

Supreme M 561

Chapter 561 Hostility Part 2

"Sure, right. I'd love to hear more, but alas I'm a busy man." Lith's tone was as condescending as it was full of sarcasm. He took out the army amulet from his pocket dimension, suppressing a chuckle when the Count yelped at the sight of it.

Lith reported everything to his handler, then he had her confirm the Count's well being and record his request for canceling the mission.

"I need you to state the reason why you requested the army's intervention in the first place for the record." Kamila said.

"Because Viscount Krame's mercenaries were harassing several upstanding citizens and interfering with their religious freedom, but now everything is resolved. Those sinners have received their retribution."

The Count's fervor put a dent in even Kamila's perfect poker face, making her raise an eyebrow in confusion.

"Do you mean that the local guards dealt with the problem?"

"No, the gods did. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a lot of work to do. When will Ranger Verhen leave? His services are unrequired and his disrespect most unpleasant." The Count asked her, like Lith wasn't even there.

"Right after lunch. Since you have already wasted my time, the least I can do is to get a hot meal and restock my food supplies." Lith left the Count's office, never hanging up the call.

"I've resolved two missions in as many days. I would like to apply for leave due to outstanding performance." He said.

"The second doesn't count since it was canceled, but nice try. If you need any kind of supplies, buy them from the local army store. Merchants inflate their prices during the lockdown, whereas we keep ours fixed."

'How cute of her worrying about my expenses. She seems to be faring much better than yesterday.' Lith thought.

'Yeah, but isn't it odd that she is still your handler after becoming a Field Assistant Constable?' Solus pondered. It didn't make much sense, unless someone was attempting to manipulate their relationship again.

Lith cursed himself for forgetting about her promotion again and called Kamila during her lunch break to make sure everything was fine.

"I was supposed to be replaced after I started my training course, but I asked to continue being your handler. I don't know if it's because of Lady Ernas or Commander Berion, but the central command accepted my request." Kamila said while unpacking her chicken salad.

Having a sedentary job and practicing cooking had made her gain some weight, so she was on a diet. To make matters worse, Lith's training routine gave him his lean muscular build and made her self-conscious about her body.

"Is that why you looked so tired recently? I don't want you to overwork yourself. Starting a new job is already challenging enough, you don't need extra stress." Lith ordered a whole roasted chicken with gravy sauce and potatoes, almost making her drool.

"Don't worry, it's no big deal. This way we can keep in touch even when we are away from each other. Being sure you're alright is worth a little overtime and I can use a little extra money." Kamila needed to save as much as she could for Zinya's procedure.

"I'm glad to still have you as my handler, but most importantly, as my girlfriend. I wish you were here." Lith caressed Kamila's hologram's cheek while she intently stared at his meal. She was already done with her food and yet she was still hungry.

"I got to go. Have a nice meal and remember to tip the waitress." Kamila said when the gong signaled the end of her break. Her hologram disappeared, leaving Lith's full blown paranoia to worry about why she seemed to be on edge the whole time.

'Maybe she is sick of our long distance relationship, or maybe she met someone else. Someone better than me.' Lith had no idea that it had been his meal upsetting her. Kamila couldn't forgive herself for speaking to the chicken the whole time instead of Lith.

"Hey handsome, is this seat taken?" Said a honeyed feminine voice.

Lith was so focused on his alleged troubles with Kamila that he almost choked on his lunch from surprise. Aside from noble girls, no one had hit on him since he had started working as a Ranger.

Without waiting for a reply, the woman sat in front of him while crossing her legs in a slow, seductive way.

"I'm flattered by your attentions, but in case you missed it, I was just talking to my girlf..." Lith looked up from his plate, too dumbfounded to continue his speech.

Aside from Tista, Tyris, and Thrud, it was definitely the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Long silky black hair framed her delicate visage, emphasizing her light chestnut eyes and her fair skin.

Her soft curves and ample bosom were so voluptuous that not even her comfortable adventurer's clothes could hide them more than a passing cloud can eclipse the sun.

"Can you take me to a Healer? Because I just broke my leg falling for you." Lith replied, making her giggle.

A group of adventurers sitting a few tables apart were currently split between those too shocked to speak and those cursing out loud.

"Since when does the Captain have a thing for tall guys? She even rejected Hosung, and he was a giant!" Said a red haired man currently green with envy.

"Who cares! It's the first time I've seen her hitting on someone, let alone laugh at a cheesy pick up line." Said a young woman with light brown hair and her uniform dirty from spilling her wine all over it.

"What the heck are you doing here, Friya?" Lith said while embracing his old friend and causing most of the male customers of the restaurant to choke on their food from resentment.

"I could ask you the same thing. The north is a big place, I didn't expect to meet you so easily." Friya was still giggling at their flirting routine. It was an inside joke between them, from the time they both were Assistant Professors at the White Griffon.

Whenever they met, they would pretend to not know each other and spout the cheesiest lines they could think of. It helped Friya to keep annoying suitors at bay and she usually found the people's reaction to the scene to be hilarious.

"There's only one reason for me being here. They requested my presence. Luckily, I'm already done with my business and I'm about to leave. What about you?"

"I've been here in Zantia for a month. Viscount Krame recruited my whole guild to protect his properties from the local nutjobs." She shrugged.

"No offense but, why you? There are a lot of mercenary guilds in the north too. Finding you here, in my same restaurant can't be just a coincidence."

"There are several reasons for calling me. First, my guild has still a perfect score. Second, having a capable Healer during a lockdown is always a plus. Third, Viscount Krame is one of those stuck up idiots that look down on anyone who isn't a noble for at least three generations.

"There aren't many guilds lead by a noble, also he hopes that by hiring me he will get the opportunity to suck up on my parents, especially dad." Friya said.

"No sane man would approach your mother." Lith still found it odd meeting her like that.

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"Indeed. As for the restaurant, I just kept tabs on you after I heard about a Ranger zapping the guards. I followed you here to surprise you and I accomplished that. Your face was priceless. By the way, do you need help with that?" Friya pointed at his meal.

"Thanks, but no thanks. I'm a firm believer that it takes two to truly appreciate a chicken. The chicken and me." He replied while pulling the plate away from her fork.

"Always the gentleman, eh?" Friya pouted while ordering a smaller portion of what he had taken.

"Speaking of gentlemen, Count Cestor called saying your guild harassed Zantia's citizens and that you've got some kind of divine retribution for it."

"That's rich! We harassed no one. Viscount Krame owns many magical workshops, mostly small stuff like enchanted home appliances and ornaments. Those jerks from the Church of the Six pestered his customers and his employees with their fanatical propaganda.

"We simply kept them away from private property, that's it. As for the 'divine retribution', the children of the Viscount got the Griever, but my guild members are fine." Friya's gurgling stomach forced Lith to share his plate while she waited for her own.

"What can you tell me about the Griever?" Lith's professional curiosity was piqued.

"It's no illness, that's for sure. I suspect it's caused by something in the water, because all three of the Viscount's children presented weakened organs and random damage to the skin, but I never managed to identify what caused the phenomenon.

"Not even after it returned for the third time. Since those noble idiots seems to be unable to follow even the simplest orders, I had to give them a detail 24/7. Playing babysitter means my men can't protect all of the shops anymore, but since we still get paid in full, I'm fine with that."

"I'm sorry to bother you, Captain, but are you not going to introduce us to your new friend?" Said a young woman in her early twenties. She had a pixie cut and a round face.

She could've been considered cute, if not for her thick muscular build and square jaw. Coupled with her fierce eyes, they gave her a cold demeanour, like a disgruntled drill sergeant ready to dish out a punishment.

"He's no friend, Wyra." Friya said with a suave voice, while taking Lith's hand and threading her fingers through his.

"We've decided to marry."

At those words, several mugs of beer shattered on the floor as many members of Friya's guild either dropped them or made them fall by standing up abruptly in disbelief.

Seeing their bewildered expressions, Friya burst out in laughter, shocking them even more. She rarely showed her emotions to them. A mercenary guild was no charity, nor was it like the army. They followed her to make a profit, not because of honor and blind loyalty.

They were all mages from minor academies or had graduated from the great ones yet failed to master any specialization. They were jacks of all trades, but without the means to make a living with magic.

Friya knew they could leave her the moment they received a better offer or if they thought the mission was too risky. She trusted only the core members of her unit and kept the others at arm's length.

"She's joking." Lith said since Friya was still too busy crying from laughter.

"I'm Lith Verhen. Nice to meet you miss Wyra." Lith offered her his hand and she promptly shook it.

"It's an honour to meet you, Sir. You're a beacon of hope for us mages of commoner origin." Wyra blushed while squeezing his hand with enough strength that she would have crushed it if not for Lith's enhanced body.

"Did they send you here for the Griever? Zantia could use a great Healer's expertise." Said the red headed man, making Friya angry.

"Hey, I resent that! I ranked second after him, both overall and in the light department. I'm a great Healer too!" She said while stabbing her chicken with anger.

"No, they didn't. I'm leaving the city after lunch."

After meeting Friya's ten men unit, Lith understood why Quylla didn't trust them to accompany her during her travels. Most of them were either trying to suck up to him or staring at him with envy or contempt.

Only a few, like Wyra, were just trying to befriend him.

'Judging from Friya's expression, some of them are going to get kicked out of the guild as soon as their current mission is over.' Lith thought after paying his bill and offering them a round of drinks.

He tried to push open the door of the restaurant, yet it didn't budge. Only when the hardwood started to creak did it open, but a chilly wind slapped his face and big snowflakes entered the hallway.

"What the heck? Where did this storm come from?" Lith asked the head waiter.

"From the sky, I guess. The weather changes often in the north." The man replied with a condescending tone, like he was talking to an ignorant kid.

Lith ignored the waiter playing captain obvious and closed himself in the bathroom. After checking with Life Vision that no one was inside, he opened a Warp Gate leading as far as he could, using Invigoration to boost the spell's strength.

'This is all too odd. First, they call me here for nothing and send me away despite there being an odd disease spreading. Then I meet Friya and I casually get stuck here because of a sudden snowstorm. Someone is playing with me.' Lith thought.

Yet despite Lith's full blown paranoia, no matter how far the dimensional corridor went, wind and snow would always strike his face with so much strength that it was impossible to see further than three meters.

'You're right. Clearly the sky spirits conspired against you.' Solus chuckled. Yet she checked as far as she could see with mana sense, making sure the storm really was natural. Just to be safe.

'Dammit! This is even worse than I thought. This isn't my first snowstorm, but I always managed to spend them in the tower with you. What am I supposed to do until it blows over?' Lith thought.

'Maybe spend some time with your old friend? Help the people of Zantia with the Griever? You two have a lot of catching up to do.'

Friya was really happy about the snowstorm and offered Lith an accommodation as an honorary member of the Crystal Shield, her adventurers guild. Lith didn't miss that such position would put him under her command, but he accepted anyway.

'The Count is a nutjob. He didn't want me setting foot inside the city, I doubt he would offer me a place to stay. This way I get a room, the opportunity to make up with Friya for not inviting her for my birthday, and I can take a look at the Griever.

'When shit hits the fan, it would be up to me to fix that mess anyway.' He inwardly sighed.

Unfortunately, Viscount Krame didn't share Friya's enthusiasm.

"Another mouth to feed during winter is a burden, Lady Ernas." The Viscount said. He was a man in his late forties, around 1.68 meters (5'6") tall with thick black hair and a finely trimmed goatee.

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Everything about his appearance spoke of order and control. He was wearing a perfectly ironed black suit that didn't show a single wrinkle despite having been used for half day.

Not a single hair on his head was out of place, every one of his movements was slow and calculated. His stern expression was reinforced by his gold-rimmed glasses which made his calculative gaze look cruel rather than wise.

"Your guild is doing an excellent job, I don't see why I should welcome this man into my home. I'm sure there are plenty of free rooms in the city's hotels and that he can afford to pay for his meals." Krame only spoke to Friya, ignoring everyone else.

'Wow, this guy is as stingy as you are.' Solus thought. Both her and Lith were surprised at being treated like that. It was the second time in a single day that someone had looked down on him.

"Your Lordship, Lord Verhen is an excellent Healer and the Ranger in charge of the Kellar region. I'm sure you realize that his presence can be of great help. The snowstorm could isolate the city, if not even your mansion, for days." Friya said.

"You are an excellent Healer, Lady Ernas. Why would I need two? Besides, I doubt he can be of any use. No truly talented and sane man would ever work as a civil servant. It still has the word 'servant' in it and proves a lack of ambition."

"What about my mother and my father, then?" Friya hated to use her parents' names. The whole point of leading a mercenary guild was building her career outside of her family. Yet the 'sane' part prevented her from using Manohar as a model.

"Please." The Viscount scoffed at her naïve attempt of manipulation.

"Your mother chose a noble career that allows her to uphold and influence the law. She protects us from the scum of the earth. Your father's talent is bottomless. He is an Arch Duke, a warrior, a Forgemaster, and a leader of the Knight Guard.

"This man, instead, took the job of a watchdog with no further career path. Rangers usually drop out of the army or drop dead. He's barely more than a vagrant with a hundred masters, and as soon as the winter lockdown ends, I'll be one of them. Now please get out of my office. I have work to do."

"What a dick. I'm sorry, Lith." Friya said after they left the Viscount's office.

"Follow me, I'll show you your accommodations."

"Didn't he just say that I'm not welcome?"

"Yeah, but he never said no either. I know the type, if I take you in as my guest, he'll never dare to complain to my face. You've changed a lot, you know? The old Lith would have glared at Krame until he pissed his pants." Friya looked at him with curiosity.

"That's unfair. If I killed every single noble that treated me rudely, I'd have been called the new Balkor for years by now. I don't care what Krame says. He's just an irrelevant road bump on my path." Lith replied.

"I wouldn't be so sure. He's using the events caused by the Church of the Six to get Count Cestor removed and become the next city Lord. He's likely to succeed if you ask me."

"What events? The Griever is not a plague and a few nutjobs aren't enough to dispose of a loyal servant of the Crown."

"You would be right, if Cestor was competent. Ever since he joined the Church of the Six, those fanatics have harassed every mage of the city. They say that magic is an insult to the gods and all that crap." Friya said.

"What? That's enough to outlaw such a religion. Harming mages is a serious crime. Why has no one contacted the army or the mage association about this?"

"Because the city is split into two factions. One follows the Church's dogmas and wants to kick mages out of the city. The other one is collecting evidence to get rid of their opponents and seize their properties.

"Neither faction wants to involve the army, it would ruin their plans." Friya said.

"Then why did the Count call me? Wasn't that shooting himself in the foot?"

"Beats me. Maybe he really has gone mad." Friya shrugged as she opened the door of Lith's room. It was barely bigger than a storage room, with just enough space for a bed and a wardrobe.

"Sorry to give you the worst room, but it's all that's left."

"Don't worry, I've been in worse places." Lith lied. The only reason he had accepted staying there was to keep an eye on her. The situation in the city was too odd, and Lith had noticed how Friya was on edge while dealing with some of her guild members.

'Damn, I can't leave the city during a snowstorm. The army locates my position every time I make a report and a single Warp Steps only crosses about ten kilometers (6.2 miles).

'I can reach a mana geyser with it, but for a normal mage it would be suicidal. Now that I have a better understanding of the situation, I might as well play ball.'

As soon as he was alone, Lith called his handler and explained everything to her.

"My assessment is that Count Cestor is insane or being manipulated, while Viscount Krame is willing to exploit the chaos that will ensue as the conflicts escalate to further his political agenda." Lith said.

"Agreed. I'll contact my superiors and let you know their decision. Until then, investigate this Church of the Six and the Griever. If your friend is right about the means of contagion, then Zantia could be the rehearsal for something bigger.

"Gods, I'll never understand why people are willing to hurt those closest to them for the pettiest reasons." Kamila's voice was so sad that Lith understood she wasn't talking about Zantia, but rather about herself.

He called her on her civilian amulet immediately after ending the call. He had recognized the hologram's background as her home, so there was no risk of interrupting her job with his paranoia.

"Kami are you alright?" Lith said noticing she was crying, which made him sick with worry.

"It's just a rough moment for me. Everything is fine." Those words made Lith shiver. In his experience, when a woman said those three words, they were usually a lie.

"No, it's not. Yesterday you were in a bad mood, then you behaved oddly during lunch, and now this? Kami, if you don't talk to me, I don't know what to do." He said. At the mention of lunch, she laughed amid the tears.

"I was perfectly normal at lunch, silly. I'm just on a diet and couldn't stand watching you eat while I starved." She chuckled.

"But you are right about the rest, I'm not fine. I went to visit my sister and seeing her like that broke my heart. I don't know if I can save her anymore. I feel so helpless that it's driving me crazy."

Lith didn't understand much from her rambling, but he let her talk and cry as long as she needed to.

Seeing her breaking apart like that hurt him deeply. Kamila always smiled and she always had a nice word for Lith, turning his perpetual frown upside down. He wanted to drop everything and run back to Belius just to embrace her.

"Is there anything I can do?" It was all he could say when she was done talking.

"No, but thanks for the offer. I'll explain everything to you once you get back. I promise that the second time it will make sense." She chuckled.

"Thanks for listening to me. I feel much better now. Don't worry, you did nothing wrong. This time." She laughed harder, making him smile.

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"I'm going to kill that fucker." Lith's smile disappeared as soon as the call ended.

He didn't understand everything, but based on what he knew about Zinya's situation, it wasn't hard to guess who the root of Kamila's problem was.

'Calm down. Making Kamila's sister a widow isn't bound to make her happy, especially if she finds out you are the culprit. She isn't as morally flexible as you are and she isn't stupid.'

'If what's-his-face dies, she'll understand the truth and you'll lose her.' Solus said, quenching his anger.

Lith looked out of his window, noticing that the intensity of the snowstorm had decreased enough to allow him to move safely.

'Now that I have a mission, I can't ask Friya to go against the interests of her client. It would ruin her reputation.' Lith Warped outside and asked around for directions to reach the main temple of the Church of the Six.

Sorting out its believers from regular people was quite easy. Rangers were known to be mages, so whenever he met the former, they would either shudder in fear or call him names, whereas the latter would warn him.

"Be careful, son. Those nutjobs are a dangerous bunch." Said an old man who was taking advantage of the temporary relief from the snowstorm to stock up groceries.

"They will try to beat the crap out of you at the first opportunity they get. To make matters worse, if you retaliate that idiot Count will hold you responsible for their injuries." He spat on the snow as if Cestor's name tasted like horseshit.

Unlike most cities of the north, Zantia wasn't divided into rims, but into two districts. The eastern one, where Lith currently was, was the residential area. The Noble or rich households were the farthest ones from the city gates, whereas the poor people lived in its proximity.

The west district was the commercial area, where one could find shops, hotels, and restaurants. The main Church of the Six was located in an old warehouse near the center of the city.

Lith shapeshifted his clothes into a commoner civilian attire before proceeding any further.

'It would be a good idea to not stir unnecessary trouble. I'll get in, check out the most notable members of the church, and get out. If not for the Griever and the Count's support, this would be an open and closed case. Let's hope things keep being so simple.' Lith thought.

When Lith reached his destination, his mouth almost fell on the ground from the surprise. The temple was exactly as he expected it, a simple rectangular shaped building made of wood with a sloping roof.

What stunned him for a couple of seconds was the insignia hung above the double doors. It represented a handsome young man with silver hair and seven eyes, arranged exactly like those which appeared on Lith's face during a world tribulation.

Yet they weren't yellow, but each one was a different color with the exception of the seventh eye in the middle of the young man's forehead which was completely white, with no pupil nor iris.

'If it wasn't for the seventh eye and the pink skin, I'd think the Church of the Six venerates the Balors.' Solus thought.

"Agreed. The question is: how do they know what an ancient Balor looks like? What does the seventh eye mean?" Lith pondered.

Despite the bad weather, a lot of people were entering the building. Lith waited outside, using Life Vision and mana sense to check on them. He soon noticed they could be sorted into two different kinds of people.

Those who had a really weak mana core and looked really angry, and those who had a normal bright red or yellow one but looked to be in anguish.

'I can't feel any magical aura coming from the temple. It has no defenses nor arrays.' Solus pointed out.

Lith only had so much time before he was forced to get inside. The snow had turned the city white, making any passerby stand out. The sloping roofs didn't offer any cover, while patrolling from the sky limited his field of vision due to the still ongoing storm.

He didn't want to go inside before whatever ceremony or ritual they were about to perform started. He suspected they would use it to spread the Griever with magic, yet he couldn't afford to do small talk with the Church's believers.

'If they see a new face, the ones behind the scheme might get spooked and just spout bullshit, wasting my time. I'm too easily recognizable as a stranger. It's better to wait for all eyes to be on the altar. It will be easier to go unnoticed.' Lith thought while hiding behind a corner.

'From above!' Solus's warning made Lith dodge to the side with a roll. Nothing was falling from the roof over his head but a piece of snow, yet he knew Solus wouldn't yell like that without a good reason.

He was right.

A split second later, two deep footprints appeared in the snow and a thud could be heard. Someone almost invisible had just landed. Lith could see the air in front of him slightly distorted, but it was otherwise unnoticeable.

"You're better than I expected, Ranger Verhen." Said a male voice quickly closing in to him.

Lith activated Life Vision and took out the Gatekeeper Sword from his pocket dimension, making it shrink to the size of a short sword to more easily maneuver it in the alley they were in.

Thanks to Life Vision, the distortion was now evident enough to see the human figure hiding behind it.

'Whoever this fucker is, he's not on par with Zolgrish.' Lith struck forward with the Gatekeeper, too fast and too close for the opponent to dodge his lunge.

The moment their blades touched, a young man with blue eyes in his early twenties seemingly appeared out of thin air. He wore what seemed like black assassin garb, covering him from head to toe and leaving only his eyes exposed.

He was wielding a couple of long daggers. One of them had just deflected the Gatekeeper, while the other was aimed at Lith's heart.

His first instinct was to grab it with his free hand, but his paranoia stopped him.

'Solus, analysis!' He thought while taking a step back and a dagger out of his pocket dimension. Lith had no idea how to dual wield, but at least he could parry with it.

'Red core, normal weapons, and great life force. At least on par with Orion after you rejuvenated him, if not better.' She replied.

'Something is off with his blades, though. I can see they are coated with something viscous but colorless.'

'It can't be a simple poison. He knows I'm a Ranger, normal weapons can't even put a scratch on my uniform. He's hiding something!' Lith thought as he kept being forced on the defensive.

He had already infused himself with all the elements but the enemy was incredibly fast, plus he had the poison and was better suited to fight in such confined space. Lith suspected that there was more than a trap waiting for him.

He was careful not leaving an opening that a second camouflaged enemy could exploit.

To add insult to injury, the assassin had taken him by surprise, so Lith had no spells at the ready. He quickly jumped back, gaining the split second of respite he needed to Blink behind the enemy and finish him off.

Lith was flabbergasted when the enemy turned around, deflecting the Gatekeeper with inhuman speed as his second dagger, positioned exactly in front of Lith's exit point, skewered him using his own momentum.

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"I spy with my little eye someone who's going to die." The assassin laughed merrily as he exploited Lith's shock to push away the Gatekeeper and struck at his neck to finish him off.

The first dagger had pierced Lith's chest, but thanks to his reflexes, which had allowed him to stop at the last second, and to the Skinwalker Armor, it didn't go deep. Lith knew that a normal weapon couldn't cut his skin, let alone his armor.

Which meant that they were anything but normal.

'No one can move that fast. How did he predict my exit point?' Lith thought.

His mind spun at top gear as he used the dagger in his left hand to defend himself while he stepped back. The blade in his chest only needed one more push to pierce his heart and Lith had no desire to test if he still needed it to survive.

The assassin wasn't willing to let him go, but keeping his arm so close to the opponent left it exposed. He was forced to retreat to avoid losing his wrist to the Gatekeeper, but he left behind a gruesome present.

He dodged Lith's slash while twisting and pulling the dagger away. The movement ripped the flesh apart and turned the already deep wound into a gaping hole. Life fusion started to heal the damage the moment it was inflicted, yet it only made things worse for Lith.

As Solus had predicted, the assassin's blades were coated with some kind of venom that the light element boosting Lith's body was now quickly spreading through his blood system.

'Fuck! I can't use darkness fusion to cut my pain receptors this time. Otherwise I won't be able to notice the venom's effects until it's too late and it cripples me. I need to focus light fusion on flushing it out of my body.' Lith thought.

"I was wrong. You're such a disappointment, mate. So much for Treius' killer and the destroyer of the Black Star." The assassin sneered as he relentlessly attacked Lith with inhuman speed and surgical precision, not giving him any time to think.

The wound on his chest burned as if someone had stabbed him with a burning spear and was twisting it inside his flesh. The venom coursing through Lith's veins made his heartbeats hurt like his blood had turned into sand and now it was scraping at every fiber it met on its wake.

With every heartbeat, the venom spread further. With every breath Lith took, his brain went on fire, blurring his vision.

'This is no normal venom. I'm analyzing it with Invigoration and it's magical in nature. What the actual fuck is going on?' Solus was desperate. Her words fell on deaf ears and she knew it.

Lith was too focused on survival to listen to her advice and she was too shocked from mana sense failing her in such an obnoxious manner to think properly. Lith's knees suddenly went weak while he was trying to keep his footwork on par with his enemy's and two small cuts opened on his legs.

The assassin was not only inhumanly fast and precise, but he was also well trained. Since he had failed to overpower Lith he had changed his tactic. The cuts by themselves were enough to slow Lith down and the new doses of venom they carried with them made his situation even worse.

Then, all the pieces of the puzzle fell into place and Solus regained her cool. She took a lightning wand out of her pocket dimension and shoot at the assassin. He managed to dodge it, but his assault was interrupted.

"Not cool man. How did you do that?" His eyes were flaring with mana. He had clearly managed to follow the wand's movements with Life Vision.

'Son of a gun!' Solus cursed while weaving several spells at once. Lith had only one breath of time to rest before the opponent came charging through the barrage of lightning bolts she unleashed.

That single breath allowed Lith to regain his footing as well as his focus. The detoxifying spell from his magic ring coupled with life fusion gave him a brief respite from the blinding pain that was crippling him.

'This venom alternates waves of pain with sudden weakness. If I had used darkness fusion to cut off my pain receptors, I would have missed the pain fading right before my body goes limp and I would already be dead.

'I only have a few seconds before the spell stops blocking the symptoms.' Lith thought

He stored the Gatekeeper inside his pocket dimension and had Solus assume her gauntlet form. He deflected the first blade with his own while using his open palm to thrust at the opponent.

The assassin smirked, thinking Lith had lost it. He lunged with all of his strength, boosting himself with air and fire magic to cut Lith's arm from wrist to shoulder in one fell swoop.

Only when his blade struck the stone covering Lith's arm did he realize something was wrong. The impact made him almost lose his grip on his weapon as Lith's palm stuck at his nose, crushing it flat.

Blood started to stream and his vision became blurry as the sudden injury made them watery. He tried to step back, but Lith had stomped on his left foot, crushing it and locking him into place.

The palm slid on his face, followed by an elbow blow that shattered his jaw.

The stunned assassin had no idea what was happening. His enchanted garb was supposed to absorb most of the damage, yet it seemed to be nothing more than a tacky cloth in front of the Ranger's assault.

Solus had simply taken out Zolgrish's Eraser from her pocket dimension at the exact timing of the impact, shutting down the magical protections. Also, by cutting off his pain receptors, the assassin had missed both the pain and the stomp.

Now his foot was stuck under Lith's, making it impossible for him to get away. At that distance, his weapons were useless, whereas Solus's gauntlet reached its apex. Whenever the thin blades struck the thick stone, the impact made his hands go numb.

They couldn't cut, nor express the full strength of their wielder, whereas the stone gauntlet was fast and hit like a hammer. The assassin ducked under the claws aimed at his face, but they still managed to make a small cut on his forehead.

After his breathing, the assassin also had his vision impaired from the blood trickling in his eyes. He activated life fusion to stop the bleeding, only to suddenly feel that something was wrong.

Solus had coated her claws with Balkor's venom to return him the favor.

It was a special substance devised by the god of death, which directly attacked its victim's mana core. The assassin felt no pain, yet he noticed his fusion magic getting weaker, making the difference in physical prowess between them grow even wider.

He activated one of his magical rings to turn the Ranger into a popsicle, but at that distance Lith had the time to react at his weak mana flow by grabbing and crushing his hand so that the twisted finger threw the spell in a random direction, making it useless.

The assassin lost one of his daggers, which Solus promptly stored away, and tried to use the remaining one to stab Lith in the neck. Lith reacted by deflecting the blade with his stone covered arm while the dagger in his left hand pierced the assassin's right side and cut him open until his ribcage stopped it.

Chapter 566 A New Enemy Part 1

The tables had been turned, but both Lith and Solus knew it didn't mean much against a fellow Awakened one, whoever the assassin was. He only needed to use Invigoration to go back to his peak condition and get rid of the venom, but luckily the same applied to Lith.

'Behind you!' Solus yelled as a new enemy Blinked at their back.

Lith turned around as fast as he could, noticing that the newcomer was swinging a curved blade at him. He was a young looking man, barely in his twenties. He had light brown skin and several tattoos on his face.

He reminded Lith of the man who had fused with the Black Star to prevent its destruction. Unlike the assassin, he wasn't wearing any cloaking device, so his body shone like a lightbulb to mana sense.

'Bright cyan mana core, infused with all the elements, and everything he wears is enchanted.' Solus said without waiting for Lith to ask. He could see the weapon's trajectory, but unfortunately, his body couldn't keep up with it.

Lith was still bleeding profusely from his chest and the venom was still ravaging his body. The best he could do was intercepting the scimitar with his arm protector. The enemy was fresh and charging with all of his weight and fusion magic, whereas Lith was running on fumes.

The curved blade pushed Lith's arm down and opened a deep cut from his left shoulder to his right hip. The assassin's venom coupled with the blood loss made Lith fall to his knees as the new enemy spun on himself to decapitate him with a horizontal slash.

The blade hit only air as Lith was suddenly swallowed into the ground. Solus could use only a few powerful spells before running out of mana, so she had to pick them carefully.

The first one she had weaved was a Warp Steps leading back to Lith's room. She placed it under his feet, turning gravity into their ally. Had she chosen to heal such deep wounds, the spell would have drained what little stamina Lith had left, while countering the venom would have required for her to not take part in the fight.

Lying on the floor of his room, Lith gasped as blood kept gushing from his wounds, forming a small pool under him. Breathing was becoming harder by the second.

He shut off his pain receptors to gain enough focus to be able to use his breathing technique. Invigoration healed his wounds almost instantly, yet the venom proved to be harder to deal with.

It had caused extensive damage that couldn't be treated without first cleansing the toxin. Whatever it was, its maker had infused it with darkness magic, making it capable of rotting its victim's body and using the light magic used against it to empower itself.

'That was awfully close. That assassin knew who I was and that I'm an Awakened. The venom, the cloaking of his mana core and of his equipment, everything was made to counter how an Awakened usually fights.' Lith thought.

It took him only a few seconds to get rid of the toxin, yet the process seemed to last hours to him. He kept looking around his room, waiting for his enemies to open a Warp Steps and finish him before he could recover.

Right after Solus had brought Lith to safety, the youth with the scimitar was giving his all to save his comrade's life.

"Wake up, Keiran. You know I suck at healing." He was mostly talking to himself since Keiran was unconscious. Being gutted like a fish with most of his organs damaged was already bad.

Balkor's venom eroding his body and turning his mana core grey only made things harder for the second Awakened. He was forced to gamble what would kill his friend first, if the bleeding or the never seen before toxin.

He could only treat one at the time with Invigoration, at least on someone else. As most Awakened, he had always considered healing magic a waste of time, since there was nothing that branch of magic could do that Invigoration couldn't do better.

Deraniel decided to bet on the Awakened's iron body and removed the venom first. As soon as Balkor's toxin was cleansed, light fusion started working again, making Deraniel work much easier.

"What the fuck were you thinking, man?" He said as soon as the assassin regained consciousness.

"Your stunt might have compromised the whole plan. Besides, we came here to see if the guy is as strong as that old bat Raagu says, not to kill him."

"Talk for yourself." Keiran said while using Invigoration to return to his peak condition.

"I'm sick of hiding like a thief. Tired of my master always reminding me of being careful of fake mages, undead, Guardians, and all of that crap. Damn, we trained for over fifteen years, spitting blood every single day, and yet they always treat us like kids.

"I want to prove to that old fossil that there's nothing we Awakened cannot face."

"Yeah, right. Remind me again, who saved your sorry ass?" Deraniel sneered.

"That's different! The fucker took me by surprise."

"Right. Your ambush took you by surprise. It totally makes sense and doesn't sound like a pathetic excuse only a ten year old would use." Deraniel was already regretting having saved Keiran's life.

Only when both Lith and Solus were back to their full strength did Lith allow himself to relax.

'If they didn't barge in here already, it means they have no idea where I am. Who were those guys and what's the beef they have with me?' Lith thought.

'The assassin mentioned the Black Star and someone named Treius. Maybe they are friends with the Awakened from the Blood Desert you killed a few months ago.' Solus said.

'Unlikely. There was only spite in his voice, not rage. My guess is that he had to be quite young. Aside from his carefully planned attack, everything he did and said seemed like a teenager during a measuring contest. Like he had to prove something.

'The real question is if he attacked me because I was near the Church of the Six or for a completely unrelated reason.' Lith's paranoia could easily trace a connection between two Awakened, a new religion, the Griever, and even with JF Kennedy's death.

'Whatever the answer is, maybe it's better to ask Friya's help. She's bound to know something about the Church of the Six, and Awakened cannot show themselves to the public. Together you can take both of those guys out.' Solus said.

'Unless they decide to go all out despite the presence of witnesses or there's more than two of them. Anyway, I've lost my opportunity for today's ritual, so second hand information is better than nothing.' Lith thought while watching the storm intensify again.

For a second, he considered the possibility of the Awakened assassin using the venom to cause the Griever, but he discarded it immediately.

'It's made to kill, not to incapacitate. Also, someone as skilled as Friya is would have detected and extracted it. Unless someone baited me in this house, meeting Friya might actually be a blessing in disguise.

'I can use her guild to collect the information I need and maybe even get access to some victims of the Griever. If really there is a link between those two Awakened and the illness, by understanding how it works I can guess what their endgame is.'

Lith used Accumulation to refine his core while waiting for dinner. Without his tower and with the storm raging outside there wasn't much he could do. A couple of hours later, someone knocked on his door.

Chapter 567 A New Enemy Part 2

"Hey Lith, mind giving me a hand before we go get our dinner?" Friya asked.

"No problem. What's the matter?" Lith stood up, feeling a little light headed.

"Are you alright? You are way paler than when we met earlier." Friya cast her best diagnostic spell on him before he could even open his mouth.

"Just tired from almost dying. No biggie." He shrugged.

Friya was happy when her spell confirmed that he was perfectly fine, just a bit famished. Yet the dying part made her flinch.

"Forget about my problem. What the heck is going on here? How did you put yourself in trouble so fast?"

"Off the record? Because it's Ranger business, so I need you to keep it a secret." Lith replied.

'If I have to ask for her help, I need to tell her everything. Otherwise I could endanger her life for nothing.' He thought.

"Sure. I'm your friend before being an adventurer." She said while forcing him to sit on his bed and giving him some beef jerky.

Lith told her about his new mission concerning the Church and how an assassin had ambushed him while he was on recon.

"Good gods!" Friya blurted out.

"Your Skinwalker Armor is superior even to a Ranger uniform, yet you're saying this guy had poisoned weapons capable of piercing it?"

"Worse. Even the venom was enchanted and the Kingdom has very few alchemists capable of creating such a thing." Lith pointed out.

"You said you took one of them before retreating. Can I see it? If we identify its design or the venom, we could get some clues about the assassin's identity." Friya said.

"No. If I take it out from my dimensional item, I risk them learning my position. Tracking spells are common for precious weapons, not to mention the possibility of a self destruct spell. Assassins aren't supposed to leave clues behind." Lith shook his head while munching.

"True. How many people knew you are in Zantia? I mean, you arrived just a few hours ago and now there's a snowstorm. How the heck did the assassin made it here in time?"

"Good point." Lith nodded. "Only Kamila, the city guards, Count Cestor, Viscount Krame, and your men knew about me." He stressed the last two possibilities, making her turn pale.

"Why would Krame put a bounty on your head?"

"For the same reason he doesn't want me here. To get Zantia for himself. If I solve the problems with the church and the illness, he would lose the merits from exposing the Count's collusion with the church and with them the chance of becoming the next city Lord."

Friya was about to ask why Lith suspected her men too when she realized she already knew the answer all too well. Money. The idea of having a traitor in her guild made her furious, even more so since it wasn't the first time.

"Calm down, Friya. I'm just looking at all the possible angles. My main suspect is someone else." He said as she bit her lower lip out of frustration.

"The Count? After all, he turned off his communication amulet after requesting your assistance. That way, he forced you to come even if he wanted to cancel the mission and had all the time to call for an assassin." She said.

"My thoughts exactly. The only loophole in this reasoning is that he had no way to know the snowstorm would stop me from leaving. Anyway, what do you need my help with?"

"Duluth, the Viscount youngest son, has the Griever again. It makes no sense since we kept him home all the time and checked the preparation of his meals. I said the others it's just the flu to buy some time. I need a second opinion." She said.

"Fine. If you screwed up, you owe me dinner." After eating the jerky, Lith had realized how hungry he was. Between the adrenaline rush and his paranoia, he had forgotten that Invigoration was helpless to replenish the nutrients lost after healing.

"And if I didn't?"

"You owe me dinner anyway. You can't put a price on your pride as a Healer, can you? That would make you stoop to my level." Lith's reply made her laugh, yet she didn't yield.

"No way. With an assassin around, you need my help, so this makes us even at best."

She Warped them outside Duluth's door, making the two guards she had left outside point their weapons at their throats out of surprise. Lith caught both short swords between his fingers, locking them into place like they were just pesky flies.

"At ease, guys. No need to make a scene every time." Friya sighed as she took a mental note to kick them out of her guild. Them being on alert was a good sign, the rage in their eyes instead of relief once they recognized her, not so much.

'Having failed to learn dimensional magic even though they attended one of the six great academies seems to bother them to no end. If they get any sourer than this, I'm sure "accidents" will happen.' She thought.

"Sorry, boss." Said a blonde mage with a snarl. She could barely stand Friya casually flaunting her dimensional magic instead of walking as any normal person would. Lith blocking her swing with just three fingers added insult to the injury.

Yet Friya didn't Warp just for showing off. The Viscount's Mansion had many floors and extended for hundreds of meters. With an ill patient waiting for her, she had no time to waste coddling her subordinates' feelings.

When they walked through the door, Lith whistled in appreciation. Duluth's room was actually an apartment bigger than his own house. Every piece of furniture was made from the finest materials and had the Krame family crest engraved on it.

'I can clearly see the hand of a true artisan at work and the ego of a true self-centered asshole messing with him. He's so stingy that he preferred masterpieces to look tacky rather than risking them being stolen.' Lith thought.

'Oh yeah? What's the difference between the two of you?' Solus giggled at Lith criticizing someone for being stingy and paranoid.

'I don't wear glasses.' His reply made her laugh harder.

The hallway also served as a living room, with several padded sofas arranged around a square table with a cigar box and a tray full of flower petals on it. The wood of the sofa was painted gold, while the silk covering them was deep green, to match the pattern of the precious carpet covering most of the floor.

The walls were pristine white, emphasizing the gold of which were made or coated all the ornaments in the room, even the frames of the paintings decorating the place.

After entering inside a bedroom similarly decorated and with more gold than a jewelry store, Lith expected the king sized bed to host a profligate teen. Yet Doluth was barely ten years old, with black hair like his father and covered in sweat.

Lith chanted some gibberish and activated Invigoration, performing a full body scan of the child.

"Are you sure this is the Griever? It takes a tier one spell to cure it." Lith said,

"Yeah. It's the fourth time in less than two weeks, so I'm pretty sure. Fever, bloodshot eyes, weakness, and black spots on his chest." Friya lifted the bedsheets and the youth's nightgown revealing what looked like oversized blackheads.

"I have good news and I have bad news. Which do you want to hear first?" He asked after creating a Hush zone around the two of them.

Chapter 568 Round Two Part 1

"The bad news." Friya said almost holding her breath.

"This is most likely to be an inside job." Noticing her shock, Lith beckoned to her.

"Use your diagnostic spell and follow my instructions. Can you see the greyed out zones near the blackheads and what's-his-name's organs?" He said as soon as Friya did as instructed.

'Why not use a random name like Zolgrish would? His name is Doluth!' Solus rebuked him.

"Of course, I can. Why?" Her answer surprised him quite a bit.

"Are you telling me you noticed them but you don't know what they are?"

"Yes, is it a common illness?" She felt greatly embarrassed, by the knowledge gap between them.

"No! It's what remains after someone gets tortured with magic and only partially healed. Didn't Jirni teach you anything?" Lith asked.

"Mom is no healer, how does she fit in?"

"Since when did it stop her from being good at her job? Your father provided her with plenty of tools to make up for her lack of magic. We exchanged a lot of pointers while we were in Othre. Bottom line, a wizard did it." Lith pointed at Doluth.

"That's the bad news. The good news is that you were right. There is no Griever no poison going around. Someone is harming people with darkness magic just to heal them immediately after.

"That's why the symptoms vary from person to person. It depends on both the mage's skill and how the victim's body responds." A simple wave of Lith's hand restored the youth's health.

"When you said inside job did you mean my men or the house staff?" Friya asked.

"Both. The culprit only needs to have access to Delicious here and some sedative to not wake him up during the process."

"It would explain why it's not contagious and how it can return so fast." Friya pondered.

"The culprit only has to repeat the process as soon as the Healer leaves the house to make them appear like a quack. To what end, though?"

"This is what I need your help for. I need a list of all the victims of the Griever and all the information you can get about the Church of the Six. After all, the main reason why religions don't take root is because of Healers being good at their job."

"I'll ask Wyra to learn everything she can about the church and the Viscount for the list. If he refuses to help, we'll be on our own, though."

"We? You're an adventurer. As far as I know, you can't serve two masters at once."

"Neither of you is my master." Friya gracefully showed him Orion's masterpiece she wore on her middle finger while making a fist.

"You are my friend whereas Krame is a pompous idiot. It's not difficult for me to pick a side, even though I doubt we'll come to that."

She took out her communication amulet and gave instruction to the core members of the Crystal Shield guild to investigate discretely about the church.

"I'm no expert, but while we wait, I can give you an abridged version of their teachings. I listened to their ramblings so many times that I got the gist of it."

Lith nodded at her to continue.

"The Church of the Six preaches that in the beginning there were six gods. Each one of them controlled a different element and together they created all of Mogar's lifeforms. According to the church, the world energy also comes from the six Elemental Sovereigns.

"They also say that long ago the world was at peace because the Sovereigns distributed their gifts equally with every living being. Then, some nondescript evildoers plotted to overthrow them and steal their powers.

"They succeeded yet failed at the same time. The weakened Sovereigns fell into a deep slumber instead of dying and magic as we know it was born. According to this cult, mages are the descendants of those who stole the gods' powers."

"This is ridiculous!" Lith blurted out.

"How could normal humans and beasts take down gods? Also, how do they explain the fact that mages can be born from non mages? What good can relinquishing magic do?"

"Beats me." Friya shrugged.

"Do you have any idea who is the guy with seven eyes on their poster?"

"The supreme deity, the All-Father. Each one of his eyes became one Sovereign while the seventh became Mogar, bestowing mana upon all of his children's creations." Friya said.

"The All-Father, eh?" A cruel grin appeared on Lith's face as a plan to use the church's teaching against itself formed into his mind.

"Are you sure you're not adopted?" Friya interrupted his musing.

"What? Why do you say that?"

"It's no wonder Phloria likes you so much. You're getting as tall as Dad and your expression right now is identical to Mom's when she's hunting her prey. What's our plan?"

"First things first. Dinner." Lith replied and his gurgling stomach agreed.

"Are you free tonight?"

"I wish. Now that I have an idea of what the Griever is, I'll take credit for it with the Viscount and after that, I'll need to change the detail's schedule. I'm sure he'll try to switch the blame on my men and the worst thing is that I have my doubts too. Why?"

"I'm planning to return the ambush. If I catch the guy, I can get new intel. Otherwise, I'll take out one enemy. It's a win-win."

"That's the dumbest thing you've ever said! If they are looking for you, they might even know you're here. Two against one is too much for anyone. You need my help." Friya said.

"I'll need you for the second act, that's for sure. First, I need to probe their strength and wits. Don't worry about me. I'm not the 'master of space', but I can still Blink to safety if necessary."

"Gods, don't use my title from the academy! I can't believe I used to find it flattering, it's embarrassing at best."

'Seriously, what are you thinking?' Solus asked.

'I doubt someone as skilled as the one who made the dagger didn't insert a tracking spell. Mostly because its cloaking effect makes it impossible to distinguish it amid normal weapons.' Lith thought.

'So what? Life Vision is no mana sense, but they can still recognize your energy signature. If they see you near the dagger, they will either stay away or attack together.'

'First, it's two against two. They have no idea of your existence and if we prepare the field, speed and coordination can make the difference in mana core level irrelevant. Second, they will never see me coming.'

'As you said, they can recognize my energy signature, but I have more than one, right?' Lith inwardly grinned.

Viscount Krame was stingy, but it turned out that his avarice only spread those outside of his house. Both the kitchen staff and the ingredients at their disposal were top class, allowing Lith and Friya to enjoy their meal while reminiscing the old days.

It was part of Friya's plan to weed out the most likely members of the Crystal Shield that would betray the guild at the first opportunity they got.

It wasn't hard to spot them since they almost popped more than one vein whenever they talked about their specializations, their dreams for the future, or even talking about the Ernas couple.

After dinner, Lith returned to his room and checked with all of his magical senses that no one was spying on him. Then, he stored away the Skinwalker Armor and assumed his hybrid form before Warping away.

Chapter 569 Round Two Part 2

Back when Lith had just acquired his second life force, he had joked about slaughtering people and pin the blame on a black scaled monster. He would have never expected that the day would come that he would turn the joke into reality.

Lith flew towards the commercial district. He needed an isolated zone for his ambush, to have as few witnesses as possible. He couldn't afford to raise rumors about a demonic being appearing in the same city he was.

His nature as a hybrid was a double edged sword. It gave him an advantage against most human enemies, but it had to remain secret at all costs. It was necessary not only for it to keep being an effective weapon, but also as a matter of survival.

Lith doubted that liches like Inxialot or even the human Council of the Awakened would leave him alone if they knew about the existence of a new power. He was certain of it because it was what he would have done.

He picked the warehouse district for his plan. That late at night, with the snowstorm still ongoing, there was no one around aside the men of the night watch. Lith took the enchanted dagger out of his pocket dimension, collected all the venom still coating it, and then he hid as far as he could before dropping it in an open space between buildings.

'I hate fair fights.' Lith thought.

'Against any other enemy, I would leave Solus to stand guard on the dagger and ambush them. Too bad I only have one cloaking ring. If I keep it, then those two would discover her existence, while if I give it to her, my blue core would be like a goddamn sun to their Life Vision.

'If I'm right about the tracking spell, the only thing I can do is to remain close enough to the blade to spot the assassin, but far enough from it to be mistaken for a guard. As long as I wear Orion's ring, I look like an inconspicuous yellow cored individual.'

'What about me? I can't take my gauntlet form. It would give your identity away and defy the purpose of this charade.' Solus asked when she noticed that Lith was casting only a few spells.

There was a limit to the number of spells one could keep at the ready. Each one of them would exert mental pressure on the mage, wearing down their focus and willpower. They had no idea how long they would have to wait.

Mindlessly going all out meant getting tired even before conjuring their first attack.

'Save your strength and cast spells only when we have a grasp on the situation. Try not to draw attention to yourself.' Lith replied. The wait turned out to be so long that Lith had to dispel even the few spells he had prepared.

He kept moving around the warehouses, following the pattern of the guards for more than an hour before something happened.

'A red core is flying fast toward the dagger.' Solus warned him.

'He didn't rush in, but bid his time and watched from afar instead.' Lith thought.

'Clearly he has been trained well, but flying while wearing a cloaking spell is a blunder. There's no way a red core could fly. Either he got impatient or training aside he is a moron.'

'Or maybe it's a trap to lure you in the open.' Solus pointed out.

'If you're right, it's naïve and poorly executed. If he walked, I could have mistaken him for a guard until it was too late, whereas by flying he made an easy target of himself.'

'Unless he is the bait and his companion is the hunter.' Solus couldn't believe the levels of paranoia she had reached. It seemed that bad habits did indeed rub off.

Like Lith had predicted, the enchanted dagger had a tracking device. It alerted Kieran the moment it left the pocket dimension. The assassin had reached the warehouse district as fast as he could, smelling the trap from miles away.

His problem was that even though he knew there was a trap, he couldn't find it. There wasn't anything magical near his dagger, no array surrounding the area, and only weak ass cored humans patrolled the area.

Whenever he spotted a yellow cored human, Kieran checked his energy signature to be sure it wasn't the Ranger, but even after more than an hour, the area was still quiet.

'Damn! He can't have dropped my blade here without a reason. I waited for so long that now I have no time left. If I don't imprint the Reaver every two hours or store it in a dimensional item it explodes!

'That stupid master of mine is so afraid of others stealing her secrets that her safety measures border insanity.' He thought.

To make matters worse, only Deraniel had accompanied him to retrieve the lost dagger. The other members of the group blamed him for his solo stunt and aside from laughing at his expenses, they did nothing to help.

Even Deraniel would have given him the finger rather than a hand if not for their masters being good friends. He was following Kieran from a distance thanks to his surveillance mirror, ready to Warp to his side if necessity arose.

It was an enchanted item that allowed him to see everything in the vicinity of its transmitter, a small pin that Kieran wore under his cloaking garb. As the assassin was about to reach his blade, the Reaver, Lith took out a wand from his pocket dimension.

Then, he broke it in half before tossing it inside a Warp Steps leading directly beside the enchanted weapon together with a Hush spell. Although it produced no sound, the following explosion sent the Reaver flying against his owner.

The sudden flash blinded both Deraniel and Keiran, so neither of them could see a second Warp Steps opening above the assassin's head, nor Lith emerging from it. The rapier in his hand lunged at Kieran's right arm, yet he reacted by infusing himself with air magic and managed to avoid the strike despite being blind.

The black scales covering Lith's mouth opened as he breathed a stream of Origin Flames against the enemy. The blue fire ate at the black garb, revealing several overlapping auras.

The cloaking aura was the first to fall, allowing Solus to distinguish its pseudo core.

'Okay. This guy has a bright cyan core, a physical prowess slightly inferior to yours, and the dagger stuck in his chest.' She inwardly smirked, glad to have left enough venom on the Reaver in case something like that happened.

'His armor has a defensive barrier, a clocking aura, and something that reminds me of Full Guard. They were arranged so that the cloaking function covered them all.'

'Lucky bastard!' They thought in unison.

Full Guard was one of the most useful spells a Mage Knight had. It created a spherical blue aura with a radius of 1.65 meters (5.41 feet) around the caster.

Thanks to Full Guard, a Mage Knight had no blind spots. Whatever entered the sphere would be detected, allowing them to counter attack and dodge with surgical precision without even looking.

'That's how he reacted so promptly to my Blink, earlier. Full Guard's biggest downside is that it turns you into a neon sign, but the cloaking aura solved the issue. I need to get my hands on that thing!'

Chapter 570 Round Two Part 3

Even though their thirst for knowledge burned bright, Lith and Solus knew better than meaninglessly rush forward. Lith expanded the silence zone to not be interrupted by the city guards and unleashed a volley of lightning bolts.

Even Full Guard was useless if its user wasn't fast enough to react to the information it provided. Kieran cursed as his body went into a seizure. The blade stuck in his body was a perfect conductor, allowing the lighting to bypass the armor's defensive barrier.

Darkness fusion prevented him from feeling pain, but the electrical current still triggered his active motor neurons. Having the opponent lost his mobility, Lith pushed the Reaver through Kieran's body until its hilt struck his chest.

With a pierced lung and the venom flooding the assassin's blood system, Lith was almost sure to have absolute control over his enemy.

'Too bad that almost is never enough.' He thought.

'At least now he can't use Invigoration. I could question him, but if the scimitar guy is around, he will have all the time he needs to cast his best spells, if not even an array. Time to find out if we are alone or not.'

"Time to die, human. You shouldn't have messed with my turf." Lith's voice in his hybrid form was a low grumble, as if the words were half spoken and half roared, making it unrecognizable.

The rapier went straight for Kieran's heart, forcing Deraniel's hand. The man from the Blood Desert had no choice but to open the Warp Steps he had at the ready while unsheathing his sword.

It cost him the array he had been preparing from the moment the ambush started.

Another of the strong points of the surveillance mirror was the possibility to project arrays from a greater distance than it was normally possible, making it a perfect tool for Awakened working as a team.

'That idiot! Not only did he get his ass handed to him before I could finish my spell, but he also managed to anger an Emperor Beast. Fucking animals, they are almost as annoying as Keiran.' Deraniel thought.

'Behind you!' Solus warned Lith as her mana sense detected the opening of the dimensional corridor. It was too far for Lith to stab the opponent before he could react, so Lith feigned ignorance until the last moment.

Only then did he dodge the attack by rolling to the side while using spirit magic to toss the helpless assassin against his companion.

"Fuck!" Deraniel said, unable to express how frustrated he was. He had only two choices: to Blink away and be at the enemy's mercy or kill Kieran with his own hands.

Dimensional magic was the only way he had to alter the path of his blade, but Lith took the choice out of his hands by hurling a stream of Origin Flames against the two Awakened who were about to collide.

Deraniel cursed again, Blinking both him and his companion in opposite directions. He didn't do it to protect Kieran, so much as to create two exit points at once. He gambled on his luck, hoping the Emperor Beast would follow the wrong Blink.

Lith activated the spirit magic variation he had learned while in Zolgrish's lab.

"Demons of Darkness!" He shouted despite being deeply ashamed of his current persona. Talking like an evil overlord made him cringe to the bone.

He injected his pure mana inside his shadow and then he expanded it like a black sun. Blink had an area of effect much smaller than spirit magic so both Awakened were still within his grasp.

Kieran was too busy spitting blood to not drown in his own fluids to notice his shadow coming to life, whereas Deraniel activated fusion magic as soon as he realized an invisible force was constricting his movements.

'What the?' Not only the grip he felt all over his body was getting stronger instead of fading, but his life force was being sucked as well. It took him just a moment to notice that his own shadow now had yellow eyes and was wrapped around his limbs.

He freed himself with a small flash of light that dispersed the darkness and then he Blinked away.

'Damn, the shadow version of spirit magic has a weak spot even easier to exploit than the regular one does. Ratpack didn't notice it because he's an idiot.' Lith thought.

Instead of wasting his time giving chase to Deraniel, Lith went after Kieran. Preventing one enemy from running away and the other one from healing himself was impossible, so he decided to cut his losses along with the assassin's head.

"We need help!" Deraniel yelled at his communicator amulet panicking.

"Two against one? How pathetic are you two?" Replied a feminine voice full of disdain.

"You can't kill me. I'm..." Kieran attempted to say, but Lith enchanted rapier fully infused with air, fire, and darkness magic made a short work of the black garb's barrier.

"Dead." Lith completed the phrase for him.

'Oh, shit! Forget about the loot, this thing is going to explode.' Solus said when she noticed that all of the pseudo cores of the assassin's equipment were becoming volatile.

'No need.' Lith chuckled as he Blinked both himself and the corpse at Deraniel's opposite sides.

Deraniel now had to take his chances with two kinds of demise. Either he faced the explosion and took the demonic beast's sword in his back or he took the explosion in his back and got skewered from the front.

Panicking and using the communicator amulet didn't leave him enough focus to cast a Blink fast enough to save himself.

Luckily for him, the person on the other side of the call wasn't really refusing to help. She just needed enough time to lock into his coordinates. She appeared in the nick of time, using the multi-layered barrier she had prepared to save Kieran to contain the explosion instead.

Her companion blocked the incoming rapier with a great sword that he was able to wield with only one hand. He was a handsome man who seemed to be in his early twenties. He was even taller than Lith in his hybrid form and had the build of a mountain.

He wore a set of light armor that covered his vitals and his joints with small metal plates over a set of high end hunter clothes. Lith recognized it as a style originating from the Gorgon Empire. The youth had blonde hair and sky blue eyes.

"To kill Kieran so fast you must be a worthy opponent." He said.

"Too bad you can't harm me with that needle..."

"Scram!" Lith roared while infusing himself with all the elements as the youth did the same.

'Deep blue mana core, strong as a bull, good equipment. Especially the sword' Solus said.

"What the..." Pelion couldn't believe his own eyes when the shorter and much slimmer creature pushed him aside. Lith's hybrid form had the same abilities as the human one.

Yet despite the difference in build, thanks to his constant training and body refining, his muscles were even more powerful than the giant's.

The moment Pelion tried to fight strength with strength Lith sidestepped, making the enemy be thrown off balance by his own charge.

The youth was an excellent swordsman, but the nimble rapier exploited his weakness and slithered like a snake through his guard, opening deep wounds on his four limbs and crippling his strength.