete the world energy of a specific element, only alter its balance. I can still use all elements as long as I compensate for the disturbance.' Lith thought.

His enthusiasm was short lived. Yozmogh kicked the wall with all of his strength, turning into a living bullet. Lith managed to dodge and put some distance between them, but another barrage of beams aimed to his heart forced him to slow down enough for the Balor to catch up with him.

A fist the size of a bowling ball struck at his chest while he was in mid air, crushing his ribs and squeezing the air out of his lungs as he was sent flying.

'This cannot be.' Lith thought. 'Not even the idiot in dragon form hit me so hard. How is...' He almost choked on his question when he noticed that the Skinwalker Armor was now of the same plain grey color it had before being imprinted with his mana.

Yozmogh caught up with him again, ready to strike, but Lith intercepted his fist with the Gatekeeper sword. The blade infused with darkness, fire, and air magic made short work of the Balor's fingers until it hit the silver sphere and went dead.

Without its enchantments, the Gatekeeper couldn't resist the impact, and a cobweb of cracks spread from the point of impact to all of its surface. Lith had barely the time to store it inside his pocket dimension that Yozmogh's right hand closed around Solus's arm protector.

'Fuck, I know that spell! That's 'Clean Slate!'' Lith thought. It was a tier four Forgemaster spell, which generated a combined pulse of light and darkness magic. It temporarily short circuited the imprint on any magical item, making it useless.

Lith had learned it after becoming a Spellbreaker, but he had never bothered to convert it into true magic because of its harsh limitations. It required physical contact, hence it was useless in battle.

Any enemy he could touch, Lith could kill. Death too would remove any imprint and he could inflict it from distance. Clean Slate was also ineffective against booby traps and barriers.

The two effects combined meant that any explosive device would blow up in his face and that he couldn't use it to open shielded doors like those of Zolgrish's lab.

The arm protector didn't budge, but Lith's shoulder wasn't so lucky. Yozmogh dislocated it with the same ease as if he was breaking a twig and kept pulling. The pain was enough to make an adult man faint, but Lith had already shut down his receptors.

A second flash from the silver sphere and the arm protector went as limp as Lith's arm, allowing the Balor to take it away.

"Impressive. I would've never thought there was something Zolgrish's magic couldn't steal."

Lith replied by stopping his attempt to fly away. Air magic supported the Balor's wings, making him faster than he ever could. While they were fighting in mid air, Lith grabbed Yozmogh's silver air with his good arm and struck at his nose with a knee.

Blood and teeth scattered throughout the room as Lith used the energy that his tier four spell, Vampiric Touch, stole from Yozmogh to fix his injured arm. Lith followed up by extending his leg like a spring and kicking the Balor's chin like a horse.

Yozmogh crashed against a library, but he never stopped smiling.

"It's over, human." He said showing Lith his perfectly healed right hand and light wing.

"We can do this all day and the result would be the same. You can fight, but you cannot win."

Lith sneered, using the time the Balor was wasting trying to crush his spirit to use Invigoration and recover his strength.

"Foolish mortal!" Through his white eye, Yozmogh could check Lith's condition with the same accuracy as a diagnostic spell. He spread his six wings, sucking the world energy and returning to his peak condition.

"You only have two choices. Teach me the secret of Awakening or die. Why do you think you're still alive?"

"Because you're weak. Not for a lack of trying." Usually, Lith wouldn't speak to the daily madman, but by breaking his imprint on Solus, Yozmogh had managed to accomplish something that many before him had attempted and failed to do.

He had made Lith angry.

"Stop wasting my time with your yapping and give my artifact back to me."

Yozmogh laughed and pressed the protector against his right arm. The artifact grew in size until it fit like a glove.

"The lich is a thief and a liar. He trapped you just like he trapped us. You had no chance to begin with. Soon Dann'Kah will be back. Soon my minions will revive. You couldn't defeat me even with all of your precious artifacts.

"What do you think you can do now that you've got nothing and are alone?"

"No." Lith shook his head while emitting a strong deep blue aura which infused him with all the elements.

"Not alone." As Lith bolted forward, Solus's arm protector shrunk again, using spirit magic to boost her own strength and crush Yozmogh's arm in the process. At the same time, she unleashed both her most powerful spells against her helpless enemy.

Clean Slate could break any normal imprint, but not the bond between her and Lith. Only specific artifacts, like Nalear's box, were capable of such a feat. Otherwise destroying cursed objects like the Black Star wouldn't have been so difficult.

Solus had a will of her own, so she could restore Lith's imprint the moment it was jammed. Clean Slate was like getting slapped to her. It was painful, but far from enough to make her lose consciousness.

Still, both Lith and her could feel their bond was being threatened, their mind slipping out of synch, even though for just a split second. It triggered the trauma Nalear had inflicted them when she had forcefully separated them.

Solus injected her tier four Death Zone and tier five Spirit of Decay directly inside the Balor's body to vent out her rage, spreading them like a disease that made her victim rot from the inside.

Physical contact made darkness magic capable of achieving its maximum potential, even more so now that Solus had the inside of the arm protector turn into countless thorns that pierced Yozmogh's flesh until they cut his bones.

The two darkness spells coursed through Yozmogh, draining his vitality like he had been gutted and making him fall to his knees. He activated his black wing to stop or at least weaken them while his white eye mended the damage.

It was bound to work since Solus's green mana core couldn't resist for long to the raw strength Yozmogh possessed. As long as his light wing was undamaged, it would provide his white eye endless mana.

When the infinite clashed with the finite, the outcome was written in stone.

That was why Lith's first move was to pierce the white eye with his extended fingers while releasing electricity from his fingertips.

Chapter 552 Bloody Revenge Part 1

Even though their improvised trap had been a success, Lith lived it as a defeat. The enemy had forced Solus off his arm and stolen her from him. She had left of her own will, to prevent Lith's limb from being ripped off and then planned the counter attack with him via their mind link.

Lith appreciated the brilliance of their plan. It had created an opportunity and broken the slippery stalemate they had been stuck in, yet he didn't like it one bit. He had already spent one lifetime being robbed of everything and everyone he held dear.

Lith wasn't willing to lose anything or anyone else. After losing Carl to a drunken driver, after almost losing Solus due to Nalear's scheming, Lith had sworn that as long as he drew breath, his destiny would be his own.

Clean Slate had hurt Solus, and her pain was his pain. In Lith's eyes, Yozmogh was Nalear back from the grave, attempting once again to take Solus away from him. Lith was happy the Balor couldn't die, because it meant there was no end to the pain he could inflict him.

Solus did her part, forcing Yozmogh to focus on his rotting body and almost forget about Lith's existence. When he darted forward, the Balor activated his other four eyes. Ratpack emerged from the shadows on his blind side, spinning above his head the bundle of chains and envelops that was his 'enchanted chainmail'.

The small undead threw it at Yozmogh's head and hitting him with a thud. The chains melted over his face while the burning letters set the Balor's hair ablaze. The sudden distraction plus the close range made the elemental beams' trajectory telegraphed.

Lith dodged them and struck at the white eye, pumping bolts of lightning inside of it so that they would strike the Balor's brain and burn the surrounding tissues. Yozmogh screamed in outrage as his light wing went dark.

"It works! I knew not even master so cruel to deceive Ratpack. Chainmail really is Balors bane." He said as his Coward's Mantle made him ethereal again. Taking a cheap shot was one thing, facing Yozmogh was another.

Without the eye to store the light element, the white wing was no better than a pigeon's. Now only the black wing's jamming effect remained. Solus pushed forward with the last of her energy and spread the dark energies to the creature's lungs.

Darkness fusion prevented Yozmogh from feeling pain, but he still needed to breathe. His body wasn't able to follow Lith's speed anymore. The Balor extended his left arm to grab the Ranger, only to have it deflected to the side as Lith struck at its exposed elbow with his own.

No matter how strong the enemy was, joints couldn't be trained. With his right arm turned into a pulp and the left one shattered at an unnatural angle, Yozmogh couldn't react when Lith moved behind him and ripped off his black and yellow wings.

Solus's spells had corrupted his lungs to the point that he could barely breathe. After that, she focused the dark energy against the Balor's eyes until only empty sockets remained.

Yozmogh was helpless as a newborn in front of an adult as Lith removed his wings and then his legs.

'Are you alright, Solus?' Lith asked as soon as she returned to him.

'Peachy, thanks. I'm just exhausted for going all out. I need to use Invigoration or it will take me hours to recover.'

'Take your time while I fix the last details.' Lith took out the Gatekeeper sword and opened a Warp Steps that sent Yozmogh inside one of the closed cells.

Lith couldn't afford to kill him, otherwise Dann'Kah would become even stronger by assimilating the lich's life force that resided within the Balor's battered body.

The Skinwalker Armor was still inactive, but it had suffered only minor damages. The Gatekeeper, however, seemed to be on the brink of shattering, so Lith placed it on a nearby silver table, waiting for his enchanted items to reactivate.

Solus stored both the Invisibility Mirror and the Clean Slate Sphere inside her pocket dimension, alongside with all the artifacts she had stolen from Yozmogh while pretending to be under his control.

They still bore his imprint and couldn't be used until he was alive. Only when she was sure that their defeated enemy had no way to harm them did she activate Invigoration to refill her green mana core.

While she wasn't linked to a mana geyser, her only medium with the world energy was Lith's body. It made her recovery speed much slower than a normal Awakened and put stress on her companion who had to absorb and refine the world energy for her.

Performing the breathing technique with his mouth while keeping his strain to a minimum required her full focus, making it impossible for her to use any of her magical senses.

It was the reason why she avoided taking part in the fights unless it was strictly necessary. Not having much to do, Lith studied the items on the Forges looking for something useful.

Unluckily, Dann’Kah and Yozmogh had already taken all the artifacts the lich had completed, leaving behind only items that had yet to be enchanted. Even the library proved to be off limits for him.

The translucent blue barrier didn’t harm him but didn’t let him reach the books either.

’I can’t give it a try at cracking those protections until I know what happened to Zolgrish. If he comes back and finds me messing with his stuff, he will not be pleased.’ Lith thought.

As soon as the monsters who had died during the previous battle resurrected, Lith crippled them too before sending them in an empty cell. At that point, Clean Slate’s effect wore off.

Lith imprinted and restored the Skinwalker Armor before moving to the Gatekeeper. Invigoration revealed to him that although the sword’s pseudo core was still intact, the damage was so extensive that even a weak impact could bring it beyond the point of recovery.

It was like a patient on the verge of starvation. Lith couldn’t infuse it with massive doses of mana, otherwise the same energies meant to save it would make it crumble. He injected into the blade small amounts of mana, triggering its self repair properties.

Now that Solus was done recovering, she helped him by coating the blade like a mold and redirecting the energy where it was needed the most.

’It’s better if we stop now.’ Solus said.

’The pseudo core is almost exhausted. It needs some time to recharge.’

Lith observed the sword for a moment before sheathing it. It was still too damaged to be of any use in battle, but at least it was no longer in danger of shattering.

"Ratpack?" Lith called.

The small undead emerged from the shadows a few seconds later, when he was sure that no enemy was still around and that Lith wasn’t angry at him.

"You welcome." Ratpack said.

"I told you chainmail powerful artifact." He puffed out his chest with pride.

"Your ’help’ was unnecessary. I was about to Blink, but your meddling ruined my plan. If Yozmogh had started shaking his head in pain, no exit point would have been safe."

"You welcome." Ratpack didn’t budge.

Chapter 553 Bloody Revenge Part 2

Lith looked at his clock. There was still half an hour before the Wardens sent by the army would start tearing down the underground complex. He had no intention of calling off the attack. Not until he was sure that the orc shaman was no more.

"Can you turn off the device?" Lith asked Ratpack while pointing at the amplifier.

"No. We must wait for master."

Lith cursed his bad luck and used Clean Slate on the barrier surrounding the amplifier to no avail. The spell required physical contact to work and the paranoid lich had shielded his creation on purpose.

Invigoration too worked in a similar way, so that Lith's only way to pass time was to study the pseudo core of the various barriers around the lab, hoping that Solus could reproduce them to improve her tower form's defenses.

Zolgrish and Dann'Kah were locked in a deadly embrace. None of them could allow to let go of the other because the undead energies kept moving back and forth from their bodies.

Choosing the wrong moment to push away the opponent would have meant to lose all hope of regaining their freedom. The lich would end up being trapped inside a body even inferior to that of a skeleton forever, while the orc shaman would have been reverted to his fallen state.

To add insult to injury, he would be crushed under the weight of his magic crystal and be defeated without even getting a chance to fight back.

He was able to keep the crystal compressed in the form of a ring only thanks to the undead energies coursing through his body. They restored the powers his bloodline possessed before the fall and granted him the lich's inhuman strength.

Even if it appeared small, the ring actually weighed over a hundred kilograms, something he couldn't lift with just one finger in his orc form. The tug of war of sheer willpower was quite balanced.

The orc-elf drew his strength from the grudge he held against the lich and from the echoes of the past shamans inhabiting his ring. The moment they perceived the lich's mind, they stopped harassing Dann'Kah and joined his efforts, having mistaken Zolgrish for a member of the dreaded demon race.

Despite his current madness, Zolgrish had the indomitable will of all those who had not only sacrificed most of their humanity to achieve lichhood, but also had survived the excruciating pain that severing part of their soul and mana core involved.

He had the home advantage as well, since it was his body that the undead energies were supposed to inhabit. Unfortunately, the long imprisonment the lich had undergone and the support the magic crystal gave Dann'Kah were enough to even the field.

"I knew I should have never bestowed upon you such a huge crystal, you ungrateful dog! Without me, you would be no better than a wild beast, only worried about your survival!" The lich said.

"Without you, I would still have my tribe and my dreams. You slaughtered them all for your experiments and enslaved me! Yours are no gifts, but curses." Dann'Kah rebuked.

Zolgrish had Warped them to the Disciplining Hall, where he had killed Dann'Kah over and over again to break him into submission. He hoped that both his words and the dreadful memories linked to such a place would give him an edge.

Yet the orc-elf didn't flinch. Contrary to Zolgrish's expectations, his maneuver backfired.

Up until that moment, the lich's will had been like a black fog, slowly engulfing everything on its path, whereas the orc's had been like a fire fueled by his hatred that consumed the darkness on its wake.

Now the fire in Dann'Kah's mind became a focused jet stream of flames that pierced the black fog, forcing Zolgrish on his knees. Dann'Kah could feel the undead energies abandoning the lich and submitting to their new master.

"You're finished old man. You'll spend the rest of your eternal life as a slave in my mines!" Dann'Kah cast the tier three darkness spell Corrosion. It conjured a thin fog that consumed what little was left of Zolgrish's body to finish him off.

"Am I?" Zolgrish replied with a smug voice.

Using magic required focus, focus that Dann'Kah had to withdraw from their battle of will, leaving himself exposed. The black fog which represented the lich's dominance let the orc's fire pass, attacking it from the sides and the back.

Dann'Kah lost control over the undead energy as well as over his spell, which faded into nothingness.

"No matter the form you take, an idiot will always be an idiot." Zolgrish was now dressed in a luxurious golden mage robe. His face would have been mistaken for a human's if not for the red light of undeath burning in his eyes instead of pupils.

To look like a skeleton, a rotting corpse, or exactly as they were on the moment of their death, it was just a matter of choice for a lich.

"Rage by itself it's useless. I knew that if I'd have you worked up enough, you'd do something stupid. Once you get an edge, you have to consolidate it, like this!" Zolgrish was aware that it was only a matter of time before Dann'Kah recovered.

He had only a few seconds left before they went back to a stalemate. So, instead of wasting focus casting a spell he couldn't control, he used it to grip the orc's finger strong enough to take off the ring and throw it away.

Suddenly Dann'Kah was alone and much weaker. Without the crystal, he couldn't draw upon the world energy to heal from the wounds that the lich's deadly touch inflicted upon him, nor he could use his ancestors' will to reinforce his own.

"I need no crystal!" Dann'Kah said. Just like Zolgrish had done a second ago, now it was his turn to retrieve most of the undead energy.

His rage burned stronger for having fallen for the lich's trickery and allowed him to push the black fog back. A crown made of world energy materialized above his head and his grip grew in strength to the point of cracking the lich's fingers.

Zolgrish inwardly cursed his bad luck. Apparently, what his unwilling assistant lacked in cunning, he made up with fury.

Lith had just finished studying the pseudo core of all the lich's creations he could put his hands on when a Warp Steps opened right in the middle of the lab.

The humanoid figure who stepped out of it was that of a tall man with pointy ears wearing a golden magician robe. The world energy accumulated inside his body formed a crown of pure mana above his head and made his skin shine like the god of light had descended among men.

"Dann'Kah defeated master! Every undead for himself." Ratpack had prudently remained near the door and so had Lith. Yet while the small creature bolted away, Lith stood still with a Warp Steps at the ready.

There was something odd in the orc shaman's energy signature.

"Zelda! It's so nice to see you defeated that treacherous Balor. I was going to thank Ratpack too, but that idiot ruined the moment. Again." The lich sighed.

Lith wasn't upset by Zolgrish not remembering his name right not even once, as much as worried by the inexorable ticking of time.

Chapter 554 Utter Failure Part 1

"Pointy ears, shining skin. Were you really an elf when you were alive?" Lith asked. Less than twenty minutes remained before the army brought down the house, yet while dealing with a deranged immortal, he needed tact and opportunity to break the bad news.

That or a timely escape pretending to not know anything about what was happening. Lith had to play it by ear.

"What? Gods, no. It would make me a self righteous jerk. This is just a side effect of draining so many pseudo elves. It will fade in due time. I am, or better, I was human." Zolgrish walked to the device, dispelling the barrier which enveloped it with a wave of his hand.

Then, he needed a short chant to turn it off and a longer one to make the spells imbued inside the adamant ring go haywire and destroy the artifact. Once a forgemastering process was complete, it couldn't be redone.

Yozmogh and Dann'Kah had corrupted the amplifier forever, Zolgrish had no way to amend their tampering. The artifact's destruction freed the souls trapped inside the spheres of smoke which were orbiting around it, waiting to be provided with new bodies.

Each one of them released a small pillar of light that shot toward the sky, filling the lab's stale air with a feeling of joy. Lith instinctively released Death Vision to watch at the scene unfolding in front of him.

In his eyes, the space occupied by the amplifier looked like a black hole collapsing on itself. Without its constant pull, the souls of the creatures imprisoned within the underground complex were released.

At first, only a few managed to leave, but as the black hole disappeared, more and more souls escaped its grasp until a hail of shooting stars almost blinded Lith. Yet he had no time to appreciate the light show, nor to wonder why he could feel the souls' fleeting emotions whereas Solus couldn't.

His eyes were fixated on Zolgrish, who under the effect of Death Vision died several times in the space of a few seconds, but always in the same way. His body would revert into a cracked skeleton before it turned to dust.

Just like the Duchess back at Jirni's birthday party.

'Fuck me sideways! That woman was a lich too. That must be what happens when you break their phylactery. The only question remaining is if the Royals are aware of the Duchess' real identity and if so, how they deal with the undead nobles under their rule.' Lith thought.

"This is a disaster." Zolgrish sighed.

"Without Dann'Kah and Yozmogh I can't make another amplifier. I wasted years to build this place, more years to equip it with all the instruments I needed, and decades to make that goddamn thing!

"It's the biggest failure of my career." His rage was almost tangible and the mana currents he was emitting were so violent that Death Vision stopped showing his demise.

"To make matters even worse, those horny monkeys and their raids have given away the lab's position. Even if they didn't, only someone dumb, blind, and deaf could miss all those fireworks. I need to get out of here."

Zolgrish restored his lab's power, making Life Vision and mana sense useless once again.

"About my payment..." Lith didn't like the sudden turns of events. The lich was in a hurry, turning lots of levers and pressing even more buttons on the various holographic panels which appeared above the various Forges.

The amount of mana in the air was getting thicker by the second, making Lith's skin crawl.

"Yes, yes. I haven't forgotten. Usually I would give you a tour of my treasury and let you pick a reward of your choice within reason. Unfortunately, I don't have much time. You are a Ranger, right?" Zolgrish asked.

Lith nodded in reply. If even Ratpack recognized his uniform, deranged or not, Zolgrish was bound to be able to do the math.

"That means the whole army knows about this place. They will raid this place in hours whereas I would need months to take everything away with me.

"I'm weakened and almost out of mana. A few hits would be enough to destroy my physical form, and after being away from my phylactery for so long, I don't know how much time it would take me to be back at full strength.

"Rather than being robbed blind, I prefer destroying everything myself!" The determination in his voice didn't leave space for debate.

"What about me?" Lith refused to change the topic.

"Oh, yes." Zolgrish pushed another button and the holographic interface turned from bright blue to a blinking deep red.

"You can keep whatever you took on your way to save me, plus I want you to have this." A clap of his hands made a mint condition Forge appear in the middle of the room.

"It's the only unspoiled one left and after collecting my most precious belongings I have no space left inside my dimensional items to store something so bulky. It would be a waste to destroy it."

"It's pure adamant." Lith put his hand on the massive silvery table, feeling his mana flow through it without encountering any resistance.

"Yes, it is, dear Feron. Now give me the artifacts Yozmogh had on himself. They are the last batch I made with my treacherous assistants and they are priceless. They should be..."

Zolgrish listed them with uncanny memory for someone incapable of getting Lith's name right even once.

'At least Solus got some time to study them. The problem is that aside from the mirror, I have no idea what they do.' Lith thought.

"He also had this." Lith handed the lich the silver sphere. He still considered Clean Slate trash compared to Invigoration.

"My Eraser! That bastard even dared to steal my office supplies. You can keep it. I produce and lose them in bulks. Those little buggers disappear like they have a mind of their own. Now you better go. The whole place will blow up in less than a minute."

Lith stored the adamant Forge and Warped away. Only then did he allow himself to smile. He had given Zolgrish all of the artifacts he had listed, but Yozmogh had actually more.

'I would have returned the mirror and the sphere anyway. Ratpack witnessed Yozmogh using them. I couldn't afford being ratted out and then living watching my back from Zolgrish.

'Now I have a purple crystal, a lot of ingredients the dryads gifted me, and an adamant forge! I have all the necessary to craft a masterpiece!' Lith thought.

'Yeah, too bad we have no idea what to create.' Solus pointed out. 'Either we get the blueprints for something worth using such treasures, or you need to stop for a few years to devise one of our own and do some tests. We have only one block of adamant, after all.'

Lith was about to rebuke something about an improved version of the Gatekeeper when his military communication amulet drew his attention.

"Ranger Verhen, do you copy?" The hologram of Brigadier General Vorgh appeared.

"Sir, what are you doing here?" Lith asked.

"We lost your signal about half an hour ago, so your handler sent the Wardens to check the situation."

'The timing matches with the ambush. Probably the lab's shields blocked the external interferences.' Lith thought.

"They found a small army waiting for them and almost got killed. Where are you right now?"

"Outside the complex, why?" Lith said.

Vorgh's answer was covered by the rumbling sound of an earthquake which made part of the Broken Spine sink several hundred meters below the ground level.

Chapter 555 Utter Failure Part 2

'That was way less than a minute! It doesn't make sense, if Zolgrish wanted to kill me he could have just tried to tamper with my Warp.' Lith thought.

"Good gods! I have been ordered to make the arrays collapse and kill all of the monsters inside, but not like this!" Vorgh said.

"A whole ancient lab, centuries of knowledge. All lost forever! What the heck happened down there?"

"I have no clue." Lith lied through his teeth.

"After defeating the leader of the Balors, I had no strength left to fight the orc shaman. Between his powerful purple crystal, his mutated minions, and their magical weaponry I had no chance by myself."

"A shaman with a purple crystal?" Vorgh said.

"Was he tampering with the arrays?"

"I don't know. I was too busy saving my skin. All I know is that he was using his crystal to seize control of the facility." Lith replied.

"Dammit! Why didn't you tell us earlier? My spell and his meddling must have triggered a domino effect. Now there is nothing we can salvage."

"With all due respect, sir, I stated in my earlier report that there was a shaman. I didn't know about the crystal until I saw it with my own eyes and as you said yourself, my amulet was blocked." Lith didn't like the allegations implied in the Brigadier General's voice.

He was right, of course, but that didn't make them any more pleasant.

"You are really lucky, son. Had I not waited to hear from you before activating my array, you would have died along with the monsters. We can't afford to have a nest so close to the borders. Especially one full of well armed mutants."

Vorgh sighed. Lith's doctored version of the story made sense, but the General wasn't going to apologize. The high command would hold him responsible for the loss of the lab and fry his ass. Being nice was the last thing on his mind.

Lith gave him a salute and hung up before calling his handler for a full report. Even though it was already night-time, Kamila replied immediately. After returning home from work, she didn't change her clothes in case something happened, so she was still wearing her uniform.

Her relief hearing Lith was alright didn't last long. After all that time, she was used to hearing him casually talk about risking his life in battle, but when he told her about the lab's collapse, Kamila went pale and almost dropped the communicator.

She called him from her civilian amulet the moment Lith was done with his report.

"Those idiots! When I lost your signal, I asked for reinforcements to check your status, not to have you killed. Thank the gods nothing happened." She said.

"Don't worry, you just followed procedure. None of what happened is your fault. The worst thing is that I succeeded in protecting Jambel, but recovering the lab was an utter failure. No leave for me this time." Lith sighed.

Lith had gained quite some loot from the mission, but he had nothing to offer the Griffon Kingdom. Before revealing the existence of the silver mines, he wanted to check if he was entitled to a share of them or just get a thank you handshake.

Even that was a longshot, since the destruction of the underground complex had probably scattered the silver veins everywhere. Recovering some of it from the debris might turn out to be even more difficult than finding a new vein.

"About that, there's already a new assignment waiting for you tomorrow." Kamila was depressed too. She had hoped they would have some time to spend together since there were many things that she wanted to share with him.

"At least tell me it's a routine job." Lith said.

"I don't want to jinx it, so I'll just tell you what I read. A local noble, Viscount Krame has hired an entire adventurers guild, allegedly to protect his household and properties during the winter lockdown.

"The city lord called the army a week ago, saying that Krame was using his private army to harass the citizens of Zantia and ignoring the local constables. We haven't heard from him since then, so it's up to you to go check on the situation."

"Great! A 'normal' case again. With my luck, this Krame is trying to resurrect an ancient god, or maybe an Abomination has replaced him and is building an army of greater undead." Lith said.

His ridiculous scenarios made her giggle, at least until she remembered Thrud's scheme, the Black Star, and suddenly they didn't seem so far fetched anymore.

"Wouldn't you like to talk about something more cheerful?" She said while taking off her jacket and letting her hair down.

"Like what? I have yet to report what happened to Lord Wyalon, then I have to find a place to sleep before diving into the next mess this job has in store for me. I even have our big talk waiting for me in Belius.

"You'd find more cheer in a graveyard than in my life."

"Like the fact that my first day as a field assistant went great." She replied with a smile.

"Oh, shit! Sorry Kami, I completely forgot..."

"Or about the fact that I keep practicing my cooking." Kamila cut him short. She had risked losing him too many times in a single day to care about such a small matter.

'I work from nine to five and then return to the safety of my own home, whereas Lith is on a deadly clock 24/7.' She thought.

"Gods, I'm all sweaty from the stress. Let me take a quick shower and then I'll call you back."

"No need, I want to hear everything about your first day on the job. I'll gladly keep you company." Lith said after making sure that he was completely alone.

"Did you miss me so much or are you just a pervert?" Yet she didn't wait for his answer before bringing the amulet with her in the bathroom as she undressed.

The following day, city of Xylita

Going back to her hometown was never easy for Kamila. Thanks to its flourishing commerce, Xylita was the smallest city in the Kellar region to have a Warp Gate. It was far from being a metropolis and it was resistant to changes as well as its inhabitants.

Kamila had many memories from the time she lived there, but none happy. She would return solely to visit her sister, Zinya, and it wasn't an easy feat. The two sisters loved each other, but Zinya's marriage crippled her more than her blindness ever could.

Her husband, Fallmug, forbade her any social relationship without his supervision. He considered Zinya a clumsy, useless thing. Her helplessness was cute in the bedchamber or as long as she sat still, like the pretty flower she was.

Fallmug couldn't bear the thought of his wife bringing him shame with her disability, or even worse, pity. His business rivals had spread many rumors about why he had chosen a blind woman for wife and each one was rude at best.

Ever since Kamila had disowned her family, he had forbidden her from setting foot in his home.

The two sisters could only meet during Zinya's birthday. On every other day, Kamila needed to bribe the house staff or wait for a letter from her sister to casually mention an event she would attend so that they could casually meet.

This time, however, things were different.

Chapter 556 Patience of the Weak Part 1

Zinya's house was a two story building, in the middle rim of Xylita. Her husband came from a family of merchants that had been on the rise during the past decade. Kamila shivered at the thought it could have been her living there.

To bind the Sarta and the Retta households by blood, her parents had offered the young Fallmug his choice of their daughters to be his bride. Back then, she was still obedient and naïve.

Only after seeing her sister's misery had Kamila found the strength to rebel against the fate her parents had set for her and joined the army to escape from the marriage they had arranged for her.

Fallmug had picked Zinya because she was prettier than Kamila and also because back then Kamila was too young. In his eyes, there was no point in having a toy if he had to wait a couple of years to play with it.

Kamila steeled herself, trying not to think about the lust filled glances Fallmug would give her whenever they met or his creepy remarks about regretting his past choices.

She knocked on the solid wood door and waited. Vylna, one of the housemaids, opened the door. Her countenance went from surprise to contempt in the space of a single moment when she recognized Kamila.

With her pretty face and curvy body, she was currently her master's favorite, making her more powerful than the lady of the house. In her eyes, Kamila was just an outcast from whom she could make some pocket money from time to time.

"You're not welcome here. Please leave, or I'll call the guards." Vylna said when she noticed that Kamila wasn't handing her the usual two silver coins. Vylna wouldn't risk her master's anger for a smaller sum than what a Lieutenant made in a week.

Kamila grabbed the door's edge, blocking it with ease. She was weak for a soldier, but she had always kept herself in shape, whereas Vylna was just weak.

"Good morning. I'm Lieutenant Kamila Yehval, Field Assistant Constable. I'm here because we have received an anonymous report of domestic abuse. I need to speak with Lady Sarta." Kamila shoved her badge in the housemaid's face and rejoiced seeing her going pale.

"Master Fallmug doesn't want you in here, badge or not." Vylna stuttered.

"You can't come inside without a warrant and I doubt there is any report. You're just making it up!"

Yet she was wrong. Kamila had written it herself and submitted it diligently following protocol. For once, the inescapable tendrils of bureaucracy were on her side.

"Your unwillingness to cooperate with the investigation forces me to ask for a search warrant. I'm sure mister Sarta will be grateful to you when his house is turned upside down by the officers. I wonder what the neighbors will say, though."

Kamila took out her army amulet and called the local authorities with a voice so loud that many people stepped out of their doors to see what was happening.

"Please stop, miss Yehval. You can come inside." Vylna grabbed her hand as fear quickly turned into panic.

Having a Constable at the door was already bad for the Sarta, getting their house searched like they were petty criminals, might ruin their reputation and business. Fallmug would flay her alive if he lost even a copper coin because of her.

"It's Constable Yehval to you." Kamila broke Vylna's grip, her voice oozed poison. She was seconds away from slapping the maid's face, but she held her temper unwilling to taint what her uniform stood for by abusing her powers.

"Touch me again, and I'll arrest you for assaulting an officer."

Vylna seemed to shrink. She lowered her head, incapable of looking Kamila in the eyes anymore, and turned around to show her the way. Just like Xylita, the house hadn't changed.

The floor and the walls of the house were covered by deep brown wood briquettes, giving it a warm appearance of hospitality. The hallway was filled with portraits of smiling members of the Sarta family.

There was even one of Zinya with her husband and their three children. The hypocrisy of it made Kamila want to spit on the precious gold embroidered sky-blue carpet that led from the hallway to the tea room on the ground floor.

Aside from the heavy steps and the voices of the house staff, the place was silent. The walls were pristine, and judging by the many fragile ornaments decorating the furniture along the corridors, the kids weren't faring better than their mother.

'Thank the gods I'm not a mage, otherwise not even my sense of duty would stop me from destroying this accursed place all the way down to its foundations.' Kamila thought.

Her rage peaked when Vylna used a key to unlock the tea room's door.

"I see the claims were accurate. Lady Sarta is prisoner in her own home." From the moment Kamila had stepped through the door, she had never stopped typing on the holographic interface of her amulet nor taking pictures.

"It's not like you think. Our poor lady is blind. We do it for her own protection." Vylna said with a quivering voice.

"It's exactly as I think. Now leave us alone." Kamila took the key from her hand, just in case, and pushed her out of the room before locking it from the inside. Just like the rest of the house, the tea room was pristine.

The white sofas and armchairs looked like they had never been used. The center of the hardwood table in the middle of the room had been carved out and replaced by a crystal slab.

Several vases containing fresh flowers were gracefully arranged around the room along with white cotton doilies. Zinya was sitting on a chair near the glass paneled east wall, as if she was looking at the outside.

She was so still that with her light brown hair, pale complexion and immaculate yellow day dress, she almost looked like a doll.

"Zin, are you alright?" Kamila was sick with worry, but she only spoke after activating the Silencer, a magical device that prevented them from being eavesdropped on.

"Kami?" Zinya turned around following her voice, breaking into a smile.

"I thought my ears were playing a trick on me. What are you doing here?"

Kamila rushed to hug her sister as small tears streamed down her face.

"Gods, I've missed you so much. Why are you so pale? Is something wrong?"

"The Healer says it's just depression. Since the children left the house, I feel very lonely." Zinya replied.

"What happened to them?" Kamila's voice was filled with concern. The oldest one was almost ten years old, so she could have been sent to a boarding school, but the other two were too young for that.

"Business isn't doing good, so Fallmug is often in a bad mood. I know how to be quiet, but the children scream and run a lot when they play. So their grandmother took them with her to avoid further... accidents. You have yet to answer my question, Kami."

"I'm here for your eyes." Kamila said almost choking on her rage.

"Thanks to my new job, I can now afford to get you cured. I can't bear to see you like this any longer. You deserve a better life, and I know someone that can help us with that."

Chapter 557 Patience of the Weak Part 2

"Are you talking about your new boyfriend? You two are the talk of the entire family. Mother always tries to convince me to change your mind about helping the family business. Fallmug too." Zinya said.

"Did that bastard dare to touch you?" Kamila unconsciously took out a lightning wand from her dimensional amulet, wishing Fallmug would give her a reason to use it.

"Of course not." She shook her head.

"He considers me like a property, and as long as I behave, he takes care of me. Isn't it nice of him to buy so many flowers for me? Between the sunlight from the window and their sweet scent, it's like being in a park."

"Yes, it's my boyfriend. He can give you sight if you allow me to bring him here." Kamila said, glossing over Fallmug's character.

"Why did you say 'afford', then?" Zinya asked.

"Because the procedure costs a lot. I can't ask something like that of him and expect that it wouldn't weigh on our relationship. Between the gaps in age, social status, and career, I still have no clue how we ended up together.

"I can't let money tip the scales even further. It would make me feel indebted to him and if things ever go sour between us, I'll never know if I would be staying with him because I cared or just out of guilt."

"Oh, my." Zinya chuckled. "You put a lot of thought into it. You are still determined not to marry, I see."

"I did because you are the only family I have left. As for not marrying, you're wrong, you're wrong. What I'm determined about, is to not become dependent on anyone. I'll pay for your treatment with my own money, because you are my sister.

"And if I stay with him it will be because I want to, not because I have to. I prefer owning a bank some money than him your life. Some debts can never be repaid."

"All more the reason for me not to undergo the treatment, Kami. I'm sorry you came here for nothing." Zinya released her sister from the embrace and sat down again.

"What do you mean? The last time you said you wouldn't do it because of its price. Now I can afford it. Even if I don't become a Royal Constable, as a field assistant I can pay the debt in a few years. What made you change your mind?"

"I never changed my mind, I simply lied to you because it made things easier." Zinya wiped the tear she didn't manage to hold back.

"I know how it works, I've spoken to countless Healers. Back when business was good, Fallmug wanted to heal me to save himself to further embarrassment and be free to parade me around like the trophy wife I am. Yet I said no, even to him.

"If something goes wrong while altering the life force, I could end up worse than just blind. I could become also deaf, if not mentally ill. I don't want to risk losing the little I have to live for.

"If I couldn't even hear or feel you and my children, then I'd really become nothing more than a baby-making doll! I'm afraid, Kami. I'm terrified of what could happen to me after the procedure."

"Lith is one of the five best Healers of the Kingdom, he is even able to use rejuvenation magic. The god of healing himself respects him, and believe me, that alone is an inhumane feat. Manohar doesn't even respect the Royals." Kamila said.

"Your condition gets cured every day by far less competent Healers. There's no need to be afraid."

"Quite the contrary." Zinya shook her head. "If he succeeds, things will get worse anyway. My blindness is the reason why I can accept living this life. Without hope for a better future, Fallmug's is a decent husband.

"His constant cheating on me, how he treats the children, everything I can't see I can pretend never happens. It makes this cage bearable. If I'm cured, I could never tolerate this situation."

"Then get cured and ask for a divorce!" Kamila blurted out, obtaining only more denial in response.

"And where would I live? Our family would disown me like they did you. What would happen to my children? No Constable would entrust them to a penniless mother. I have no house, no job, no skills."

"If you report the domestic abuse, you can get custody. You can all live with me, in my house." Kamila said.

"What can I report? I'm blind. What I hear and think happened has no value in a court of justice and the house staff would back Fallmug. Even if somehow, I did get custody, how could I ask you to pay for everything on top of your debt?

"Kami, face reality. Could you really afford to support four more people with just one income? According to the Healers I've consulted, it would take me months just to be able to distinguish between colors, give a name to everything I see, or learn how to write and read.

"How could I ask you to burden yourself with all of those things on top of your debt? I'm already old and you're not getting any younger. You'd lose any chance of making a life of your own.

"My life isn't good, Kami, but there are a lot of people that have it worse. Let's drop this subject please." Zinya's voice was calm and composed like they were talking about someone else.

Seeing her sister resigned to live the rest of her life as a property rather than a person, realizing how useless all of her efforts and sacrifices to become a Constable had been, Kamila Yehval felt as lost as the day she walked into the army's recruitment center.

Back then, she was a homeless orphan with nothing but her first name and the clothes she wore as her possessions. Over ten years had passed, yet her helplessness hadn't changed.

The same day, city of Jambel

"What do you mean, failure?" Baron Wyalon couldn't believe his own ears and neither could all the people he had assembled for the celebratory banquet he had organized in Lith's honor.

"You solved the problem with the monster nest in one day! One thousand enemies gone from dawn to dusk. What could you possibly do better?"

"The nest was actually an ancient lab." Lith tried to explain. "The Kingdom could have learned a lot from it, maybe even have salvaged some of its master's wisdom." Lith kept a straight face, but he shuddered at the thought of Zolgrish's madness spreading.

"I call bullshit!" The Baron said, causing all the noble ladies in attendance to gasp at his rudeness his wife to give him an evil eye rivaling that of a Balor.

"It's easy talking big when you are the one who risked his neck to explore the place and find the creatures. I feel much safer knowing that no idiot mage can dig more trouble out of the Broken Spine. A mage's lab is as twisted as his mind. No offense."

He said after realizing who he was speaking with.

"None taken." Lith replied. He would have really liked to avoid attending the banquet, but the Baron was a good man and his report was worth much more than General Vorgh's grievances.

Chapter 558 Troubling Dead Part 1

"I read about you, lad. You are an overachiever." The Baron said.

"In life, especially in marriage, you have to slack off from time to time, or your missus will set the bar higher and higher. Sometimes it's better to let people down, or they will start taking miracles for granted.

"As for me, I'm plenty satisfied with you solving the crisis without even one of my men dying or my city getting breached. Honestly, I never believed a single Ranger could take on so many monsters alone and I was ready to spend winter in a constant battle of attrition with them.

"The army will only hear praise about you from me. I know there isn't much to see here in Jambel, but feel free to come back here with your girlfriend once spring arrives. You'll always be welcome here."

At those words, Iriel became even paler than she already was and left the table with an excuse. Neither Lith nor the Baron missed how she was all dressed up and had been trying to work up enough courage to speak with Lith for a while.

'Seems the Baron did a thorough job while researching me.' Lith thought.

'He's a strong and smart man. He saved me the bother of turning down his daughter and if he keeps his word, my merits will not be affected too much by the lab's destruction.'

"Thanks, Baron. Kamila is a real explorer. She loves visiting new places, but I usually drag her down. I travel so much that as soon as I get leave the only thing I want to do is sit down and relax." Lith said.

His reply was the last nail in the coffin for Iriel's naïve dream of finding a knight in shining armor. She audibly broke into tears and ran away.

'Of all the nerve!' Solus blurted out at his blatant lie.

'What relax? You don't even sleep at night unless I force you to do so. The only reasons you spend so much time with Kamila is for the 'benefits' and because you're afraid that if you treat her like you did Phloria, she'll leave you too.'

Solus's words stung hard. If it was up to Lith, he would spend almost all of his free time inside the tower conducting experiments, setting everything else aside for later.

Only after Phloria broke up with him did he realize that although they had lived together, practiced together, and trained together during their time at the White Griffon, they had actually spent little time together.

He had been so focused on his work that he had neglected his girlfriend, his friends, and even his family. But whereas his relatives could accept him growing distant with time and wanting space, Phloria became tired of all his silences, absences, and being always a low priority in his life.

She had given up on the hope he would open up first, then on attempting to become a bigger part of his life, and finally on their relationship.

'I wonder how she put up with me for so long.' Lith thought.

'You're right Solus, but where would I be if I didn't work so hard? I've made sacrifices to build a better future for myself. Everything comes at a price, even happiness.'

'You spent your first life loveless until you died alone. I'm not saying what you did was wrong, just that finding someone special is a small miracle. You should treasure such a person, instead of hoping to find another one once she gets tired of your antics.' Solus thought.

Lith mulled over her words all the way to Zantia, his next destination.

He took into account the Baron's teaching, and after calculating that without Solus's tower Warping ability it would take a normal Ranger a full day to cover such distance, he took the rest of the day to study his loot and restore Trouble's body.

Lith had yet to attempt using higher necromancy, mostly because creating a sentient undead was almost like having a child. Even though greater undead were smart and matured fast, they would still start as clean slates, needing parenting and guidance.

Otherwise they would turn into mindless monsters and attempt to destroy their creator. Lith much preferred lesser undead. They were mindless, disposable, and maybe one day they could work as a temporary body for Solus.

He had long since learned how to use necromantic energies to regenerate corpses. Irtu, the Clackers' Queen, and now Trouble were all fine additions to his collection. The Balor's black eye turned out to be capable of absorbing darkness magic like a sponge.

'Even in death, a Balor's eyes are great magical amplifiers for the corresponding element. Why the heck doesn't the army bestiary mention any of this?' Lith thought.

"Maybe to prevent Rangers from poaching. I wouldn't be surprised if your superiors asked you to give them the body. Even though they are monsters, Balors spawn slowly. They are as rare as they are powerful." Solus pondered.

"Fuck! I wouldn't have shown it during my report if I knew it wasn't just a corpse."

"Then they wouldn't have taken you seriously. Without the threat of the lab becoming a Balor's spawning ground they would have not sent reinforcements so when the lab exploded, you'd have been the fall guy instead of Vorgh." Solus said.

"If you keep everything for yourself, sooner or later someone will get suspicious about your activities. We've gotten away with stealing the purple crystal already. If the army wants the corpse, give it to them. You can't always win."

Lith sighed recognizing the truth in Solus's words. Without the army, he would have never heard about Jambel's crisis. The adamant Forge and the enchanted items he had acquired there were priceless treasures.

"Let's see what happens when I turn a Balor into an undead. I never met a corpse capable of storing so much darkness magic." Lith said.

"What about resting? You haven't had a proper night's sleep in days."

"I've still got a lot of time. I won't go to Zantia until tomorrow and I don't know if I'll get to keep the corpse. If I don't experiment now, I'll never learn anything about Balors."

Solus had many things to object with, but since they were inside the tower, there was nothing that could go wrong. Lith followed all of the steps of true necromancy Kalla had taught him.

He conjured a pseudo blood core made of darkness magic with a spark of light magic at its center. It served as an imprint, to create a bond between the undead and its maker which ensured its loyalty.

The moment the pseudo core touched the corpse, it moved on its own, finding the remnants of the Balor's mana core and using them to spread its essence.

"That never happened before. Solus, control arrays." Lith started weaving several spells, but it was too late. The corpse stood up, looking around the necromancy lab instead of waiting for orders like a common lesser undead.

To make matters worse, the red light of undeath which usually animated Lith's minions, was replaced by a blazing violet light.

"Red is for auto pilot, blue when you possess them. What's violet?" Solus asked.

"Beats me." Lith replied as he tried to move the undead at will. He could feel his mind resonate with the spark of light in the pseudo blood core. The orders arrived, yet there was a resistance, like a second will battling for control.

Chapter 559 Troubling Dead Part 2

Or so Lith thought for a couple of seconds, before the creature started moving around obediently like it was supposed to.

"Something is wrong. I'm not using tendrils of mana to fuel it since it's an experiment, but I can feel it getting stronger. Solus?"

"It's the eye! Or better, the eyes! Even as undead, they can gather world energy. The black one, in particular, has formed a mana pool with a strength on par with a red core already and it keeps getting stronger."

"Ma-master." Trouble stuttered, giving Lith the creeps.

"Shut it down!" Solus said.

"I'm trying!" Both his attempts to retrieve the undead energies and to possess the Balor's body to crush the pseudo core from within had failed. Lith didn't care if the thing called him master, lord, or hubby.

He didn't trust anything he couldn't control.

"I have no master!" The creature roared. By receiving a constant supply of darkness element from the black eye, the pseudo core was becoming more stable, independent from Lith's energy flow.

The red eye lit up, emitting a tiny jet of fire like it was a gaslighter.

"He has retained his skills!" Solus and Lith said in unison, although the former with worry and the latter with joy.

"There's nothing to be happy about! Given time, he will gather enough mana to use his real powers, and if we destroy the body you'll end up in trouble with the army." Solus said as she activated her defensive arrays.

A force field trapped the Balor, forcing him to his knees.

"You worry too much." Lith walked toward the undead, his right hand extended toward the location of the pseudo core. The closer he got, the stronger his hold over his own mana became.

Trouble crawled back until he hit the force field, then he lashed out, emitting a black pillar against Lith, who took it in head-on. The darkness magic passed through him like it was just colored light. Even the tower's walls came out unscathed.

"Whatever is happening, while this thing runs on my mana, it can only hurt me physically. I'm not stupid enough to use a perfect pseudo blood core for an experiment.

"I gave it barely enough strength to walk." Lith explained to the surprised Solus.

Trouble snarled one last time, before collapsing on the ground.

"Now what?" Lith asked. The undead was back to being a corpse. It had no life force nor mana flow anymore.

"He used all the energy he had, even his pseudo core." Solus said.

"This is great! If we can understand what happened, I can build a small army of elite soldiers with powerful abilities."

"Soldiers that will revolt against you." Solus sneered. "That thing had a will of its own, his life force was growing on top of yours."

"It would explain the purple light." Lith pondered. "Red is for the natural state, blue when an external will flows into an undead. The question is: what was the source of the external will?"

"The eye? After all, they are the core of a Balor's power. Maybe the black eye amplified your spell to the point of turning it into greater necromancy." Solus said.

Lith surgically removed and stored it inside his pocket dimension before making a second attempt. This time, despite all of his efforts and mastery, the pseudo core was unable to take root. The corpse straight rejected it.

"Let me guess, since Balors cannot process mana without their eyes I can't resurrect it after removing the black eye." Lith said.

"It makes sense." Solus's wisp nodded.

"Yozmogh had six eyes, while Trouble only had three. According to the bestiary, the remaining three are fused with Trouble's body. To test this theory, we need a Balor without the black eye.

"If we can raise it normally, then we are one step closer to fulfilling your crazy plan of making an undead army. Otherwise, back to square one."

"Yeah, tomorrow I'll buy a Balor at the market and we'll test your theory." Lith said while putting the eye back into the empty socket. Even his sarcasm couldn't hide that the idea of losing Trouble's body pained him.

Even if everything failed and Balors turned out to be impossible to reanimate as undead, it would still give him more insight into necromancy. After discarding vampires and liches as possible ways to escape from his resurrection cycle, Lith needed something new.

"Guess we'll never know." Solus sighed. They were both aware that conducting a series of experiments to uncover an unknown phenomenon required time and effort. Unfortunately, they only had a few hours before they had to be at Zantia, and Lith was tired.

Solus put Trouble's corpse inside her pocket dimension, making sure that no trace of life nor undeath remained. Trouble was the first enemy they had fought inside her tower from and she had no desire for a second round.

The following day, Lith's mood was even worse. He had remembered how according to Zolgrish, a Balor's eyes were powerful magical amplifiers. Failing an experiment was irrelevant to him.

Back on Earth, his science professors always stressed how many trials and errors were needed before making a breakthrough. Losing his specimen and three amplifiers at once, though, was a loss from which it was hard to recover from.

To add insult to injury, when he had called Kamila, hoping she could cheer him up with one of her smiles, she was in an awful mood too. Lith asked her many times if there was something wrong to no avail.

When he reached Zantia's walls, Lith was itching for a fight. It was a medium sized city, famous for being surrounded by a luscious forest where it was possible to find several rare mystical plants.

Many magical beasts resided there, keeping bandits and monsters alike at bay. Zantia was one of the few cities in the north to have not faced a monster wave in decades.

Unfortunately, the forest was both a blessing and a curse. As long as they weren't provoked, magical beasts were peaceful but the same couldn't be said for some aggressive species of plants that kept growing no matter how many times they were burnt, cut, or destroyed with magic.

Even magical beasts were forced to avoid specific areas of the forest. Merchants had a hard time reaching and leaving Zantia in one piece which created a vicious circle. As long as Zantia was cut out of the main trading routes, it would never get a Warp Gate.

At the same time, without a Warp Gate the city would never be added to the main trading routes. None of it was a problem for someone like Lith who was capable of flight.

When the guards at the main gate stopped him, he could already smell trouble. The man and the woman who donned the uniform of the local militia were clearly afraid, and not of him

"Let me pass." Lith said showing them his golden badge.

"I'm Ranger Lith Verhen and I've been called by the city lord, Count Cestor to oversee a matter of public security."

"We're very sorry to have wasted your time, Ranger Verhen." Said the male guard, a man in his early thirties with blond hair and grey eyes.

"You are free to go. The Count has waived your protection since everything has already been resolved." The man handed him a piece of paper with the Count's seal. Lith's surprise only grew when his army amulet confirmed both the document's and the seals' authenticity.

Chapter 560 Hostility Part 1

"Everything seems to be in order, but I can't follow such a command without hearing it directly from Lord Cestor." Lith said while stepping forward.

The two guards crossed their lances in front of him, but he didn't stop.

"Even if the document is in order, I need to make sure it's not forged. Anyone could use the city Lord's seal." Lith was now just a few millimeters from the blades.

"The Count requested the army's help and we've not been able to contact him ever since. Before I can leave, I must speak with him. Stand down and let me pass, because the moment your weapons touch my body you'll be persecuted for treason against the Crown."

Lith's eyes flared up as he released a bit of killing intent. The mental pressure exerted by the mana filled with his violent emotions overwhelmed the guards, who turned pale but only took one step back.

Lith was surprised by their obstinacy. Without proper training or a mana core strong enough, killing intent was more than enough to send normal people running for their lives. Their fear had to be deep rooted to allow them to hold their ground.

"Fine." A wave of Lith's hand generated two streams of lightning bolts which nailed the guards against the city walls. Their bodies trembled in seizure before falling unconscious onto the ground.

Three more guards rushed to the gate after hearing the screams. They were about to unsheathe their weapons when they recognized the Ranger uniform.

"Arrest and detain those two, I want to interrogate them later." Lith said. The shocked soldiers kept moving their eyes from Lith to their companions, never removing their hands from the hilt of their blades.

Their lack of discipline annoyed Lith. He was used to being harassed by the inhabitants of small cities, but even there the local guards knew their place.

"Where is your Sergeant? I want to give him a piece of my mind about how he trains his soldiers." Lith said.

"You just knocked him out, Sir." Replied one of the guards after snapping out of his reverie.

"What happened?"

Lith explained the reason of his coming and his need for meeting the Count Cestor.

"I understand, Sir. I apologize on behalf of the Sergeant. I can assure you he is a good man. It's just that these days we are all jumpy." The soldier replied. He was a young man in his early twenties, with light brown hair and blue eyes.

"My name is Firgon Heklas. Nice to meet you, Sir." He said while giving Lith a salute. The other two took care of the injured guards before cuffing and move them to the nearest jail.

"What reason could possibly lead your comrades to commit such blatant insubordination?"

Firgon led Lith to the city Lord's mansion while explaining to him the details about Zantia's recent events.

"Please, don't be too harsh on them. Their families are going through a tough time. Not only is this winter really harsh, but a lot of people are falling ill. Healers are powerless against the disease and many of the relatives of its victims have joined a shady cult that claims to be able to treat any illness." Firgon said.

"Are you saying there is a plague here in Zantia?"

"Not a plague." Firgon shook his head.

"Technically, it's not even a disease. Every person displays different symptoms, so we don't even know if they are all suffering from the same thing, and it never lasts long. The problem is that after some time people get sick again, like it never heals. We call it: 'the Griever'."

"What about your Healers?" Lith found the story ridiculous. Illnesses and even poisons acted all the same. Someone poisoning several different people each with a different substance was as cruel as it was idiotic.

"They have confirmed it's not poisoning, but an affliction of the body. They can cure it, but it only makes things worse. Whenever the disease gets removed, it returns almost immediately stronger than before." Firgon replied.

"I can sympathize with them. One of my sisters has been ill for a long time, but that still doesn't explain your sergeant's odd behavior."

"I'm afraid it's because of the Church of the Six." Firgon sighed.

"Life in the north is harsh, so a lot of religions are born and die every year. They try to give people hope about the afterlife, but usually their absurd dogmas are just a cover to rob believers of their money.

"The Church of the Six is different for two reasons. First, they don't ask for 'donations' for everything, and second, whatever they do, it works. Or so they say. Some of them get rich, others get healed, and stuff like that.

"People whose relatives got the Griever became fanatics after word got out that the clerics can cure it for good. The bastards only treat the most loyal worshippers, though."

"I've traveled quite a lot and have never heard about either the Church of the Six or the Griever." Lith pondered.

"It's not a surprise. The Church was founded only last year and it would have already disappeared if not for the Griever."

"Let me guess, your Sergeant is a believer." Lith said.

"Yeah, a big one. He recently became a father, and there's nothing he wouldn't do to spare his son from all that suffering. His wife's hair is turning white from the fear."

"When did the Griever appeared?"

"Right after the winter lockdown started. The worst stuff always happens during that period. Bad luck loves company."

Lith nodded and decided to let the Sergeant off the hook. The man was already suffering enough.

'I doubt the Griever is a real illness. Most likely his son is terminally ill. If I accuse him of treason, he will lose his job, his life, and the little time they have left together.' Lith thought.

'Why don't you cure the baby? It shouldn't be difficult for you.' Solus thought.

'I sympathize with him, but that doesn't mean I care for him or his son. Especially after he pointed a blade at me. He made his choice when he preferred listening to a cleric rather than ask a Healer for help.'

After another few questions about the situation of Zantia, they reached Count Cestor's House. The city Lord was a short man in his mid fifties, around 1.62 meters (5'4") tall with white hair and thin mustaches.

The Count was sickly pale, far more than what passed for normal in the north, with bloodshot eyes and so many nervous tics that Lith suspected him of drug abuse.

"I'm really sorry to have wasted your time, Ranger Verhen, but as the guards told you at the city gates, our issues are already solved. I'm sure there are plenty of cities that need your help." His voice was firm, yet it sounded old and tired like he hadn't sleep in days.

"Why you didn't just cancel your request? We've tried to contact you for several days."

"Because I've seen the light, Ranger Verhen. Magic is the sad attempt of men to play god. Our arrogance has long since blinded us and angered the real gods. Only by relinquishing it can we pray to receive their mercy."

Lith was tempted to give the man a soapbox and a "the end is near" t-shirt as the Count looked at him with the ill-concealed contempt a self-righteous man usually reserved for a nonbeliever.