

Supreme M 661

Chapter 661 From Bad to Worse Part 3

"Damn if I smell delicious." Morok said while wobbling from the electroshock. His many magical protections and uncanny constitution had allowed him to survive the Golem's sneak attack.

The fact that the powerful tier four spell Hammerfall had been split several times, significantly reducing its prowess, also helped. Lith tried to Blink away, just like his fellow Ranger had done a split second earlier, but earth magic was necessary to use dimensional magic, so his spell failed.

He had Solus's glove cover his hands as he injected the Skinwalker armor with his mana, boosting its defensive properties. The armor's energy field was now strong enough to disperse part of the spell while Solus's stone body blocked the rest.

'That was close. Did it hurt?' Lith thought.

'Just a sting. Don't worry about me and kick its ass. The other Golems are seconds away from breaking into the barrier.' Solus warned him.

Professor Neshal raised her magical staff and the remaining bolts of lightning were drawn to the gemstone on its top, which redirected them against the stone floor, rendering them harmless.

"Why didn't you use them to attack another Golem?" Yondra asked.

"They all have the same energy signature. One Golem's spell can't damage the others, it only strengthens them. I've seen it happening before." Neshal explained while channeling more mana into her staff to activate another of its properties.

Neshal's weapon was nothing compared to General Vorgh's but it still made Lith and Solus wish they could borrow it for a while. It was made of some kind of wood that had a mana flow similar to Adamant, with several purple mana crystals embedded on its sides.

On its top, there was a diamond-shaped purple mana crystal the size of Lith's fist, surrounded by smaller crystals of the same shape, giving it the appearance of a crown.

Neshal's mana was gathered inside the main gemstone after being amplified by the smaller crystals along the way, allowing her to cast spells beyond her actual capabilities.

She was still inside the Golem's array, so earth magic was sealed to her as well. Neshal used her tier five spell, Crystal Clear, conjuring a frost wave boosted by a raging tornado.

Air magic allowed her to focus the cold with surgical precision and also to strike at the frozen solid enemies with a thunderstorm that would seep into every nook and cranny the ever-expanding ice opened.

The three remaining Golems were suddenly brought to almost -200°C (-328°F). The sand froze and became useless, while the thick ice covering their limbs made every one of their movements terribly slow.

The external thunderstorm messed up with the constructs' spells and to make matters worse, the ice covering the stone allowed Neshal's lightning bolts to finally reach one of the Golems' compartments where its Alchemical tools were stored.

The moment one of the wands sustained enough damage to break it, the resulting explosion triggered a chain reaction that blew up the Golem's entire arm, revealing a shining purple mass through the now hollow shoulder socket.

"A power core!" Neshal yelled while focusing Crystal Clear on the wounded Golem to prevent it from moving the power core to a different and more protected location. Unfortunately, another array was activated, negating water magic.

Neshal's spell went haywire and the thunderstorm exploded, sending the Golems crashing against Kulah's walls. The group had been saved from harm by the defensive arrays that protected the camp.

"First earth, now water?" Phloria was starting to lose hope. The moment they were about to gain the upper hand, the Golems pulled a new trick out that allowed them to escape from the jaws of defeat.

The fight had broken out for less than a minute and half of their spells had already been sealed, crippling their chances of victory.

"It's not as bad as it seems." Yondra said. She was aware that to a non-Forgemaster, Golems appeared as an unbeatable foe. "Those kinds of arrays require a lot of mana to affect such a wide area. The longer the Golems use them, the faster they will run out of energy.

"It also limits both ours and their attack options, making them predictable."

In the meantime, Lith was done casting his Array Detection spell.

'I need reliable information to devise a plan with a chance of success. Land Shark's fizzling already cost me a lot of mana. I can't afford to waste any more without a good reason.' Lith thought.

The spell revealed the presence of several arrays, all stacked one upon the other to make them overlap, but without creating the weak point that Kulah's gate had.

'Damn, the Odi sure knew their stuff. The most internal array is the Golem's AI. I can't tamper with it without using Invigoration, but I have no desire for a second shock.

'Another one allows the construct to use air magic to shapeshift, then there is the Earth Blocking array. I can work with that.' Lith thought.

The Water Blocking array was too far to affect him, just like the Earth Blocking Array didn't hinder the rest of the Golems. Unfortunately, the rest of the group was caught in the middle.

Lith grinned, using spirit magic to lift the Golem and throw it on the opposite side of the camp. Constructs were capable of fighting in a way similar to Awakened, but they were just things. They had no fusion magic that could stop Lith's spirit magic.

The Golem's AI reacted by conjuring an air shield that was supposed to stop the attack, but spirit magic's ethereal nature ignored the barrier surrounding the enemy and proceeded to slam it left and right against the ground.

Lith kept the construct far enough that he could easily dodge any lightning the Golem could release with air fusion.

"I don't know how you do that and honestly I don't care." Morok said. "Yet by the time you put a dent to it this way we'll be both dead of old age. Pass the ball on my mark."

The Ranger whispered a word to his weapons that Lith was able to hear thanks to his enhanced senses.

"Brezza."

The battle hammers turned from silver to yellow, starting to crackle with power.

Lith continued to slam the construct against the ground while preparing his spells. He had no idea what Morok was planning but either he succeeded or failed, Lith could hope to find at least an opening.

After being separated from its group and its lightning bolts reduced to nothing but a light show, the Golem deactivate the Earth Blocking array. The construct needed its best spells to free itself from that invisible cage.

"Mark!" Morok said while spinning on himself and throwing the hammers one at the time.

Lith did as requested and used spirit magic to launch the Golem against the incoming projectiles. The construct tried to use its electromagnetic field to deflect the war hammers, but the enchantment they were imbued with pierced the protection as if it was just a piece of paper.

The first hammer struck with the combined energy of Lith's and Morok's toss, giving the impact enough momentum to crack the Golem's shell, but nothing more. After the collision, the second effect of the hammers was activated.

The first hammer had now a strong positive charge while the second hammer was negatively charged. The resulting effect was to guide the second hammer right onto the first adding the magnetic pull to its momentum.

Chapter 662 From Bad to Worse Part 4

The following hit produced a thunderclap as the hammer stuck in the cracked stone was turned into a giant nail that shattered the Golem's protective shell and revealed its power core.

The construct had managed to move it out from harm's way in the nick of time. The power core was spherical purple mana crystal as big as a basketball, with its entire surface covered with blue runes of power.

"Darn it. I missed it by an inch!" Morok said.

Lith had been able to see it moving from the Golem's chest down to its abdomen thanks to Life Vision, so he already knew that Morok's plan would fail. He used spirit magic to keep the Golem away from the ground and from the materials it needed to fix the hole in its chest.

Earth was the second slowest element, so the enchanted sand would need some time before reaching its master. A time that neither of the Rangers was willing to give. The hammers had already returned into Morok's hands and Lith used spirit magic to slow the Golem's arms long enough to give his companion the time for a second attempt.

The Golem opened all of its compartments and released several Alchemical tools to protect its core. At the same time, it activated the strongest spell in its arsenal, the tier five Earth Splitter.

Lith saw the massive amount of earth element build up near the construct and rejoiced for it. The power core's light had become significantly duller after conjuring such a big spell.

The only problem was that the Golem had resorted to a low blow as a last-ditch effort. The Alchemical tools it was using were a darkness based toxic gas and the same combination of air and fire wands the other Golem had used earlier.

"Crap, that thing wants to suffocate us!" Morok said after noticing that only a few fire blasts were aimed at them while the rest destroyed the biggest moss deposits in the cave.

Everyone had avoided using fire magic because after the Golem's initial attack the air in the cave was already thin. If the oxygen dropped any further, no amount of light magic could save the expedition team from a slow death by asphyxiation.

'Do you want to play dirty? Fine by me!' Lith had no choice but freeing the Golem from his spirit magic so that the mana strand could snap the wands grafted inside its arms in half.

Leaving them exposed for so long was a huge risk since alchemical magic harmed its user as well as the enemy. Lith had avoided that tactic because the resulting explosion was bound to be huge, but at that point worrying about it was useless.

He could only cut his losses and hope for the best.

Morok was about to curse at Lith for letting go of the enemy and making it impossible for him to deliver the deathblow when the Golem disappeared in a burst of flames.

The chain reaction destroyed the construct's limbs, neutralized the noxious gas, and cracked the power core. Just a scratch, but enough to dispel Earth Splitter and make the Golem fall limp.

Morok turned the curses into praise as his hammers' combined strike shattered the power core. The purple sphere exploded, releasing a pinkish goo.

"Is it dead or just playing dead?" Lith asked to both Solus and Morok.

"Only one way to know." Ranger Eari moved his hand and the Golem disappeared inside his dimensional amulet.

"It's dead. If there was any active spell, I wouldn't have been able to store it."

"I know that too, you idiot? Why do you think I kept myself at safe distance? What if it self-destructed?" Lith was seconds away from strangling his fellow Ranger.

"Big deal. There's so little oxygen left that I'm barely able to breathe. Worst case scenario, the explosion would have raised some dust." Morok said as breathing was just a hobby for him.

"And killed us all by consuming our last air. I- You- Let's help the others!" Lith would have gladly murdered Morok on the spot, but he had yet to understand Ranger Eari's real nature and he needed all the help he could get to defeat the three remaining Golems.

Once Lith had removed the Earth Blocking array from the field, the rest of the group had quickly gained the upper hand. One of the three remaining Golems had been heavily damaged by Syndra's spell and its power core was now partially exposed.

The animated sand quickly went to fill the empty shoulder socket, hiding the power core from the enemy's sight.

"They have the same design." Professor Neshal, the Master Warden, said after analyzing them with her spell. "Each one of them can use only one Elemental Blocking array. The other two can respectively stop air and fire magic.

"Only the one the Rangers are taking care of can block earth magic."

That piece of news was the only silver lining of their situation. Darkness and light magic were useless against constructs, water magic was still sealed, and fire magic was currently a suicidal option.

Even though they were barely needed to move thanks to the defensive formation blocking the Golems' attacks, the whole group was gasping for air.

Quylla was sick and tired of being a spectator, helplessly being forced to rely on others for her own survival and for that of the people she loved.

'If I get out of here alive, I swear I'll learn at least one offensive specialization.' She thought. Her rage and self-loathing fueled her brain, pushing it to top gear in search of a way of making the difference.

"All the non-Professors, come with me if you want to live!" She said before rushing to one of the few spots of the cave that hadn't been ravaged by the flames or by the fight.

The Assistants and Phloria's soldiers all thought she had gone mad from the lack of oxygen, yet they followed Quylla nonetheless. They were all ill-equipped to face Golems.

Their situation was so dire that only specific tier five spells could be helpful, whereas most mages would focus on darkness and fire because they were the elements of destruction.

The Professors, instead, not only did they have a wide range of spells at their disposal, but also being Forgemasters, they all had several masterpieces at hand. Yondra focused on the injured Golem while the other Professors took care of the remaining two constructs.

Being unable to bring the defensive array down, the Golems conjured several small flames all around the barrier to quickly consume the remaining air. Their protocols included that strategy because it was all part of the Odi's plan to defend their facility.

The fungal creature had been enslaved to both defend the city and keep the moss at a minimum so that any life form attempting a siege would be easily exterminated.

"Enough with your cheap tactics!" Professor Neshal threw several red mana crystals in the air. The gemstones surrounded the two undamaged Golems and formed two concentric circles before exploding.

The magical forces released generated a powerful tornado that enveloped the magical constructs, making them smash against each other and the cave's walls as if they were trapped in a makeshift blender.

To escape from the death-trap, a Golem activated its Air Blocking array, allowing them to return safely to the ground.

"Do you realize that now we have only the earth element left to fight?" Gaakhu asked.

"Please, like any sane mage would waste mana for a spell that those things could block with a thought. Besides, as that obnoxious brat would say, it's only proper etiquette to use earth magic in a battle between fossils."

Chapter 663 Battle of Wits Part 1

It had been a long time since Professor Yondra had felt so alive. Her situation was dire, but her rejuvenated body had yet to feel the fatigue from the fight.

'Once we get out of here, I need to have my husband rejuvenated too and thank Lith properly. A couple of artifacts should suffice.' She thought while unleashing her tier five spell, Burial Grounds.

It allowed her to seize control of the ground around them while imbuing it with darkness magic at the same time. Golems were darkness' bane since it dealt them little to no damage, but in a battle of wills, even a small chip could make the difference between victory and defeat.

Countless black tendrils erupted from the ground, restricting the injured Golem while trying to rip it apart limb from limb, to expose its power core. Yet the construct was capable of using earth magic just as well as Yondra.

It first turned the surrounding ground in its docile servant and then conjured tendrils of its own. The Golems natural affinity with the earth element allowed it to stop Yondra's spell and to strike at the defensive arrays with enough power to almost made them crumble.

Yondra knew that no human could compete with a Golem's willpower and strength, at least not in the short run. Constructs were single-minded creatures that followed their orders to the letter without hesitation.

Their power cores provided them with plenty of mana and their bodies were built to handle the burden that such power implied. Unlike humans, they were unrelenting and devoid of fear. It was their strength but also their weakness.

"Thanks for the idea, kid." Yondra said as she stopped her spell from defending the barrier and focused solely on the Golem. "Let's see which one lasts longer. My array or your core."

Darkness magic couldn't harm the construct, but it could wear down the mana that the Golem used to sustain its spell and existence. The two colliding spells were similar, but unlike her opponent, Yondra could blend together different elements.

Darkness magic didn't make her Burial Grounds stronger, it made other spells weaker. As Yondra's tendrils enveloped its body, the Golem's mana expenditure skyrocketed and its healing speed plummeted.

It took it only a split second to conjure even more tendrils and get rid of that disturbance. At the same time, the Golem unleashed a bolt of purple lightning to destroy the barrier that prevented it from achieving its goal.

Yondra waved her hand, making the stone wall that she had kept at the ready until that moment emerge from the ground and block the lightning.

"Sorry, kid. You're not the only one who's able to multi-task. Do you know what I really like about tier five spells? Sure, they consume a lot of mana and require a lot of focus, but once they're cast, you have your hands free."

Yondra took out of her pockets a small crystal sphere and threw it in a lob shot above the maze of living earth between them, aiming for the construct. The Golem used earth magic to manipulate the enchanted sand and block the unknown menace.

Unluckily, it was exactly what Yondra wanted. The sand was just pulverized parts of the Golem's body that they used as a means of both attack and defense, so when the sphere released the Clean Slate spell it held, it counted as a direct hit.

Golems were animated lumps of earth, imbued with too much mana and too many arrays for a simple tier four spell to deactivate them, but it was enough to make the construct's AI stutter for a split second and lose control of its spells.

Yondra exploited that moment to overpower her opponent and sink the Golem under multiple layers of Burial Grounds. Its body was sturdy and its power core had still quite some power, but there were just too many things to defend against at once.

Burial Grounds was crushing the Golem like a vise, the darkness energy weakened all its attempts to get free, and Yondra was using the smaller tendrils to dig out its power core. The Golem was unable to cope with its many conflicting protocols and in the attempt to perform them all at once exhausted its power.

'What would I give to keep the power core intact.' Yondra thought while crushing the Golem's very heart. 'Yet it would expose us to countless risks. Not having enough juice to move a construct doesn't mean that it can't pull some underhanded trick.

'Purple crystals recharge damn fast and even a small explosion could consume the little oxygen we have left.'

On the other side of the cave, Professor Neshal was grinning from ear to ear. Only two Golems were left, but not for long. She was a Master Warden inside a set of arrays that she had set up, even upgrading them to military-grade after the Teks' sneak attack.

While Gaakhu kept the constructs busy, Neshal was finally able to stabilize the arrays, making them recover from the damage they had sustained and that had almost compromised their integrity.

Now that they were back at full power, the arrays' power nodes lit up one after another as she activated their offensive abilities.

Neshal channeled her spell through her Crown Staff, which amplified her magical force before injecting it into the arrays that further enhanced it tenfold. The ground under the Golems darted upwards like an elevator gone haywire while a portion of the ceiling several meters thick came crashing down like a meteor.

The constructs tried to jump off, but the earth under their feet had turned into quicksand, making them unable to move. They used earth magic to try and free themselves, but Neshal's boosted Titan Crusher was immune to their magic.

When the two slabs of rock collided for the first time, the Golems' bodies cracked. Yet it was far from over, the tier four spell simply pulled them away before slamming the two flat surfaces again and again.

The second impact cracked the constructs open, the third shattered their power cores and by the time the spell was over, nothing but dust remained.

"How did you do it?" Gaakhu was flabbergasted. "I had to resort using artifacts because the air is so thin that I might have fainted at the slightest effort and such a combined spell is quite the feat."

"Didn't you notice?" Neshal said. "At some point, the air got much better and that allowed me to go all out."

Now that they could finally relax, Gaakhu noticed that she could breathe even better than when they had first arrived at the cave.

"Is it over?" Jerth, one of Phloria's soldiers asked. When the Professors nodded, she yelled:

"You can stop now, we are safe!"

Quylla and the others had used light magic and some food from their dimensional items to stimulate the growth of the underground moss. By enhancing its metabolism and even giving it some life force when necessary, they had turned a whole patch of the cave green.

"Help me spread the moss near Kulah, otherwise it will take too long to make the air breathable again." Quylla said.

The Golem Lith and Morok had fought had destroyed most of the moss inside the cave, so once they stopped feeding the patch with light magic, the oxygen it produced wasn't going to be enough to supply such a wide space.

Chapter 664 Battle of Wits Part 2

"Excellent thinking, Quylla." Phloria said while placing food and moss at the four corners of the cave. "Defeating the Golems would have been a hollow victory if we died right after taking care of them."

"Yeah, but once I got the idea, anyone could have done it. I would have much preferred to help the others on the front line rather than play gardener and leave to others doing the dirty job." Quylla replied.

"You and me both, sis." Phloria said.

"Now you know how it feels to be me. It sucks, right?" Both women chuckled.

Lith was impressed by the Professors' prowess. Sure, they had the protection of the arrays whereas he had been forced to fight inside the formation, but defeating three Golems had taken the Professors the same time he had needed to crush just one and with Morok's help at that.

'I really need a good weapon. There's only so much I can do bare-handed, especially against an enemy capable of blocking my best elements.' Lith thought.

He had yet to have the time to relax that the ground trembled. Lith used Life Vision to see through the wall surrounding Kulah. A giant pillar of red light was enveloping the second building, the one from which the Golems had emerged.

'That's an array, the question is: what is trying to achieve?'

'Based on the runes it's comprised of, it seems some kind of huge self-destruction array. Too bad that because of the Golems' plan to asphyxiate us now there's not enough air inside Kulah for the array to work.'

'Our array keeps the oxygen inside our camp, out there you couldn't light a match, let alone a bomb.' Solus explained.

After a few failed attempts, the pillar turned from red to a mix of orange and black. Since it couldn't explode, the array made the building implode under its own weight by using earth magic.

Then, it conjured a focused mass of darkness magic that fed upon everything the armory contained until the nothing but dust and debris were left. No one had told him what the building contained, otherwise Lith would have probably started cursing on the top of his lungs.

He was in dire need of a new weapon and all the marvels the Odi had left behind were now lost forever.

The sound of the collapsing building alerted the camp, but no one was willing to go outside after such a heated fight. Lith kept staring at Kulah even after the ground stopped trembling.

The destruction of the Golems had triggered some kind of safeguard that was now flooding all the buildings with the world energy that the magic crystal cables extracted from the underground mana geyser.

Lith could see them through the wall thanks to Life Vision.

'What could they possibly need all that energy for?' Lith pondered.

'The world energy is simply flowing through the buildings, without any apparent effect. No new array has been activated nor the mana is accumulating in specific points to power up weapons or new constructs. Do you have any idea, Solus?'

'None, but we already know that inactive arrays are invisible even to my mana sense. We need to get close and cast the array detecting spell to make sure that the coast is really clear from danger.' She replied.

'The Odi were indeed arrogant, but they spared no expense on security. There must be something worth protecting. Maybe even the secret of body-swapping you are looking for.'

Lith couldn't tell if Solus was more excited or worried at the idea of getting closer to an answer to his reincarnation problem and maybe even her lack of a human body, so he asked her what the problem was.

'I really hope this gets us somewhere, but at the same time, I'm very scared. Not only because I'm afraid that using the technology developed by such monsters could affect us negatively, but also because of the implications finding the body-swapping spell implies.'

'The Teks are alive, so nothing prevented one of the surviving members of the Odi to hide down here and use their bodies to prolong their lives while researching a way to once again become the dominant species or waiting for young, powerful mages to be delivered at their door.'

'Like the members of our expedition. What if this is all a test? And not one of those ridiculous "tests to search for a worthy heir" that the bards sing about but more like a "test to find a body worth possessing"?''

Solus's words sounded dangerously similar to the worries Lith had hidden for many days. According to Morok's story, when he first reached the ruins with a group of miners and Crystalsmiths, they had been attacked multiple times by different types of creatures.

The expedition, instead, had been attacked only once on the day of its arrival. It made sense, in a twisted way, since Morok's first group consisted of weak individuals, whereas the current one had wiped out the waves of Teks in a matter of seconds, hence 'passing the test'.

'Viewed in this way, maybe the Odi weren't so stupid after all. The Teks could be considered the admission exam, the array on the front gate was just a test of intelligence, and so on.' Lith thought.

'It would also explain why the Golems had no weak point. They were the first real safety measure we have encountered and maybe by defeating them we have proven our worth.' Solus said.

Lith stood there for a while, hoping that with time the flow of world energy would stop and Kulah would go back being dormant, but even after several minutes, the situation was unchanged.

He tried going outside the barrier, but the oxygen coming from the tunnels wasn't enough, making Kulah uninhabitable. The Professors were resting to regain their mana, studying the Golems' remains while Assistants and Soldiers continued planting new moss patches.

"It might take a few days to get some fresh air, we might as well get comfortable and catch up a little." Phloria noticed his worried look and tried to cheer him up.

By the time Lith was done explaining to her his new theory about Kulah's real nature and the changes that had occurred to the city after the destruction of the second building, she was the one needing to be cheered up.

"By the gods, if you are right, then we need to get out of here as soon as possible. I'll have the Professors reinforce the arrays again while the cave gets filled with oxygen." Phloria said.

"Excellent idea. In the meantime, I think I'll go examine the tunnels. With Kulah open, there was no time for playing adventurer, but now I have a reasonable explanation to explore them.

"If I find traces of creatures living in the vicinity of Kulah, then all my theory is just my paranoia going wild again. If I discover hidden passages or more signs leading here, instead, it will mean that our trouble has just begun."

Lith would have really liked to sneak out of the camp to check if Solus could assume her tower form inside Kulah. It would give him an immediate escape route in case things went badly or an access point in case he ever decided to return.

Chapter 665 Mixed Signals Part 1

Unfortunately, even if Lith could conjure a bubble of air around his head, it would last him only a few seconds if he was forced to go all out. Leaving the camp in such circumstances was an unnecessary risk that he had no reason to take, at least not yet.

The situation was still under control, Lith could afford to wait a little longer.

"I agree with your plan. We'll leave tomorrow at dawn once we make sure that nothing is going to follow us or attack the camp." Phloria said.

"We? No offense but isn't it better if I go alone? You know I'm a tough nut to crack." Lith had mixed feelings about Phloria coming with him. She was a reliable partner, but living together again for so long was becoming kind of awkward.

"Yes, but between your Warden skills and my Forgemaster tools, we can explain anything we might find. You should be the first one to realize how easier would our situation be if we could share all our information with the Professors.

"Your secrets may protect you, but at the same time, they keep you in the dark. On top of that, you're strong but you're not invincible. You needed my help against the fungus just like you needed Morok's against the Golem. Right?"

"Right." Lith had to admit that Golems were his bane. Being an Awakened one meant nothing against constructs. Without the Gatekeeper and with the fire element sealed, he needed help.

'If there really is a guiding hand behind all the hurdles we have faced so far, then the mastermind's next step would be testing us individually. Phloria is the best partner I could ask for. She is strong, smart, resourceful, and I don't have to hold back in front of her.' Lith thought.

The following day, while the rest of the group continued to grow moss patches so that they could resume exploring Kulah as soon as possible, Lith and Phloria took the corridor from which the first wave of Teks had emerged.

Due to the late Professor Syndra's Corona Discharge spell, the walls were still wet from the water and black streaks were visible where the powerful lightning had struck.

"It seems that we are lucky." Lith said while using the array detecting spell on the area in front of themselves.

"What do you mean?" Phloria asked. She was using a light spell to illuminate their surroundings. "Gods, I hate confined spaces. Any move we make echoes and carries across the caves. To make matters worse, all this light makes us an easy target."

"I mean that Professor Syndra might have involuntarily tossed a huge monkey wrench in our invisible enemy's plan. Damn, I overthink so much about the small details that I always end up missing the obvious stuff."

"If that was supposed to be an explanation, it's no wonder that the White Griffon relieved you from your duties as Professor. The class here is almost blind, do you mind being clearer?" She grunted.

"First, I was just an Assistant Professor. Second, I was referring to the soot on the walls. Think about it. According to my theory, someone sent the Teks to attack our camp, and maybe, when Syndra unleashed his tier five spell, he didn't hit just a few overgrown crabs."

Lith could have taught her Fire and Life Vision, but he was afraid that their use would have speeded up her Awakening process. Both spells required to let the mana flow from the core to the eyes, and to make sure that Phloria survived despite her already bright cyan mana core, he needed all the time he could get.

Phloria looked at the blackened walls in a reverie before saying:

"You're right! We only need to follow the markings left by the Corona Discharge and check where they end. If the Teks came from a hidden tunnel, maybe its jammed and we will find it still open.

"If the markings disappear suddenly, instead, it will mean that during the fight the spell must have entered the dimensional corridor the Teks were coming out from and that it killed the mage or destroyed the array that generated the Gate."

"Exactly." Lith nodded. "Maybe the attacks didn't stop because we passed a test, but because Syndra sealed the entrance."

They kept walking in silence for several minutes before Lith was forced to take a rest. Constantly using both Life Vision and the array detecting spell was exhausting for him as using all of her magical senses was for Solus.

Invigoration was an option, but they preferred to be underestimated, in case someone was spying on them.

"Did you find anything?" Phloria asked. The silence and the darkness surrounding them didn't scare her, but the thought of what might be hiding around the corner kept her on edge the whole time.

She kept preparing spells just to be forced to release them once the mental stress they required became too much.

'Unlike Lith, I don't see through walls.' She thought.

"So far the corridors are completely dead. You can relax, the moment I spot an enemy, I'll warn you."

Yeah, unless they Warp on our back. Anything else?"

"Yes. There are markings on the walls at regular intervals. They are different from those we met following Morok's path." Lith replied.

"Are they always the same word or different ones?"

"Some are Kulah's name but some are different. I jotted them down." Lith said while handing her a piece of paper filled with unknown characters.

"Gods! You should have told me earlier. I'll be right back." Phloria opened a Warp Steps leading straight inside the camp, uncaring of the alarms she triggered.

She gave the Professors the piece of paper along with a brief explanation and returned even before the dimensional door could close.

"You just wasted precious mana. We could've given it to them after our return. Who cares if this tunnel leads to Lutia while that one goes to Valeron? We are here to find out what happened to the Teks, not to sightsee." Lith said.

"Yes, and that's exactly why I asked for a translation. If your theory is right, then those characters are just road signs. If you are wrong, however, they could mark secret tunnels, deposits, monsters breeding grounds, everything.

"You can see the markings with your special sight, but for normal people, Odi included, they are just as good as a secret code. They could help us to unravel this mystery faster." Phloria explained.

"I still think it's a waste of mana, but since we're clutching at straws, your idea is as good as mine." Lith needed a bit more time to recover, so they sat down in a silence that grew awkward with time.

"How are things going for Kamila's sister?" Phloria asked after a while.

"Pretty good. The physical activity is helping her to get used to her newfound sight. Her headaches are almost gone by now and the vertigo fits are becoming a rare occurrence. How do you know about Zinya?"

"Well, your girlfriend now works for my Mom, and she's even more of a control freak than you are. Mom runs background checks even on grass if she gets the chance. I'm happy that things are going well between you and Kamila."

'And that's my cue.' Lith thought while standing up and resuming to walk. 'I'm comfortable spending time with Phloria, but not enough to talk with her about my current relationship.'

Chapter 666 Mixed Signals Part 2

They kept following the trail left by Corona Discharge's stream of lightning until it suddenly stopped. The floor went from dripping wet to humid as if an invisible barrier had halted the spell's advance.

"It seems you were right, the only possible explanation for this phenomenon is a Warp Steps." Phloria said.

"Quite the contrary, it doesn't make sense." Lith shook his head. "According to what I saw with Life Vision, the Tekes appeared close to our camp, this place is too far to have any significance."

He even tried using Invigoration on the nearby wall despite the fact that none of his magical senses perceived anything, but to no avail. Rocks were just rocks. There was nothing magical in the area.

While Phloria was racking her brain to find an explanation to that riddle, her army amulet drew her attention. The interference prevented her from communicating with the outside, but it still worked just fine at close range.

"I have good news." Professor Neshal's hologram was fuzzy, but her voice was clear. "Most of the characters you found are just well-hidden road signs, but some of them are powerful rune words."

"Never heard of them." Lith replied, noticing that Phloria seemed distressed.

'That's her "I'm hiding something from you" face.' Lith thought. 'Damn, we really did spend too much time together. If she's able to do the same to me, then all my lies are for nothing.'

"I read your file, you've actually met them before." Neshal said. "Do you remember that ancient Warp Gate you discovered in Othre? The one the Dawn Court used? Well, it was made of rune words."

"This is classified information, so I can tell you only the bare minimum to understand our situation. In ancient times, when Forgemastering had yet to be created, mages used runes to empower their creations."

"Runes are power words that represent an aspect of magic and that can imprint it in an object. They were awfully expensive and unreliable. You needed to carve them and then fill them with magic crystal's dust to keep them active."

'Like those cables!' Lith thought.

"They were expensive because once pulverized, a magic crystal loses a lot of power and recharges slowly, so you could only use purple crystals and obtain mediocre effects. Unreliable because if anything happens to a single rune, the whole spell is broken."

"Imagine a sword that can stop working after a bad clash, or an armor that offers no protection if it takes a hit. That kind of bad. In ancient battles, runes became the first target because they were easy to spot."

"That's the reason modern magic uses only mana runes to create arrays and artifacts. They are conjured by the spells, giving them their effects, but being made of energy, they can't be damaged."

'So runes were the first way fake mages had found to emulate true magic.' Lith thought. 'Fake Forgemasters need to draw magic circles, whereas I don't need them because I can freely manipulate my mana.'

'Yes, but Neshal is feeding you only old news.' Solus pointed out. 'I bet that Runesmithing has evolved with time. Both the sword in our possession and Phloria's hairpin are the proof of that.'

'Huryole's sword must be some kind of middle link between ancient and modern Runesmithing. I'm sure of it because its runes are all made of energy, not carved, but unlike Phloria's hairpin, they are visible.'

'If you think about it, visible runes have several downsides. The most obvious are that they made it impossible for you to hide since they shine like a torch and that just by watching at your blade your opponent can predict its enchantments.'

'If even after receiving Silverwing's legacy fake mages didn't stop using runes, then they must be useful.' Lith thought.

"What did those runes do?" Phloria asked, snapping Lith out of his inner debate with Solus.

"Each one of them represents a set of coordinates for some kind of Warping device. My guess is that the Odi used them to Warp troops at the right intersections to surround invaders." Neshal said.

"Can you point them out to us?"

Following Phloria's request, a set of characters appeared on her communication amulet. Then, the Professor broke each character down into words and runes. After ending the call, Phloria said:

"I think I know what happened to the Teks, but to be sure I need to get to this rune. Do you remember where is this placed?" She was showing him a character comprised of an unknown power rune and the word "Meat Shields".

Lith had no clue, but Solus did. He opened a Warp Steps that lead them straight to their destination and then pointed the hidden character to Phloria. She took her silvery wand out of her dimensional amulet and touched the character with it.

A strand of silver light filled the markings on the stone and then more. Corona Discharge had scraped the surface of the wall, making part of the character unreadable. The markings only had a physical nature, not a magical one, so Lith could only see them with Fire Vision.

Phloria's wand, instead, was able to imbue the markings with magic, forcing the rune to activate. The faint traces of mana left from its latest activation outlined the original shape of the rune, allowing Phloria to repair it with earth magic.

Once she was done, she used what looked like purple crystal dust on the restored rune until it glowed for a second.

"There. Old runes are really annoying. Giving them the correct shape is not enough to repair them, you also have to restore their mana flow with crystals." She explained. *frēewebnovel.com*

"I guess Orion has taught you about runes. Did he do it in case your hairpin gets damaged?" Lith asked.

"So you knew." She said with a smile. "No, modern runes can't get damaged. Dad taught me about runes in case I decide to become a Royal Forgemaster as well. By the way, it's not just your sight being special, but your touch as well.

"Otherwise you would have noticed that my weapon and part of my equipment have been Runesmithed as well."

Unlike Lith, Phloria didn't even attempt to lie and shared with him everything she could.

"What are you doing exactly?" Lith asked.

"One of the many downsides of ancient runes is that they couldn't be imprinted. As long as they have power, anyone can use them."

Lith nodded at her words. The Dawn's Court Warp Gate worked the same way.

"Which means that if I can properly restore the dimensional rune the Odi used to ambush us, we can get behind the enemy lines by using their own secret pathway."

"How do modern runes work, exactly?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't teach you about them. First, I know only the basics, so it wouldn't be much of use for you. Second, if I did, I would put more than just my life on the line, I would put Dad's as well.

"Even speaking about them is an act of treason. My father trusted me and I'm trusting you, but I cannot involve him in my decisions."

'Fuck me sideways.' Lith thought. 'The Kingdom takes Runesmithing very seriously. Being a Royal Forgemaster must be quite a big deal if no one ever talked me about it before.'

"How did you discover about runes? Not from Othre, otherwise you would have already made the connection between the vampires' Warp Gate and the Odi's." Phloria asked, proving Lith once again that she had not to be underestimated.

Chapter 667 Meat Factory Part 1

"I raid Huryole on a regular basis. During my last trip, I met an emerald dragon and I found these." He took the booklet and the sword out of his pocket dimension.

Phloria's wand hit the ground and emitted a ting.

"Did you really fight a dragon? A real one? Big, scaly, and everything else?"

"More like I ran away from him. I'm not stupid. Emperor Beasts refer to me as just a Wyrmling, so a full-grown dragon is definitely out of my league. Yet."

Phloria picked up her wand, using it to examine both the ancient relics. Forgemastering helped her to avoid thinking about the implications Lith's latest revelations held.

"The sword is an interesting link between old and modern Runesmithing, but it sucks. Judging from its runes, it's a teaching prop." Phloria said.

"Nailed in one." Lith gave her thumbs up. "What about the book?"

"I only know the Three Great Countries standard language, so this is gibberish to me. As for the magic circles inscribed in here, they are more teaching props. Some of these are powerful spells, others are meh. Do you want me to mark them?" Phloria asked and Lith nodded for her to proceed.

She gave each spell an academy like score based on her understanding, adding a question point whenever she met a spell beyond her knowledge.

"Why Huryole had teaching props and how did you understand their use despite being completely oblivious about runes?"

"Again, I'm not stupid. If my theory is correct, Huryole is the zeroth great academy." He then proceeded to tell her about his findings about the lost city, turning her surprise into shock.

"I bet that this knowledge is a state secret as well, so keep it for yourself."

Phloria nodded, her mind was still a little fuzzy. She had never expected that Lith would actually reply to her questions.

'Is he being honest with me because he trusts me or because he just wants to get even for my earlier explanation? Gods, the more I learn about him, the less I understand how Lith thinks. Maybe I should just ask him...' Her train of thoughts was derailed by Lith exploiting her moment of weakness.

'In for a penny, in for a pound.' He thought. 'If Runesmithing is as important as I think, Yondra will not teach me about it unless I become her apprentice or something catastrophic happens. I must strike the iron while it's hot.'

"What do you make of this?" Lith asked showing her the ring that he had received from the fungal creature.

'You're a horrible person.' Solus said. 'Phloria just admitted that she is putting her life in your hands and you can only think about squeezing as much knowledge as you can from her?'

'Solus, let's be honest. I put my life in her hands the day I showed her my other form. Besides, anything I learn can help us to get out of here alive, save Phloria from her Awakening, and maybe me from my reincarnation problem.

'I'm morally flexible, yes, but everything I do, I do it for a reason and Phloria knows it as well as you do.'

"Where did you find it? It's even crappier than the sword, but this is a different kind of approach to blending old and modern Runesmithing." Phloria had known Lith for years, yet she still wondered why sometimes a golden light shone behind his eyes.

It was the manifestation of Solus's strong emotions.

"Off the record?" Lith asked, receiving a nod of approval. "It's a gift. The living fungus gave it to me. It also said a lot of gibberish. I really hope it was just a thank you, because if it shared with me the secrets of Kulah, you'll see a grown man cry."

"And you didn't tell me this before because...?"

"Because I knew about runes, I want to learn about runes, and if I told anyone I had found an ancient Odi ring, the army would have taken it from me. Being my friend and my commanding officer, I didn't want to burden you with any more secrets but since we already got to this point..."

Phloria sighed. She had the impression of being taken advantage of, but she could also understand Lith's reasoning. Her father could provide her with everything she wanted, whereas Lith only had his own cunning and a mountain of secrets.

"Did you imprint it already?"

"Despite knowing that the Odi used slave items and suspecting some of them might still be alive and kicking?" His words were full of sarcasm.

"This should just be a dimensional item. It's nothing dangerous." She gave the ring back to Lith.

"A dimensional item with a crystal?" Lith couldn't believe his own words.

"I told you, old runes suck. Now, I need a few moments to collect myself and prepare my spells. We have no idea what lies beyond the Gate, so it's better to be prepared for the worst."

Lith nodded and started to blurt the first American pop song he could think of as he was seriously considering accepting Yondra's offer.

'Wait a minute. I still have to talk with the Hydra lady, maybe she might be able to help me. It's better not to rush into anything.' The promise Lith had made to Protector also reminded him about the one with Selia and her threat to kill him if he didn't visit them again.

'Damn, I don't hear from Kamila for almost two weeks and winter is almost over. I would need to clone myself to do everything on my list.'

"Are you ready?" Phloria asked.

"Yes." Lith replied, stopping in the middle of the chorus.

Phloria touched the rune with her wand and said a single word.

"Kron."

Lith could see with Life Vision that her body was emitting pure mana, as if she was using spirit magic. The mana traveled from her core to her hand and into the wand, filling the rune.

It wasn't blue like the one Lith usually emitted, nor emerald green like the legend said. Maybe it was because of the Orichalcum wand, but her mana was of pristine white.

'If this is like the Gate the Court used, then only one of its sides needs to be powered up since its coordinates are permanently fixed.' Lith thought while having the Skinwalker armor cover his now scaly throat.

Origin Flames were more than an instrument of attack, he could also use them to force the Gate to collapse in case the necessity arose.

A Gate as big as the tunnel they were in appeared in front of them. On the other side, there was a room entirely made of metal.

Every building in Kulah seemed to follow such design choice, making Lith wonder if the Odi did it to avoid them being breached with earth magic or simply because they lacked the mana necessary to protect them all with the earth blocking array.

'Even if they knew about Awakened ones, the mana geyser provides them both a perfect cover from above and all the world energy they needed. Unless they were already using most of its power for some experiment.' Lith thought.

"By the Great Mother!" Phloria said.

The Odi word associated with the Warp rune was "Meat Shields", an accurate definition for the purpose of such a place.

Chapter 668 Meat Factory Part 2

The Gate opened in the bottom right corner of the room, allowing them to examine its contents. There were several tanks filled with a transparent liquid, similar to those Lith's group had found in the first building.

One cylindrical tank held a female Tek in what they could only hope was a state of suspended animation. Her exoskeleton was pierced by tubes in several places, flooding her body with liquids of different colors.

The liquids' nature was a mystery, but their purpose was as clear as the day. The poor creature was forced to produce eggs non-stop. Each one was the size of an orange and was made of a translucent pearly substance holding a smaller golden sphere at its center.

The second tank held another Tek that had to be a male. Based on the extra tube on his nether regions, he wasn't faring any better than his unwilling breeding mate.

Another tank, this one shaped like an aquarium, contained several Tek younglings the size of a ten year old child. Their diet seemed to be based on defective Tek eggs, deformed Tek younglings, and the corpses of those who died in the constant struggle for food and space.

The white of their chitinous bodies looked blue due to all the Tek blood spilled inside the tank. The battle for survival was so fierce that the water filters weren't capable to keep up with the bloodshed.

The younglings were currently chopping a newborn Tek with their pincers and eating its remains.

"This is a nightmare! Those poor creatures are being turned into cannibals, only the most ferocious and the strongest among them have any chance of survival." Her blade shone of a black light, ready to unleash several spells, but Lith stopped Phloria from crossing the threshold.

"We can't risk triggering more alarms, also we don't know if we can safely open the portal from the other side and get back into the caves." Lith said.

"Also, you have yet to explain to me what do you think happened after Syndra used Corona Discharge."

"As if you don't know it already, but thanks." Phloria said while regaining her cool and clutching her estoc so hard that her knuckles turned white.

"The lightning must have struck in-between waves, otherwise you would have seen the Gates. That way, it could fry the Tekes and destroy the runes.

"When the system attempted and failed to open the Gates again, it must have tried to open them in succession from the closest to the farthest, riding along the wave until it beat Corona Discharge to the punch and swallowed the spell."

"It makes sense." Lith nodded, trying to think about something to say to keep Phloria's mind occupied. The procedure taking place in front of them was something disgusting to the point that any sane person would have their stomach churning.

'It must be because of people like the Odi that magical beasts prefer suicide and filicide to let themselves captured.' He thought.

"What do you want to do, Captain Ernas?" Lith used her military rank, to remind her of their situation, but most importantly, of her status.

"If we go inside an activate traps that block even one of the elements, we might not be able to escape with dimensional magic. We can destroy the tanks from here, but there's no telling what defensive mechanisms are in place."

"I had no intention of doing either." Phloria's eyes were as cold as ice. "I just wanted to take a peek inside and check if we can use the ancient gates to raid the place. Arrays?"

Lith waved his hand, and several magical formations became visible to the naked eye.

"What the heck?" Phloria blurted out. There wasn't a single centimeter of space covered by at least two arrays. "I recognize only the lighting and the self-cleaning array."

"Same. The others use runes too old for me to know them. Is there any you recognize?" Based on what Neshal had said, the same runes were used for both arrays and Forgemastering, so Lith had actually decent foundations for Runesmithing.

Or at least he hoped so.

"Yes. That is the ancient rune for fire." She pointed at a glowing character that resembled an English P.

"That is the rune for darkness..." The character resembled an M overlapping with an X.

"...and that one is the rune for air. The others I have no idea what they mean." If Lith had to describe it, he would compare the rune to something drawn by someone who sneezed with their pen on the paper.

"My paranoid guess is that fire is for intruders. Darkness is for the Teks, in the case they manage to escape, and air is an alarm." Lith said

"Agreed. Now we have to wait and see if the Gate has some defensive mechanism too. I wouldn't be surprised if opening it by our side required some kind of convened signal." Phloria was cautious. Her spite for the Odi only made her more vigilant.

"Can you tell me if there's any difference between ancient and modern runes?" Lith asked.

"Ancient runes were less efficient and more unstable. That's all I can share with you without endangering Dad."

'Damn! Then both the ring and the sword are only good as teaching props. At least thanks to Phloria now I know the ancient runes for dimensional items. I can compare them with the modern ones I know and start experimenting already.' Lith thought.

Just as Phloria predicted, after a handful of second the alarm array was triggered. It emitted a high pitched sound and activated the other arrays in the rooms as the dimensional door was closing.

"Well, the damage is done. We learned what we needed so we might as well crash this party for good." She unleashed her Tier five Mage Knight spell, Blade of Destruction before the Gate disappeared.

For a moment, Lith could see a great mass of darkness and lightning magic take form inside the room. Noises of shattering glass and screeching metal filled the air just for a split second.

The dimensional door was now sealed again and silence returned. Phloria damaged the dimensional rune on the wall she had just repaired to prevent further attacks from the "Meat Shields".

"I know that what I did was seemingly useless. The Teks in the tanks were probably comatose or raving mad and I doubt there's only one such a room in Kulah. I did it because this way the smoke should point us to the right building." Phloria said.

"Our orders are to find and destroy anything that can harm the Griffon Kingdom and I think that a monster farm qualifies. I also did it because, orders or not, I can't see such things and do nothing.

"I joined the army because I want to make a difference for the citizens of the Kingdom, humans and beasts alike. Some people might consider my actions just a drop in the ocean, but to me, it was saving them from a fate crueler than death."

Phloria opened a Warp Steps that brought the straight back to the camp. After showing to the Professors the arrays revealed by Lith's spell and describing them the alarm mechanism, their next course of action became clear.

Chapter 669 Planning Ahead Part 1

"You were wrong, Ranger Verhen. The darkness array wasn't for the Teks, but for us intruders." Neshal said. "If you had stepped through the Gate, the darkness spell would have tried to kill you right after sealing the dimensional door.

"Using the Odi's runes is too dangerous. It's better to go through the front door and clear our path one bit at a time instead of jumping feet first into a trap."

"How long before we can resume exploring Kulah?" Lith asked.

"At least a couple of days. I recommend four days so that we can use fire magic without risking to suffocate. Judging from the Golems' behavior, the Odi worked hard to prevent intruders from using powerful fire spells, so by messing with that we might have an easier time countering their defenses."

"Agreed. We only have to wait now." Phloria said.

Since he had nothing to do, Lith went inside the men's quarters. He used earth magic and the Hush spell to get some privacy. Then, he took out his army amulet and called his handler while using Accumulation.

Feeding the amulet enough energy to counter the interference was child's play for him. Unlike fake mages, Lith could freely manipulate his mana core.

Meanwhile, on Mogar's surface, the sudden pull at her consciousness made Kamila flinch. She anxiously took her communicator out of her purse to check if it was the Human Resources.

They were in charge of informing Constables if something happened to their relatives. Lith had disappeared off the face of Mogar for almost two weeks and to make matters worse, Fallmug was missing as well.

After Zinya had petitioned for divorce, he had tried multiple times to contact Kamila to discover his wife's whereabouts, failing every single time. She had never shared her contact rune with him and had blocked her mother's the moment Zinya had received her own communication amulet.

Her family was now officially dead to her. Yet she couldn't help but worry that something had happened to Lith or that Fallmug had found Zinya, so Kamila was on edge at the idea of receiving bad news.

"How many times do I have to tell you to stay away from that thing during our lessons?" Jirni said, stabbing their prisoner in his thigh with one of her needles.

"Whatever it is, it can wait."

"Lith's rune is active! He's calling me." Kamila ignored the man's screams and showed Jirni the blinking rune, almost jumping for the joy.

"What are you waiting for? Answer immediately, I haven't heard from neither him nor my daughters for days!" Jirni planted a mouth gag on the prisoner with a well-placed fist, which also dislocated his jaw so that it would not need straps to secure it.

"But first: Royal override. Identification: Archon Jirni Ernas. Password of the day: Sylpha, Silverwing, Knight, Blue." All the magic crystals on Kamila's amulet lit up at once.

"I've activated the secure line. No one can listen to your conversation, not even the army."

"Thanks! There are so many things I can't say as a handler." Kamila couldn't believe her luck.

"If you really want to thank me, once you two are done, put him on. I need to speak to him as well. While we are at it, use meeting room number three. It's the only one without recording devices." Jirni said.

"Will do! I'll try to be quick."

"There's no rush dear. We're done for today." Jirni's words surprised the prisoner quite a bit. He had been captured during a slave auction and identified as one of its ringleaders.

He had been interrogated for days before Constable Ernas resorted to using more violent approaches. He had yet to say anything. He was aware that the moment he had nothing to offer they would execute him.

'The longer I hold on, the more time my accomplices have to get me out of here.' He thought. 'They have to, otherwise a lot of noble heads will roll. I have no intention of dying alone.'

'This stupid woman has even given me the means to contact my associates. With her password, I can easily bribe a guard and safely use their communication amulet.'

Jirni seemed to read his mind, because the more confident he became, the wider her grin grew.

"You know, it's hard to find scum like you." Jirni said. "That's the reason you're still alive. My apprentice is still naïve, so when I saw you, I knew you would be a tough nut to crack."

"I used you to allow her to practice all the normal interrogation techniques and develop her own. Then, when as predicted you didn't talk, my aim was to use you to not make her feel guilty for what she was going to do. Everyone has to start somewhere.

"This call changes everything, though. We both deserve some quality time with our families and I hate leaving a job halfway through, so...." She struck both of his lungs with thin, hollow needles.

At first, the prisoner felt barely a sting. Then, he realized he couldn't breathe anymore. The air entered from his nose and mouth, but it was as if someone was choking him.

"That's called a pneumothorax. I punctured your lungs so that no matter how much air you draw in, they can't fill up because it leaks and fills your thoracic cavity. You'll die in about eight minutes, without being able to talk or even cry.

"If you're lucky, she'll be done soon. I always confirm my kills, so the moment that door opens, I'll give you a quick death." Jirni noticed the confusion in the man's eyes, all the unanswered questions that were keeping the pain at bay.

"Do you really think by remaining silent you had any chance of survival? In my line of work, the first one to talk gets the better deal. Your accomplices were smarter than you and told us everything we needed.

"Some of them will go free, others will serve a sentence. You instead, were nothing but a teaching prop since the beginning."

In the meeting room three, Kamila was overjoyed seeing that Lith was alright. He couldn't tell her much about his mission, so she was the one speaking for most of the time.

"These ruins are a pain in the neck. Between the constant danger and communication blackout, I really missed you." There were many things he would have liked to ask her, but the army amulet triggered his paranoia too much.

The idea that someone could listen to their conversation kept him on the edge despite Jirni's reassurances.

"Why are you still working on the weekend? I hoped to reach you while you were still at my place, to 'casually' talk with my family."

"The weekend ended yesterday, silly." She giggled. "You must have lost track of the days."

"Damn, I think you are right. How is everyone?"

Kamila told him the last news about his family. Tista had finally started her journey, sending everyone in a panic. It was the first time that she traveled completely alone and her absence complicated things even more now that Rena was pregnant.

"Oh gods! Not again!" Lith blurted out.

"Your sister is very young and her family is wealthy. Why shouldn't she have more than one child?" Kamila found Lith's reaction somewhat disturbing. She had never considered having children of her own, but such a fierce denial made her scared of the future.

Chapter 670 Planning Ahead Part 2

'Am I worried because I'm older than him or it's just my insecurity talking?' Kamila thought, a second before turning beet red for apparently no reason. 'What's wrong with me? We have never even talked about marriage and I'm already worrying about how many children we should have?'

"Kami, are you feeling alright? You seem a bit off." Lith said, snapping her out of the chaos her mind had become.

"I'm perfectly fine, thanks. I'm just worried about Zinya." Happy to change the topic, Kamila told him all about the divorce and Fallmug's disappearance.

'I don't pay the bastard a visit since the mission started. I hope he doesn't get the wrong idea and thinks to be off the hook.' Lith thought. 'I really hope he tries something funny near my home. Between the arrays and the Queen's corps, they'll pick up his remains with a teaspoon.'

"I'm more worried about you. Being a civil servant, most of your information is public. Fallmug must know that the easiest way to get to Zinya is through you. Be on your guard, always." He said.

"Don't worry, I'll be fine." Kamila was both flattered and happy by how concerned he was about her safety. She was more than able to take care of herself, especially now that she was a Field Assistant, but being pampered a little after such a long separation felt nice.

"Belius has so many safety measures that even if Fallmug comes there, there's not much he can do. Besides, I've been staying at the Ernas Household for a while. I doubt even he would be so foolish to attack me there."

"What? Why?" Lith asked.

"Officially, for my training, so that Archon Ernas can teach me how to arrange the work from home when necessary and teach me everything I need about Constable's codes away from prying eyes. Off the record, the Ernas feel lonely with all their daughters away.

"I suppose they want some company or maybe they were hoping for something like this to happen. You know, you calling me so that they had the opportunity to speak with Phloria and Quylla. How are they?"

"Given the circumstances, I'd say they're doing fine. Quylla is the one struggling the most. She can't stand remaining on the sidelines, but she knows that she can't help us in a fight. As for Phloria, she has to make tough calls almost every day.

"Luckily for me, I'm just a Ranger. The Professors know they stuff but are too arrogant, they- Never mind. I can't talk about that. We would both end in trouble and I don't want to endanger your career." He said with a warm smile.

"Speaking of Rangers, how is he?" Kamila asked.

"Who are you talking about?"

"Ranger Eari, the beast-man."

"The what?"

"Beast-man. They call him like that because there was a year when he never took a single day leave and when he finally returned to civilization, he behaved more like a magical beast than a human."

"He is indeed odd." Lith replied, wondering if Morok was just a man rude enough to act like a beast or simply a beast shapeshifted into a man.

When they finished talking, Kamila gave the amulet to Jirni. By that time, the prisoner was already dead by more than half an hour. Jirni had taken care of piercing the corpse's heart and brain before beheading it.

There were rumors about necromancy techniques capable of extracting the memories from the recently deceased and Archon Ernas liked to err on the side of safety whenever state secrets were involved.

There were people who would pay a small fortune to get access even to a daily password.

"How are my girls? Spare me the niceties, I want the truth." Jirni asked as soon as Kamila left them alone after she activated a personal device that further ensured their privacy.

"They both almost died more than once. Quylla is putting up a tough act, but I think she feels guilty for failing to save our fallen comrades. Phloria, instead has a few problems with deciding who lives and who dies." Lith could openly talk with Jirni.

With her status and rank, he doubted that anything that passed through Berion's office didn't reach her ears in less than a minute.

"Good. This experience is bound to help them to understand the implications of their life choices. Sometimes I'm afraid that Orion has sheltered them too much. I'm glad that you're with them in their time of need.

"You protect mine and I'll keep protecting yours." She said.

"Do you mean that..." Lith could only call himself an idiot for having taken Kamila's naïve thinking seriously.

"That Kamila now lives in my home for her own safety. I took some information on this Fallmug. He's not a criminal, but he's acquainted with plenty of them. If he decides to, he can mess with Kamila. Zinya, on the contrary, is beyond his reach.

"Promise me that you'll bring my baby girls back home and you have my word that I'll keep your courtyard clear." Jirni said.

"I would have done it anyway. I resent you doubting my friendship." Lith's voice turned cold. He didn't like to receive ultimatums.

"So would have I, but you know as well as I do that common interests form a stronger bond than any pretty word can. Now that we have a deal, please put Phloria through. I hope that for once she will listen to me." Jirni sighed.

Lith was now in quite a pickle. The moment he left the amulet, the conversation would end. On top of that, he would have to explain how he had managed to establish a connection without external help.

He and Solus quickly arranged an array with the purple crystals Professor Neshal had gifted him to fuel the amulet.

'We're lucky we had this many big and powerful crystals at hand, otherwise such a makeshift formation would never work.' Solus thought.

Phloria was amazed by Lith bypassing the interference so easily, but she didn't ask him for explanations. Their cohabitation was starting to become awkward. Lith had opened up to her more in those last few days than in the two years they had been together.

That coupled with the words they had exchanged during Jirni's birthday were giving her a headache. To add insult to injury, her mother's smug grin told Phloria that she was well aware of that.

"I'm glad to see you're alright and in one piece, dear. I hope you can get back home soon." Jirni would always caress before landing a blow.

"Thanks, Mom. I can't wait for this mission to be over. The things I've seen here will give me nightmares for days, I'm sure of it." Phloria was used to the killing part of her job, to her life being constantly at risk.

Seeing the results of the Odi's work, facing the consequences of their experiments, however, was eating her from the inside. How could she hate the living fungus for killing so many innocent people when the creature itself as a victim?

Even the people forming the monster who had attacked them in the lobby weren't at fault. Killing innocents was chipping away the pride she took in her job, making her feel more like a murderer than a soldier.

The memory of the Teks in the tanks overlapped with that of Morok eating them as if they were just crabs, making her want to puke.