

Supreme M 621

Chapter 621 Hybrid Part 2

"You've grown stupid with age." The creatures said with a stern tone while charging at the Source Wall.

"Your barrier just traps my prey preventing them from both escaping and retaliating. On top of that, only Abominations need to feed on life force. For the undead, light magic it's nothing but a full course meal!" Scarlett could see the creature's blood cores going into overdrive, lured by the spell's energy mass.

"If you say so." Scarlett snapped her fingers, turning the Source Wall into Night Wall. The creatures slammed into the mass of darkness energy which destroyed their blood cores and made their bodies crumble.

Without the blood core's energy keeping the other two apart, the black core was free to feast on the mana core first and on the mud puppet holding it in later.

'What a moron. Darkness and light are two faces of the same coin. Converting one in the other is a child's play if you know what you're doing. I can rule out my most brilliant acquaintances from my suspect list.' She thought.

"Okay, it's time you get out of here." Scarlett opened a Warp Steps leading a dozen of kilometers away.

"Those things were all linked to the forest, so the further you go, the weaker they'll become. Keep walking straight past the Steps and you should reach a village by nightfall."

The magical beasts took the others on their backs and ran through the dimensional door while giving the Scorpicores a nod of their heads as a thank you. They were grateful to Scarlett, but also aware that they were nothing but a liability to her.

Ants caught in the middle of a fight between titans who could stomp them without even noticing.

Now that Scarlett had the enemy's energy signature stored by the Eyes of Menadion, she had no more need to guess the identity of her opponent, she just needed to reach them.

Her pince-nez had allowed her to track Balkor despite he was hiding in the Blood Desert and she was in the Griffon Kingdom, whereas the new hybrid behind the mud puppets was just a few kilometers away.

Their life force shone like a sun to her eyes, allowing her to fly in a straight line at subsonic speed until she reached her destination. It was a cave, located at the base of a hill.

Once it had been covered in grass and flowers, but now the whole area was a wasteland full of dead trees. Her pince-nez could only pick up three different energy signatures and they were all hybrids.

"This smell... Xacha, is it really you?" Now that most of the smells were gone and with the hybrid so close, Scarlett's nose could easily perceive the familiar scent which in turn jogged her memory.

Xacha was an Emperor Beast even older than Scarlett was. In a sense, Scarlett considered her almost as a relative. Xacha was the mother of all Nues, a feline species of Emperor beasts.

She had the head of a monkey, the body of a tiger, the wings of an eagle, and the front half of a snake for a tail. Both the Nue and the Scorpicores were chimeras, sharing light magic as one of two innate elements.

The other one was fire for the Scorpicores and air for the Nue.

"How could you do something so cruel to your own home? To yourself? Have you gone insane?" Scarlett asked. She remembered the Nue being a gentle and kind soul. To the point that she had refused to take the mantle of Lord of the Forest because of her hate for violence.

"I have no idea how you could find me so quickly, but it doesn't matter." Xacha's voice wasn't feminine anymore. It was the flat and cold tone of an undead who didn't care for their past anymore.

"As for your question, what kind of mother would let her children starve?" The creature that came out of the cave barely resembled the Emperor Beast that Scarlett remembered.

Xacha had now a horned skull for a head, her body had turned white snow, and she was capable of standing on her hind legs 3 meters (9'10") tall, having become more humanoid than before. Xacha's empty eye sockets were lighted by red undead energy.

"I don't know what you are talking about, but nothing justifies such a blatant abuse of Forbidden magic." Scarlett's eyes became stone cold as she guessed what kind of changes had Xacha put herself through.

"It's not Forbidden magic if it's done for the greater good. All kinds of creatures will be able to benefit from my discovery! Normally, a mana and a black core cannot coexist, but what happens if you add blood core?

"Being made of darkness magic, a blood core can withstand the Chaos of the black core, while its red part made of pure life force can nurture a weakened mana core, prolonging its existence.

"What I've found it's the cure for all illnesses. Something so great that it can defeat death itself. This is my legacy for all of our children, who will be able to thrive as perfect life forms."

"The only problem is that both the black and blood core need a lot of energy, but I'm certain that with enough time I will be able to solve this issue as well." Xacha said.

"Are you out of your mind? Your current form is far from perfect. To survive just for a few months, you have killed thousands and completely destroyed the balance of the forest! Mogar will not allow this."

"Foolish cat. Mogar doesn't care about any of it. Otherwise how could it let so many bad things happen? Why Abominations and undead are the only ones allowed to live forever while all the other creatures live a life of pain before dying?" Xacha asked.

"I could tell you that pain is a constant of life and that the immortality you envy so much has a heavy price, but I'm tired of listening to your nonsense. Have at you!" Scarlett had hoped to appeal to whatever good there might be left in the Nue, but after seeing the monstrosities Xacha had turned herself into, she had given up.

She used that time to cast her Light Sovereign array. It projected a white six pointed star inscribed in a white circle that filled its area of effect with the light element so that using Chaos magic was impossible.

On top of that, it created a natural source of light energy that allowed Scarlett to skip conjuring energy and go straight to manipulate it, making her casting speed much faster.

Unfortunately, the Nue was on her same page and had used that time to cast more than just an array.

To turn herself into a hybrid, Xacha had used forbidden magic and sacrificed countless lives. It had allowed her to merge her body with part of an Abomination and a Grave Lord she had raised with Necromancy.

She now had three different minds capable of parallel thought, resulting in triple casting. The Nue unleashed the Life Suppression array while her Abomination side cast the tier three Chaos magic Void Rain.

Void Rain produced a volley of Chaos arrows as fast as bullets, but because of Light Sovereign's effect, they immediately turned back into slow darkness projectiles. Only thanks to her array did Scarlett have the time to block them by conjuring stone shields with a wave of her hand.

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Life Suppression, however, was a tougher client. It conjured a black five pointed star inscribed in a red circle which allowed the person at its center to feed on the energy the array drained from everything inside its area of effect.

Scarlett inwardly cursed as she realized that both her array and her life force were being turned against her, making the Nue even more powerful.

"Yes! I knew it! You are the key to my research." Xacha said as the flood of nutrients made the hunger that had tormented her ever since her metamorphosis disappear.

Black flames erupted from her neck, enveloping her skull as her body started to mutate once again.

"What goes around comes around, pal." Scarlett reacted quickly, turning her Light Sovereign into its darkness magic counterpart. Normally she would have suffered from its deadly effects as well, but thanks to Life Suppression, all of its energy was redirected to the Nue.

The black flames disappeared as the hybrid started to wither. Life Suppression injected the poisonous darkness energy directly into Xacha's cores, making it spread like wildfire.

"No! All the life force I have collected. Lost!" Darkness magic was the bane of both undead and Abominations. Xacha could feel her blood and black core weakening as the darkness magic seeped through them until it almost reached her mana core.

Her tail fell onto the ground, turning into specks of darkness before fading into nothingness.

"Look at yourself and at what you have become. Do you understand now? Abominations and undead leave no corpse behind because they are simply shadows of their former self.

"If there's anything left in you of the kind Nue I knew, let me give you a painless death." Scarlett said, dispelling Shadow Sovereign a second after Xacha did the same for Life Suppression.

"Shut up! What good is a mother who can't protect her own children? I refuse to die!" The sky blackened and the earth trembled. A black pillar descended from the thunderclouds that were blotting the sun and enveloped the Nue.

"Do you see it? Mogar agrees with me! This is my world tribulation. The planet still considers me one of its Guardian candidates!" Dark clouds gathered and spun around the two Emperor Beasts as Xacha's form became covered in black scales.

"You're only half right." Scarlett said. "The black pillar is just a sign that Mogar has relinquished any hope for you. You're turning into an Eldritch and there's no way back from that. You're right about the tribulation part, though.

"Only it's not yours." Scarlett was forced back into her bestial form and then her body started to change, doubling its size. Her fur morphed into red scales as thick as a shield and a new set of feathered wings appeared on the Scorpicores back right beside her membranous ones.

Her muzzle turned into a mask of fire, only her eyes remained visible. Scarlett's red mane erupted into a raging purple flame, hot enough to blacken the ground below her.

The Emperor Beast roared as she attacked the Eldritch with her claws. The two creatures rolled on the ground, spraying red or black blood whenever one of them managed to wound her opponent.

Soon Scarlett realized her mistake. Her fangs and claws were as sharp as those of the Eldritch, but she lacked the deadly touch such creatures possessed. Each wound Xacha's new body inflicted to Scarlett would also drain her life force, mending the Eldritch's wounds.

The scorpion's sting at the end of Scarlett's tail stung Xacha multiple times. At such close range, neither of them could cast spells and the Eldritch was quickly getting the upper hand since she could heal and attack at the same time.

"What good is venom against someone who has no blood? You took everything from me, so I will slowly savor your death." In her Eldritch form, Xacha's heart was quickly being replaced by the hunger that plagued all Abominations.

She was aware that after killing Scarlett, her own cubs would be her next prey. She was too hungry to care anymore for such a dead weight. Her mind was becoming colder and more calculative by the second.

'It's all Scarlett's fault! If not for her meddling I would still be a Nue. All of my hard work is ruined!' Xacha train of thought was interrupted by a sudden burst of pain coming from her back.

A Scorpicores tail didn't inject venom. Plants, undead, Abominations, there were too many creatures that would be immune to such a weapon. Acid, on the other hand, worked the same way on all kinds of enemies.

The surprise made the Eldritch falter long enough for Scarlett to escape from her deadly embrace and take flight. She was bleeding from multiple deep wounds and her red scales had been blackened by the Eldritch's parasitic touch.

'That does it! Mogar is truly a scumbag. How can it give Xacha a power up, turning her into an Eldritch in the middle of our fight while giving a tribulation to me? Not only does it not give me a single advantage, but also if I fail it, I'll die, no matter the result of the fight.' Scarlett thought, using light fusion to treat her wounds.

Xacha was still getting used to her new body, but since air was one of her innate elements, she was able to fly better than Scarlett. The Scorpicores only had the time to wave a single spell before the enemy caught up with her.

'Damn if I miss my pince-nez. It would help me to understand how much power Xacha has left. Too bad that Chaos magic is too dangerous. If I take any artifact out of my pocket dimension, I risk it getting destroyed. I only have one trick left at this point.'

Scarlett kept dodging and stinging with her tail at her opponent, trying to stall for time as long as she could. Eldritchs were indeed powerful, but because of their hunger, they consumed mana even while standing still.

They needed a constant supply of energy to survive, so during such a heated battle, a newborn Eldritch like Xacha couldn't last long. She had yet to learn how to use her new abilities to their fullest.

Xacha was well aware that the tables had been turned. Each sting of Scarlett's tail opened a new wound, making her hunger worse. In the few seconds they had played airborne tag, she had consumed a lot of vitality just to keep up with her opponent's speed.

Xacha was eager to finish the duel and find something to eat. She focused her remaining energies into a full powered tier four Chaos magic spell, Hollow Void. The black spear erupted the moment Scarlett was forced to slow down to avoid a patch of tall trees.

At such a close range, the spell was unavoidable.

'Finally! Here's my chance!' Scarlett thought as she unleashed a powerful tier four spell, Light Pillar. For a split second, the two spells clashed and Howling Void easily pierced through construct, but Scarlett was expecting that.

She reversed the light into darkness, so that the opponent's Chaos magic stripped her own spell of its light element turning the Howling Void into normal darkness magic and vice versa. Thanks to her ruse, Xacha had unwillingly turned Scarlett's Dark Pillar into a Chaos spell.

The huge energy mass was too big and too fast to dodge. The Eldritch took the full force of the Chaos Pillar, dying on the spot.

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Scarlett didn't fare much better. Darkness magic was slow, but she was still close to its source and she was wounded.

She managed to only partially dodge the incoming attack and crashed to the ground with half of her side destroyed by Xacha's spell. She gritted her teeth to not lose consciousness and used Invigoration to escape from the jaws of death.

After she recovered from her wounds, Scarlett was surprised to notice that she was still in her pseudo Guardian form. She waited to be back to her peak condition before taking the Eyes of Menadion out of her pocket dimension.

Much to her surprise, the artifact could still perceive Xacha's life force running under the Gheluan forest in the form of an intricate network of hybrid tentacles. They were all converging into the cave from which the mad Nue had emerged.

Scarlett stepped inside the cave, finally able to make sense of Xacha's ramblings about her offspring. In the middle of the cave, inside two gelatinous pods, there were the remains of two smalls Nues.

The tendrils that Scarlett had seen and fought up to that point were coming out of the pods, providing the cubs with a constant flow of nutrients.

They were the size of ten years old child, but they were skeletal and on the verge of death. Up until Xacha's death, the tendrils had harvested life force just to keep them alive.

Thanks to her pince-nez, Scarlett could see a black core inside their bodies. Somehow it had taken a deep root, to the point that without it the small Nues wouldn't be able to survive.

"They must have been infected during the monster outbreak." Scarlett pondered.

"Judging from what I see, the Abomination must have been killed before its seeds could properly develop. Once the creature died, Xacha's children must have started to slowly die due to the black core fading.

"Emperor Beasts have an amazing vitality, but in this case, it would be a curse. It must have taken them weeks to get to this point. Weeks during which Xacha could only watch them suffer. It must have driven her mad."

Scarlett was really close to the truth. The creatures involved in the so called monster outbreak weren't actually monsters, just Abominations hidden behind a meat mask. One of them managed to spread its disease to some of the creatures of the forest before being captured.

When Xacha had realized her cubs were among the victims, she had begged the Lord of the Forest, Myshar the Unicorn, to spare the Abomination. To keep it alive long enough for her to safely extract the black cores or at least find a cure for her cubs' condition.

Yet Myshar refused. She knew that any attempt would have been pointless. That a corrupted core was beyond saving and that leaving the Abomination alive would only mean giving it more chances of escape.

Xacha wasn't the only one struck by that tragedy, but unlike the other parents, she couldn't find the strength to put her down her small, innocent pups. She had used all the ingredients she had, all the artifacts she possessed just to buy them one more week, then one more day until she struggled to prolong their lives of even one second.

It was then that her mind had snapped, making her turn to Forbidden magic to solve her problem. The other beasts called it madness, but to Xacha it was an epiphany. If they needed the black core to survive, then she only needed to find a way to make it thrive.

The answer was so simple that she almost couldn't believe it. Her research needed test subjects, but luckily the forest was full of life. When Myshar had realized what was happening, it was too late.

Xacha's hybrid form fueled by her madness and countless sacrifices proved to be too strong for her.

Scarlett watched at the pods and at their content. Her heart ached at the idea of killing such helpless creatures, but she had no choice. Even if she managed to somehow stabilize their condition, those hybrids were cursed to experience the worst of their three worlds.

Like an undead, they would never physically grow.

Like an Abomination, they would live in perpetual hunger. Last, but not least, it was only a matter of time before they regained some form of consciousness and either committed suicide or fell into desperation once they understood how cruel their destiny was.

Through the gel of the pods, Scarlett could hear their small voices moaning in pain, their bodies squirming now that Xacha's death had stopped the tendrils from working. She had no idea what kind of magic the Nue had used, and the young creatures were in agony.

A wave of her pawn released enough darkness magic to shut down their pain receptors before giving them a peaceful death. They didn't even notice it, Scarlett made sure to make them fall asleep before putting them out of their misery.

Only after the last hybrid was dead did the sky clear and the earth cease its trembling.

'Wait, what? Wasn't the tribulation about killing Xacha but releasing the cubs? Then why did nothing happen when I met Lith? He's a hybrid too, but Mogar didn't want me to put him down. Isn't he supposed the potential Guardian of death or something? Then what am I...'

Her streak of unanswered questions was interrupted by an all too familiar feeling. It was like a stomach-ache, but worse. As if instead of bile, she had to puke molten lava.

'No! Please, not now. I've waited for over a hundred years for my core to evolve and it happens now? I'm never coming back to the Gorgon Empire. This place is bad luck!' Scarlett thought as the impurities accumulated inside her body over the years were expelled.

The pain she was experiencing made the fight with Xacha look like a pleasant experience.

A few weeks had passed since Lith had resumed his duty as a Ranger. Lutia was already free from snow and bad weather, whereas spring had yet to reach the Kellar region.

After the events of Zantia, everything became quiet. Despite the chilly winds and black clouds on the horizon, the northmen could see all the signs that announced the end of winter.

Days would pass now between snowstorms and the bad weather would last hours instead of days. Soon the roads would be open again and supplies wouldn't be an issue anymore. Rich and poor alike could plan their tomorrow without fear, so there wasn't much for Lith to do.

He had often the time to visit Kamila and his parents, but most importantly, he had received full access to some of the most important libraries of the Kingdom. It allowed him to gain a complete understanding of the basics of higher Necromancy and to learn all about the known undead species.

"Fuck." Lith said with a dejected voice, drawing on himself several looks of reproach. He had searched for years for that knowledge, working day and night for the Griffon Kingdom to get his hands on everything known to mankind about undeath.

It was a vital step in his research to escape from the cycle of death of rebirth that had worried him since his reincarnation on Mogar. Like if often happens, the answers he got weren't the ones he had hoped for.

Chapter 624 Raid Part 1

Thanks to all the merits he had racked during the past year, Lith had been granted access to the Royal Library. It was the biggest and most complete library in the Griffon Kingdom, covering all the subjects known to mages, including the forbidden ones.

The library was comprised of many floors, one for each element. Normal books could be checked out freely, whereas to consult forbidden books it was necessary to spend merits and receive a recommendation letter from someone with a high clearance level.

In Lith's case, both Professor Marth and Vastor had vouched for him along with his commanding officer. Lith was now sitting behind at a hardwood table, surrounded by fellow mages in search of knowledge.

The city of Valeron, the capitol of the Griffon Kingdom, was surrounded by all kinds of protective arrays and because of them, Lith couldn't put the valuable tomes inside Soluspedia to read them all in a single moment.

Dimensional magic would allow spies and thieves to freely Warp, so it had been sealed. Lith and Solus had spent the last few hours reading tomes about Necromancy, to see if among the undead species there was one suitable for Lith's tastes.

Unfortunately, despite having even checked the legendary creatures' section, their quest had ended up in failure.

'Sigh, why real vampires suck so bad? They have so many limitations that now I can understand why despite becoming a vampire is relatively safe and easy no mage wants to be turned into one.' Lith thought.

'Please, if there was such a thing as an immortal and eternally young species that had no weakness at all, outside becoming a disco ball under the sunlight, they would have ruled Mogar for millennia.' Solus said, yet despite her mockery, she was dejected as well.

As long as Lith was human and with a cracked life force at that, he was bound to die sooner or later. Solus had no intention of letting that happen, but just like Lith, she was now clutching at straws.

According to the tomes of the Royal Library, there was a way for Lith to safely become an undead and retain all of his memories.

Unlike Necromancy, that worked on corpses that no longer had a working brain and mana core, many species of undead could slowly turn a living being into one of their own.

In such a case, the subject would never really die. A blood core would take form inside their bodies and grow over time, replacing their mana core the moment their heart ceased to beat.

The problem was that there was no undead specie without absurd or crippling limitations. Most of them were unable to even move during the day, trapped in a forced slumber no matter the danger they were in or how deep below the earth they hid.

Others, like the Banshees, couldn't cross water and would die if they fell into a river or a lake. Yet their biggest weakness was their inability to use light magic. For someone like Lith, who had spent countless hours to become a Healer, it was an unacceptable trade.

To make matters worse, light magic wasn't just needed to heal others. Without it, Lith would also be unable to Forgemaster truly powerful artifacts and even to use dimensional magic as freely as he had always done.

Blink, one of his bread and butter spells during fights, required light magic and so did Switch. Undead weren't completely unable to use light magic, but since their blood core was unable to assimilate it from its surroundings, they had to consume their own life force in order to produce light energy.

It meant that if Lith decided to turn into an undead, just to Forgemaster a single item he would need to consume the equivalent of a pigpen of food. Some undead were picky about who they could feed upon and of course, their victim had to be alive.

Lith couldn't store living humans inside his pocket dimension and he couldn't bear the thought of traveling with a caravan of slaves. He would have to feed and care for them every day just to murder them later.

'I can be morally flexible, sure, but where the heck do I keep so many people at all times without being found out and hunted down? Liches have no such problems, but after reading a lot about them, I don't think it's something I'd like to become.

'First, there is no sure fire way to become one. I would need to spend years to find a way suitable for my unique mana core and life force, just for a measly 10% success rate, with no do-overs. My luck always sucked, so I don't feel like playing with dice.

'Also, the phylactery is a huge weak point. It cannot be stored in a dimensional item and it can't be too far. On top of that, after meeting Zolgrish, I discovered another weak point Liches have.

'If I can seal space with an array and I cut them off from the link with their phylactery, both their physical and magical strength will be halved, plus they would become unable to recover their mana.' Lith thought, not knowing he had just discovered the principle underlying Leegaain's anti Lich spell.

'Unless they bring it with them.' Solus pointed out.

'That's too risky. Life Vision, your mana sense, Scarlett's pince-nez. There are countless ways to spot such a powerful object and even if the Lich might somehow cloak it, the constant stream of mana and life force would betray its position.'

Lith was right, yet most ancient Liches would rather bring their phylactery around with them while fighting a truly dangerous opponent than being one-shotted.

'I can definitely discard becoming an undead as an option, unless I'm either desperate or I discover a new species with acceptable limits. Creating a new race all by myself might as well take all the lifespan I've left and I would have no certainty of success.' He thought.

'I don't like the idea of turning into an Abomination either. They may be immortal, but so far all the ones I met seemed to be mad, miserable, or both. My best shot is to research ways to improve my life force to prolong my existence while I search for the blueprints of a soul binding artifact.'

After copying everything he might need to improve his true Necromancy, Lith left the Royal Library. Both of his communication amulets were silent, but in his experience, no news were good news.

If the army kept not bothering him Lith could keep exploring the Lost Cities of the Kellar region for clues, whereas not hearing from both his family and Kamila meant that Fallmug had yet to try anything funny.

Lith would have loved to stop torturing him and take him out of the picture once and for all, but he had to play it smart so that no one would suspect him. Thanks to the Tower Warp, he had never left his prey alone for long.

Lith let those morbid thoughts slide and used the capitol's Gate to return to the north. Despite all of its flaws, the army was still the perfect cover to spend a long time away, performing his research night and day.

Among his most recent pet projects, there was crafting with the eyes of the Balor a magical staff that could mimic General Vorgh's, improving the power of the lesser undead he was able to create at will and raid the lost city of Huryole.

Unlike the other ruins he had visited, Huryole was almost perfectly preserved. Gold, jewels, magic books, there were countless things up for the taking. Unluckily, the creatures inhabiting the city made every raid extremely difficult.

Chapter 625 Raid Part 2

Lith's predecessors hadn't left all that goodies out of the goodness of their hearts. Finding something valuable inside Huryole required luck, plus one had to fight not only against powerful monsters, but also against time.

The lost city was a living labyrinth that would periodically rearrange itself, making any old map useless. To make matters worse, its walls couldn't be affected by earth magic, dimensional magic was sealed, and destroying the walls to make haste only made the cursed item that ruled Huryole angry.

Normally, the problem with the inhabitants of a lost city was that they would grow in power and numbers over time. It was a Ranger's duty to cull them and reset their power before they became too strong.

In Huryole's case, however, the number of creatures that spawned and their power was fixed. Even the monsters had a hard time finding their way out of the city and Lith only had to kill those who managed to reach the external barrier before they could breach it.

From the outside, the lost city looked like a giant stone dome. The only entrances were located at the ground level and breaking the dome would make the cursed object who 'protected' the city turn the whole Huryole into a rampaging golem.

Flight was useless as well, making many wonder what lay at the center of the city and for what purpose it had been built. Lith couldn't stop thinking how odd it was that Rangers were allowed to take for themselves whatever they recovered from it.

Huryole was also nicknamed "The Cursed Training Ground".

Lith used his badge to bypass the magical barrier isolating the city and checked the reset counter. The labyrinth would randomize itself at fixed intervals, so he had to make sure that it wouldn't happen any soon.

Otherwise, if a combat lasted for too long or if he managed to get deep into Huryole, Lith would risk becoming trapped inside the city. According to the counter, the next reset was in half a day, so Lith went directly inside.

'I swear, this place is oddly familiar. The rooms are always different, but the vibe here is something I already experienced somewhere else.' Lith thought while crossing a small courtyard, where several training dummies and weapons were orderly lined up.

A quick check with Life Vision confirmed to him that there was nothing valuable. The only magical aura in the room belonged to the walls encasing the courtyard. Solus used her spirit magic to pick up the weapons and use them to strike down the dummies.

"Why did you do that?" Lith asked as the last strawman was cut into half.

'Cursed training ground, training dummies, I thought maybe there was a reward for clearing the task.' She replied.

"Yeah, if this was a video game, you might be right. Real life is a bit different, though. No one rewards you for completing menial tasks." Lith's voice oozed with sarcasm.

The following room looked like a warehouse of some kind. Wooden cupboards and shelves were lined against the wall, while multiple vases filled with food lay around, enchanted with an unknown spell that prevented it from rotting.

'Jackpot!' Lith thought. 'I've never seen this kind of pseudo core before. I wonder if I'm the first to...' A quick use of Invigoration made him lose interest.

'Damn, the pseudo core it's too complex compared to a dimensional item. This thing is worthless to me.' Lith still copied it down to the smallest detail, just to be safe.

Fake mages couldn't scan magical items as he had just done and even if such a spell was of no use to Lith, the Kingdom might have been interested in buying it from him. The shelves in the room had several books, but after a quick glance, they turned out to be either inventory or account books.

Lith opened the door leading to the next room, surprised that he had yet to find a crossroad or a monster. Up to that point, his path had only one way in and one way out, making a map pointless.

'The outer layers have always been easy, but never this simple. If it keeps like this, I could get really deep into Huryole. Why is my paranoia sense tingling, though?' Lith thought.

'Well, maybe because if it's easy to get in then it's also easy to get out? It's not like this place is inhabit...'

'Thanks, Solus. Way to jinx it!' Lith said as he stepped inside what looked like a dorm, running into a Mage Slayer and a White Lady. They were two kinds of undead who were able to stay awake during the day, as long as they avoided direct sunlight.

Unfortunately for Lith, all the light inside Huryole was artificial, so that his enemies could move without problems. A Mage Slayer was usually born from the dying body of a powerful swordsman.

In their new form, they would be unable to use fake magic, but their undead nature combined with their skills allowed them to channel the elemental energy into their swordplay.

They weren't true mages, but they were able to cast spells without any chant or hand signs. They just needed to perform a series of attacks to unleash all kinds of elemental attacks up to tier three.

On top of that, magic was their source of nourishment, making all kinds of direct spells useless against them, no matter their tier. Both fake and true mages had a hard time facing someone with infinite stamina that could use magic by simply swinging their blades in close combat.

The Mage Slayer in front of Lith looked like a featureless humanoid mass of orange gas wielding a longsword covered in runes of power. Its red eyes were fixated on him, seething with hunger.

Inside the borders of Huryole, all the creatures the labyrinth spawned couldn't die, but that didn't mean that they would be freed from their needs.

'Why is its sword covered in runes? Aren't they supposed to disappear after the Forgemastering process ends?' Solus thought, glad to have the opportunity to share part of her memories without giving out her secret.

"Why is your sword covered in runes?" Lith asked with a sarcastic voice, talking to Solus more than to the Mage Slayer. The creature rushed at Lith, its blade slashing the air in front of itself to unleash a fireball.

'Sorry, Solus. It says it doesn't feel ready to share on a first date.' Lith thought while clapping his hands. It conjured a spinning air dome that sucked the fireball and deflected it against the White Lady.

Born from the corpse of a woman who had killed her own children, White Ladies were capable of using only two elements, water and darkness. They needed to feed on the life force of children and they extracted it by drowning them.

The undead was wearing a tattered wedding gown. The pristine white of the dress emphasized her grey necrotic flesh. Due to the prolonged lack of food, the White Lady was unable to retain her humanoid physical appearance and was reduced to a zombie-like creature.

Yet her hunger didn't diminish her magical powers one bit. She hurled a powerful stream of water that enveloped the fireball and snuffed it out like it was a candle. The White Lady shrieked in anger while looking at her companion with so much anger that Lith hoped she would attack the Mage Slayer.

Chapter 626 Loot Part 1

'White Ladies are weak to fire. According to the gazillion books I consulted recently, they burn like gasoline. I don't know what kind of relationship these two have, but if they coordinate their attacks I'll be in a pinch. I must even the field.' Lith thought.

The Mage Slayer ignored the White Lady's grievances and jumped at Lith's spell, incapable to see past the meal served in front of itself. Lith dispelled his air dome and struck with the Gatekeeper sword infused by darkness magic, the only element Mage Slayers couldn't feed upon.

The creature was unable to scream, but its eyes went wide open as the enchanted metal pierced through the orange gas, creating a gaping hole the size of a soccer ball on its chest for a split second.

'Solus, wasn't his heart supposed to be there?' Lith asked. Their vengeful heart was the source of all the powers a Mage Slayer had and also their weak point. Only a physical weapon could destroy it, but finding it wasn't easy.

The undead could move it freely inside their gaseous body, even while they were fighting.

'Yes, it was. Now it's in the nether regions.' She replied. Lith's Life Vision was blinded by the magical gas that made up the Mage Slayer's body, but her mana sense was keen enough to follow the heart's movements.

The White Lady had never stopped hurling new water. She was using it to shape a water cage to drown Lith. He was an adult, so he was bound to taste like horseshit, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

Lith blocked the lunge of the Mage Slayer, interrupting both its attack and its spell while unleashing a stream of lightning from his hand. The electricity traveled through the water and entered the White Lady's mouth, setting her ablaze from the inside.

It wouldn't have been so easy in normal circumstances. The starvation had turned her flesh into dried meat, making it even more inflammable than a White Lady already was.

The undead turned into a pyre while screaming in agony. It took her less than a second to be reduced to a wet pile of ashes.

Now that Lith could focus on a single opponent, he conjured a thick layer of spirit magic around himself. It would be useless against a gaseous opponent, but the enchanted blade the Mage Slayer was using was physical.

Lith used spirit magic to envelope the sword more each time it clashed with his Gatekeeper, making it slower as his grip over the blade of the enemy became stronger. The Mage Slayer wasn't able to use fusion magic and with its sword being constantly pulled in random directions, it was unable to complete a single spell

Soon the second undead was at Lith's mercy.

Spirit magic kept its blade locked in Lith's left hand while the Gatekeeper in his right hand cut through its body so fast that its heart was perfectly visible, no matter where the Mage Slayer moved it.

Lith cut the heart into small pieces and kept cutting it until the smoke stopped regenerating. Unfortunately, the sword disappeared as soon as the undead was vanquished.

A Mage Slayer's physical body actually consisted of two parts: the heart and the blade.

'It's very odd, Solus. According to the books, the sword should be an exact replica of the blade master's weapon. Yet in the pictures we found, their enchanted weapons had nothing special. I'd remember so many runes.' Lith thought.

'Yeah. It's likely due to Huryole being very ancient. If the Mage Slayer was centuries old, maybe so it was the Forgemastering process they used when it was still alive. It's too bad that conjured blades have no pseudo core. We might have learned a lot.' She sighed.

'Look at the bright side. If the path in front of us continues to be straightforward, those creatures would have reached the exit in no time and then we would have been forced to come here to slay them.

'Not only did we save ourselves a trip, but also we might get deeper inside the city than anyone else ever managed to!' Lith replied, regretting his words the moment he thought them.

'Way to jinx it, Lith.' Solus chuckled, hoping that for once they would be lucky.

Before moving on, Lith searched the room. The dormitory was a long rectangular room, and least 100 meters (330 feet) long with four-poster beds lined up against the wall. In front of each bed there was a dimensional chest, ready to be imprinted.

'This is even odder. According to Professor Wanemyre, a magical item that's not imprinted can't last long. Then how can these dimensional chests be in perfect condition?' Lith thought.

'Maybe they are also full!' Solus said.

'I told you to look at the bright side, not to start daydreaming. This is barely the third room. We might as well be like the hundredth visitor or something.' Lith still imprinted one of the chests to probe its contents.

It contained a chamber pot, some kind of odd looking pajamas, and a set of items for personal hygiene.

'This place must be very old if they expected the residents to use chamber pots. It means they had yet to discover how to use mana crystals to obtain tap water.' Lith thought.

Their path kept being straightforward only for a few more rooms. Lith found a training weapons warehouse, an office filled with paperwork written in an unknown language, and a canteen bigger than the village of Lutia before they met a crossroads.

At that point, Lith checked his pocket watch and started to draw a map. During his past visits, he had never managed to get very far due to his busy schedule and the abundance of monsters.

According to the army's information, every time a monster was killed, it was sent back to square one, near Huryole's core. Also, the city was built on multiple levels and all the rooms would be shuffled every time the labyrinth rearranged itself.

Lith had no idea what floor the city core was on, nor where the good stuff could be stored. Yet the prospect of finding ancient artifacts and study the pseudo core of a being capable of resurrecting its minions without taking away their free will drove him to continue his search.

After several more offices, pantries, and even an inner garden bigger than a football stadium, Lith was about to run out of time. He started to run and avoided searching the rooms hoping to find something useful.

When he stumbled into a Forgemastering lab, Lith knew that it would be his last stop. There were so many enchanted items to almost blind their magical senses. The Forge in the middle of the room was made of an unknown metal.

One second it was white with black veins all over it and the next second it was black with white veins. The Forge was solid, but its surface constantly changed, as if there were two colliding forces battling for dominion over it

Lith struck it with the hilt of the Gatekeeper, making it emit a crystal clear sound he had never heard before.

'Solus, this thing isn't made of Adamant, right?' He asked while placing his hand on the Forge and using Invigoration.

'Nope. I have no idea what it is, but its mana flow is magnificent.'

Lith couldn't agree more. Unlike his Adamant Forge, the one in front of him was able to draw in the world energy and compress it to the point it almost had a pseudo core even though it wasn't enchanted.

Chapter 627 Loot Part 2

Lith tried to lift the Forge, but it weighed too much, even for his inhuman strength.

'Damn! Without dimensional magic, we cannot store it nor warp it away!' Lith inwardly cursed non stop.

'You could make it float with a spell, but this thing is too big to get it out of here by crushing through the walls. The cursed object that oversees this place would kill us before we manage to escape.' Solus said.

Lith tried to lift it with a spell anyway. Much to his surprise, an external source of mana blocked his spell and the room started to rumble as an earthquake was about to bring down the roof. The quake stopped the moment Lith let the Forge go.

'Let's run away. There's enough mana surrounding us to kill you in the blink of an eye.' Solus warned him. Lith waited a few minutes and resumed searching the room only when Solus confirmed to him that the hostile mana was fading.

Even if it was very old, it was still a Forgemastering lab. After working for two years at the White Griffon, Lith knew how such places were built. He ignored the open cabinets and went straight for the test room, where any competent Forgemaster kept his prototypes.

A weapon rack full with all kinds of swords covered in blue runes was waiting for him.

'Yes!' Lith started picking them up, but after the first blade the rumbling resumed, forcing him to put them back in their place except for one. A second attempt to collect more than one sword confirmed his intuition.

"Okay, fine! They all have the same spell on them after all." Lith's sour grapes claim was followed by a quick read of the textbooks stored in the libraries. Once again, he could only pick one or pay the consequences.

The problem was that they were all written in gibberish and he was dangerously running out of time. The only silver lining in Lith's situation was that even if he was unable to understand the words and all the magic circles depicted were unknown, the basics of Forgemastering were still the same.

Lith and Solus were instantly able to tell the tier of an enchantment just by looking at the complexities of the drawings and the number of pseudo cores each spell was devised to handle.

They picked a small book that was filled with only complex tier five Forgemastering spells.

"Let's just hope they actually have a practical use. With my luck, they might as well be just teaching spells..." Lith choked on those words, finally realizing why the Huryole seemed so familiar to him.

The furniture's design was outdated and he had met the rooms in a random order, but too many things inside the lost city reminded him of the White Griffon academy. Lith would have liked to put his intuition to the test, but there was no time.

He used his flight spell to backtrack, moving as fast as he could while checking the map to not get lost. Solus couldn't help him this time, she was too focused keeping watch against possible threats.

'Watch out! Something big and powerful is coming our way!' She warned him. Lith turned to his right just in time to see and incredibly handsome man with emerald hair and purple eyes came from around the corner.

'Powerful I can believe, but big? Also, what's wrong with his hair? Did he come out of an anime or what?' Lith didn't slow down and set up several barriers, just in case the newcomer was hungry like all the creatures Lith had met during his explorations.

\u003c"Wait! If you help me to get out of here, I'll reward you handsomely!" \u003e Said the green haired man in a forgotten language. Seeing that Lith wasn't even listening, he charged forward with inhuman speed, shapeshifting into his real form.

An emerald scaled dragon the size of three-storey noble house started to give Lith chase, using air magic to support its gigantic wings and gain more speed.

\u003c "I said wait!"\u003e The creature roared while desperately trying to catch up.

Lith had never seen a real dragon before. His first reaction was surprise, immediately followed by his survival instincts kicking in.

'How bad is our situation?' He asked.

'Bright blue core inside the stronger body I have ever seen! Shapeshift?'

Lith was losing ground, so he had his hybrid form's wings emerge from his back.

One of the perks of the Orichalcum Skinwalker was that it was able to revert to its liquid form at will, so even if dimensional magic was sealed inside Huryole, Lith had no need to take it off to be able of shapeshifting.

The wings allowed him to go as fast as the dragon since his much smaller figure had an easier time maneuvering along the corridors. Lith only needed to fold his wings to go through a door whereas his alleged enemy had to revert back to human form.

The emerald dragon was flabbergasted and overjoyed seeing a fellow dragon, so he attempted to speak in draconic.

\u003c "Wait, I mean no harm, little brother. We can get out of here together!" \u003e Too bad that draconic was a guttural tongue so filled with power that it would hurt the ears of a normal human, making them bleed.

Lith took it as some kind of sonic attack and moved even faster.

\u003c "I said stop!"\u003e Outraged by the blatant lack of respect from the lesser dragon in front of him, the emerald dragon breathed bright blue Origin Flames against Lith.

"Thanks, sucker!" Lith replied hurling a jet stream of Origin Flames of his own which countered the enemy attack and produced a conflagration that further enhanced his speed whereas it forced his enemy to stop.

The emerald dragon couldn't cross the raging firestorm in front of himself without risking to die.

'How can a lesser dragon produce such a powerful flame? I only fired a warning shot, but he still managed to block it. Father Leegaain must have become even stronger if even such a hatchling can reach that kind of skill.' He thought.

Lith was back to the straight path, so he could put away the map and focus only on his speed.

'How much until the reset?' He asked.

'Less than five minutes.' Solus's reply made Lith curse.

'That's too much time! I don't want to fight a dragon. I don't even know what they are capable of.'

Lith moved outside the barrier, using his army amulet to call for reinforcements. General Vorgh went pale hearing about the emerald dragon.

"Good gods, him again? The strike team will be there as fast as they can. Do not engage him unless the barrier is at risk. Fighting alone would be a suicide."

Lith nodded while preparing for the worse. Little did he know that the conflagration caused by the Origin Flames had damaged Huryole's walls, making the cursed object overseeing the city react with extreme prejudice.

The emerald dragon was currently fighting for his life against an endless barrage of spells which prevented him from moving even one inch forward.

Vorgh and a full platoon of Spellbreakers arrived less than a minute after Lith's call. They patiently waited for the enemy's arrival, casting several arrays one on top of another and using the barrier's power source to boost their spells.

When the reset time arrived, the whole stone dome surrounding Huryole trembled and the emerald dragon was sent in a remote corner of the city.

Chapter 627.2 Birthday and Anniversary Part 1

"It seems we were lucky, son." Said General Vorgh while dispelling the arrays he was keeping at the ready.

"Usually when Jakra manages to get out, things go downhill fast."

"Is Jakra the dragon's name?" Lith asked.

"No, that's how we call him. Her. Whatever that is. We've tried multiple times to communicate with him, but it never works. A dragon would be a powerful asset, so we've tried bringing language experts and giving him food.

"Yet the only thing he is interested in is getting out, so we are forced to kill him every time. We still have no idea why so many powerful creatures have been locked inside Huryole, but we cannot allow any of them to escape unless we are sure they can be trusted.

"In my book, whoever spews fire first and talks later, is unworthy of trust." Vorgh waved his staff, creating a Warping Array leading to the closest Gate.

"Ranger Verhen, you'll remain here until the next reset. If by then Jakra is still trapped, then you'll resume your regular duty. Don't hesitate to call for help."

After Solus confirmed Lith that they were alone, he Warped to the nearest mana geyser and had her assume her tower form. He had no need to camp in the middle of nowhere when he could use the Surveillance Mirror on the tower's first floor to keep an eye on Huryole from a distance.

"I know it may sound hypocritical coming from me, but I think Vorgh is too paranoid. That dragon can only escape out of pure luck. Huryole has several floors and we never managed to fully explore even one of them in the short time between resets." Lith said, taking their most recent prizes out of his pocket dimension.

"Agreed, but if you look at the bright side, it's like you got a few hours leave." Solus welcomed him in her wisp form.

"Yeah. There are far worse ways to spend your birthday, Solus. Happy birthday." Lith confirmed on his clock that it was more or less the same hour when thirteen years ago he had spoken with Solus for the first time and given her a name.

"Thanks!" She said brimming with joy. She only needed a shred of consciousness to stand watch with the Mirror. The rest was focused on the task at hand. It was one of the most difficult things Solus had ever done, but she wanted to do it anyway.

"Lith, can I ask you something as a birthday present?" She asked.

"Anything you want. Within reason, of course."

"Can you promise me not to get angry?" The wisp rested on his shoulder, wobbling in anxiety.

"I can try. That much I can promise. Are you sure that's all you want for your birthday? You're making me feel like I set the bar so low for you that..."

The wisp left his shoulder and stopped in front of his eyes before starting to grow in size, cutting Lith short in surprise. Soon Solus was in her humanoid form, wearing a simple dress with a flower design that left her shoulders and arms exposed.

"Well? What do you think?" She searched his neck for the vein that she knew would throb whenever he was really angry, no matter how good his poker face was.

"That it was about time you told me. I was really starting to feel left out." Lith said, his neck vein calm and composed.

"Plus, if you waited more, it would have made my birthday present kind of awkward." He handed to her one of the Orichalcum hammers they had forgedmastered. Its shaft was slimmer and more delicate compared to the other one.

The words "Maker of Wonders" had been magically engraved on both sides of the shaft. The hammer's head featured an actual hammer on one side and a pick on the other.

"You knew all along?" Solus felt embarrassed and frustrated at the idea of having spent so much time worrying for nothing.

"It wasn't that hard to guess. First, you refused to keep me company when I bathed..."

"That happened way before I got my body." She thought.

"... then, you started to press me to 'go to sleep' or left me to spend time with Tista. Plus, there was the increase in the food expenses and the bills for clothes Tista bought but never wore.

"If you consider that I knew that once the first floor of the tower would be restored you were meant to acquire your body made of light, it was almost obvious." Lith shrugged.

"So, you're not angry?" She asked.

"No. I know all too well the difference between sharing your secrets because you want to and because you have to. I honestly don't understand the reason why you kept it a secret from me, but I was willing to give you the benefit of the doubt.

"You look gorgeous in that dress, by the way." Solus brimmed with joy at those words, and so did the tower.

She hugged him, feeling for the first time Lith returning the embrace. Solus then told him that the reason she hadn't told him about her new form was that she didn't want to mess up his relationship with Kamila.

"I just wanted you to be happy. I realize that now it??s like you are living together with two women at once and I didn't want to force you to lie to Kamila. I decided to come clean with you because I think my past could help us with your problem."

Solus started to share with him all of her memories, about the Forgemastering method she had witnessed during her visions and how different the enchanted items she remembered of were from those they currently used.

They watched the memory of her adamant hammer over and over, comparing it with the sword they had recently acquired. There was a striking resemblance between them.

"Maybe this Master Menadion of yours was also a teacher in an ancient academy. If I'm right and Huryole really is some kind of twisted version of the six great academies, maybe this sword was one of her works." Lith handed Solus both the book and the enchanted item, hoping they would trigger one of her flashbacks.

Solus ran her fingers over the runes engraved in the blade. Each time she did it, they turned from blue to gold for a split second, emitting each one a different musical note.

"This hasn't been crafted by Master Menadion. Don't ask me why, but I'm sure of it. I think it might have been Forgemastered using one of the techniques she shared, though. It feels so familiar to me that it can't be just a coincidence." She said.

"What about the gibberish. Can you read it?"

"No. What's worse I don't recognize any of these spells. I don't think I have ever seen them before." She replied.

"Maybe it's because Menadion was an Awakened too. If like Master Silverwing she decided to pass her knowledge onto fake mages, this is not what she would have taught you. According to your memories, you were likely to be her Awakened disciple." Lith pondered.

"If you are right, why did she do this to me?" Solus pointed at the tower and then to herself.

"Most powerful mages are batsh*t crazy." Lith didn't know what to tell her.

Chapter 627.3 Birthday and Anniversary Part 2

"Or maybe it was just the result of a failed experiment. The really important question is: do you really want to spend your birthday working or do you have anything in mind?" Lith asked.

"I actually do." Solus took a small package from a secret compartment in the walls.

"Happy anniversary, Lith."

He destroyed the gift paper, revealing a cylindrical ring made of an alloy of gold and Orichalcum, with a blue mana gem set in the middle of it.

"The cloaking ring! That's why you didn't rush me making one. Does it have any special abilities?" Lith's Orichalcum armors had proven to be better than he had planned. The adamant was able to enhance a pseudo core in unexpected ways.

"Not that I'm aware of." Solus said.

Lith imprinted the ring before slipping it on his right forefinger.

"How does my mana core look like now?"

"Red, and your life force appears to be at human levels."

"Interesting. Normal cloaking items do not affect the life force. Maybe it depends on the fact that I'm wearing two at once. Let's see if it works the same for you too." Lith put the ring on Solus's right hand, but she felt her heart pounding anyway.

Her light body disappeared with a pop and her dress fell to the ground.

"Fuuuuu..." Solus's voice made the tower's wall tremble for several seconds until she managed to make her body reappear.

"...ck! That cost me a lot of stamina. We can't check the effects on me until I return in my gauntlet form. To add insult to injury, I don't have much time left before I need to rest. Taking human form drains a lot of energy." She said, her mood was getting worse by the second.

"Then revert to your wisp form. I don't want you to disappear in the middle of dinner. We've waited for too long for the moment when we could share a meal together." Lith said with a sigh.

They spent the time before supper studying the unknown blade. The metal it was made of was nothing special, the mana crystals it was fused with were just cyan, and its pseudo core was rather simple.

If not for the runes, Lith wouldn't have given it a second look.

"I don't get what purpose can engraving runes have. There's nothing special in this blade. Its mana pathways, its mana circulatory system, and even its pseudo core is insignificant."

"Maybe they have a special effect. We should try it out." Solus was out of options. She couldn't find any reason to waste time engraving runes as well.

Lith reluctantly imprinted the blade with his mana. He would have preferred not doing it, because the weapon would have no market value until the moment he died. Solus created a test room, using earth magic to shape several dummies of different durability.

The sword made short work of those as hard as wood, but was unable to put a dent on rocks. Lith channeled his mana through the pseudo core and activated its effect. The pseudo core suddenly grew in size and power, yet the mana pathways remained stable.

The excess energy was drawn to the runes and spread across the entire weapon. A split second later, several air blades cut down all the remaining dummies, even the ones made of stone, before hitting the tower walls.

"Damn, that was unexpected. Are you alright, Solus?"

"Yeah, don't worry. That thing is too weak to hurt me. Do you think what I think?"

"Yes. The runes somehow compress and stabilize the pseudo core, allowing even common iron to withstand such a powerful magical energy. Also, despite the cyan mana crystals, the spell had the same firepower that normally would require blue gemstones." Lith had determined the strength of the spell with Life Vision.

"The problem is that we have no idea how to carve them, nor if their number, kind, or position holds a special significance." Solus said.

"Nor we know when they have to be applied. Before or after the Bonding spell? Before or after the Forgemastering process???? He asked.

Lith opened the booklet, but he couldn't decipher a single word.

"We need a library, an archaeologist, or both."

"I doubt there are many dead language experts. Most of them are likely to work for the Crown." Solus said.

"Sharing our discovery will be the last resort. If this kind of knowledge spreads, Awakened ones will be able to convert it into true magic, just like us. I don't want to lose our edge on the competition." Lith put away both the sword and the booklet, searching his memory for someone trustworthy they could ask for help.

"Maybe and maybe not. Remember that Awakened ones have a long life. This knowledge might be lost to fake mages, but it could be common among the Council or whatever it's called.

"The Crown might actually be aware of it as well. Do you remember the insanely powerful weapons Thrud had? Or Vorgh's staff? They are impossible to make, even at our current level, at least without the runes." Solus pointed out.

"Are you saying that I'm the only idiot who doesn't know about it?"

"No, more like you are part of the 99% population who doesn't have access to it. Also, the book is damn old. Magic makes progress over time, so the method described might be good for you who are starting from scratch but it's likely to be old news.

"Unless we evolve it into something unique by combining it with your talent for Forgemastering and my abilities as a tower, of course." Solus was intrigued by the idea.

Mana geysers gave them an edge that no other mage, even Awakened ones, had.

Lith took it less gracefully. Having spent hours exploring Huryole, risking his life, and almost facing a dragon for almost nothing made him want to scream.

Almost.

"Fine! It's dinner time. Let's eat something and then I'd like for us to do something I always dreamed about ever since I've seen your light body form." Lith said.

Solus needed sheer willpower to not blush. Lith's dirty mind plus seeing him with his girlfriends too many times had rubbed off on her over the years.

When they moved to the dining room, Solus discovered that Lith had stored a small banquet inside his pocket dimension.

He had no idea what Solus liked or disliked, so he had bought a lot of stuff from his favorite restaurants. Most of them were meat dishes, but there were also vegetable soups and grilled fish.

Solus ate to her heart content, brimming with joy. Usually she could only consume food already stored in the tower, but aside from pastries and meat, Lith didn't carry much along with himself, at least not already cooked.

Solus had no idea how to prepare a meal and neither did Tista, so her eating habits until that point had been pretty repetitive. Solus lived it more like a date rather than as a birthday, having all of Lith's attention for herself.

He asked her all about her new body. How it worked, how much she could feel, and experience.

"It doesn't feel like skin, but it's soft, warm, and pleasant to the touch." He said while touching her naked arm while using Invigoration on her. Lith wanted to check if there was any way to speed up her recovery process.

"No. I mean, yes. I mean, thank you." The situation was getting more awkward by the second. Solus was swallowing non stop out of stress.

Chapter 627.4 Odd Ranger Part 1

When Lith started to talk about Forgemastering, things went back to normal.

'So that's what he was he was talking about.' Solus thought, half relieved and half disappointed when they went back to the Forge lab.

"We are, hopefully, the only two people in the whole Mogar who have the same mana signature. Now that you have a body, we can Forgemaster together! Imagine what kind of items we can craft by combining our efforts.

"Not only do we always live, breathe, and work together, but our minds are also linked. I doubt there are many artisans who can match our mutual understanding." Lith said, being overly optimistic.

It turned out that their mana was indeed compatible, but they had two completely different ways of Forgemastering and they had to learn how to adapt to each other. The problem was that Solus had to keep the magic circle, empower both hammers, and Forgemaster, whereas Lith could focus only on shaping the pseudo cores.

On top of that, Solus could only hold her body for a few hours if she did nothing, but Forgemastering exhausted her strength much more quickly. Time was an enemy she couldn't beat.

"With the little time we got, the best we can do is some basic stuff I have no need for anymore. Either we must make you stronger or find a way to speed up the crafting process. We could try again, but this time you step in only during the pseudo core injection phase." Lith proposed after a few test runs.

"Seems like a great idea. Do you mind if we continue another day? I'm so tired that even my wisp is about to collapse." Solus was back in her wisp form, wheezing and panting.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to make you work even on the date of your birthday."

"If you didn't, I would've thought that you had been replaced by an alien shapeshifter." She chuckled.

"Besides, I had a lot of fun. I never feel alive like when we work together, especially on Forgemastering."

"Next time, I keep the circle and you do the crafting. That way I can observe your method and learn how to better coordinate with you." Lith proposed after they had discovered that they couldn't use mind fusion to speed things up.

Fusing their minds caused Solus's body to get assimilated as well, making it impossible for her to wield her hammer. The fusion would allow them to feel what the other felt, but also would flood their minds with each other's thoughts.

Shaping a pseudo core required surgical precision and their conflicting approaches at crafting ended up being a distraction.

As soon as the next labyrinth reset happened and there was no trace of Jarok, Lith received a call on his army amulet. He returned back to Huryole via the Warping Mirror before answering.

"Ranger Verhen, this is Ranger Morok Eari. I supervise the Hessar region and I'm calling you to schedule your yearly evaluation. Are you done with urgent business in Kellar?" Lith had never heard of other Rangers, but he knew about Hessar.

It was the region neighboring his own and according to his books, it wasn't much better. Ranger Eari was a man in mid twenties, about 1.8 meters (5'11") tall, so he was quite tall according to Mogar's standards.

He had black hair and dark eyes. Like most Rangers, he had a stubble a few days old and unkempt hair. There was no reason to keep appearances if you were alone most of the time.

"Yes, I've already taken care of most Lost Cities and I've nothing to do except for patrolling. What do you mean, evaluation? I do regular reports and so do those who request my help. I never heard about a further test." Lith asked.

"It's no standard procedure. A normal Ranger has no need for a yearly evaluation, but so far you have proven to be anything but. The army is interested in putting your abilities to test since you have only one more year left of service.

"If you pass, the top brass might make you a good offer to tempt you to prolong your military career. I'll be in charge during the mission you and I will undertake together." Morok said.

"What kind of mission requires two Rangers at once?" Lith hated teamwork. Tower warping would become impossible with a partner and he wasn't a fan of camping in the open.

"The worst kind." Morok sighed. "Babysitting."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Some poor bastards have discovered ancient ruins inside an underground network of tunnels inside a dungeon and a group of idiotic mages with more money than brain have organized an expedition."

"What does it have to do with us? Can't they pay for their private guards?" Lith was getting annoyed just at the thought of such a job.

"In theory, yes. Ruins, however, are all considered Royal properties unless a team of experts decides otherwise. The Crown cannot allow for lost artifacts or knowledge to fall into the wrong hands.

"To make matter worse, one of those noble mages has a powerful daddy who demanded the best, and that's where we come into play. The ruins are located at the border between our turfs and we were both graded as Monsters from the army."

'He was graded as me? Turf? This man speaks more like a beast than a human. Solus, analysis.' Lith thought.

'Yeah, right. Since when I can evaluate someone from his hologram? I need to see him in person.' Solus replied.

"When and where?" Lith asked, eager to finish the mission quickly.

"Let's meet in Letras. It has a Warp Gate, it's close to our destination, and their roasted pork shank is to die for. I'll wait for you at the Wild Boar tavern. We have a few things to do before picking up the kids, so come prepared. Over and out."

Lith took into account how much time it would take a normal mage to reach his destination and used all the extra time to use Accumulation. One of the problems of conducting experiments was that it left him little time to refine his mana core.

Luckily, a mana geyser combined with his tower allowed him to absorb world energy at a faster rate than normal. Lith's blue mana core needed enormous amounts of world energy for a single cycle of expansion and compression.

'Usually, I'd rush there, but I don't want to raise suspicions by moving too fast. Behind Morok's kind words there could actually be a trap. General Morn never liked me. He is likely the reason for this evaluation.

'He must be doubting my achievements. I bet that pompous ass is envious of how Constable Tyrus rewarded me after Zantia's events. Either it's him, or one of the enemies of Commander Berion is trying to pull a fast one.' Lith thought.

Lith's had no intention of serving in the military more than it was needed. He hated politics and all the struggles that taking a side would result in, but at the same time, he wouldn't allow anyone to take away his merits.

The following day, Lith reached Letras. Solus was back in her ring form, wrapped around the cloaking ring she had crafted. She now appeared as nothing but a fancy stone decoration.

'If this Morok Eari is an Awakened or an Emperor Beast in disguise, at least Solus is safe as long as I give him no chance of using Invigoration on me.' Lith thought.

Chapter 627.5 Odd Ranger Part 2

Letras was a trading city and due to the winter lockdown, dimensional magic was still banned inside its walls to prevent illegal food trades to alter the price markets. Like most of the cities of the Griffon Kingdom, it was divided into three areas.

The outer rim was the biggest and the most populated one.

It was where the commoners lived, the granaries were located, and the resting place for tired travelers like stingy Rangers who wanted to save a few coins but still enjoy a decent meal and bed.

During winter, moving huge loads of merchandise required wagons and draft animals, so the roads were large enough to accommodate three of them at once. One lane was usually reserved for civil servants tasked with removing the brown and yellow snow that would otherwise turn entire city blocks into open outhouses.

The houses were one or two-storey high, made of stone or wood based on the owner's income. They were usually tightly packed with little to no space between them. Entire blocks consisted solely of warehouses, most of which were located near the city gates or bordered on the middle rim to facilitate the transportation of goods.

The middle rim was occupied by merchants' shops, craftsmen's and artists' workshops. Only the middle class could afford a house there. They were all made of stone and at least two storey high. There was enough space between them to have a garden or a small stable.

According to the Desk Sergeant who welcomed Lith when he stepped out of the Warp Gate, the Wild Boar tavern was located in the middle rim.

The ground level consisted of a wooden floor and walls, with several hardwood tables where groups of clients could sit to order their meal.

Those who came in alone would rather sit in front of the counter to enjoy the company of the barkeep, of the other customers, and be served more quickly. The room had a cozy feeling and was lighted by several chandeliers and a big popping fireplace that occupied a good quarter of the east wall.

A whole pig was being roasted over the fire, spreading in the air a delicious smell that made people open up their stomach and loosen their wallet. Lith was no exception, so he ordered a plate of roasted pork and a beer to go with it even before sitting down at Morok's table.

The Ranger was eating one of the tavern's famous pork shank with the appetite of a man who had been stranded for a long time and had forgotten his manners.

'Bright cyan core, excellent physical conditions. According to my mana sense he shouldn't be an Awakened and based on my life sense he is human.' Solus said.

The man had a lean but muscular physique. From the last time Lith had seen him, Morok had cut his hair, but the beard was still there. Except it was now dirty with gravy and the fat dripping from the meat.

"Please, have a seat." Morok said with a full mouth and spitting over most of the table. A powerful burp later, he cleaned his right hand over his shirt before offering it to Lith, who reluctantly shook it.

'If all Rangers are like this guy, I now understand why we have a bad name.' Lith thought.

"It's great to eat warm food without worrying about it getting cold or luring hungry beasts, right?"

Lith nodded, his appetite waning by the second. Morok noticed Lith's eyes staring at the grease stain above his heart which had yet to completely fade.

"Gods, sorry. I almost forgot how a civilized human behaves. I've become too reliant on the self-cleaning properties of our uniform to fix my mess. I'll never be grateful enough for it.

"Without such a marvel, after a few weeks in the open, we'd stink so bad that the stench would kill us faster than any enemy." He laughed, making Lith glad for Solus's company and the safe haven she represented.

"Any question about the mission?"

"Many. How dangerous is it supposed to be?" Lith asked.

"Wish I know. It can go from boring as heck, where the worst thing we have to face is the whining of pampered smarty-pants, to a nightmare where we have to pave our road in blood, steel, and bacon."

"Bacon?" Lith asked regretting the question the moment he heard himself saying it out loud.

"Well, yes. When push comes to shove, we might run out of supplies, and monsters are meat, after all. A man needs to eat." His words sent a shiver down Lith's spine and made him check his food supplies stored inside his pocket dimension.

"How are you supposed to evaluate me if nothing happens?"

"I wish I was still such an optimist. Sh*t always hit the fan, kid. It's only a matter of when. If it's of any consolation, I'm not enjoying this any more than you do. As soon as winter ends, I'm going to retire." Morok replied.

"Retire? You're what, 25?"

"Being a Ranger it's not an easy job. Most people quit after two years, four tops. I've been a Ranger for six years now. I've done my part and now I'm eager to convert my merits in a noble title, get me some lands, a missus, and dedicate my life to magical research.

"As for you, I heard you are a bounty hunter and now even a Spellbreaker. This mission is the perfect task to put your abilities to the test. When exploring ruins, the real danger doesn't come from monsters or magical beasts.

"The real threat usually comes from the human sitting right beside you." Suddenly, Morok's jovial mood disappeared. He took a dramatic pause, looking at some point past Lith.

He had the expression of a man who had experienced one betrayal too much and was now lost in unpleasant memories.

Lith felt an odd sense of kinship toward the fellow Ranger. At least until Morok stood up and said.

"Man, the food here is great, but it runs through your stomach as if it Warps. See you in a jiffy."

Lith sighed, wondering what kind of a moron he had been paired with while pondering Morok's words.

'Interesting. So the army suspects that someone inside the group might be a foreign spy interested in our ruins.' Lith thought.

'Or maybe they want to prevent an internal strife. In case of a big discovery, a lot of people might be tempted to cause an "accident" to take credit for it. It's not just a matter of fame or glory, but also of the reward that the Crown would bestow upon the one who contributes the most.' Solus suggested.

After Morok returned, they went stockpiling for food and everything they could need during the following days. Once they were done with the preparations, the two Rangers left Letras by flight.

"Our destination is the crystal mines in the duchy of Laroxya. The rest of the expedition should arrive shortly." Noticing Lith's surprised look, Morok quickly added.

"Do you remember the monster outbreak? Well, some crazy-ass goblins raided the permanent guard post that protects the mines. Normal monsters would have been easily killed, but the little bastards could fire some black rays from their hands that pierced through our defenses like they were made of paper."

Lith had no idea how to call it, but he had seen Chaos magic enough times to recognize it from its effects.

Chapter 627.6 Gathering Part 1

"Our defenses? You were there?" Lith asked.

"Of course, I was. That's my turf and the Kingdom spends big money to protect something like a crystal mine. They are more valuable than even platinum. Their production can't stop even during winter because even magical research would be affected.

"Thanks to their weapons and arrays, the guards managed to hold on until my arrival, but there wasn't much even I could do. You know goblins, right? Well, they were a frigging army, each one capable of using normal magic and those black rays as well.

"Once I realized we had no chance against such an assault, I detonated the arrays to buy us some time and lead the survivors inside the crystal mines. We went to its deepest tunnels and then I used earth magic to bring us even deeper.

"Usually doing such a thing is idiotic, raw crystals are unstable and earth magic could make them detonate. That's why you need specialized personnel and Crystalsmiths to work in the mines. Yet between a likely death and certain death, the choice was obvious.

"We walked for days, with only my rations to feed dozens of people, constantly on the run. Somehow, the goblins would always find us, and to make matters worse, they seemed to become better at magic over time.

"Long story short, we found the ruins by sheer luck. While escaping, we crossed an underground network of tunnels we weren't even aware of. At that point, our luck turned. The goblins stopped following us and I finally had the time to wait for reinforcements. You can easily guess the rest." Morok said.

'Fuck me sideways! This means that the Abomination inside the goblins had enough time to completely reform and is waiting in the area, or that even such a powerful creature is scared of those ruins. Either way, this is bad.' Lith thought.

Solus opened all of her senses at once. Lith's dirty mind wasn't the only thing that had rubbed off on her over time. Her paranoia was now fully developed too.

"Is that the moment when you consumed monster flesh?" Lith asked.

"Yeah, but not the goblins'. There was something off with them. Their smell, how they moved, heck, they could even talk."

When they landed, Lith casually sniffed his partner. He trusted Solus, but after the experience with the Awakened assassin, he had started to consider that her senses could be fooled.

Morok kept talking like a magical beast. A normal human wouldn't have the time to perceive the goblins' smell in the middle of a crisis. Yet all of his enhanced senses told him the odd Ranger was human.

The entrance to the mines resembled a military fort. A tall, round wall made of stone one meter (3.3 feet) thick surrounded an area the size of a village. Four guard towers stood 10 meters (33 feet) tall, allowing the guards to notice incoming enemies from afar.

Life Vision showed Lith a series of arrays surrounding the fort. All the buildings within the walls were made of stone and in mint condition. At the fort's very center, there was an arch made by stone and huge wooden beams that lead to an underground passage.

"Are you sure this is the place? It's in perfect condition. I don't see any traces of the attack." Lith said,

"Told you. The Kingdome spares no expenses for a crystal mine. Winter or not, they rebuilt it in less than a month."

"Then why not put a Warp Gate? It would allow moving reinforcements and crystals way faster than any other common means of transportation." Lith asked.

"Crystals are unstable. Even the number of arrays in place here is fine-tuned to not trigger a chain reaction. A Warp Gate would be a liability since bending space for such long distances creates ripples that might make the crystals explode.

"That even if there was no array, and defense takes precedence." Morok took several rectangular wooden rods out of one of his dimensional amulets. The rods were about 2 meters (6.5 feet) long and 3 centimeters (1.8 inches) thick.

Each of their four sides was covered with bright red runes, pulsing with power. Lith immediately recognized those rods. They were the same the late Captain Velagros used to build a temporary waypoint near Kandria.

Back then Lith knew nothing about runes and advanced Forgemastery, so neither Solus nor him paid the enchanted item any attention. Now that they had discovered about the importance of the runes, it took them quite an effort to not stare dumbly at them.

'By my maker, each of these things holds only part of the pseudo core. The runes are even more amazing than we thought! They can even allow a magical item to be disassembled and assembled at will.' Solus thought.

'Also, why red runes? Are they different from the blue ones or what?' Lith wondered.

"First time seeing one of these?" Morok asked after noticing Lith's surprise.

"Second time, actually. Do you have any idea why these things have runes on them? Aside from communication amulets, I've never seen them on an enchanted item and I'm a Forgemaster."

"Lucky you! I spend a fortune every time I need to upgrade my equipment. Honestly, I have no clue. Maybe just like the runes on an amulet mark their owner, these runes are related to the coordinates they are locked on." Morok shrugged and started to move away from the mines.

"I wish these things weren't so delicate. It's hard to assemble them when you are under siege, but the worst part is that they can be used only once and are linked to a specific location.

"Even if I had one back then, I couldn't have used it to escape because without a proper structure, the dimensional ripples a Gate generates would have blown up the mines and killed us all." He sighed.

Lith helped Morok to assemble the beams, forming with them a circle on the ground. Solus could see that each time a beam was correctly positioned, the pseudo core fragments would assemble.

The slightest mistake would make them clash, and the beams would disconnect releasing sparks. When they were done, the Rangers had to inject mana into it. It took them time and effort, but after several minutes a Warp Gate materialized above the circle.

"What did I tell you? Spoiled rich kids are the worst. We had to fly here and do all the hard work so that they don't break a sweat. Lazy bastards." Morok said.

Lith was more interested in sharing Solus's mana sense and studying how the runes interacted with the Gate rather than listening to Morok's ramblings. Normal enchanted items couldn't hold spells like flight, healing, or Warp Steps because they required their caster's will to work properly.

A mage could only infuse such spells inside his own magical rings, which was one of the reasons that made even tier three rings expensive and tier four ones prohibitive for most mages.

The pathway, instead, was able to overcome such limitations thanks to the runes. They enveloped the pseudo core, bearing the will of its creator and channeling all the accumulated energy in the beams to connect to a Warp Gate.

The dimensional corridor was big enough to allow several people to cross it together. Those walking through the Gate were all members of research teams from all the six great academies, each one wearing their distinctive uniform.

The clearing was quickly filled with a rainbow-colored mass of people.

Chapter 628 Gathering Part 2

"What the heck? Are we really supposed to take care of so many people with just the two of us?" Lith couldn't believe his own eyes. There were already ten people and more kept stepping out of the dimensional Gate.

"Of course not." Morok replied.

"Each one of these bastards would gladly cut their best friend's throat if it meant getting more funds and recognition. I'm here to guide them to destination and you are here as a contingency measure. For everything else, there's the army." Morok's words garnered him a lot of attention.

Mostly of the bad kind. What he had said was true yet incredibly rude. He was speaking of esteemed Mage Professors and Researchers as they were just common thugs.

Lith recognized the uniforms from the Black, White, Lightning, and Fire Griffon, whereas it was his first time seeing people from the Crystal and Earth Griffon.

"Ranger Verhen!" A young woman greeted Lith by giving him a big hug.

"Dad really has done it. He made you come here with the excuse of the evaluation!"

"What the heck do you mean with that, Quylla?" Lith's paranoia had made him see countless shadows and conspiracies on his path, yet the truth had turned out to be beyond his wildest expectation.

"I told you that there's no one I trust enough to watch my back while on the field. Since you never got the time to accompany me, I had no qualms exploiting my family's influence to get you assigned here."

"Don't worry, miss. Us Rangers are always glad to help hot women." Morok said with his arms open, expecting to receive the same treatment.

"I'm sorry, I don't hug unknown creeps." Quylla replied with a straight face, before letting Lith go. The scene was drawing too many gazes.

Lith went to greet the White Griffon Professor who had brought Quylla along as her Assistant when the real bodyguards stepped through the Gate. It was a five men unit, donning deep green uniforms that identified them as members of an elite troop.

Their clothes granted them protection on par with that of a Ranger, but they also wore enchanted arm, legs, and shoulder guards that increased their defense to the level of a Professor's uniform.

Each one of them had at least a cyan core and excellent physical condition. Their weapons were nothing much, though. They all held the same pseudo cores, giving them several versatile abilities rather than few but powerful ones.

The only exception was their Captain. All of her equipment was custom made and on par with Lith's Gatekeeper, if not even better.

"Lith, what are you doing in the Hessar region?" Phloria asked. She now had very short hair that resembled a pixie cut. It made her look even more tomboyish than usual.

"It's nice to meet you too, Phloria. How are you doing?" Lith was happy not being the rude one for once.

"Pretty well, thanks. I volunteered for this mission to make sure that nothing bad happens to her. I was expecting to meet another Ranger, so you'll excuse my surprise." She said while pointing at Quylla.

"I'm your man, man." Morok offered his hand to her.

"Ranger Eari, at your service. Now that we are all here, let's not waste any more time. We need to fly to the mines and then it takes a long walk to reach our destination.

"Since we're babysitting academics, it might take us days to get to the ruins."

Phloria's soldiers repressed a chuckle, while the Professors and their Assistants threw at the Ranger more gazes filled with contempt. Morok collected the wooden bars forming the temporary gate before leading the group to the mines.

"Is it really necessary to have a guide? We could've found the ruins on our own." A middle aged Professor from the Crystal Griffon asked to Phloria after they landed. He had blue eyes, white hair, and a beard.

"Good luck with that." Morok chimed in.

"I closed the passages as fast as I created them to make it harder for the goblins to follow us. The only traces left are those of the tunnels opened by the goblins, but most of them have collapsed during the chase or shortly after.

"The little bastards only cared about catching us and they made quite a few crystals explode in the process. I'm the only one who can find the way, so shut up and follow me."

After checking their identities, the guards residing inside the fort let the expedition team in. Despite the incident with the monsters, the mines were already fully operational. Carts full of crystals were being unloaded near the entrance before being sent back.

Lith's group was comprised of twelve experts, one Professor and one Assistant from each academy, Phloria's five men unit, and Morok.

The mines had ample corridors, but not big enough to accommodate 19 people while workers and Crystalsmiths did their job. Even though they moved slowly, by the time the group reached the lowest levels, the people from the academy were exhausted.

The Professors were all experts in their fields with decades of experience, which meant they were quite old and more used to sit behind a desk rather than walk on rough terrain.

Their assistants were younger than them, but equally out of shape. None of them was warrior material.

"Girl, you may be pretty, but if you start getting a fat ass at your age, it will be hard keeping your boyfriend. You need to exercise a little." Morok said to Quylla. He had yet to break a sweat and had only compassion for a young woman who wheezed like one of the old fossils.

"Lith is not my boyfriend." She angrily replied.

"I know. I'm talking about the Captain guy. He clearly fancies you if he's risking his ass for your safety, you could at least..."

"Phloria is my sister." Her voice became stone-cold, her eyes brimming with rage and fatigue.

"Oh. Sorry, I just heard a noise coming from that way." Morok said pointing his finger in a random direction.

"We'll resume this conversation never." Morok moved quickly and silently like the wind, reaching the position of the make-believe threat under the baffled gazes of the soldiers he met along the way.

"Did you hear that too?" Lith emerged from a shadow, pointing at the only tunnel that despite the many mana crystals coming out of its walls and the artificial lights was poorly lit.

"I sure did. I mean, that thing is a woman?" Morok's voice was still shaken by the revelation.

"Not that. That." A small clunk made the hair on both Rangers' necks stand up. They waited in silence, ignoring the noises coming from the distant miners and the nearby academics.

A clunk, followed by another. Lith used Life Vision but the mana crystals inside and outside the walls messed up his perception. He could have sworn there were life signatures among the crystals.

Solus's mana sense didn't fare much better, so she stopped focusing on the details and looked at the corridor's bigger picture.

'There's a distortion in the mana along the right wall.' She said.

The moment Lith's gaze followed her directions, he could notice that the distortion had a humanoid form.

"It seems that hiding any further is pointless." A raspy, feminine voice said. A snap of her fingers made the tunnel they had come from be sealed by a stone wall while the entire zone was silenced.

Not even the guards near the collapsing tunnel noticed that something was wrong until a volley of Chaos arrows came flying their way.

Chapter 629 Sudden Death Part 1

Korgh, the Eldritch Abomination whose fragments had been implanted inside the goblin tribe, still believed to have drawn the short end of the stick by being bonded to such useless and ugly creatures.

On the contrary, she had been quite lucky. The goblin's only strong point was their reproductive ability, so she had an easy time manipulating them at first and then overpowering their feeble minds once she had grown stronger.

Assaulting the crystal mine had given her plenty of time and energy to refine a body similar to the original Eldritch she had been spawned from. Unlike the other hybrids, she didn't give chase to her 'mother' due to her vessel's weakness.

She had preferred to remain hidden inside the mines all along to build her strength and regain her knowledge. Korgh had no trouble avoiding the miners. There were too many unused corridors she could use as havens and as long as she didn't suck the crystals dry, they would always recover their energy.

She was one of the few hybrids still alive in the entire Garlen continent. Most of the others had been killed by humans or Emperor Beasts before reaching their maturity or assimilated by their originals after challenging them.

The noise that Lith had heard and Morok pretended to, was her slowly digging out a particularly juicy mana crystal to feed upon without being noticed. She had no idea how the humans had found her.

Her light manipulation abilities rendered Korgh almost invisible and with all the noise echoing through the tunnels she was as silent as a mouse.

Korgh wasn't worried, though. Those guys weren't miners, their disappearance was likely to go unnoticed for days if not ever. Lith cursed his bad luck as several darts from a tier one Chaos spell threatened his life.

There wasn't enough space to dodge them and he knew from experience that most barriers would be useless against Chaos magic.

Lith and Morok Blinked in opposite directions in the nick of time. Holes several centimeters deep opened in the wall behind where their vitals had been just a second ago.

Korgh couldn't use powerful spells without risking to trigger a chain reaction that would make the mine collapse, killing both herself and the humans in the process. Luckily, the Rangers had the same problem plus they had to take care of the dead weight.

Many Professors were caught by surprise and remained severely injured. The same happened to their Assistants and the soldiers tasked to protect them. The only silver lining was that their enchanted armors had prevented any deadly wound and that Korgh was focused on the Rangers.

'How bad it is?' Lith asked while taking the Gatekeeper out of his pocket dimension and shrinking it to the size of a short sword.

'She's magically stronger than you, but her physical strength sucks. Half of her body is still that of a goblin.' Solus replied.

Korgh's appearance was that of a humanoid creature, about 1.6 meters (5'3") tall, with thin limbs and a head too big for her body. Half of her skin was a yellow so pale to almost be translucent, allowing to see what little of her organs still remained.

The other half was a pitch black gelatinous substance that seemed to constantly move and change its shape like it was a flowing liquid. One second it resembled the slimy skin of a toad, the next one it was full of hair like that of a beast.

'Let me guess, the black half is a tough client.' Lith thought.

Solus telepathically nodded while turning into her glove form. The last hybrid they had fought was capable of accessing to strong equipment. In presence of so many witnesses, Lith needed a decent excuse for his Awakened skills.

Her glove form with its two mana crystals shining on the back of the hand fit the bill. She had even changed its design, to give it a more complex look that resembled the artifacts they had seen in the past.

Korgh sneered when she saw Lith charging forward. The two Rangers were the only one unscathed from her sneak attack, so she had been afraid that they might Blink away and call for help.

Yet at least one of them was saving her the time of a boring chase. She welcomed Lith's arrival with another volley of Chaos arrows. The distance was now too short even for Blinking and the magic missiles were so fast to be almost invisible.

Lith had gambled on his enhanced speed further boosted by air fusion, hoping it would allow him to reach his opponent before she could cast even more powerful spells and lost the bet. Korgh had started to weave her spells from the moment the two Rangers had stared in her direction.

Also, she held numerous advantages. By being near a wall filled with protruding crystals, she prevented her enemies from using magic against her, since the slightest mistake would make the mines collapse and kill hundreds.

Plus, her position blocked Blink, leaving physical attacks as the only mean to harm her. Korgh expected to see Lith fall, his body riddled with more holes than swiss cheese, so she was quite shocked when the impact didn't even slow him down.

Instead of open wounds, his chest was filled with what looked like a molten silvery liquid deformed from the impact that was quickly fixing the damage it had received.

Another one of the unexpected abilities derived from using Orichalcum to Forgemaster a Skinwalker armor was that, by injecting it with mana, it was possible to amplify both its hardness and its repulsive energy field.

Before charging, Lith had covered himself with mana from head to toes, just in case. The mana expenditure to withstand Chaos magic had been enormous, but it still beat instant death.

Lith performed an upward diagonal slash from right to left, forcing Korgh to move from her safe spot to not be cut in half. She ducked while sidestepping on Lith's left, her eyes fixated on the blade infused with darkness magic that passed millimeters away from her face and cut off the extremity of her pointed ears.

She had yet to perceive the pain from the injury when Lith's left fist struck her side, one of the parts her body which still belonged to the goblins, with enough strength to lift her from the ground and made her spit out a mouthful of blood.

She ignored the pain, grabbing his wrist to cut it open with her claws, only to discover his whole arm was covered by the silvery liquid, turning it into an Orichalcum living hammer.

'Cunning bastard! The sword was just a distraction to hit my weak spot. If he thinks an armor can protect him from my touch, he's in for a surprise.' She thought as her grip turned into a vise, sucking his vitality through the enchanted protection.

Unfortunately for Korgh, she wasn't Lith's first Abomination. Under the silver, there wasn't the pink, frail skin of a human, but the black scaly body of a hybrid. Both of them had the ability to prey on the vitality of their opponent and even if Korgh was more skilled, Lith's counter flow made hers a hollow victory.

The stolen vitality was so scarce that it was barely noticeable. Lith was unable to free his left hand, so he lunged with the Gatekeeper at Korgh's shoulder which was still made of goblin flesh.

Chapter 630 Sudden Death Part 2

She intercepted the blade with her open palm, letting it pierce through her hand until her fingers closed unto its hilt.

"Beating an Eldritch in a contest of strength it's a foolish quest. The only question is which one of you will break first. If you or your blade." Korgh sneered.

Lith inwardly cursed as her black blood corroded the Gatekeeper's surface and dripped onto the mana crystals embedded in its hilt. Of all the creatures he had faced, Lith had never met one with acid for blood.

Lith tried to pull the blade away, but Korgh was too strong. At the same time, she tried to break his arm, but between his mana boosting the Skinwalker Armor and earth fusion boosting his enhanced physique, it felt to her like moving a mountain.

"What do you think I'm here for?" Morok said from behind her a split second after one of his short swords pierced her chest and another her head.

Korgh had forgotten about the other Ranger and that by not having her back against the wall anymore, Blink was a significant threat.

"By the gods!" Morok was shocked seeing that the creature wasn't dying whereas his blades were melting.

"No vitals! Go for the yellow parts!" Lith said while exploiting Korgh's indecision to let go of the Gatekeeper and struck with Solus's gauntlet at Korgh's goblin sternum. Solus had infused herself with all the elements and released a few spells she kept at the ready at the moment of the impact.

The resulting effect of the combined attack of Lith, Skinwalker, and Solus was akin to a jackhammer on the snow. The fist pierced through her chest and came out of her back, spraying red, harmless blood all over Morok.

"Copy that." He replied starting to stab at the exposed goblin parts so fast that before a wound had enough time to bleed, four more had been opened.

Korgh inwardly cursed, trying to find a way out. Hitting her goblin body couldn't kill her since she had no vitals, but the wounds were making her strength plummet.

Lith kept hammering her body with his free hand and when she tried to move him aside with both her hands to escape from Morok's onslaught, Lith grabbed the Gatekeeper's hilt.

He flooded it with all the mana he could spare, infusing it with darkness magic as he twisted and pulled the blade away. Black blood hit the spot Lith had been until a split second before, making the rocks sizzle while they melted.

Feeling her life slipping, Korgh didn't hesitate to Blinking to one of the upper levels of the mines. She kept Blinking until she reached the surface, choosing a crystal deposit as her hiding spot.

'The crystals will help me recover my strength and shield me from an Awakened's Life Vision. I can only hope no one enters the deposit before I'm able to fight back, otherwise I'm screwed!' She thought while feeding off the nearby crates.

"Where did she go?" Lith asked Solus while looking around. The crystals surrounding them were jamming his Life Vision, making it hard for him to even see Morok's energy signature.

'She might have gone anywhere. The mines are a maze and there are too many interferences.' She replied.

"That thing was a woman too? Weirdest day ever." Morok replied while using quick flicks of his wrists to clean his blades from the black blood.

"I don't think she will be back any time soon. By combining our attacks we have given her ugly ass a solid kicking. How's your weapon?"

Lith stuck his back against the wall to prevent being stabbed in the back while using Invigoration on the Gatekeeper. The massive flow of darkness magic had already destroyed any trace of the Abomination's acid, it was only a matter of assessing the damage.

"No, no, no!" Was all Lith said. The corroded metal wasn't an issue, but the damaged mana crystals were another story. Too much black blood had soaked them for too long.

The pseudo core had already spent most of its energy to regenerate the damages as fast as it could, but Lith's last darkness burst had been the final straw that broke the camel's back.

The Gatekeeper was already in critical condition. If he didn't retrieve it, it would have been destroyed, but to do it Lith had been forced to push it beyond its limits. Lith drew a Forgemaster repairing circle so fast that even the Professors watching at the process couldn't believe their own eyes.

He fought with all of his skill, using his mana as a life support system, but the Gatekeeper's pseudo core slowly faded as the corruption caused by the black blood destroyed its mana circulatory system.

"It's dead." Lith said after a while. The magic was gone and the crystals had turned dull. The piece of metal in his hands was nothing but scrap. The memories of the enemies they had vanquished together, of all the times it had saved his life flooded Lith's mind.

For a moment, he grieved the Gatekeeper like it was a lifelong friend. Then he started to worry about his immediate future.

"Sorry to hear that, man. Hope you have another to spare. Losing your main weapon before even starting a mission is the worst that could happen." Morok was honestly sad. He knew all too well how expensive good equipment was.

"Phloria! Quylla! Are you alright?" Lith blurted out as soon as the word dead escaped from his lips. In his battle frenzy, he had completely forgotten about his two real friends.

Replacing the Gatekeeper would be hard but feasible. Lith knew that sooner or later he had to upgrade his weapon.

A living being, however, couldn't be replaced. The image of Yurial appeared in his mind as Life Vision was focused to spot the only two life forces that held any significance to him in that tunnel.

"I'm okay." Quylla said, her voice was feeble from fatigue.

"I was staring at the rude Ranger, so I had all the time to drop down the moment I heard the voice. Phloria wasn't so lucky, though."

More than half of the expedition team was laying on the ground in a puddle of their own blood. The Chaos arrows couldn't pierce through the magical protections, but they could still smash bones and rupture organs.

Following her duty as a Mage Knight, Phloria had pushed those who were near to her to safety while conjuring a protective shield for herself. Unfortunately, she had never met an Abomination capable of using Chaos magic.

Her spell had been ripped to shreds and she had taken the full force of many arrows at once. If not for all the enchantments Orion had imbued her equipment with, she would have died on the spot.

"How is she?" Lith asked while placing a hand on Phloria's shoulder to check her condition with Invigoration.

"Aren't you a Healer? The Captain is already being treated. You should take care of the wounded." Said a woman in her late fifties donning the colors of the Black Griffon. She had been hit on a shoulder, but her assistant was in critical condition.