

Supreme M 641

Chapter 641 Perfect Array Part 1

Those words made Lith almost slap his own forehead, but luckily he remembered in time about the Orichalcum still covering his hands.

"Those are water creatures, but there can't be a big enough water body around here to sustain such a big colony. If that was the case, we should hear the underground water stream or at least smell a lot of humidity in the air. Does any of you perceive any of that?" He asked.

The group started to sniff the air like a pack of hounds.

"No. The air is drier than many places we crossed on our way here." Said Professor Gaakhu.

"Exactly. So where the heck did they come from? Why we didn't hear them coming despite the ever-present echo?"

"Those are good questions, but I can at least answer one of them." Professor Yondra said. "Teks manipulate earth. They must have made the ground softer to avoid making noise."

"That doesn't explain why they were so focused on us. If they were starving, they would have eaten their fallen first. Instead, they kept attacking like their lives were on the line even though we did nothing to provoke them." Lith looked at the tunnels.

They were empty again. There was no trace of scouts or survivors fleeing from the scene.

'It doesn't make sense. My paranoia sense keeps tingling.' He thought.

"I think he is right." Professor Syndra said.

"Either the Odi's longevity is a hard truth rather than a myth, or we must have activated some automated defense mechanism. No matter the answer, both of them mean that we are in front of the discovery of a lifetime. Half of us will..."

"With all due respect, I give the orders here, Professor." Phloria cut him short.

"Before resuming our search, the Wardens must strengthen the barrier while my soldiers and the Rangers rest. In the meantime, all those that didn't do anything will guard the tunnels."

"Sir, yes, sir!" Morok said spitting a bit of Tek meat from the arm he was chewing.

"How certain are you that they didn't just come here following our noise?" She asked Lith with a whisper.

"Remember this?" Lith tapped the side of his eyes, resuming to speak as soon as she nodded him to continue.

"I'm 100% sure that those corridors were empty. Then there were ten Teks and after we started killing them others popped up. I mean it. I didn't see anyone walking."

"Then please rest and help us to find a way to open that door. This place is already giving me the creeps."

Lith used Accumulation while he looked around the cave. He remembered that both the White Griffon academy and his tower had surveillance mirrors, so the idea that someone was actually looking at them from a distance was quite likely.

Life Vision scanned every centimeter of the cave, searching for the transmitting device. Divination didn't exist, to spy on someone it was needed a transmitter that would capture the reflected light like a camera would and Warp the images to the mirror.

It could have been anything, but its magical aura was supposed to be visible.

'Unless it's cloaked.' Solus suggested.

'It wouldn't make sense. Only Awakened can sense mana and I doubt that those Odi creeps were Awakened. Otherwise each body they occupied would have lasted centuries and they would have kept their magical talent.' Lith replied.

'Maybe they weren't Awakened, but they might have been aware of their existence.' Solus suggested.

'Solus, do you realize that you've become a bigger pessimist than I am?' Those words put an end to their argument and made Solus wish they were both wrong. Solus about the Odi and Lith about her.

Unlike Invigoration, Accumulation had no rejuvenating effects, it would simply absorb the surrounding world energy and feed it to Lith's mana core, making it stronger.

Since whatever Kulah was it was built on a mana geyser, Lith could draw much more nourishment than usual from the environment.

'Even though hours of Accumulation don't amount to much of a power up, if I'm right about someone operating Kulah's defenses, every bit can help.' He thought as his enhanced body naturally recovered his mana and stamina.

While Morok slept to recover from the fatigue of the fight, Lith ate some food and searched for the activation mechanism of the door. The entire stone wall had been enchanted and several arrays overlapped on its surface.

'Whoever did this was indeed a Master Warden.' Solus thought. 'The runes comprising the various arrays never touch each other and have an even spacing between them, allowing the runes to work in perfect harmony.

'On top of that, it makes really hard to understand which rune belongs to which array. I'm afraid that I was right about the Odi being aware of Awakened.'

'Maybe and maybe not.' Lith replied. 'There are things like Scarlett's pince-nez or General Vorgh's staff that can make them visible to the naked eye. So far the only thing we know for certain is that they were crafty bastards.'

Lith placed his hands on the stone wall, as if he was searching for crevices or a hidden switch, and activated Invigoration. It was the only means he had to bypass any kind of cloaking device that could hide the truth from his eyes.

Invigoration required Lith to override someone's or something's mana flow with his own. It was a skill he had developed as a kid and it was second nature to him. Unfortunately, he had never used it on something that big.

There was only so much space he could cover without spreading his resources too thin, dulling his senses. To make matters worse, the complexity of the arrays and the enchantment of the wall made it hard for him to properly examine their countless details.

On the bright side, Solus could now deactivate her mana sense and focus solely on deciphering the incantation by sharing Lith's senses. Lith's antics drew more than one surprised look and several scoffs.

"Ranger Verhen, this is a waste of your abilities. If groping a wall was enough to bypass a protective array, then Wardens and Forgemasters wouldn't have spent so much time and effort developing their spells for tasks like the one at hand." Professor Syndra said.

There was no mockery in his voice, only sincere worry.

'If that idiot of my Assistant was half as capable as Lith, instead of cackling at him like a child...' He thought.

"Thanks for your concern, Professor. Yet we must consider that the Odi might have taken spells into account and resorted to some kind of mechanical trigger." Lith replied with the first believable explanation that came to his mind.

"Excellent point! Did you hear that, Calil? Take a lesson from Ranger Verhen and use your brain. If by the end of the expedition your contributions amount to nothing, I'll have you fired."

Just like the other Assistants, Calil had been noting down his master's findings so that he could later revise and make sense of the bigger picture. The rest of the time, the youths had been laughing behind the wall-groping Ranger's back.

Suddenly, there wasn't much to laugh about. Instead of mindlessly writing, he started to rack his brain for a solution to the conundrum at hand.

Chapter 642 Perfect Array Part 2

By the time the artificial sun started to set, the members of the expedition decided to call it quits for the day. Yondra could make the sun rise whenever she wanted, but that would mess up their sleep cycle even more.

Everyone was tired either because of the constant spellcasting or from trying to make sense of the collected data about the wall. Some, like Quylla, had a splitting headache from doing both.

Morok and Phloria's soldiers were pretty relaxed instead. They had slept, eaten, and spent their time playing dices or cards while guarding the tunnels.

"How do your weapons work, exactly?" Lith asked Morok while eating dinner.

"The problem with the wilds is that you never know what mess you're going to stumble into. So I had a good Forgemaster make me Orichalcum weapons capable of shapeshifting at will.

"The sheaths are part of the weapons and the key to trigger their shapeshifting abilities. If I need them to be heavier, the extra mass comes from the sheaths. They are also made with Orichalcum and are thicker than they look."

Solus studied their pseudo core with mana sense and was relieved to discover that they had no runes engraved on their surface.

'It seems that we are right. Runes must be a state secret. The pseudo core is very complex and it even required purple crystals to be stabilized.' She thought.

"They shapeshift? That's it?" Lith asked.

"That's it my ass!" Morok was offended.

"They saved my life countless times. They have a few minor incantations too, but nothing more. Energy based properties and Orichalcum are hard to not mix together, smartass. I don't have that kind of money." He said while looking at the Skinwalker in envy.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to belittle them. It's just that between the Orichalcum and the purple crystals, I expected something a little flashier."

"What does your gauntlet do?" Morok asked, ignoring the apology.

"Not much, yet. It's a work in progress. So far it can store a few low tier spells and serve as a last-ditch weapon." The glove's fingers turned into claws.

"I think it's very useful already. If you ever mass-produce them, I call dibs. Why use stone as its foundation though?"

"I told you, it's a work in progress. I used cheap materials because I constantly upgrade it." Lith replied.

"No duh, man. You are too stingy. Those magic crystals are smaller than my eyes and green and yellow at that! No offense, but that's lame."

'Lame? I've worked my ass off for years to get those two... gems, things, whatever they are!' Solus thought. 'Can I please punch him on the nose?'

"Any idea about how to open the door?" Lith was stuck between a rock and a moron, so he was eager to change the topic.

"None and I don't even care. I get paid no matter the result of the expedition. Fighting an Eldritch and those Tekes should be already worth a hefty bonus. Anything more is just gravy."

Since there was nothing to get from him, except maybe getting cleaned up at gambling, Lith went to speak with Quylla. Aside from the Professors and Solus, she was definitely the smartest person in the cave.

"How's your head?" Lith asked.

"After I treated myself, the pain is gone, but I'm still foggy. I can't waste a tonic on our first day." She replied while massaging her temples.

"Gods, I feel so useless. I'm more of a deadweight in battle now than when we were still at the White Griffon and I can't even open a damn door."

"That's not true. You saved Phloria's life and many others'. As for the door, I'd say you are in good company." Lith tried to cheer her up.

"That was days ago. The only thing I've achieved today is getting prime callouses on my fingers." She showed him her right hand. After swinging the Forgemaster wand for hours and using healing magic to treat blisters and skin irritation, her skin had hardened.

Quylla could easily get rid of them, but since she seemed to have many hours of wand swinging ahead of her, it would have been pointless. While they were talking, one of the Assistants passed them a copy of the information collected by the members of the expedition during the day.

Withholding knowledge in front of a common hurdle was pointless. Each Professor wanted the glory for themselves, but unless they got past the door, there was no glory to take.

The data had been sorted so that each array could be studied separately from the others and from the door's enchantment, making it easier to identify their rune patterns and energy nodes.

There was a lot of Warden jargon on each piece of paper and Lith could only understand the terms that Kulah's arrays and those he knew had in common. Quylla squinted her eyes hard as if there was something she couldn't focus properly on.

"Great, my headache is back! I give up. Good night, Lith." She put the notes in her dimensional amulet and stormed away.

'Why didn't you help her with Invigoration?' Solus asked.

'She's tired and frustrated with herself. The headache gives her a reason to rest and blow off some steam. If I make her head clear and she still fails, Quylla will feel twice as useless.

'Once because I fixed something that she couldn't and the second time because she would have no excuse for failing to open the door.' Lith replied.

Lith wasn't prideful. He didn't care how he solved a problem as long as he succeeded so he had no qualms asking for help to his betters. He walked towards Yondra's campfire.

Up to that point, the Professor from the Black Griffon was the one he had the best relationship with. She had already taught him a few things and maybe she was willing to expand his understanding of ancient arrays.

"Professor Yondra, maybe it's a stupid question, but why no one has tried to use Clean Slate to open the door?" Clean Slate was a tier four Forgemaster spell that would temporarily disable an enchantment, so in theory, it might solve their problem.

"It's not a stupid question, Ranger Verhen. This array here-" She said while showing him one of her notes. "-prevents the lock from being tampered from the outside. If we use Clean Slate, it will trigger the first energy node and cause a chain reaction that will activate all the other arrays."

'Damn. I can't even use Invigoration, then.' He thought. 'It's not a spell, but it's likely to be perceived as an external energy. I don't know what most of the other arrays do, but they are too powerful for a blind tinkering approach.'

Lith started to ask her about all the runes he was unfamiliar with and Yondra was happy to answer all of his questions. They had got off on the wrong foot, but the more time Lith spent with her, the more Yondra reminded him of his late mentor, Nana.

Yondra wasn't that old nor her back hunched, but the fierce light in her eyes was the same as Nana's and so it was her shameless approach to get what she wanted from people.

"It's fantastic that someone as young as you are has already comprehended the importance that every single rune comprising an array has. Most students are only interested in learning how to cast an array and how to bring them down.

"They don't care for the hows or the whys involved in the process." She patted his back before yawning.

Chapter 643 Perfect Solution Part 1

'It's hard to miss their importance when you see how runes affect the space around themselves and how the order of their activation can make so that the effects of two arrays comprised by the same runes are completely different.' Lith thought.

"Alas, I'm too old and tired to keep going. The moon is high already. Get some rest. If more creatures attack us tomorrow, I'll be counting on your protection." Yondra smothered the fire with a finger snap and entered the women quarters.

Lith remained alone for a while, sorting the new information acquired with Solus and taking notes on his own papers to later store them inside Soluspedia. Soon fatigue gave him a headache and his brain begged him for a break.

'Fighting is so much easier.' He sighed.

'Your body can withstand a lot, but your mind still needs to relax. Go to sleep, I'll keep an eye on the situation.' Outside her tower, Solus was unable to sleep or rest. It gave Lith an edge in many situations, but in the long term, it affected her sanity.

Lith went to sleep near a guard post, ready to act at the first sign of danger. He trusted no one. Morok was too strange and the soldiers too weak for his taste. The Professors were magically strong, some even more than Lith, but as Korgh had demonstrated, it only took a single shot to take them down.

Paranoia was a cruel mistress but it had served him well too many times to ignore her. Except when it was dead wrong, of course. When morning came and nothing happened, Lith cursed at himself.

'Hindsight is always 100% correct.' Solus chuckled.

The members of the expedition went back to study the door and before any of them could notice, dawn turned into sunset. Lith had even tried using Fire Vision at noon to spot hidden compartments.

If a switch was camouflaged under a fake rock, it should have shown a different coloration at his thermal vision when compared with the rest of the rock wall after being heated for hours by Yondra's spell. Unfortunately, even this attempt failed.

Lith spent dinner with Yondra and Quylla, comparing notes in search for a solution. The expedition was Lith's best shot at getting his hands on ancient Odi technology that might help him solve his reincarnation problem.

'If we crack this riddle and in the future I find more ruins on my own, I'll know how to get in. If we fail despite so many wise mages working together, I might as well check the Odi off my list of possible solutions.' He thought.

During the third day, Lith started to become restless just like the Assistant Professors. The older mages knew that solving ancient mysteries required time, effort, and luck, whereas their aides took failure personally.

After whispering "open sesame" in front of the door, obtaining nothing in return but an awkward echo, Lith asked Professor Gaakhu, the language expert:

"What's the Odi word for friends?"

"Glavrish. Why?"

After a painful second that shattered his last hopes, he replied:

"No reason. I was just curious." He said while Solus laughed her ass off at his expense.

When dinnertime came, Lith decided to give a break to both himself and Yondra, spending the evening with his friends. After receiving her own Skinwalker, Quylla's mood had improved a lot, but she was getting gloomier with each passing day.

"Gods, it's so frustrating to me. I'm probably the one that knows more about the Odi among all the Assistants taking part in the expedition since I've been researching them for over a year now. Yet my contribution is close to zero." Quylla said.

"I'd rather not work while I eat. If I hear another word about arrays, I'm going to scream." Lith said. "But since we are already there, maybe there's something we are missing. When I taught magic to Tista, I improved my foundations by learning from my own teachings.

"Maybe if you tell us what you know about the Odi, we could better understand their way of thinking."

"First of all, they were conceited, self-centered bastards." Quylla said with a voice full of spite.

"Their laws allowed them to have slaves, as long as they weren't Odi, and they treated the other races worse than their cattle. The Odi would use their slaves as guinea pigs, infecting them on purpose with the illnesses they had yet to cure.

"When healing magic wasn't enough, they would resort to Body Sculpting, permanently altering their subjects' physiology trying to make them immune to congenital diseases.

"Once they achieved perfect health, they moved on altering their appearance so that every member of their race would be born with what they considered to be perfect proportions.

"For decades they attained countless feats, uncaring for their cost since they weren't the ones paying for it. Then, they tried to defeat aging and failed.

"You know the rest. They were obsessed with the search for perfection in every aspect of their life. I mean, look at the arrays." The word was enough to make Lith's head throb.

"The spacing between the runes, the way they overlap with each other, and the door at the same time. It's a seamless formation with no weak points."

Lith reviewed his notes inside Soluspedia, comparing them with Quylla's words.

"It's indeed an amazing piece of work." He said, his eyes fixated in a blank spot as he examined the runes one by one and forced himself not to puke.

"Even if there are five arrays covering the door, the resulting structure resembles that of a musical score. Each rune is perfectly placed, one flows into another and is reinforced by the other runes surrounding it as it in turn reinforces them."

"Yeah, it's almost like... That's it! I think I know how to open that door!" Quylla stood up abruptly, flipping her plate. Only a well-timed use of spirit magic saved the innocent food.

She dragged Phloria and Lith to Professor Gaakhu's campfire to share her success with them. Gaakhu was the head of the expedition, her permission was required before making an attempt at opening the barrier.

"We got it all wrong, Professor. There aren't five arrays, just one and I know how to open it." Quylla said.

"Nonsense, Mage Ernas. Any of us, you included, can detect five different structures and their unique power nodes. We have even identified the purpose of each one of them..."

"No, that's where you are wrong. You have identified the purpose they have when you take them separately and that's why there's no solution. Please humor me. What happens if you consider them as a single array? What becomes of their runes?"

Professor Gaakhu sighed, using water magic to write down the information about the different arrays on a single page.

'I can't just say no to Mage Ernas. At least she has shown initiative and confidence. The morale is already bad as it is. Trying and failing is better than letting yourself fall into despair.' She thought.

At least until the entire picture appeared in front of her eyes.

"This is amazing! The five arrays actually do combine into a single one with its own purpose." She blurted out as her colleagues started to huddle up behind her back, looking at the piece of paper in her hands.

Chapter 644 Perfect Solution Part 2

"Exactly! They split the array into different parts to disguise its real structure." Quylla said.

"It's more than that." Said Professor Neshal, the Master Warden from the Earth Griffon.

"The five arrays can work both individually and as one. The Odi found a way to make overlapping arrays more than the sum of their parts. But you are right. The final array is the weak spot because once you discover the truth, it allows you to destroy them all at once.

"It's unbeatable if you don't know the trick behind it, but once you do, you can topple them all like a house of cards. It would be revolutionary otherwise." She sighed. Neshal admired the Odi for their ingenuity and despised them at the same time for their conceit.

They had clearly thought that no member of the 'lesser races' would notice the fatal flaw in their creation.

"Excellent work, Quylla." Said Professor Phesta from the White Griffon. "I'll make sure that you are rewarded properly by the academy. Without your insight, we might have wasted days standing in front of the door."

"Thanks, Professor!" She was brimming with joy. "Can we open it now?"

"Absolutely not." All those present said in unison.

"We have no idea what lies beyond the gate and we are all tired. We will work on the sixth array after we are fully recovered and are ready for any surprise the Odi might have left behind."

Professor Gaakhu said.

Quylla was kind of disappointed. After struggling so hard and for so long, she had to continue waiting to see if the fruits of her labor would pay off. Lith didn't share her anxiety. He didn't need Life Vision or mana sense to perceive the danger that kind of array posed to his life.

The next morning, the Professors used earth magic to conjure a table made of stone and worked together to safely open the door. As soon as all the papers were laid on the stone surface, Lith made his proposal.

"I don't think that opening the array is a good idea. Destroying it will require the same energy and it's much safer."

"Are you insane?" More than one Professor said.

"That kind of technique in laying arrays constitutes a relic by itself. Even if it's a faulty product, we could study it and learn a lot about the ancient Odi magic. We might even find a way to improve their creation!" Professor Syndra said.

"Indeed. But what if we open the door, trigger a trap, and the arrays activate again? What if they shoot us in the back the moment we walk through that door? Is a single relic worth our lives?" He spoke looking in Phloria's eyes.

She was the commander of the expedition and the only one who was aware of the anomalies occurred while battling the Tekes.

"I agree with Ranger Verhen." She said. "Take your time to study and copy the array formation if you must, but no one is going inside until that thing is taken down. The first rule for every combat situation is to have a clear retreat path."

"If the Odi's defense system identifies us as members of the 'lesser races' and the gate closes behind us, we'd have no time to open it again. Leaving our back exposed is out of the question. My decision is final."

What started as a low grumble soon rose in intensity, until outraged yells echoed throughout the entire cave.

"Give it a rest, will you?" Morok's voice overcame them all like a roar. "We could be attacked by a whole army and I would miss their arrival because of your yapping. If you want to die, leave me out of it."

The bickering went on until it started to grind on Phloria's nerves.

"Maybe you're not familiar with how the army works. The discussion is over." She said.

"Maybe, and maybe not." Professor Gaakhu replied. "Over two-thirds of the members of the expedition disagree with you. We demand to speak with your commanding officer."

"How dare you questioning my judgment?" Her voice was low, yet it was perfectly audible and scarier than any angry yell or threat.

"I dare because I think that due to your young age you fail to realize how important this discovery might be, Captain Ernas. Ours is not just the temper tantrum of some old fogeys." Gaakhu replied.

"We are concerned that your hasty decision can harm the development of magic and the Kingdom itself. Not to mention that albeit Ranger Verhen has a point, I believe that your past relationship is affecting your judgment."

"Being careful is good, being paranoid is not. As the head of the expedition, it's in my right to veto your decision if it damages the Kingdom."

"Fine." Phloria knew Gaakhu was right.

Since there was no emergency situation and the army communication amulet still worked, she had to rely the message. Yet it was the first time during her military career that someone had disrespected her orders so blatantly.

She broke the communication silence and called the high command, explaining to them everything that had happened. She mentioned Lith's insight on the most recent attack and emphasized the risks that keeping the array would imply.

"Interesting." Commander Berion replied while tapping his mahogany desk with his forefinger.

"Who proposed to preserve the array?" He asked.

Judging from his choice of words and his tone of voice, the Professors understood that he agreed with them so they introduced themselves one by one. With the Mage Association's bleak looking future, receiving the support of a rising star in the army like Berion could lead to countless benefits.

Even some of those who had previously agreed on destroying the formation switched sides. Only Professor Yondra and Professor Syndra were adamant in putting their safety first and didn't change their mind.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your honesty. I have to agree with Captain Ernas and Ranger Verhen. They both have a 100% mission success rate, so I'll trust their judgment since it's the only reason you are still alive.

"No offense, Professor Gaakhu, but without Ranger Eari the coordinates of the ruins would be lost. On top of that, in case the expedition gets wiped out, the Kingdom would have lost some of their most valuable subjects.

"Captain Ernas is right. Study the formation as much as you want and take it down when you are ready. Over and out."

Berion's calm attitude disappeared as soon as the communication ended.

"Damn idiots! I didn't invest so much to keep Ranger Verhen under my command just to lose him to preserve a crappy array. Even if he wasn't there, I would think twice before putting at risk one of the Ernas's daughters on a whim, but two of them?

"I like my head where it is."

Once he managed to calm down, he called his secretary and instructed him to update the status of the expedition.

"I don't know whether those Professors suffer just from hubris or dementia, and I don't care. Flag their personal files as unfit to command for the next missions."

Meanwhile, in the cave, Lith was sighing in relief.

'I'm not willing to risk my life for those morons, worst case scenario I'd have been forced to commit insubordination. Luckily for me, Berion earned his spot by working in the field.' He thought.

Chapter 645 All is One Part 1

'The silver lining is that now we know who is worth protecting and who is just dead weight.' Solus said, making Lith worry about her mental condition.

She was perfectly fine, it was just that the closer she got to achieve her human body, the more protective toward Lith she became. Solus still valued all lives, but she was willing to make sacrifices to preserve her own happiness.

To her, a bunch of suicidal idiots wasn't worth the risk of a lifetime of solitude.

Many of the Professors swallowed loudly, thinking they had just signed their own death warrant. Gaakhu, instead, wasn't worried. Berion was just a single man that coincidentally was in charge.

There were many others in the army that would share her vision and help her to protect her status.

'It's pointless to worry about a minor failure. Bureaucrats only care about results. If I bring back something valuable, this blunder will be dismissed as an insignificant incident.' She thought.

The expedition team started to examine the array down to the smallest details, double-checking everything. Quylla was very annoyed by the prolonged wait. She was eager to see what was on the other side of the wall.

It took them half a day to complete their study and another half to make sure that their spell would destroy the formation in the safest way possible. The morning of the second day after Quylla's epiphany, the spell was finally cast.

Just as Professor Neshal had predicted, by tampering with the sixth hidden array formed by the overlapping of the other five, their finely balanced structure collapsed. Two arrays were destroyed, while the other three became purely ornamental.

The door unlocked, turning on its hinges as if it had been properly preserved for all that time. Moss and dirt fell from its crevices, throwing up a lot of dust.

"Oh shit!" Was the collective opinion of the expedition the moment they could see what was waiting for them. Kulah wasn't a city, a village, nor a shelter. It was formed by long rectangular buildings that looked all the same.

They had been built out of some unknown pale blue material that was neither rock nor metal. It emitted a bright luminescence that made the whole area around the buildings as clear as the day.

The roads connecting the buildings were covered by a layer of dust several centimeters thick. It proved how no creature, living or not, had walked them during the last decades.

Each facility had only one access, consisting of wide double doors made of metal, and no windows. Each door was sealed by a yellow array visible to the naked eye.

It was shaped like three concentric circles inscribed with unknown runes and fueled by both purple crystals and the mana geyser underlying Kulah.

With Life Vision, Lith could see that there were cable-like devices that ran across the whole compound, carrying the world energy to the various arrays, including those the expedition team had just deactivated.

"This is a fucking military base!" Morok said, taking the words right out of everyone's mouth.

"Lith, what do you see?" Phloria asked. Her question made no sense to the others, yet no one dared to move. Any country would react to intruders accessing to a secret compound with extreme prejudice.

The Odi were likely to have left a lot of nasty surprises behind.

"The coast is clear, but we can't allow ourselves to relax. Everything, and I mean everything, is still perfectly functional." He pointed at the arrays on the doors, which were supposed to have faded centuries before.

Lith started to chant gibberish while preparing his spells, quickly followed by Morok and Phloria's soldiers. Once he was done with his preparations, he took a step forward.

The door and the stone wall started to flash with bright red color and emitted a high pitched noise. The surviving arrays activated one after another, but because of the damage they had sustained, they could only produce a series of sparks and sizzling before imploding with a thud.

Lith kept watching around, waiting for something to happen.

"Morok's log: add to my report how the old fossils would have been the death of us if we didn't destroy the arrays before entering." He said, drawing on himself several mean looks.

Morok was about to reply when Lith's prudence paid off. Life Vision showed to him a life force rushing through the several centimeters thick dust layer covering the floor, making it come to life.

It took the form of a colossus over 3 meters (10 feet) tall with bright yellow eyes. Aside from the eyes, it had no features nor definite shape. The whole dust cloud was its body, and the creature used it to try and drown Lith.

"Oh gods! A sand golem." Said Professor Ellkas in a panic. "It's supposed to be impossible! Where the heck might the core of that thing be?"

Phloria didn't care if it was possible or not, the only things worrying her were that it was standing right in front of them and that Lith had yet to react.

"Hold your fire!" She said while raising her open hand in the air to reinforce her command.

'Sand golem my ass.' Lith thought. 'Golems have no life force whereas this thing is alive. The obvious response would be to burn it, but if it was me, I would have filled the air with something volatile.

'Even finely dispersed flour is highly flammable and if this thing is what I think it is, the resulting explosion might kill me.'

Lith was right about almost everything. The creature in front of him was alive and flammable, but it wasn't an explosion the real threat fire posed. It was a fungus-like creature he was facing and the dust was actually its spores.

Putting it ablaze would have caused a small explosion strong enough to send them flying everywhere, killing the expedition in a matter of seconds. The creature was capable of moving each spore individually and was using them to flood Lith's respiratory system, making it impossible for him to breathe or cast new spells.

The spores were also able to feed upon their host and drain their fluids to increase their numbers. Surviving to such multi pronged attack was nigh impossible. Unless of course one had fusion magic.

The darkness coursing through Lith's body fed on the spores and turned them into nourishment while Invigoration allowed him to study their attack pattern.

"Ingenious." Lith said while releasing a series of darkness magic pulses that slaughtered his grain sized opponents. The fungus emitted a prolonged, bass noise that Lith interpreted as pain.

The creature retrieved all of its spores, condensing them to assume a physical form.

"Gods' there are so many things we can learn from the Odi." Professor Gaakhu said while following Lith's lead and releasing a wave of darkness energy. The creature opened its body in response, letting the spell harmlessly pass through the empty space it had created.

Lith would have liked to give the Professor a piece of his mind, but the eyes of the creature were drawing his attention. There was no fury, pain, or battle spirit in them. Lith knew that look, it was how Carl and Tista looked at him when they were little.

It was hope.

Chapter 646 All is One Part 2

"That thing is no golem, it's alive." Lith yelled without averting his gaze from the fungal creature in front of him. Life Vision and mana sense kept scanning the surroundings, trying to make sense of the creature's odd behavior.

'Hope? What kind of fool would look at his sworn enemy with hope?' Lith thought as a black aura enveloped his body, protecting him from the deadly spores.

'Maybe you're looking at the issue from the wrong angle. Why would a seemingly immortal creature bother to defend this place? The Odi are no more, and if Mogar's fungi are like those on Earth, killing one is nigh impossible.

'Especially if the spores share a hive mind. One of them is enough to regenerate the whole creature from scratch.' Solus pointed out.

'It shouldn't care. Unless it's bound to this place, of course.' Lith thought.

His train of thoughts was interrupted by the creature using earth magic to make a hail of stalactites fall from above. Lith had no problem dodging them, but the creature grabbed and used them as clubs.

The spores arranged themselves in tendrils capable of freely attacking Lith from every direction. The pseudo arms had no bones nor joints, so they could change their trajectory at any time, forcing Lith to Blink away before being trapped.

"We need to help him!" Calil, Professor Syndra's assistant, was tired of waiting on the sidelines. Unlike the others, he wasn't just a theoretician. One of his specializations was Battle Mage.

A wave of his hand unleashed the tier five spell, Fire Arms. A volley of flaming hands the size of an adult intercepted the clubs and clawed at the enemy at the same time. Each one of the magical hands was made out of air and cyan flames.

The wind element allowed them to grab anything without inflicting harm or could boost the flame's intensity at any given time according to the situation.

'If it's a sand golem like Professor Gaakhu says, my spell will turn it into glass. If it's a living being like Ranger Verhen says, then Fire Arms will kill it. No matter the species this bird belongs to, mine is the right stone for the kill.' Calil thought.

"Don't use fire, you idiot!" Lith said, crashing Calil's heroic dreams.

The spore cloud exploded with a series of small thumps, spreading the mushroom creature's minuscule limbs past the door.

Only those like Phloria who had blind trust in Lith had prepared a darkness barrier to protect themselves. All the others resorted to air or earth magic, but such elements couldn't do anything against a pollen sized attack.

Calil took the brunt of the spore wave, coughing madly while he started to bleed from all of his orifices due to the mycotoxins the creature released as it grew inside his body.

The infection spread so fast that it took it seconds to entirely cover the youth's skin.

"Light magic is useless!" Professor Syndra said after his attempt to save his assistant's life only accelerated the spreading of the disease which was now also covering Syndra's hands.

"It's a fungus!" Lith yelled with his last breath as the creature now enveloped his body withing its own, pummelling at him non stop with its appendices. Lith could kill the nearby spores with darkness magic, but they were just expendable.

The entire Kulah was covered in them, giving the creatures almost infinite mass to draw upon. Lith turtled up, infusing his Skinwalker with mana so that the Orichalcum protected him from head to toe.

The spores couldn't touch him anymore and the stalactites were just normal weapons. Thanks to the Thunderbird's plume, the Skinwalker was immune to blunt attacks. At least until he had enough mana to keep the armor in its boosted form.

'Any ideas?' Lith asked while searching for a way out.

'Working on it.' Solus replied. 'There must be something that forces the creature to stay here. Now that I know the creature's energy signature, I should be able to locate its core from a distance if I focus hard enough. If it has one, though.'

Phloria and Quylla had their own battle to fight. Aside from Morok and Yondra, the rest of the expedition was dying. Quylla could only treat one person at a time, whereas Phloria was racking her brain to find a spell that could turn the tides of the battle.

'Think, Lith. Think. How do you coerce a plant to do your bidding? A hostage? Nonsense. With a hive mind, one is all and all are one. A slave ring? Even more idiotic. How do you put a ring on a bunch of spores?

'They would just need to cut off the f- That's it! The hive mind is the key. The Odi must have infected part of the spores with some kind of slave agent. It would be enough to take control of the entire creature due to the consciousness the spores share.

'If I'm right, the enslaved spores must be somewhere nearby. A place where they are protected by random harm but have enough resources to survive. If it was a sealed container, over time they would have died of starvation.'

'On it!' Now that she had at least an idea of what to look for, Solus could restrict her search parameters.

Even if his intuition was right, Lith had yet to find a way to escape from his predicament. Most of the spells he had at the ready weren't suitable against such a creature and Origin Flames were now an even worse option than they had been before.

Even though they were mystical, they were still made of fire, and to make matter worse, they would hurt Lith along with his enemy. He had avoided using them because an explosion made by Origin Flames might have wiped out both the expedition and Kulah.

"If we get out of here alive, I'm going to ask for a raise!" Morok complained while cleansing another Professor from the spores. He wasn't much of a caring guy, but he was aware that as soon as the fungus was done with the fossils, he would be its next target.

"This is never going to work!" Quylla blurted out in desperation. With only three healers and 14 patients, some already in critical condition, fighting the spores as if they were not sentient was a losing battle.

She stopped treating Professor Phesta and started to spread short and weak pulses of darkness magic all around her.

"Are you insane? Your spell is going to affect us too!" Morok said.

"No, she is a genius just as you are a moron!" Yondra said. "The pulses she emits are strong enough to prevent the spores from spreading but weak enough to be stopped by our armors. She's buying us time by acting as a human array."

'A reckless genius.' Yondra thought while treating her next patient as fast as she could. 'You can't improvise spells, which means she is using first magic. Covering an area that big while keeping such fine control over the pulses must put an immense burden on her body.'

Yondra was right. Unlike Awakened ones, fake makes were unable to stimulate their cores to produce more mana without the help of magic words and hand signs. Even producing the effects of a tier one spells with first magic would endanger their lives.

In the meantime, Phloria had never felt so helpless. The sword and spells she had practiced so hard were useless against the monstrous fungus, especially now that it held Lith inside its clutches.

Chapter 647 All are One Part 3

'I can't use fire unless I want to repeat Calil's mistake. Earth would only squash Lith, the same applies to darkness. I'm no Healer so I can't help the infected. What are the elements I can safely work with? Air and water.' Phloria thought.

A sudden idea popped up inside her head. It was dangerous and likely to backfire, but Phloria had learned from her father that she had to fight with the options she had, not those she might want.

Regretting to have never learned a single tier four War Mage spell, she unleashed a barrage of the tier three spell, Frostbite. Fake mages couldn't amplify the strength of a spell below tier five at will, so Phloria had to compensate for the lack of quality with speed and quantity.

A frozen wave after another struck the mass of living spores surrounding Lith, limiting their movements and making those closing in to replace the mass lost due to Lith's dark aura fall to the ground.

The fungal cage became thinner by the second as its external layers were frozen and the internal layers were sucked dry by darkness magic. Lith managed to escape by releasing a sudden burst of his aura that scattered the creature's remains away while Phloria's unrelenting barrage of spells prevented the spores from taking a physical form again.

"Why you didn't do that earlier?" Lith asked while flying to her side.

"Because I was afraid that something like that would happen!" The moment she stopped casting to catch her breath, the spores broke out of the ice and started to multiply at a terrifying rate.

"If something that size lived for so long and kept such a huge mass, then the Odi must have left it plenty of food. Food plus lots of water...."

"Make the problem even bigger." Lith completed the phrase for her.

'So she was aware of the risks and yet she used water anyway. How can she still trust me so much that she bet her life on me finding a way to beat this thing?' Lith thought.

'Maybe it's not just trust. Maybe she wasn't willing to abandon you. Feelings don't fade just because we want them to.' Solus hated it when Lith was so dense, but being cynical also made him blind to the most obvious and cheesy answers.

'I hate to ask you for this after all the troubles we had to escape from that living prison, but I need you to get back in the belly of the beast. Metaphorically, of course. I can't find anything from here, so if you are right, the corrupted spores are in some place deeper inside Kulah.

'It would explain why the creature didn't attack as soon as the door was opened. Probably if its consciousness gets too far from the corruption, the mind link might be broken. It had to wait for us to be in position.'

Lith mind whimpered before saying:

"Thanks for your help, Phloria. Also, please don't get mad at me!" Then he seemingly threw in the gutter all of her efforts by charging at full speed against the spore cloud that was now so big that it covered the entire Kulah from her sight.

'I really hope Lith does have a plan. Otherwise that creature will have to get in line to kill him, because I call dibs.' Phloria thought as she was now left alone against a raging storm of deadly spores.

Only half the creature was following Lith. The remaining half was determined on crossing the entrance and dealing the finishing blow to the crippled expedition team. Then, it would have all the time to focus on the last invader standing.

'Well, at least protecting is what I do best.' Phloria activated her tier five Mage Knight spell, Death Bastion. It conjured a stone wall infused with darkness magic that quickly replaced the opened door, sealing Kulah's entrance.

The spores tried to seep through the crevices in the newly formed rock, but darkness magic killed them faster than they could advance. Then, the creature tried to overpower Phloria's control with its own earth magic, but tier five magic allowed her to infuse her will inside her spell.

On top of that, darkness magic wouldn't make a distinction between the spores and their mana. It devoured them both, giving Phloria an edge in the willpower tug of war for the control of the earth surrounding the city gate.

On the other side of the gate, Lith moved as fast as a bullet, using waves of dark energy to force the enemy to open a path for him. At the same time, he canceled some of the spells he had at the ready and started weaving new ones that were better suited to handle his current situation.

'This plan sucks so badly for so many reasons.' Lith thought. 'The Odi should have ordered the creature to protect the container holding the corrupted spores. The closer I get, the more focused on me the creature will become.'

'If on one hand it will help me to understand how close I am from my destination, on the other hand, it's also likely that once I become its only mark, things will get even more difficult.'

Lith flew above Kulah's blue buildings, but kept himself away from the ceiling. The fungal creature had already proved to be able to manipulate earth and the fight was already unfair as it was.

Tidal waves of spores were surrounding Lith from all sides. They couldn't keep up with his speed but they had no need to. The creature was slowly collecting all of its mass, sealing all the possible way outs with living walls made of spores mixed with earth.

Each one of the walls was at least 2 meters (6.6 feet) thick and kept expanding by the second. Their hardness was also increasing, making them able to withstand most tier three spells without effort.

The creature had spent centuries trapped inside Kulah, with nothing to do but eat, multiply, and develop its skills.

'Found it!' Solus said. 'Same energy signature but stuck below the ground. In front of the third building on your left.'

The moment Lith came 100 meters (330 feet) close to the container, the defense order took priority. The entirety of the creature moved against Lith, giving Phloria and the Healers the respite they so desperately needed.

Even the spores infecting the expedition members willingly abandoned their victims and tried to reunite with the main body. Unfortunately for them, the moment they were far enough from the humans, Phloria, Quylla, Yondra, and Morok shot a darkness pulse that wiped them out from the face of Mogar.

Quylla collapsed as soon as she made sure that her patients were alive, not a second sooner. Yondra cursed at her old age. She had not much stamina left and Quylla was not faring any better than the victims of the spores.

Morok was whistling, he had done his part so he could pretend to be exhausted and wash his hands of the rest.

In the meantime, Lith had just landed on the spot Solus had identified. He conjured his tier five spell, Setting Sun. It generated a globe made of darkness imbued flames around him to act as his last stand.

"I'll stall for time, you take care of the container." He said.

Solus glove detached from Lith's arm, using Invigoration to make sure there weren't hidden traps or arrays while Lith filled the space of 10 meters (33 feet) around himself with black flames.

His own magic couldn't harm him nor Solus, whereas it would incinerate the fungal creature as if it was paper thrown into the fire.

Chapter 648 All are One Part 4

Lith's problem was that if you toss enough paper at once, it can end up smothering the flames.

'Fuck me sideways. I wish I had added the air element to the mix. A tornado of black flames would be much harder to overpower.' Lith thought while looking at the incoming avalanche.

'Again, only hindsight is 100% correct.' Solus replied. 'Plus, making two elements coexist is already hard. If there was a third one, you would be complaining about not having enough mana to maintain it active for long.'

As she had feared, the container was protected by several arrays. They were layered one upon the other, to force the enemy to waste their time deactivating them one by one.

It was a perfect plan since with the fungal creature on a rampage, Lith and Solus didn't have more than a few seconds at their disposal. Even an Invigorated Setting Sun could only hold for so long.

"I really hope you Odi are all dead, otherwise I'm going to kill you!" Lith said while making the black flames so tightly packed that they almost became solid. The first tidal wave of spore was turned into ash on impact, but the second one managed to penetrate the barrier, and the third went deeper.

Tons of spores were crashing on him non-stop from every direction, Lith was too focused on slowing their advance to keep his breathing rhythm. Invigoration had been sealed by the simple raw power of the creature's onslaught.

'Did they really devise this strategy to fight Awakened ones?' Lith thought while the enemy was seconds away from eating his face.

'Nah. You know the Odi. Too arrogant to admit that the devil is in the details.' Solus said as the arrays collapsed in unison, allowing her to destroy the corrupted spores. The moment the creature was freed from the mind control spell, it stopped its attack.

After that, most of the cloud died, leaving only enough spores to form a humanoid figure that creepily resembled Lith down to the smallest details. He had no idea it was the creature's way to show respect toward a member of another race.

"Thanks, human. Even though we doubt that freeing us was your real purpose, we can't argue with results nor justify our attempts to end your life." The creature said. Unfortunately, Lith couldn't understand the beasts' language, let alone mycetes'.

He used that moment of respite to rekindle Setting Sun back to its full power.

"You have no idea of the pain we endured. Centuries of slavery spent having our mind violated every day and forced to increase our numbers despite the pain having our consciousness split between such a big colony inflicted to us. We'll hinder you no more. May the Great Mother bless you."

The Lith-looking creature beckoned with its hand and a small ring floated in the space between them.

"We don't know if it's powerful or not. Its magic comes from the accursed Odi and it's useless to us. We pray it will aid you in your journey. Please, forgive us." The creature gave him a deep bow before bolting away.

Only when Solus and Life Vision confirmed Lith that there were no more spores did he lower his spell.

'Okay. First of all, how the heck did you crack so many arrays that fast?' He asked while using spirit magic to lift the ring before studying it with Life Vision. Lith had no idea what it was, but he could recognize blue glowing runes when he saw them.

'It was actually an incredibly menial task. What do so many powerful arrays need to work?' She asked while studying the ring with her mana sense. Its pseudo core wasn't very complex and the gem on top of it was just green.

It made both Lith and Solus very happy.

'A lot of mana. So?' Lith replied.

'Do you see mana crystals around here?'

'No. Wait, don't tell me that...' Lith couldn't believe that an entire race could be so shrewd and yet so idiotic.

'Bingo! I just cut the mana crystal cable that supplied the arrays with the world energy from the mana geyser and they dissipated. Easy as flipping a switch.' Solus wrapped herself around Lith's arm before returning to her ring form.

'Morons. As for the gift the creature left us, it's must be a trinket someone lost and never bothered picking it up. Which is awesome. It might as well be our Rosetta Stone for studying runes.' Lith thought, putting the ring inside his pocket dimension.

Lith had already returned to his peak condition thanks to Invigoration. He flew back to Kulah's gates, to check on Phloria and Quylla. Maybe on Yondra too. The rest of the expedition might as well die for what he cared.

"It's me. Let me out, the creature is gone and the area is safe." Lith said once he reached the Death Bastion.

"What's my mother's name?" Phloria asked. She wasn't leaving their lives up to chance. For what she knew, someone or something might have been imitating Lith's voice.

"Jirni. Your father is Orion and your dog Lucky. In name and in fact."

Phloria dispelled Death Bastion, giving Lith a solid punch in the stomach right before hugging him with enough strength to squeeze out the little air left in his lungs.

"Thank the gods you are alright. You almost scared me to death. Again!" She quickly searched his body for injuries and when she found none she said:

"Please, help Quylla. She's not getting better." Phloria had no idea how he could still be so energetic and couldn't care less. Calil was dead and many others were on the brink of death, Quylla included.

Yondra was deathly pale, her breathing was irregular and she had barely enough life force to remain conscious. Morok was black, blue, and pale as well. Once the creature had ceased its attack, Phloria had 'politely' demanded that he pulled his weight.

Lith first checked on Quylla. Her life force was so faint that it couldn't hold her mana core together. It was still intact, but her body was already past the point of recovery. Unless one could use Invigoration, of course.

Lith had her drink a tonic and gave enough life force to fill two bulls. Only then did her condition stabilise and her skin turn from pale to pink. Lith then gave a bit of life force to Yondra before moving onto the others.

Phloria's soldiers and the rest of the assistants were just unconscious. The proper treatments and Quylla's care had prevented them from dying on the spot but unlike them, the Professors weren't so young anymore.

"They all need life force and I've not enough for all of them. I can save one, maybe two, but the rest is up to their luck and constitution." Saving them all would have meant revealing his secret. Lith wasn't willing to put at risk his entire life work for a bunch of self-entitled strangers.

"Use mine." Phloria offered him her hand which he promptly examined.

"That makes two more tops. Which means that one or two of them have to die. Make your decision, Captain." In that moment, he wasn't speaking as her friend but as her field Healer.

Phloria didn't think twice about her answer and she hated herself for it.

"Save those who are more likely to survive. It's pointless to waste life force on those who might die even after getting treated."

On the battlefield, terrible words had been invented. "Resource management", "collateral damage", "rules of engagement", they were all fancy terms to describe the forms of murder that the human society considered acceptable.

Chapter 649 Tough Calls Part 1

Lith didn't play favorites and obeyed his orders. Professor Gaakhu was his first choice being the youngest among her peers and the language expert. Then came Professor Neshal. Her condition was as bad as the others', but she was the only Master Warden in the group so Lith presumed he might still need her help.

After saving them, Lith had enough strength to save only one Professor. His choice was between Professor Ellkas from the Fire Griffon, the one who was better at deciphering the Odi language, and Professor Syndra, who was a War Mage.

The Odi's protections were all heavyweight and Syndra could kill dozens of enemies with a single spell. Professor Phesta from the White Griffon was the most useless member of the team.

Aside from a historian she was also a Master Alchemist and a Mage Knight. The former was inconsequential for the expedition and the latter was ruined by his old age.

"This is up to you, Phloria. Both of them can be useful in their own way and their survival rate is identical." Lith said. He was panting and his breathing was irregular. Using so many times tier four healing magic without Invigoration was truly exhausting.

'Thank the gods Quylla is still unconscious. She would cry her eyes out knowing the old, meek Phesta is going to die.' Phloria thought.

She wasn't faring any better than Lith. It was her life force he was using now, and even after drinking a tonic and eating some food, she still needed rest to recover.

"Is it impossible to save them both?" She asked. Lith shook his head in reply.

"Then save Ellkas. So far, all the threats we faced required more brain than brawns, not to mention that Syndra's contribution to the expedition has less significance compared to Ellkas'."

When Lith was done, both Phloria and he were on the verge of fainting.

"Why didn't you ask Morok to contribute?" He asked, glad that Solus was able to keep watch and that it would only take him a few breathes to recover in case something else happened.

"Because he is already tired from all the healing he performed. We need at least one person able to stand guard while we rest." Phloria fell asleep the moment she finished her explanation.

Lith followed her lead after using Invigoration to restore half of his strength, just to be safe. Luckily, the arrays were all still standing since Professor Neshal was alive and well. Morok's guard duty was hellish due to his fatigue but relatively safe.

When Lith woke up, bad news was waiting for the survivors of the expedition team. Professors Phesta and Syndra were dead and so was Nilla, Professor Gaakhu's assistant. Many tears were being shed, either due to shock or for the loss of precious friends.

The Professors had known each other for years and even if they were rivals, they still respected their competition. On top of that, seeing a veteran mage die that easily filled their hearts with the fear of being the next one to fall.

Rainer was crying like a lamb sent to slaughter.

"The easiest expedition my ass! We're dying like flies. Professor Yondra, please, I want to go home."

"Field work is bound to be unpredictable, son. We came searching for ruins and we found a military compound. No one could have predicted this outcome, otherwise the team would have been assembled very differently.

"It was Calil's naivety that brought this disaster upon himself and us as well." She replied, bursting into a violent cough she was unable to repress. To save her beloved assistant, the old Professor had given her all and some more.

Rainer regained his cool, performing on his mentor a quick diagnostic spell.

"Oh gods, Professor Yondra, what have you done? Don't speak, you need to rest." He forced her to lie down. Despite her protests, Yondra was now weaker than a child and unable to get up without help.

Thinking about his previous words, Rainer felt like an egotistical prick. He went in search of a Healer while cursing himself for his helplessness. Quylla was still asleep, the Professors were still weakened, leaving only Morok or Lith as a possible choice.

'Professor Yondra and Ranger Verhen are in a good relationship. He should be willing to help.' Rainer thought. The youth was shocked seeing the Ranger's appearance.

Phloria and Morok had suffered no damage as well, but even after eight hours they still bore the signs of exhaustion. Phloria was slightly pale and had bags under her eyes despite having plenty of sleep.

Lith, instead, looked like someone who had just arrived there after a relaxing vacation.

"How is this possible? You have fought that thing, healed people, and yet you look amazing."

"Do you have a reason to disturb me or are you just hitting on me?" Lith had relieved Morok from guard duty for a while, to allow his fellow Ranger to get some sleep.

Rainer inwardly cursed and explained to him how dire Yondra's condition was. Lith wouldn't have believed a single word if not for the honest fear he could see in Rainer's eyes.

"It's impossible. I personally checked on her before going to sleep, but taking a second look can't hurt. You stay here and if any of the traps I set up make a single noise, scream."

Rainer nodded, staring at the tunnels in front of him as they were the open maws of as many beasts, ready to release unknown horrors upon him. He was scared of them, but he was terrified at the idea of losing the closest thing to a family he had ever had, so he calmed his heart and kept an ear to the ground.

Lith discovered that Yondra's condition was actually worse than Rainer had described. Her life force was such a mess that he needed to use his tier five Scanner and Chisel spells to stabilize her.

The moment he was done, she opened her eyes abruptly.

"What the heck did you do to damage yourself that badly?" Lith asked.

"I simply did what was necessary. Rainer and the other Assistants needed help. If it wasn't for this old body, the poor Nilla would still be alive. I collapsed before treating her." Yondra sighed.

"That was stupid of you, it almost cost you your life."

"Nilla was barely twenty! She has- had all her life in front of her whereas I squandered mine. I spent so much time researching magic that I almost lost my family more than once. My children may recognize my face, but they don't know me at all."

Her voice was filled with regret while her eyes looked past Lith, staring at visions of all her past mistakes. Yondra now regretted many things and wished she had made different choices in her life.

"That's why I want to retire and why I approached you. I want someone to relieve me of the burden of my magical legacy. Most of all, I know you can use rejuvenation magic. Please, give me back my strength! I beg of you."

"I can't keep living like a helpless fool, incapable of protecting even what she holds dear the most!"

Yondra looked at Lith's face, finding sympathy, compassion, and more. She felt like she was staring into the eyes of an ancient creature, something whose feelings were smothered by the dust of centuries and too many still open wounds.

Chapter 650 Tough Calls Part 2

"I can do that, even now." He said, yet Yondra was unable to rejoice at those words. There was no warmth in them. "My price is steep, though."

"As long as it doesn't involve high treason or murder, I'm willing to pay. Be it in gold or artifacts, I don't care. They would be part of my legacy anyway." She replied.

Lith was actually more interested in her knowledge. Yondra was a Royal Forgemaster and a leading figure among historians. She could help him deciphering the mysteries of Huryole.

'If only I could trust her, I'd take both the runed sword and the booklet out of my pocket dimension right now. First, I'll make her indebted to me, then I'll find a way to put her to the test.

'Maybe I could pretend to find a page of the booklet inside Kulah and study her reaction.'

Lith kept planning his next moves while rejuvenating Yondra's body. Rejuvenating magic was Healing magic capable of detecting and fixing all the marks that the passage of time inflicted on the human body.

On paper it was something simple, but officially there were only four mages capable of performing it in the entire Griffon Kingdom. Professors Manohar, Vastor, Marth, and of course, Lith.

He realigned Yondra's spine and bones while also fixing her muscles. Healing magic was no miracle, it simply sped up the natural healing process. A broken bone would still present traces of being fractured after being healed, scar tissues would be formed after an internal injury.

Rejuvenating magic was the only thing that could rebuild rather than repair an injured body, even returning worn cartilages to their mint condition. Lith did all he could, but was forced to stop halfway through.

"The damage you have inflicted to your life force needs time to heal. If I proceed any further, it would do you more harm than good." He said.

Yondra nodded. She felt terribly fatigued and even though she had just woken up, the only thing the old Professor wanted was to fall asleep again. Yet she could already feel different, as if a weight had been removed from her shoulders and another from her chest.

Breathing was much easier and none of her joints bothered her, no matter the position she took.

"It doesn't matter, we can always resume later. I feel like I'm twenty years younger." Yondra said before losing consciousness. Lith placed his hand over her shoulder, checking her life force.

That was the real source of a human's life span. He had treated Nana countless times with rejuvenating magic, allowing her to spend her last years free from all the symptoms of old age, yet death had come for her anyway.

'She got this close to shorten her lifespan just to help those useless brats and so did Quylla. Sometimes I wonder why I even bother saving this kind of people over and over.' Lith thought, yet

the resemblance between the Professor and his old mentor led his hand to sweep her hair away from her face, to let her breathe better.

'For the same reason you protected Carl from your father when he became his favourite target. Or when you choose to take care of Tista's illness. You could have always taken the easy way out and only cared about yourself.' Solus said.

'Yet how would you feel if Quylla died? If any of those few people you let into your life disappeared and you didn't do anything to prevent it?'

Lith knew the answer all too well. He remembered how he felt after his brother's death. Lith/Derek was Carl's only beneficiary, so between the inheritance and the money Derek had accumulated for his brother's college and wedding, he had so much money he had no idea what to do with them.

Yet all he had been left with was an empty life, dragging his feet forward just waiting for death well before he discovered to have lung cancer. It was how the void inside of him had been born and Yurial's death had only made it bigger, just like Nana's.

Still upset from Solus's words, Lith returned in front of the tunnels.

To Rainer, Lith said: "Yondra is okay now, she just needs to rest. Send the other Professors to me the moment they wake up. They need to know what kind of monsters we are about to face."

The youth thanked him many times, giving Lith such deep bows that his head almost touched the ground. Yet Lith didn't care. His gaze was fixated onto the caves, praying for something to attack him and provide him the opportunity to vent his rage.

Thinking about all those he had lost during his lives, Lith had finally realized how close he had come to losing Quylla as well. His hatred the Odi, for what they had done to the fungus creature, was beyond what words could express. With their actions, they had messed with what he could only think of as his turf.

The hours passed and nothing happened. The few creatures that stumbled in the vicinity of the camp ran away as soon as they perceived his murderous intent targeting them.

Phloria went to keep him company as soon as she was certain that Quylla was out of danger and that nothing had happened to the soldiers she had tasked with guarding Kulah's gate.

"It seems I'll have to learn Healing Magic as well. Now I understand why Dad says that a good mage must never stop learning and why my mother is so happy not being a mage." She sighed.

"Tier five is really an edge case. Unless one wants to become a professional Healer, but yes, I agree. You should learn at least tier four. Regrowing limbs and sharing life force is much more important than one could think." Lith offered her a few sweets from his pocket dimension along with a cup of hot tea.

"By the way, thanks for saving Quylla. I don't know how you did it, since according to both Yondra and Morok she was on the brink of death." She said with a casual tone, never stopping to look in his eyes.

"Thanks for the heads up." Lith nodded, thinking about a plausible explanation for his feat.

"Yeah. Consider that it's amazing how you managed to help her and the others even after an all out battle against such a powerful creature." There was no curiosity in her voice, only worry.

Phloria had given up on Lith explaining her how he performed his "miracles", she just wanted him to be aware of what the rest of the expedition knew about the most recent events.

Sure, Yondra seemed a nice woman and Morok seemed indifferent to anything that didn't involve him directly, but she had learned how deceiving appearances could be. There were few people whom Phloria really trusted, and still fewer of whom she thought well.

Lith was one of them and she hoped that one day he would feel the same about her.

"It wasn't as hard as you might think." Lith lied with such grace that Phloria almost fell for it. Unfortunately, almost wasn't enough, dealing another blow to her feelings.

Lith explained to her how the creature had been enslaved and that instead of defeating it, he had just set it free.

"The Odi really were shameless in their use of forbidden magic." After what had happened to Yurial, Phloria had a bone to pick against anyone who used slave items almost as big as Lith's.