

Supreme M 631

Chapter 631 Friend or Foe Part 1

"It's none of my business." Lith replied. Phloria's recovery was slow because she had suffered extensive damage and because of her fatigue, Quylla hadn't much life force to spare.

Phloria had several broken bones, punctured organs, and was bleeding out of her head, mouth, and nostrils. She was deadly pale, gurgling more blood with each breath she took.

"I already risked my life to protect you guys from that thing at great personal cost. I will not waste my mana on a stranger when the life of another of my friends is on the line."

He started to support Quylla's spell, stopping Phloria's internal bleeding before it was too late. He could've fixed her in the blink of an eye, but with Quylla monitoring Phloria's condition he had to pretend to be a normal mage, incapable of recovering his full strength with just a few deep breaths.

"Great Mage Verhen! The duty of all the members of the army is to protect life without giving preferential treatments." The woman from the Black Griffon was seething with anger.

Her shoulder length grey hair was dancing in the air due to the mana exuding from her body and her eyes were reduced to two fiery slits. Yet she was holding her left arm in pain.

The healing spell from her magic ring would take a while to heal her completely and until that happened, she was unable to cast spells. Fake mages needed both arms and magic words to use magic.

"The Captain performed her duty honorably and with your actions, you are wasting her sacrifice. You should..." Talking about Phloria as if she was already dead made Lith snap.

His right forefinger whipped as a scorpion's tail, releasing a small air bullet that struck the injured shoulder right where it would hurt the most. With his innate skill for deathblows and extensive knowledge of the human body, Lith didn't even need to use Life Vision to find the right spot.

The bullet was weak, barely as strong as a push, yet enough to rattle the bone fragments inside the Professor's body like it was a flesh maraca. It caused her a pain so intense that the woman fainted without emitting a sound.

"That's why I hate academics." Morok said while treating the Assistant from the Black Griffon.

Healing wasn't a specialization he had learned back when he was a student at the Crystal Griffon, but after becoming a Ranger, he had quickly understood how dangerous it was not being able to treat all kinds of wounds.

It had taken him some time, but the army had provided him with all he needed to become an excellent Healer.

"You think you are so much better than us because of your knowledge, yet when shit happens, you're as useful as a third nostril. Just because we chose to wear a uniform, it doesn't make us expendable.

"Instead of running your mouths for whining, help yourselves. Our lives aren't any less important than yours."

Quylla felt the sting of those words as well. After leaving the academy, she had neglected physical training, thinking that always being either at her home or at the White Griffon made it unnecessary.

'What good is a Healer that gets exhausted after a long walk? Lith has walked as much as I did, fought for his life, and yet he still has enough energy to help Phloria. I'm no different from that old hag. I'm too dependent on others in times of crisis.' She thought.

Once Phloria's condition was stabilized, Lith helped the others. Every one of those present was able to use tier three healing magic and had plenty of potions, so only a handful of people were still injured.

When the Healers were done, the group in the tunnel looked like war survivors. Their clothes were damaged, their bodies weakened from either performing or receiving the healing, making their breath ragged and irregular.

Except for Lith, who thanks to Invigoration was still at his peak condition.

"What kind of monster are you? How the heck did you survive those black rays?" Morok was proud of his stamina, yet after sharing his life force with the wounded, he wasn't faring any better than one of the old fossils.

He would gladly take a few hours long nap, if given the chance.

"Orichalcum." Lith replied.

"I recently Forgemastered a Skinwalker Armor out of it. The results are way better than I expected."

"What? That's impossible." Morok said, quickly followed by a few experts.

"I'm no Forgemaster, but when I commissioned one, I was told that the spell reacts erratically with metals, that's why Skinwalkers are always made out of clothes."

"Believe what you want. The important thing now is getting out of here. The Abomination might return and with the crystals surrounding us, we can't set a proper defensive perimeter nor use spells for self defense.

"Must I remind you that I've lost my weapon?" Lith was eager to change the topic.

Back when he didn't find a metal Skinwalker on the army's catalog, nor on the Association's one, he had simply thought that just like many items of his interest, they were hidden to the public and reserved for the elites.

His objective had always been to copy and improve the best artifacts money could buy, so he had never stopped considering that there could be a different explanation.

"Opening the collapsed corridor is too dangerous. We must Warp to the outside!" A panicked youth from the Lightning Griffon tried to cast the dimensional spell, but his master slapped him, interrupting his cast.

"Don't panic, you idiot! The Rangers could Blink because the dimensional rift it creates is weak and lasts for a split second. If you open a dimensional corridor, we might all die!"

Even if the Warp Steps had never been completed, some of the crystals protruding from the walls started to tremble madly, resonating with the huge amount of released mana. Everyone stopped what they were doing, even breathing.

After a few seconds, everything went back to normal.

"I agree with Ranger Verhen on the matter." Morok said out loud, for everyone to listen.

"I would like to rest too, but this position is a defensive nightmare. Those who can walk will walk, the others should use a float spell and let themselves be dragged. If any of you wants to back down, I've already alerted the mines' supervisor.

"Wait here and someone will open the passage in a few hours."

A lot of moans and groans could be heard. Almost all the mages chose to float and it was up to the soldiers to bring them along like balloons filled with helium. Morok took point, while Lith covered their back, walking alongside Phloria and Quylla.

"Thanks, Lith." They were both able to walk after he had given them a bit of his life force.

"I'm really sorry about your sword. I know how much you loved it. Do you have a replacement?" Phloria asked.

"I have a lot of weapons with me, but they all suck. All my attempts to craft a better Gatekeeper failed. I guess I'd have to ask Orion for something better once we get out of here." He sighed.

"Did you really try to improve my father's work without even knowing the manufacturing process? That's bold. If Dad learns about it, he would be royally pissed by your attempts at stealing his secrets." She chuckled.

Chapter 632 Friend or Foe Part 2

"I think he will be more pissed off by you almost dying due to your bravado. There's no defense against those black rays, your shields are no safer than wet paper against them. What the heck were you thinking?" Seeing Phloria almost die had triggered his memories about Carl.

Both Quylla and Phloria were surprised by his aggressive remarks, but only because neither of them had ever faced a fully formed Abomination. Only after Lith explained to them what they were capable of, did the girls realize how big of a bullet they had just dodged.

"Even if I knew all this, I wouldn't have acted any differently." Phloria said.

"My aim is to become a member of the Knight's Guard, the elite of the elite for Mage Knights. If we don't protect our assigned marks, we're useless. What just happened is an occupational hazard."

Lith would have liked to scold Phloria for her nonsensical behavior, but in the end, he decided against it. He too had risked dying many times to follow his own agenda, criticizing her for doing the same would have been plain hypocritical.

Soon Morok started to open new tunnels with earth magic. Seeing how fast and confident he was while taking several apparently random turns, made Lith curious.

"How can you be so sure this is the right way? Do you have a map or something?" He asked via the army amulet.

"No, I just marked the walls on my passage to react to my mana, in case I got lost or I needed to backtrack. That's why only I can lead the expedition. Don't you do the same in dungeons or underground places when there is no time to draw a map?" Morok replied.

"No. I have a great memory." To be exact, Solus did.

In emergency situations, Lith would rely on her abilities to access to his memories and find the right path. Otherwise, he would always take his time to draw a map and store it inside Soluspedia to gain tactical awareness in the case an ambush occurred.

Like he was doing at that moment. Morok had tasked him to close the tunnels as soon as possible so that no one could follow them without being noticed. Earth magic produced a lot of noise and with the echo in the tunnels, its use could be heard from hundreds of meters of distance.

The expedition team managed to move forward for two more hours before even Morok was on the verge of collapsing due to exhaustion. Their advance had slowed down even further due to the lack of lighting since they had left the mines.

The natural tunnels were bumpy and uneven. Their footing was also very precarious because the humidity would condense on the ground, making it slippery. Luckily for them, during his first passage, Morok had marked safe rest spots.

"You take the first watch." Morok said while pointing at Lith.

"Then have someone relieve you after one hour, I don't care who. I'll take the last watch. We're not moving from here before four hours minimum."

Before any of the soldiers could complain that he wasn't their commanding officer, Morok was already asleep. His behavior caused many grumbles, but they didn't last long. Everyone was so tired that they fell asleep the moment they sat down.

Lith checked his surroundings with Life Vision. The light coming from the crystal mines was far enough to allow him to scout far and wide, making sure that there was no imminent threat.

He even performed a Life Detection array to cover more ground.

"Forgemaster, Healer, fighter, and even Warden?" A voice asked.

Lith recognized the woman from the Black Griffon. He was expecting some snarky remarks or even that she would attempt to report to his commanding officer the assault she had suffered by Lith's hand.

Not that Lith was afraid of either possibility. He was used to being insulted ever since he had stepped inside the White Griffon academy. Powerful people hated the idea of witnessing the growth of someone that could become more powerful than them.

Their natural response was to nip people like Lith in the bud, at any cost. As for the latter possibility, Lith would have loved to see Jirni discuss with someone that had dared to suggest letting her daughter die.

'I'm sure it would be something so slow and gruesome that I could learn a lot. I'd like to think of myself as a master of coercion, but compared to Jirni I'm just a learner.' He thought.

"Everything that's needed for survival has to be learned." Lith replied.

"Wise words for someone so prone to violence." Her voice was calm. She wasn't trying to insult him, only stating a fact.

"Without strength, wisdom is nothing but hot air. Without wisdom, strength is just violence. I was only protecting someone who I hold dear. If you expect an apology from me, don't hold your breath." Lith replied.

"Quite the contrary. I've come to apologize for my earlier behavior. My assistant is like a son to me. I couldn't stand watching him die while I was helpless because of my wound. I was angry at myself and I took it out on you." She gave Lith a small bow.

"Take these as a sign of my goodwill." She handed Lith several mana cyan crystals, each one with a flat bottom and as big as a beer bottle.

"Thanks, but what am I supposed to do with them Professor...?" Lith was very confused. He had a lot on his mind, from the loss of the Gatekeeper to almost watching Phloria die. His brain was about to pop.

"Yondra Mefaal. Black Griffon's Professor of history of magic and Forgemastering. You can use them to set a barrier. I'm too weak to cast a spell, but at least I can give you some help." She replied with a kind smile.

Seeing that Lith wasn't moving, Yondra laughed and showed him how to perform the Silent Shroud array. When Lith was done, a black dome surrounded the camp, preventing both light and sound from spreading outside of its premises.

"Now no one can see or hear us. The barrier it produces is not very strong, but as you can see, it's a very useful formation." Thanks to the array, Lith could see the area surrounding them as if he was wearing thermal goggles.

It was quite useless for someone capable of using Life and Fire Vision, but it would allow him to rest more easily when others would relieve him from guard duty.

"Thank you very much." Lith said while copying the spell in his grimoire along with his thoughts about how to turn it into true magic.

"Don't mention it. By protecting you I'm protecting myself. I'd like to talk about many things with someone as peculiar as you are, but alas, I'm beat. See you later." Yondra checked on her assistant condition and after she made sure he was just fatigued as she was, she fell asleep.

Lith followed her example and went checking on his friends. Morok didn't seem to need his help and judging by his snoring, he was having a good time. Quylla and Phloria were both sleeping.

Invigoration confirmed to him that there was nothing wrong with them. Since there was no point in waking them up, Lith started to circle around the edges of the formation while using Accumulation.

The tunnel was quiet. There was no noise nor energy signature coming towards them, yet the space around them was far from being empty.

Chapter 633 A Fair Trade Part 1

Under the crystal mines, he could see a flow of world energy so big that it made mana geysers look like drinking fountains.

There were also life forces inside the ground, the kind of which he had never seen before. He couldn't notice any of it earlier because he was in the middle of the raging storm that was Mogar's essence.

It was also the reason he had been unable to chase Korgh.

Only now that Lith was far enough, could he glimpse the magnitude of the natural phenomenon that gave life to mana crystals.

'Does the life force belong to Awakened crystals or to Mogar itself? Thank heavens we left the mines. Being exposed for long to such a vigorous flow of world energy might speed up Phloria's Awakening process.

'It would be a shame if I had to kill the entire expedition to protect our secret. Yondra and Morok seem to be nice people, but "seem" is not enough to...'

"Who are you planning to kill?" Phloria's voice took him by surprise and made Lith flinch.

"No one. What are you doing here? You should be sleeping."

"I don't believe you. Your eyes were ablaze and you were making the face." She shook her head.

"What face?" Lith asked.

"Your battle face. When you look at people as nothing but corpses to dissect. You know, it hurts thinking that when we first met, you looked at me that way. If I knew what it meant back then, I would have never asked you out." Phloria chuckled.

"Do you mind company while you stand guard? I think I'm still tense from the ambush and I can't fall asleep, no matter how hard I try."

'I must have given her too much life force.' Lith pondered.

"I've no such face." He lied through his teeth, making her giggle.

"And these eyes are not because I'm angry. I call this Life Vision. It allows those like me to gauge our opponent's strength and to see even through walls." He said while using a quick Hush to prevent others from hearing him.

Seeing that Phloria had become beet red and was covering her chest and nether regions with her arms, Lith rushed to explain.

"It came out wrong. I don't mean I can see through clothes or something, I see people as featureless lumps of energy. I can't even tell a man from a woman unless they're very close."

"Really? Do I have your word?" Her arms didn't move an inch.

"Yes, I swear on my family. Am I making my perverted face?" He said while looking straight at her body. According to Kamila, he had that one too.

"Definitely not." Phloria relaxed as the realization he actually had a perverted face stung at Lith's pride.

"Why are you telling me this now?" Phloria asked.

"Because there are a lot of things down here and I don't know if they are friendly or hostile. You already know enough about me and I need your trust so that the next time something happens, you'll do as I say."

Lith also wanted to check how much he could reveal about himself without shocking someone he cared for.

"Who among my men is the strongest?" Phloria asked, curious to put his ability to the test.

"Physically, the small guy with red hair. Magically, the woman sleeping near the people from the Earth Griffon."

"You're correct. Helion has an uncanny constitution and Jerth is the only one in the team who got into one of the great academies. Wait, what do you mean 'those like me'?" She knew about the Hush zone, but she still lowered her voice until it was barely audible.

"There are others?"

"Yes. Nalear was one of them. Why do you think she only kidnapped me? She was afraid that I could mess with her plan, and she was right."

Suddenly many things started to make sense to Phloria. Why both Lith and Nalear could emit an aura without the use of spells, how he had been able to notice the slave items despite they all had a different shape.

The revelation was quite a big shock, so she needed to sit down for a minute.

"Could she shapeshift too?"

"No. As far as I know, only Emperor Beasts and I can shapeshift. Undead too." He said after a while.

"Are you a human or an Emperor Beast?" The shock in her eyes was growing stronger, but Phloria was just surprised, not scared.

"I wish I knew. My parents are humans, and so are my siblings. As for me, I'm me. I can't give you a better answer, sorry."

Phloria stood up, never averting his gaze. She couldn't stop asking herself how she looked through those blazing eyes.

"Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?" Lith said, grateful that she wasn't prying further.

"Not at all."

"What in the gods' names did you do with your hair? It was so..." His hand moved towards where the soft mass once was, before stopping midway.

"And now is so..." There was no way to express his disappointment without being rude. Phloria's hair had always been a delight for his touch and his nose. After losing the Gatekeeper, seeing her with the pixie cut was like one blow too many.

"Men are idiots. You've lost your blade, I almost died, you opened to me four years late, and your biggest worry while we are stranded hundreds of meters below the ground, guided by the rudest man I've ever met, it's the length of my hair?"

She was laughing heartily, bringing back for both of them many happy memories.

"I didn't do anything to it. My hair is alive and kicking." Phloria grabbed a small silver hairpin in the back of her head and took it off. A cascade of waist long hair fell down from her head, giving Phloria back the appearance she had at Jirni's birthday party.

"I cut them once I joined the army, but I got permission to grow them back once I became an officer. My mother too nagged at me for my looks, so I asked Dad for help. Long hair might be nice to look at, but for a fighter is nothing but a nuisance.

"So, he did this for me." The moment she put the hairpin back, her hair rolled up like a shutter while it was compressed as if it was vacuum-packed.

"Can I see it?" Lith's Forgemaster curiosity was piqued. The hairpin turned out to be a mix of dimensional, air, and light magic. It was the most complex useless pseudo core Lith had ever seen.

'Son of a gun!' Lith thought as Invigoration revealed several little runes covering the hairpin.

'Not only was Solus right about the Kingdom knowing about the runes, but also that big oaf used so many resources for his daughter's hair and made my Gatekeeper so frail!' He was quite pissed off by Orion's double standards.

'First, unless we're talking about people, I'm always right. Second, hello kettle! My name is pot and you are black!' Solus replied.

As if mentioning his name was akin to a summoning ritual, Orion's rune lighted on Lith's communication amulet, drawing his attention.

"Is Jirni okay? Did something happen to Friya?" Lith asked before Orion could even utter a word. There was no other reason he could think of to explain the call. On the rare occasions they had talked to each other, it had always happened in person.

Chapter 634 A Fair Trade Part 2

"What the heck are you rambling about? Do you think that if something like that had happened to them, I would be wasting my time on social calls? I would be hunting Manohar's ass down while one of my men seeks your help.

"I'm calling you because of an outrageous rumor I heard a few hours before. Some of my Forgemaster colleagues in the expedition say that you claim to have crafted an Orichalcum Skinwalker armor.

"At first, I paid it no heed, but when I called my Little Flower to hear about her mission, she confirmed it. Is it really true? I need to hear it from your voice." Orion said.

Lith furrowed his brows while looking at Phloria, who just shrugged.

"The cat was already out of the bag. There was no point in denying it." She said, hurting Orion's feelings. The idea that one of his daughters could keep secrets from him was terrible.

Yet Phloria had never shared with anyone Lith's secrets just as Friya never talked about Protector's ability to shapeshift into a human.

"Yes, it's true." Lith injected a bit of his mana into the Skinwalker, making it turn into a quicksilver-like liquid that covered him from head to toes and made him resemble a humanoid metal golem.

"Amazing! That's supposed to be impossible. The Thunderbird's feather and the Orichalcum release wild energy whenever they interact, making the spell unstable. I tried countless times with as many variations but I never succeeded.

"How the heck did you do it?" Orion asked.

"There's no such thing as a wild energy release." Lith wasn't going to give away his secret, but if he wanted to obtain something decent to replace his lost weapon, he had to drive a hard bargain.

The first step was baiting the prey with an honest, but useless information.

"It's just that the Orichalcum amplifies the feather's energy field, so if you had planned to handle a spell with 100 units of power, you actually get one with 130, which is more than your spell is devised can harness."

"It makes sense." Orion pondered. "Orichalcum has the property to amplify energy based enchantments. It's the reason Orichalcum is considered so precious since its hardness is just above Damascus steel levels."

"Still, I handled tons of Orichalcum, yet only a few crafting techniques always fail, like it happens for the Skinwalker. How do you explain that?"

"Because the interaction between ingredients is very strong and it significantly varies with the amount of adamant in the Orichalcum." Lith replied.

Only a true mage like him could comfortably wait for the pseudo core to stabilize before fusing it with an enchanted item. Fake mages used spells that would barely last twenty seconds and they had no way to assess how great the amplifying effect was.

They could adjust the energy output with a tier five spell, but without Life Vision or Invigoration, it would still be like a blind man trying to kill a bird with a single arrow.

"Would you like to share your method? I've struck a bottleneck in crafting armors because to upgrade my products I would need to use Orichalcum or Adamant, but the little bastards always mess with my spells." Orion's request was the closest thing to a taboo between mages.

Sharing spells was something that could be done only on a voluntary basis, and usually no one would reveal one of their trump cards.

"Would you like to share your crafting methods?" Lith replied with a sneer.

"Of course not." Orion sighed. "What about an exchange? I heard that the Gatekeeper has been destroyed. I can give you an even better weapon if you provide me with an Orichalcum Skinwalker as a study subject."

Orion wanted to exploit the situation as well. Any decent warrior knew that a weapon was more than a tool. In their line of work, it was a lifeline.

"I first need to see what you're offering. As you can see, my crafting process made the armor much more versatile than a normal Skinwalker. A Gatekeeper is good, but it's not enough. To use it at its full power, it takes a lot of mana."

"On top of that, it was too frail. It almost broke during the events in Othre, Maekosh, and even Jambel. What good is a weapon that it's not able to protect my life and that requires to be protected?" Lith painfully remembered every time he had come close to sacrifice the Gatekeeper to protect his life.

"Fine! You're right." Orion yielded, especially because Phloria was giving him a bad, bad look.

"It was just the gift for a 13 year old and one I didn't like much at that. I'll make you something worthy of a Ranger. You have my word."

Lith hung up after showing Orion exactly what his armor could do. Lith didn't ask him for anything specific because he knew that as a craftsman, Orion's pride would force him to give his best to not fall short of Lith's skill.

Making specific requests would have been like giving him boundaries, whereas this way Orion could do whatever he wanted and Lith was free to refuse the trade if he considered it to be unfair.

To Phloria, Lith said:

"Well, at least now I can put one of my prototypes to good use. You have no idea how many tweaks it took to craft something that could store my full power without it exploding into my face."

"Are you really going to give Dad just a prototype? A faulty item?" Now she was giving Lith a bad, bad look.

"Not faulty, just not the best one. He will tinker with it a lot, probably even damage or destroy it. There's no reason to waste a good armor when even a mediocre one follows the same principles and has the same properties." Lith shrugged.

"If your father is even one bit like me, if I were to give him a masterpiece, he wouldn't bear the thought of destroying it and limit his experiments as a consequence. This is yours, by the way."

Lith handed her a chainmail set that even under the dim light of the camp shone like a precious gem, creating a rainbow on the tunnel ceiling.

"As I told you, I made a lot of them but I only need one. You've already almost died today and if something happens to you, I would never forgive myself. I might not be in love with you anymore, but I love you nonetheless." Lith said.

"I- I can't accept it. It's too precious." Both his gesture and his words made Phloria incredibly happy and sad at the same time. Lith still cared for her deeply, but not like before.

When he looked at her, she could almost perceive an invisible wall between them and its presence hurt her way more than she expected.

"Precious, yes. Rare, not so much. I have already given one to Tista and to the rest of my family as well. It took a lot of work to get this right, so I have plenty to spare. I have even one for Quylla and Friya. So get down your high horse and accept my gift."

Phloria took the armor and imprinted it immediately. There were just cyan crystals bonded with the metal. They proved that it was indeed a prototype and that Lith lacked powerful resources.

Chapter 635 Davross Part 1

In Phloria's family, purple crystals were a given for almost everything. Yet even most Archmages couldn't afford many of them, along with the natural treasures, metals, and ingredients.

The Ernas family was one of the most ancient and richest in the Griffon Kingdom, after all.

"Did you tell Kamila?" She asked while hugging the chainmail suit as if it was something precious and delicate as a newborn.

"About what?" Lith asked.

"About the things you told me. She deserves to know and the longer you wait, the harder it will be for her."

"I don't see how time can make accepting me for whatever I am harder." Lith chuckled.

"Not that. If she really cares for you, she will be a bit scared at first, but then she will start wondering: why did he wait for so long before telling me? How many more things is he hiding? Kamila might start doubting your feelings and her own as well."

Phloria conjured a stone dome around herself to get changed into the Skinwalker armor, using the cover from the Hush zone to not alarm the others.

'She's right, you know.' Solus said.

'I know.' Lith replied.

After his pocket watch marked the passing of the hour, Lith woke up a couple of soldiers and went to sleep. He had already used Invigoration a few times and with no Gatekeeper to help him, he needed all the edges he could get.

After four hours had passed, Quylla went to ask Morok to resume their journey.

"I'm still beat, but we can move. If that witch didn't hunt us down after so much time, she's likely moved to an easier prey. Let's move!" The Ranger said.

Lith recovered the mana crystals and dispelled the Silent Shroud while Phloria took her place at the center of the group to better coordinate her men while Quylla moved to the rear, near Lith.

"Any advice on how to get stronger? My magic has grown since our days at the academies, but I think I've become as physically weak as a kitten." She said.

"Do like I did when I was at the academy. Train until your muscles hurt, eat meat, use light magic to assimilate the food and rebuild your tissues. Rinse and repeat until you are too tired to continue."

"Sounds dull. How long would it take?" Quylla asked, making Lith feel her arm's muscles.

"A week to get some meat on those bones and a few months to get stronger." Was his reply.

"Months? I thought it would be easier. I mean, you and Phloria make it seem easy."

"We trained a lot over the years. If there was a shortcut, everyone would take it. Besides, even if you had a magical way to regain your stamina at will, you would still need to sweat a lot. It's just like magic, it takes time and effort.

"There's no 'become an Archmage by training 5 minutes a day' cheat in life." Lith shrugged.

Professor Yondra and her Assistant, Rainer Lomann, joined them after a few minutes. Rainer was wearing the uniform of the Black Griffon, a black magician's robe that was made out of a material that seemed to be made out of living darkness.

He was the same age as Lith, around 1.72 meters (5'8) tall, with red hair and blue eyes. The black of his robe made him appear even thinner than he already was. Lith couldn't believe that he was a Forgemaster.

Being muscular wasn't a prerequisite, but a Forgemaster's body would be tempered by harnessing the enormous amounts of mana that the advanced crafting processes required.

Rainer was holding his chest, and his breath was already short despite the fact that they had just finished resting. After receiving the mana crystals and a new spell from Yondra, Lith felt indebted to her, so he decided to further smoothen up the previous incident between them.

Lith placed his hand over Rainer's shoulder and gave him a bit of life force before treating his injuries. The young man stopped slouching as his chest stopped hurting.

"Thank you, but we didn't come here for that. I hoped we could resume our earlier conversation." Yondra said, throwing a mean look at her pupil.

"Kid, I'm old, so I need time to recover from a bad wound. What's your excuse? Do you realize you are making even a complete stranger notice your weakness?"

At those words, both Rainer and Quylla blushed in embarrassment, they were in a similar situation.

Seeing them walking side by side, reminded Lith of the odd Forge he had found inside the Lost City of Huryole.

'She's the best next thing to an archaeologist, plus Yondra is a Forgemaster. I forgot to ask Orion about it, but maybe she is even more likely to know what that was.' Lith thought.

"I brought him on this expedition to show him that even being an historian requires strength and guts." Yondra said. "Sure, we spend most of our days sitting behind our desk doing research, but when you actually need to search for relics, you can't just ask to monsters and beasts to kindly step aside and let you do your job.

"You need to learn how to fight, dammit."

"But Professor, what about the army or the mercenary guilds? Isn't it easier to get their help rather than pointlessly risking our lives?" Rainer asked.

"The army will help you only if you have solid evidence of a discovery that could benefit the Kingdom." Quylla replied. "As for mercenaries, I wouldn't trust them to be satisfied with a few coins if you find a priceless treasure. They are mages too."

"Exactly." Yondra nodded. "This is likely to be the easiest expedition you'll ever take part in. We have two Rangers, an elite squad of soldiers, and six Professors. The number of things that can go wrong with all this firepower is very limited."

"Easiest?" Rainer was flabbergasted. "We almost got wiped out before even starting!"

"My dear, that 'almost' makes all the difference in the world. When I was your age, my so called bodyguards tried to kill and rob me after I stupidly showed off how much money I had. I wanted to buy their loyalty, not give them a motive, and yet..."

Rainer swallowed several times, wondering why he was the only nervous one. Quylla was shorter and wimpier than him, yet she looked confident.

Lith used the sudden silence to tell Yondra about his recent trip to Huryole. He didn't mention the sword, the booklet, and not even his theory about the lost city being actually a lost academy.

Lith had checked the army database, yet Huryole was always referred to as a city in the official documents. Even if Yondra knew the truth, she was unlikely to share it with him.

Once Lith reached the part about the black and white Forge, her eyes lit like stars with greed and wonder.

"Are you sure? A whole Forge?" She asked more than once, as if she couldn't believe her own words.

"Yes, I can show it to you." Lith materialized a hologram of the Forge, mimicking its shapeshifting pattern.

"Good gods, how unlucky of you! You found and missed a Forge made of pure Davross." She said.

"I didn't miss it. It was bolted to the ground and when I attempted to take it away, the city tried to kill me. There's a big difference. What's Davross?"

Chapter 636 Davross Part 2

"The strongest metal known to man, even stronger than pure Adamant." Yondra's words made Lith internally scream in frustration.

He clenched his temples, taking deep breaths before finding the strength to ask:

"Why have I never heard about it? What makes it so special?"

"It's a legendary metal, said to be indestructible. It can be broken, only melted and refined into ingots. It's so rare that I've seen it only when I was allowed to study the artifacts belonging to Valeron Griffon, the first King.

"In all my years, I've never seen it again and you say there was a whole Forge?"

"Yes. Any idea why it shapeshifts?" Lith asked.

"Ideas, no. Only a legend, if you're interested."

Lith nodded for her to continue.

Yondra first explained Lith how according to the lore, Mogar, the Great Mother, had given birth to the six gods of magic. There was one god for each element and according to such legend, those blessed by the gods would bear their mark on their hair or fur.

Lith looked at Quylla's hair and her silvery streaks, finally understanding the meaning of such an odd coloration. According to the fable, the gods had shared part of their essence with all things on Mogar, even metals.

Normal metals would receive the blessing of two gods at most, the only exceptions were Adamant and Davross.

Adamant was considered a metal where the elements had failed to achieve a perfect balance as it was proven by the fact that instead of absorbing the light, Adamant would split it into its components like a prism.

Davross, instead, was supposed to be a metal where the elements of destruction, fire and darkness would battle against those of creation, light and earth, while the remaining two with their dual nature would try to keep the balance.

Water gave life, but ice would take it away and the same applied to air and lightning. The conflicting natures of all six elements refused to coexist, so the three factions would always be eternally at war.

Lochra Silverwing, the first Forgemaster, had written in her diaries that it was up to the mage to tip the scale by adding the seventh element, the only one that the Davross lacked. The element of life, more commonly known as mana.

"It sounds like a load of rubbish." Lith said.

"I would agree with you if the artifacts I studied didn't shapeshift anymore. I saw King Meron using the Sword of Saefel, and he can make the whole blade change color according to the element he needs to boost.

"I wasn't much younger back then, but I can still count. The sword turned into seven colors. Red, yellow, black, white, blue, orange, and emerald green. The Davross ingots, instead, would follow a pattern similar to the one you showed me."

"Wait, are you telling me that Adamant is nothing but dead Davross?" Lith asked.

"At least I think so. The Royal Family has ingots of Davross, but no one knows how to use them. Plus, if the legend is right, then it's only a matter of time before they lose their special properties. Otherwise why let experts like me study Valeron's Armor or his sword."

Lith's mind started spinning like a top, trying to put together everything he had learned ever since he had arrived on Mogar. The shades in the hair of living creatures, the different colors of mana cores and crystals, the seven eyes of his hybrid form, and now even the Davross.

'If I'm right, life happens on Mogar when the six elements the world energy holds become one. According to such logic, by absorbing enough world energy, living creatures can become Awakened by becoming part of the planet's breathing cycle.

'A blood core would be nothing but a mana core which has lost its light element and craves for it, whereas a black core it's nothing but pure darkness. Also, it would explain why the Davross Forge I found back in Huryole almost had a core whereas the Adamant one Zolgrish paid me with doesn't.' Lith thought.

"Do you mind me asking why you're telling me so many things? Not to sound ungrateful, but most of them sound like classified information. The Kingdom usually likes to play close to the vest." Lith didn't believe in generosity, especially from someone he had just met.

His companions, the Ernas couple, even the Royals, they were all indebted to him. Their bond of trust was based on having been together through thick and thin or on the services he had provided.

He could smell that something was off with Yondra.

"You're quite perceptive. Yes, it's classified information, but you work for the Kingdom as well and I am looking for someone that could inherit my legacy. Rainer might take my place as History Professor in a few years, but I doubt he'll become a decent Forgemaster any soon.

"The kid lacks motivation, and even if he finds it during this expedition, I don't have that much time left." Yondra said.

"I'm sorry, Professor, but I checked your condition earlier, and you are just fine. Why do you talk like that?" Lith was getting more confused by the second. The offer wasn't that good either.

He wouldn't take an Awakened master lightly due to all the responsibilities and the obedience it would imply, let alone a fake mage one.

"I'm not talking about death, young man, only about retirement." Yondra laughed.

"I've lived for over sixty years and I'm tired of a life of duty. I want to spend what time I have left with my family, doing things I like. I was thinking about it for a while and almost getting killed by a random creature as if I was just a first year student made me think.

"I wasn't able to defend my assistant, heck I couldn't even defend myself. It made me feel terribly old and helpless. Discovering that a kid has succeeded in crafting Orichalcum artifacts whereas I failed at it for over forty years sure didn't help." She sighed.

"Orion told me that you might be interested in working for an Academy and I'd be glad if you could replace me in the Forgemastering department once I retire. The White Griffon can't offer you the same opportunity. The Professors there are too young, it would take decades for a spot to open."

'Interesting. So it must have been her telling Orion about my new Skinwalker Armor. I might work with this development. Maybe I could even ask her about the runes and the sword I found in Huryole.' Lith thought.

Yondra insisted on her pitch and Lith listened to her while using Solus and Life Vision to keep their surroundings in check. He noticed that the underground was populated by several creatures, but they would all shy away from their lights.

Some would follow them for a while, but after finding no opening and maybe even perceiving the power exuding from the expedition, they would soon leave. Solus identified some as magical beasts, others as monsters, whereas the rest were a complete mystery.

Unfortunately, none of their mystical sense could see more than a silhouette, so Lith couldn't even figure out which was humanoid and which was just a two-legged creature.

The walls and the ground were too rough to have been carved, so the passage had to be natural. The scratches and the claw marks he spotted on several occasions, though, were not.

Chapter 637 Kulah Part 1

They were too regular as if someone had carved directions in the stone to not get lost. Lith pointed them to Yondra, who carbon-copied them with a piece of paper and chalk.

"How the heck did you notice them?" She blurted out after calling the rest of her colleagues to take a look at his discovery.

"Secret of the trade." Lith replied since revealing his Fire Vision was out of the question. The humidity in the cave had filled the carvings with water, making them stand out like a sore thumb to his thermographic vision.

After studying the carvings, the unanimous conclusion was that they were indeed some kind of ancient language.

"If I'm right, our expedition will go in history books." Said Professor Ellkas from the Fire Griffon. "I recognized this alphabet! It's an ancient dialect of the Odi language." Cheers and applause to

both Lith and Ellkas erupted from the group as everyone took their books out of their respective dimensional items to decipher the writings.

"The Odi!" Most of the Professors and their Assistants repeated enthusiastically so often that it almost resembled a chant.

"Who the heck are the Odi?" Morok said, followed by the soldiers.

'Fuck me sideways! The Odi.' Lith thought.

They were the reason he had chosen to be assigned to the Kellar region in the first place, but he had never predicted to stumble into their legacy with so many people to babysit.

Worse than that, the Professors could actually do more harm than good, so he started to think of a way to ditch them with no consequences for his military career.

"What's wrong Lith?" Quylla asked. "You're doing your 'I'm screwed' face."

"Seriously, we have spent too much time together!" Lith didn't like being read so easily. Phloria he could understand, but Quylla too?

After setting a perimeter to defend the blabbering Professors, Lith took Morok, Quylla, and Phloria aside to share with them the history of the Odi Kalla had taught him about.

According to the books in Scarlett's lab, they were an ancient and powerful race that had conquered all illnesses. They had reigned above the other races until they had become so conceited to resort to forbidden magic in the attempt to become immortal.

They had developed spells able to move the conscience of an individual from one body to another, achieving eternal youth. Their plan had backfired for two reasons. The first was the fact that the new body was younger, but the talent for magic wasn't carried over.

The second was that their victims and the Odi lower class had rebelled to such use of their children, leading to a revolution that had wiped the Odi from the face of Mogar.

On top of that, the Odi were considered to have laid the foundation for Lichhood.

"Let me get this straight." Morok said.

"If any of this crazy ass story of yours is true, then rather than ruins we might stumble into a populated city since those guys are supposed to live as long as they got a spare body. Also, they might have access to technology as good as ours if not even Liches?"

Lith nodded in reply. He doubted the Odi could have actually progressed that much, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

"Okay, I'm out of here. I'll call my superiors and abort the mission. I've got plans! I'm too young to die just a few months before retirement and in the company of a group of fossils at that!"

Phloria waited for the Ranger to be far enough before saying.

"Anything else we should be aware of?"

"Yes. The Odi were incredibly arrogant and racist." Quylla said. "They believed to be the master race and that everything besides magic was below them. They were divided into caste according to their magical talent.

"I'm telling you this because if somehow their protections are still working, they'll discriminate us based on our mana. Another thing. To avoid doing menial jobs they had slaves, but for protections they used golems."

Lith and Phloria stared at Quylla with surprise.

"How do you know all this stuff?" They asked in unison.

"Because even though what they did was wrong, they reached the apex of Body Sculpting. All historical sources agree on the Odi having truly defeated all illnesses, it's not just a groundless legend.

"They managed to do something we still can't. If we get our hands on their data, at least the sacrifice of their victims will do some good. We could achieve the same results without injuring anyone!" Quylla was trying to convince herself as well as the others.

She couldn't stop thinking about the moral implications of using such bloodstained knowledge.

'My biggest fear is that the modifications the Odi underwent to become immune to disease might have also caused the collapse of their society. Such a deep change in the life force might have easily affected their minds.' She thought.

"Is the expedition you needed my help with also related to the Odi?" Lith asked.

"Yes. Their empire was located in the Kellar region, but aside from some small ruins, nothing relevant has ever been found. I joined this expedition hoping I might find something that could help me to locate their capital, Reshia, but I would've never thought we would find something in the Odi language.

"What if we are about to discover Reshia itself?"

"It's unlikely. A capital is a place that must be easily accessible. A city with a constant flow of people, merchandise, and a lot of guards." Phloria said. "Signs on the walls and underground tunnels make me think more about a secret facility of sorts."

Their debate was interrupted by Morok's return.

"Goddammit! The high command ordered to continue with the mission and seal all the communication with the outside." He took a small device the size of a glass marble out of his dimensional amulet.

A short pulse of orange light spread through the tunnel, drawing the attention of the Professors. Lith expected them to be enraged by such lack of trust, but they looked all smug instead.

"Excellent move, Ranger Eari." Said Professor Gaakhu, from the Crystal Griffon. She was one of the youngest in the group, a woman in her early forties with several blue streaks in her light brown hair and dark eyes.

"According to the markings found by Ranger Verhen, we are about to find the ruins of Kulah."

"What's that?" Lith asked turning to Quylla, who shrugged in reply.

"I've no idea either, but since it must have taken a lot of effort to build something so deep below the earth, it must be something important. Captain Ernas, I don't need to tell you how security has just become of paramount importance." Gaakhu said.

"We'll keep protecting you at the best of our abilities." Phloria nodded.

"Not us, foolish child! I mean our discovery. Ranger Eari, didn't you explain anything to her?"

"No, because you butted in before I could." Morok said with a snort.

"Odi ruins are considered a state secret. Revealing their position or stealing any kind of artifact and knowledge is an act of treason. According to my commanding officer, all Odi ruins discovered so far contained priceless treasures.

"Everything we found is considered a Royal property."

At that point, Morok turned to Phloria.

"We're now under martial law and since you are the highest ranked officer, the command is now yours. It makes me happy because everything that goes wrong it's your fault and not mine."

Chapter 638 Kulah Part 2

"What are your orders, Captain Ernas?" There was something in the way Morok said the word that made it sound like an insult.

"Let's move. We need to reach the ruins as soon as possible. Ranger Eari, you and two of my men take point. Ranger Verhen, cover our back. Everyone else, if someone tries to sneak away from the group, strike first and ask questions later."

The three soldiers nodded, making the Assistant Professors swallow. None of them had expected their bodyguards to turn into their jailers.

Morok picked up the pace and so did everyone else. Everyone walked in silence, they were too busy watching their steps to waste energy chatting.

Lith was alone with Quylla again and was now worried about another unexpected turn of events. The more they advanced, the fewer creatures he would spot along the corridors until the group was completely alone.

'Whatever Kulah is, it seems that no one dares to come close to it. Let's hope I don't meet my third Lich.' Lith thought.

After more than four hours of walking, the group needed a break. From that moment onwards, only the members of the military were allowed to stand guard, whereas the others had to stay grouped together, making it harder for anyone to escape from their watch.

Aside from moss, nothing grew inside the tunnels, making them all look identical.

As hours turned into days, most members of the expedition started to fall into depression. There was no sunlight, the air was stale and smelly, making it painful to breathe from time to time.

Morok was still able to find his way thanks to the marks he had left while escaping from the Abomination-goblin hybrids, but every time he opened a new passage, he could see doubt and mistrust in the eyes of the others.

They were growing afraid that he had lost his way and their lives in the process. The group was so deep inside Mogar that dimensional magic was useless. All places looked the same, so opening a Warp Steps was no longer an option.

Using earth magic with no idea where they were was likely to result in getting stranded or even cause a fatal cave-in.

The impossibility to do anything but walking, sleeping, and eating was a heavy burden for everyone which worsened with each rest they took. The dullness of their routine turned the enthusiasm of the discovery into a bleak, hopeless silence.

More than once one of the Assistants had a claustrophobic attack and needed to be sedated. According to Lith's pocket watch, only four days had passed, but to everyone the march seemed to have lasted weeks.

"Here we are. This is where I was forced to stop during my first visit. Now it's all up to you, smarty-pants." Morok said.

The group had reached a huge underground cave of irregular shape which was at least 100 meters (330 feet) wide with a ceiling about 20 meters (66 feet) high. Once again, Lith could see that aside from moss, there was no life form dwelling in the vicinities.

The floor was too regular to not be man made and several corridors departed from the cave. Each one of them had been clearly realized with earth magic and was wide enough to allow a huge carriage to easily pass.

"Where do they lead?" Lith asked.

"I don't know. I had no time to play explorer, my priority was survival. The moment we were cleared to leave, we took the same path back to the surface. It was the safest route." Morok replied.

"As you have probably noticed, there's not much to eat down here, so any predator that gets stranded will welcome our arrival as if we're a free meal ready for the taking.

"We can't close the passages without running out of fresh air but we can't leave them like this."

The two Rangers started to put tripwires and alarms along the corridors while the Professors studied the structure at the end of the cave. There was a huge door there, so perfectly crafted that it would have been invisible if not for the moss that over the years had grown inside its small crevices, outlining its shape.

It was a double door made of rock, so high that it almost reached the ceiling and so wide that three carriages could easily pass together through it. The problem was that there was no sign of its activation mechanism.

Soon the cave was filled with light and noise as everyone did his best to find a solution to the conundrum in front of them. The array detection spells perceived several magical formations protecting both the door and the wall, making them immune to earth magic.

"How the heck can those things still work? Aren't arrays supposed to fade without maintenance?" One of the assistants asked.

"There are several possible explanations for this phenomenon, but your clearance level is too low to learn about any of them. So shut up and help us open this damn door." Gaakhu replied.

Lith only needed a glance to learn the answer to that question. Just like most of the lost cities, whatever was behind the door had been built above a mana geyser. The arrays could draw their

sustenance from it and unless an event of catastrophic proportions happened, they would last until someone turned them off.

Lith and Solus consulted all their Warden books, but the design of the arrays was unknown. The only thing they were certain of, was that they were powerful and that they would react badly if someone tried to forcefully open the door.

'There are several points in the wall where the word energy has been accumulated and compressed. It can't have any other purpose than to act as a defense mechanism in case of attack.' Lith thought.

To Morok Yondra asked:

"Do you have any suggestions on how to open the door?"

"No. During my first visit, my main worry was not dying of starvation and fortifying the place." He pointed at the south wall, where a few small buildings had been created with earth magic.

The ground in the vicinities was full of holes big and deep enough that moving recklessly would likely result in a sprain or worse, depending on how badly one would fall.

"What about you?" Phloria asked. Now that she was aware of Lith's Life Vision, she could expect one of his usual 'miracles'.

"None." He used Hush to avoid being heard. The cave was so full of echoes that even a whisper would be carried around, making it noticeable.

"The design of the arrays is too complex to understand something on a first glance. I need to study them carefully and then I'll let you know."

"Are you saying you can see arrays too?" Phloria was flabbergasted.

"As clearly as I can see you. Unlike people, they are entirely made of mana, so it's much easier to notice their details. Be careful with the door, I think it's surrounded by magical traps."

The situation made no sense to Lith. He knew thanks to Life Vision that no one was around, yet Morok had told him how they had met so many monsters during their stay to be forced to fortify the place and even resort to eating them.

'The question is: did it happen out of pure bad luck, was it some kind of automatic defense mechanism like the arrays, or did someone send the monsters to kill them?' Lith thought.

'I guess it's only a matter of time before we learn the answer.' Solus replied.

Chapter 639 Teks Part 1

Soon fatigue trampled over the renewed enthusiasm from reaching their destination. The Professors had come prepared, they had all the necessary to set up a few defensive arrays before going to sleep.

"I don't know how long we'll stay here, but we can't allow depression to dull our wits. Give me a few minutes." Professor Yondra said.

After a while, the cave was lit by a sphere of light that resembled a small sun, positioned in the middle of the ceiling. The array provided both light and warmth, even giving the ceiling a blue color.

A second array made the air fresher, ridding it of the excess humidity. Despite their simple effects, the two combined arrays made wonders to lift the morale of the expedition.

"The Solar Cycle array will reproduce the solar phases, including sunset." Yondra explained while checking her pocket watch. "This way we can recover our normal sleep cycle and have an artificial night with an artificial moon that will provide us light."

Morok had already sealed the path behind them, so Phloria's soldiers could now guard the natural corridors without worrying that anyone could escape. Without Ranger Eari there was no way out and the cave offered no privacy.

The group expanded the building Morok had previously created and split it into separate spaces for men and women. Once the camp was set, a hot meal consumed around a fire gave everyone the energy they needed to resume their task with optimism.

Now the members of the expedition didn't feel lost anymore. They had a purpose, a roof, and light to guide their way. While Lith searched the stone door for a way in, he noticed that Phloria and Quylla had joined the rest of the team.

Both of them had what looked like a thin wand made of silver that resembled a conductor's baton. They would strike with it at any unusual rock or apparently out of place detail they found.

Each time the wand hit, it would produce a ding, but nothing else. Since Forgemaster Professors like Yondra had a similar tool, Lith felt compelled to ask:

"Quylla, what is that thing?"

"A Royal Forgemaster tool. If you cast the proper incantation, it forces an enchanted item to reveal its nature." She explained.

"It can tell you what a spell does?" Lith was as shocked as his voice sounded.

"No, silly." She laughed. "It just reveals the magical nature of an otherwise seemingly normal item. Then it's up to the Forgemaster to study it. We're looking for some kind of enchanted secret compartment."

"Since when the two of you are Forgemasters?" Lith asked.

"I started to practice it seriously after- you know, I killed Yurial. I spent the entire year I was cooped up home learning the basics. It helped me a lot to keep my head clear." Her voice was sad but firm.

Quylla had come to terms with the actions the slave ring had forced her to commit, but that couldn't erase the guilt she felt for the death of one of her best friends.

"I, instead, started as soon as I finished my boot camp." Phloria was eager to change the topic, she didn't want to let Quylla dwelling too long on such bad memories.

"I couldn't stand my men having poor equipment because there's never enough budget. Plus I always wanted to follow my father's footsteps. Once I got rid of grades, I could finally take my time and learn things at my own pace."

"Why have I never heard of such a tool?" Lith was kind of envious. He didn't need it, but it would have made it much easier for him to justify his findings with Life Vision.

Also, if he had Orion's teachings and resources, the sky would be the only limit for his true Forgemastery.

'You can always dump Kamila and marry Phloria, if she's okay with it.' Solus sneered.

'Sorry, you are right. I should stop thinking with my wallet.' Lith replied.

"Because it's a secret of the trade." Yondra said. "Only Royal Forgemasters know how to craft one and only they can entrust one to someone else. Doing that puts in danger their own title and status.

"It's part of the legacy of Valeron Griffon, the first King. Are you perchance interested in my offer now?"

Lith was about to give her a polite but firm hard pass when his nose caught an unfamiliar scent. Now that the air was clear, his perceptions were back to their full efficiency.

"What's that noise?" Morok said putting everyone on the alert.

'How the heck did he hear something above our voices?' Lith thought while running toward the entrance and activating Life Vision. The previously empty tunnels were now filled with unknown creatures.

They triggered all the alarms the two Rangers had set along the way before finally coming into the light.

It was a group of magical beasts with the appearance of humanoid crabs, who stood over two meters (6'7") tall. There was no head above their shoulders, just a pair of stalks ending with eyes that moved independently, allowing them to have a 360-degree sight.

Their bodies were covered with a thick and pale white chitinous exoskeleton that made them look like stone colossuses come to life.

They had huge pincers instead of hands, big enough that they could easily chop a bull's head off.

They had no equipment, but between their bulky size and their bright green mana cores, Lith could tell that they probably didn't need it. The soldiers stuck at the creatures with their blades, but they were easily repelled by the exoskeletons without leaving a scratch.

Then, the soldiers activated the spells imbued in their magical rings, unleashing lightning bolts against the magical beasts while seeking the protection of the array. The electricity slipped over the humanoid crabs like rain on a window, inflicting no damage.

Using fire magic was too risky inside caves. The air was thin and the only fresh oxygen was that provided by the ever-present moss. Fire might make the cave inhabitable or destroy the moss needed for the group's survival.

Hence the well-trained soldiers used earth magic to conjure a barrage of earth spikes to crush open the exoskeletons or at least pin the creatures against the walls long enough for the Professors to prepare a powerful spell that would finish them in one fell swoop.

Unfortunately, the creatures only needed a wave of their pincer-hands to overpower the control of the soldiers over the spikes and throw them against the barrier. The crab beings were smart enough to aim for someone who wasn't the one who had cast the spell, so that they could actually hurt them.

"Don't waste your spells! Dinner here is called Tak. Their only weak points are the joints and the eyes!" Morok said.

One of his twin short swords pierced into the midriff of the Tak in front of him, hitting its white cartilage with surgical precision despite it being almost indistinguishable from the same colored exoskeleton.

The creature tried to crush the Ranger with its pincers, but Morok stepped back, taking out the blade from the open wound as a trickle of blue blood came out of it. He also hit the creature with a palm strike, apparently using the momentum of the hit to propel himself backward faster.

Right after the dodge, a thud could be heard and smoke came out of all the joints of the Tek as it collapsed to the ground, making them visible.

Chapter 640 Tek's Part 2

Morok had actually cast a fireball right through the open wound and into the innards of the creature, using its own hard shell to trap the powerful explosion inside the beast.

"I like my crab well cooked and now you know where to hit. Time to earn your pay, boys!" He said with a feral smile before moving onto the next opponent.

Lith's blade, one of the failed prototypes, went for the eyes instead. He wanted to check why Morok had chosen such a dangerous strategy when there was a much easier target.

The answer came in the form of the eyestalks actually being articulated peduncles capable of being folded back into the shell in case of danger.

'Plan B it is.' Lith thought, putting the blade back inside his pocket dimension. Fusion magic empowered his body as Solus turned into her glove form, fully enveloped by the silver protection of the Orichalcum.

The fist struck the Tek's abdomen like a jackhammer, lifting the creature off the ground of a few centimeters as cracks spread over its armor. The waves of pain the hit caused made the eyes reflexively pop out, allowing Lith to grab them with his free hand and discharge lightning directly into them.

The electricity traveled straight into the brain of the Tek, killing it on the spot. A second creature, incredibly nimble despite its size, circled around its dead companion and released a hail of razor-sharp ice crystals.

'Water fusion is a game two can play.' Lith thought.

Now that he knew the two elements Tek could use, he could predict their basic strategy. Lith sidestepped the attack, letting it harmlessly strike the barrier as a palm strike injected a volley of Plague Arrows inside the enemy.

Seeing that Lith had killed two enemies in the same time he had needed to kill one, Morok clicked his tongue.

"Fine. Let's get serious. Pick Hammer." Morok said, sheathing and unsheathing his blades in the blink of an eye. The weapons shapeshifted into one-handed battle hammers that closely resembled Solus's Forgemastering hammer, having both a hammerhead and a pick.

Morok struck with the pick side of the weapon at the carapace of the closest Tek, but to no avail. His strength wasn't enough to pierce its rock hard shell. At least not until a second later, when the second hammer hit the head of the first one as if it was a nail.

The pick crushed both the exoskeleton and the heart of the creature, instantly killing it. The soldiers and the Professors were so shocked by the display of raw power in front of their eyes that they stared dumbly at the scene, incapable of moving a muscle.

The Tekes started to coordinate their moves, attacking in waves and dying in waves. Morok would crush between his hammers any pincer that came too close for comfort, whereas Lith used water fusion to be as nimble as the Tekes and air fusion to be faster than them.

Every one of his palm strikes would send one of the creatures flying against its comrades, spreading his deadly touch to all of them since Plague Arrow's ethereal nature would pierce through any kind of matter until all of its energy was exhausted.

"Good gods." Jerth said. She was the second most powerful mage in her unit after Phloria.

"I thought they were just tall, dark, and rudesome, but those two are not human. Are all Rangers like that, Captain?"

"No. There is a reason why unlike the academies the army ranks Monster cadets above the Special ones." Phloria replied snapping out of her reverie.

"Which one did you date?"

"The less rude one. Now stop flapping your gums and drink your potions, they need backup!" She was right. The first group was already dead, but a much larger one was flooding out of all tunnels.

"Are we really going to stand here like morons?" Professor Syndra from the Lightning Griffon yelled.

"Captain, buy me five seconds and I'll close the curtains on this madness."

Phloria nodded and started yelling orders.

Stall them with hit and run tactics, there's weakness in numbers. Darkness magic may be slow, but there's too many of them. If you shoot in the middle, you are bound to hit some of them."

"What can I do?" Quylla asked.

"Stay behind me and get ready to treat the wounded."

The Tekes were too many, forcing the two Rangers on the defensive, back to back to avoid being surrounded.

"Nice glove." Morok said.

"Nice weapons. Also, duck." Lith replied while clapping his hands and emitting a silvery sound due to the Orichalcum covering them.

"What duck? Oh shit!" Morok kneeled just in time as Lith's hands released a ring of darkness energy that expanded outwards, mowing through the horde around them.

The spell wasn't strong enough to kill so many Tekes, but it temporarily weakened them. It allowed the two Rangers to escape the encirclement and find shelter inside the array.

Phloria's soldiers were shooting darkness magic non stop, killing dozens of enemies at once while she unleashed her tier five Mage Knight spell, Boom Box. All the spells in a Mage Knight's grimoire could be cast with only one hand, making their casting speed exceptionally fast.

Their greatest downside was their very short range, but against so many enemies amassed in the little space between the tunnels and the barrier, there was no such problem.

Five square-shaped ice shields with a side length of 7 meters (23 feet) surrounded the Teks from all directions but below, trapping them. Before the creatures could smash through the ice, a sphere of wind exploded in the middle of the spell.

The thunderclap was followed by a shockwave that rebounded on the ice walls after being amplified by a resonance effect. The shockwaves grew in power every time they hit an ice wall, piercing through all the prisoners after each sonic speed rebound.

The Teks crumbled like sand castles facing a high tide, but more of them came out of the tunnels.

"Everyone, step back!" Professor Syndra said.

He lifted both his arms, conjuring a tidal wave out of thin air that crashed against the Teks both inside the cave and those still inside the tunnels.

"No offense, gramps, but all that water will just make much easier for them destroying the array with enough ice to make winter look like summer." Morok said.

Professor Syndra's lips curled up in a disgusted expression. It was hard to tell if he was more insulted or annoyed by the Ranger's obvious remark.

"Once you're old, you need to eat a lot of fish. It's good for your memory."

"Corona Discharge." Syndra said with a flat tone.

The mother of all lightning bolts erupted from his body, in the wake of the tidal wave. Corona Discharge was a tier five War Mage spell. It used water to soak the opponent so that the following bolt of lightning could bypass all protections and hit the weak spots of an enemy. In the Teks' case, their eyes.

Like all tier five spells, both the water and the lightning were guided by Syndra's will, making them impossible to escape from. Over fifty Teks died in an instant, their bodies emitting the characteristic aroma of stewed lobster.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Lith asked.

"Yes, I call dibs on the well-cooked ones. I know we just ate, but all this action made me work an appetite." Morok replied.