

## Supreme M 671

### Chapter 671 Impending Threat Part 1

"You'll get used to it, dear." Jirni said, trying to ease her daughter's mind after seeing how pale Phloria had become. "I have the same problem with Kamila. The poor woman pukes and cries a lot when we run into certain types of crimes, but she's getting stronger for it.

"I'll tell you the same thing I told her. Don't bottle up, your feelings, otherwise one of these days you will snap. Find someone you trust and share your burden with them, as I do with your father.

"You could talk to Quylla..."

"No way. She's already got a lot on her plate. I don't think she could handle the pressure of knowing how conflicted I am about this mission. She needs to believe that whatever happens, I'll be there to protect her." Phloria said.

"Then you could talk to Lith." Jirni 'casually' suggested, as if it hadn't been her goal from the beginning.

"In the lost cities, he has faced worse things than some human experimentation. It would be a perfect opportunity for you two to reconnect after avoiding each other for so long. Is Lith still airtight or has he finally opened up to you?"

"Nothing has changed." Phloria's reply came out too fast to be believable.

"That's good to hear." Jirni said, as if Phloria had told her the opposite.

"Yet don't get carried away. He still has a girlfriend and one should never overestimate the feelings that constantly being together in a life or death situation can induce. They die as fast as they are born, so tread with caution."

"Mom, I'm not going to discuss that part of my life with you!" The sudden blood rush to her face told Jirni that something was indeed happening.

"Sure, dear. Do you mind passing the communicator to Quylla? I would like to cheer her up too. If you call me again in six hours, you would have the opportunity to talk with your father."

While Jirni talked with her daughters, Kamila used her civilian amulet to inform Lith's family about his well-being. Hearing about it from Berion never meant much to them.

He could only tell them that he was alive and on a mission, which they already knew simply by looking at Lith's rune on their amulets. When someone died, their imprint on a magical item disappeared and so would their communication rune.

Kamila, instead, told them how he looked well-fed, in perfect health, and even in his normal spirits, so the mission couldn't be that bad.

Since they had finished early, Jirni and Kamila could go back home for lunch instead of eating in a local restaurant.

'Gods, I've always heard that Constables have to watch their backs, but we have so many soldiers in our detail that the only threat is that to my figure.' Kamila thought.

'Long hours sitting behind a desk, delicious meals, and then when I get back home, I'm too tired to exercise. How the heck does Lady Ernas keep her hourglass figure with our line of work?'

To make matters worse, the lunch at the Ernas House was always a full course meal, so Kamila would end up eating more than at any restaurant to not offend her hosts.

"I'm glad that Lith is with our baby girls. Those Odi gave madness a whole new definition." Orion said. "Their Forgemastering experiments were as cruel as insane. The expedition members are lucky to have faced only faulty projects, otherwise they would have probably died."

At those words, Kamila became pale, whereas Jirni's curiosity was piqued.

"How do you know what they have faced? There has been no report." She asked.

"When he called Kamila, his amulet sent all the data they have collected in encrypted mode to the research division and I'm a Royal Forgemaster, dear. You'll read my report once I'm done writing it, but I can spoiler you some things."

"Please do." Jirni nodded for him to continue.

"From what I have seen, everything we heard about the lost Odi civilization was an understatement. The ruins they are at must belong to the period immediately preceding their fall..."

"Do you want me to leave?" Kamila said.

On one hand, she had no idea if her clearance level allowed her to hear such conversation, nor if she was capable of bearing it. On the other hand, she was dying to know what was happening to Lith.

"There's no need for such a thing, dear. We are in the same boat, both at work and for the pinch our loved ones are into. You deserve to know." Jirni said while holding Kamila's hand.

'Gods, I wish my mother was such a good, sensitive person. Appearances are indeed deceiving. When I first met Lady Ernas, I thought she was a monster.' Kamila thought, moved by Jirni's kindness.

'Gods, my wife is a monster. She's playing that poor woman like a fiddle.' Orion thought.

'I still don't understand why Lieutenant Yehval now practically lives in our home, but if I know one thing for sure: by having Kamila listening to these kinds of things, Jirni is hastening the development of Lith's relationship. They will either break up or get serious soon.'

"What were you saying about the Odi, dear?" Jirni asked.

"That their experiments were a perfect blend of genius and madness. I received the data about two facilities. In the first one, there were the results of the Odi's attempt to Forgemaster living beings." Orion replied.

"Do you mean to create artificial life?" Jirni had heard countless tales about such nonsense, but aside from Necromancy, no magic had ever been able to create a functional life form.

"No. I mean using light magic to alter the life force of their slaves. Carving runes inside their bodies, to use them as vessels for their Forgemastering spells and make them akin to enchanted items."

"What? Did they succeed?" Jirni turned pale for the first time in years.

"Of course not. As you know, life force is very delicate. Even with all their experiments, the Odi only managed to turn their victims into living slave items, but both their bodies and life span were horribly crippled.

"They could live for just a few hours before dying."

"So it's not a feasible line of research, right?" Jirni was worried about such an eventuality. Any mad tyrant would have made such human modification mandatory on both their subjects and prisoners, turning them into an unwilling army of spies.

It would have meant the end of life as she knew it, making the army and all the security measures that had protected the Kingdom until that moment useless.

"No. The biggest flaw of this kind of experiment is that the Forgemaster and the vessel cannot be the same person. Two kinds of mana cannot coexist in the same body, so the victim soon dies of mana poisoning."

"What about the second facility?" Jirni asked.

"It was equally disgusting. As you know, normal metals do not have a mana flow, which is the reason we Bond them with mana crystals. They are not only needed to fuel the Forgemastered spells, but also to help the relatively inert metal to withstand the magical energies without crumbling.

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"In their attempt to artificially create Davross and Adamant, the Odi siphoned life force from their subjects and forced it into common metals, in the hope that a mana flow would form as well.

"What actually happened, was the creation of cursed items that instead of giving power to their user, they would actually take it away. The weapons crafted this way turned out to have the flaws of both metals and living beings.

"Like metals, they have no mana flow. Plus, like humans, they need to feed and sooner or later they die."

"You gave me a big scare." Jirni said. "Based on Phloria's early reports and your assessment, the Odi look like just a bunch of incompetent tinkerers. Nothing they did actually worked. Then why do you look so worried?"

"Because you seem to forget that they managed to enslave a magical beast and it survived centuries. Also because the data comes from the hallways, where every craftsman would only exhibit prototypes and incomplete works.

"Those are things that prove the value of their crafter's skill but are disposable. The real artifacts, if there is any, are bound to be inside the buildings and they have yet to explore them.

"It's quite a terrifying perspective if you think about it. Also, I'm afraid because the Odi weren't just tinkerers, they had mastered light magic to the point that they were able to try and expand its boundaries.

"If even one of their experiments succeeded and the expedition team faces it, we can only hope it's a non sentient artifact. Anything that is still alive after so many centuries would have all the power and the skill needed to do a lot of damage."

Orion's outline of the risks that Kulah posed made the rest of the lunch pass in worried silence. Even if Phloria contacted them, there wasn't much besides a "be careful" they could tell her.

Orion had just speculations about the severity of their situation, but he couldn't provide the expedition with anything useful at the moment. After the meal, Orion went back to study the data from Kulah, while Jirni and Kamila resumed their lessons.

Besides investigation techniques and the Constable's protocols, Jirni was also teaching Kamila self-defense. Their sparring sessions were long, tiresome, and most of all, humiliating.

Kamila couldn't understand how a woman smaller, lighter, and older than herself could effortlessly throw her around as if she weighed no more than a dirty rag. The only silver lining was that they didn't spar often.

Usually, at the end of a work's day, Kamila was too tired to do anything but sleep. After the Ernas' family healer fixed all of the scrapes and bruises Kamila had sustained during training, she couldn't wait to go home.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay for dinner? It takes a minute to add another serving and the guest room is always ready." Jirni asked.

"Thanks Lady Ernas, but the Camellia needs to be recharged and I've yet to check the papers for Zinya's divorce. She hasn't learned how to read, let alone understand how the Kingdom's law works.

"Without my input, her lawyer can't proceed."

"You could bring the Camellia here and maybe our lawyer could help you." Jirni offered.

'Yeah, right. The only time I accepted, I spent the entire evening studying under your supervision. Then you woke me up before dawn for a sparring session that went on until breakfast and then we went straight to work.' Kamila thought.

'The Camellia is the perfect excuse to get some personal space and some time to relax. I have enough of your boot camp.'

"I prefer to keep the Camellia at my home, so in case Lith comes back he'll know I'm okay and that I always think about him." She actually said.

"Also, I'm grateful for your offer, but this is a family business. I turned down Lith's offer for help, so you'll understand if I do the same to yours."

Kamila wasn't stupid. She was aware that if either Lith or Jirni got involved too much, Fallmug would probably die in an 'accident'. Despite the fact that she hated him deeply for what he had done to her sister, Fallmug Sarta was still the father of Zinya's children.

Her sister wanted the matter to be solved in a court of law, to give Fallmug the opportunity to redeem himself in the future and maybe be part of their children's life. Kamila respected her wishes and as long as Fallmug played fairly, she would do the same.

Returning to her apartment took her just a few minutes. The Ernas Household had its private Gate that led Kamila back to Belius, and from there a City Warp brought her to her neighborhood.

Even if winter was almost over and the days were getting longer, after sunset the temperature would still plummet in the north. The streets were almost empty, and the few people still around were rushing to their homes.

Kamila could see her breath steaming while walking toward the building entrance, the key already in her hand.

'Now I understand why Lith hates Belius so much. Dimensional items are so convenient that once you get used to them it's like an addiction. Just a few months ago, carrying bags of documents didn't bother me, yet now...'

Her train of thoughts was derailed when she neared a corner and a strong hand grabbed her shoulder, pulling her inside a blind alley. It yanked her so hard that she was about to fall face first against the concrete, but her training kicked in.

Kamila let go of her suitcase, that went crashing against the trash bins and used both of her hands to grab the arm over her shoulder. It allowed her to regain her footing and to use the strength of the pull to perform a shoulder throw.

The unknown attacker was bigger and heavier than Jirni, but compared to her, he opposed no resistance. Their back slammed hard against the ground as Kamila never let go of the arm, making it impossible for them to break the fall.

She twisted and pulled the limb, breaking it in three different points. Their shoulder, elbow, and wrist shattered, making the assailant curl up in pain.

Kamila stepped back, to look at her enemy from a safe distance. Her hand went to her pocket, searching for her communication amulet, when a second assailant struck at her back with a metal pipe, sending the amulet flying.

The impact was strong enough that would have broken at least two of her ribs, if the Orichalcum Skinwalker armor she wore didn't take the brunt of the impact, dispersing most of its energy.

She turned around just in time to intercept a second hit aimed at her head. Kamila infused the armor with some of her mana, making it turn back into its metal form. When the pipe struck her arm, the resulting impact was akin to hitting a mountain.

The weapon slipped away from the injured hand of its wielder as Kamila's now metalized foot kicked the man's groin, emitting a squishy sound. His eyes rolled, showing only the white, and his mouth foamed in pain.

Kamila was tempted to look for her amulet, but she was afraid a third assailant might have been stalking her. Cursing Belius' array which prevented her to access to the civilian amulet that she had forgotten inside her dimensional ring, Kamila put her back against the wall while checking her surroundings.

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Kamila looked at her assailants' faces, but the two men were strangers to her. Her eyes then searched the alley for her communication amulet and the main street for a passerby who could help her to contact the authorities, but no one was around.

A spark of light and a buzzing sound preceded a tier two lightning spell that struck her chest and caused her a seizure.

Without the armor Lith had given her, the electricity would have caused Kamila severe injuries and made her faint, instead of just inflicting upon her the equivalent of a brief taser shock.

"So much for professionals. They got their asses handed to them by a woman. My father was right when he said that if you want a job done right, you got to do it yourself." Fallmug said, unleashing a second bolt of lightning before Kamila could recover.

She pumped more of her mana inside her Skinwalker armor, but with her weak mana core and after already using its metalizing properties thrice, she was already running on fumes.

Yet it was enough for Lith's masterpiece to completely deflect the spell.

"Are you insane, Fallmug? Attacking a Royal Constable in the middle of a populated area? The guards will be here any moment." Kamila was dizzy from the shock and the lack of mana, so she decided to try and bluff her way out.

She had a few wands inside her pockets, but she was in no condition to win a contest of speed against someone pointing a weapon at her from such a close distance.

"I'm not stupid. Why do you think I hired those two buffoons?" Another lightning came, but this time she was able to dodge.

"I know the city guards' reaction time, it will take them a while to get here. Those two idiots were supposed to help me kidnap you, but now I've got no time for being nice. Tell me where my wife is or die." Despite his rage, his voice barely higher than a whisper.

He was afraid that someone could hear the ruckus and alert the authorities. The citizens of Belius were famous for being unreasonably paranoid. Before making his move, Fallmug had been forced to wait that Lith was out of the picture and then for the occasion when the street in front of Kamila's home was deserted.

Despite his twisted personality, Fallmug had come well prepared. Hired help so that he wouldn't get directly involved, a means of transportation to abduct Kamila unnoticed, and an illegal wand as a contingency plan.

Unluckily for him, everything was going south. The men he had recruited were down, he couldn't lift Kamila by himself, and the wand seemed to be defective since she was still conscious and screaming.

"You shouldn't have stuck your nose where it doesn't belong!" Fallmug said.

"Now tell me where my wife is and we can solve this peacefully."

His words didn't match at all with his crazed eyes. Kamila knew that her brother-in-law couldn't afford to let her live. Otherwise he would become one of the most wanted men in the Kingdom.

The army didn't take well when someone went after one of their own, even less if a Constable was involved. Fallmug looked nervously left and right, he couldn't afford witnesses.

That night, he would have to kill and dispose of the bodies of three people already, more wouldn't fit into his carriage. Kamila and his hired muscle had to die. He couldn't afford anyone being able to link him to attacking a Royal Constable. The lighter sentence for such a crime was death.

"I really didn't want to do this, but you leave me no choice. You force me to..."

"Roll over and die." A voice coming from behind him cut him short. At the same time, a small but strong hand caught Fallmug's wrist, twisting it backward so that his wand was now pointed at his own face.

Then, a low kick broke his left femur in three and a palm strike sent his face slamming against a wall and flattened his nose.

"Lady Ernas, what are you doing here?" Kamila was glad to see her mentor. She was physically fine, but the lack of mana was giving her a strong headache. Her vision was blurry and she had trouble focusing.

"Giving you a lesson, child." Jirni replied. "This is what happens when you underestimate your enemies."

'What a stupid bitch.' Fallmug thought. 'She should follow her own advice and remember I still have my wand!' A stream of lightning came out of the alchemical tool as he unleashed more than one charge at once.

There wasn't time to play anymore, he had to kill them both quickly and get away from there. Unfortunately for him, the needle in Jirni's hand absorbed the spells without letting even a spark reaching its master.

"I didn't mean to scare you." Jirni explained, while completely ignoring Fallmug. "I had to wait until he revealed himself as part of the attempt on your life and more importantly, I wanted you to realize that this isn't a fairy tale.

"Some people will do anything to get what they want. Playing fair will only get you killed. Do you see that scum?"

Fallmug released more lightning bolts, yet they were all absorbed by Jirni's needle.

"That's what you get for leaving him alive. If you want to keep doing this job, you need to grow up. Not asking for my help nor for Lith's when he was still here was stupid. What would've happened if I hadn't been following you all this time?

"Here, let me show you."

Jirni threw the needle at Fallmug's nether regions. Once it hit, the needle released the stored bolts of lightning one at a time, causing Fallmug to lose control of both his wands.

"Look at what he had planned for you. At the pain he would have inflicted upon you if not for your armor. Maybe he would have even let his goons have some 'fun' with you as part of their payment." Jirni said. Then she waved her hand and the needle returned to her.

Even in her confused state, Kamila shuddered at the thought of what could have happened if she hadn't accepted the Skinwalker armor Lith had gifted her. One blow would have been enough to take her out.

Then, without Jirni, her fate would have been sealed. All of her dreams for the future, all the things she had planned to share with her sister, all the hard work she had put into becoming a Constable, would have been destroyed by a petty man for his own petty reasons.

"Now, we can arrest them and have them executed, I can do it for you right now, or even better, you should do it" Jirni pointed at the pocket where Kamila kept her wands.

"Please, no. Have mercy. I've got a family that depends on me. I was just doing my job." The man with the broken arm, the only one still conscious, said.

"And so am I." Jirni replied. "In our line of work, you'll hear pathetic excuses like this one countless times. No matter their reasons, the penalty will be death. The only question is: do you have the guts to defend what's yours?"

She offered Kamila a non-imprinted wand, ready to be used.

"I do." Kamila stood up, her mind was getting clearer by the second. "Yet I'm not like you, Lady Ernas. I can't put down a helpless man. It would make me no different from them, a cold-blooded killer.

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"Also, I couldn't face my sister and tell her that I killed her husband so that she could inherit everything and get her children back. She would never forgive me and neither could I. What I can do is to turn them in and ask for the maximum sentence."

"Which is being tortured to death." Jirni smiled. Killing them on the spot was actually the greatest act of mercy they could do to her assailants.

"Exactly." Kamila nodded while recovering her communication amulet. "I'm not going to dirty my hands nor my conscience for these scums. They have made their choices and they will pay the consequences."

"Excellent choice, dear." Jirni said, putting the wand back inside her utility belt. "Do you want me to inform your sister about what happened to her late husband?"

"Thanks for your offer, but I want to be the one to break the news to her. She deserves that much."

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Expedition team camp, in the same moment.

During the four days necessary to restore Kulah's levels of oxygen to the point that it would be possible to use fire magic within its premises, there wasn't much Lith's group could do.

Quylla decided to use that time to follow the physical training routine Lith had suggested to her and to learn a few tier four offensive spells. Lith and Phloria pooled her knowledge about runes and his about Forgemastering to decipher the booklet from Huryole.



They didn't progress much. The ancient language was gibberish to them and even though Phloria helped him to convert some of the old runes into modern ones, her knowledge of Runesmithing was too shallow to understand the purpose of the blueprints just by looking at their pictures.

"Do you think I could show one of the pages to Yondra and ask her for help?" Lith said.

"It's a huge gamble." Phloria shook her head. "These kinds of runes are too advanced for the Odi, a Royal Forgemaster like her is likely to realize that yours it's just a ruse. Even if she falls for it, she might always ask you to share your discovery with the rest of the group, and at that point, you're likely to get caught.

"Don't forget that Runesmithing is a state secret. The army might confiscate the booklet if they knew it's in your possession."

Lith had to agree with her. Either he told Yondra the truth or he risked doing a lot of damage. If Yondra started basing her plans to counter the Odi on the booklet, it would lead her and the others astray and might cause their demise.

The more Lith discovered about the Odi, the higher the expectations to find a cure for his reincarnation problem. They had been raving mad, but their mastery in light magic was something that would have impressed even Professor Manohar.

Those days were the first real break Lith and Phloria had got in months. Despite the fact that they were near a death-trap, they both enjoyed the time spent together. They felt as if they were back at the academy, finally speaking with someone who could understand their respective problems.

Tista was too ignorant to help Lith in his experiments and Kamila wasn't even a mage. That part of his life was quite lonely and up to that moment, Solus was the only partner he had ever had in his quest for knowledge.

Phloria had a lot of pent up stress due to her personal life in the army. Her rank, build, and family created a divide between Phloria and her peers. Her soldiers respected her, but they were no friends.

There were boundaries that had to be kept for discipline to be preserved. Between her job, learning Forgemastering from Orion, and improving her skills as a Mage Knight, her social life was almost non-existent.

Now she had someone who wasn't intimidated by her rank or height. Someone who could practice both sword and magic with her, not caring about winning but just about learning.

The level of competition between the young Captains was akin to that she had experienced as a student in the White Griffon. All those below her in the rankings wanted to see her fail, while those above felt threatened by Phloria and kept her at arm's length.

The only problem with their renewed friendship was that by spending so much time alone in such a confined space, rumors were bound to be born. Hence they made sure to spend as much time with others as well.

Phloria trained her soldiers and Quylla, along with anyone who was willing to improve their physical prowess, while Lith sought Yondra for knowledge. During dinner, the day after they had defeated the Golems, Lith asked:

"What's that tuning fork you used to break the water tanks for?"

"Do you mean the Dampener?" She took the magical item out of her pocket and handed it to Lith.

"It's one of my creations. As you have seen, it has the ability to prevent other enchanted items to absorb mana."

"That's amazing." Lith said while scanning it with Invigoration. Just like Phloria's hairpin, it was covered in energy runes invisible to the naked eye.

"Why didn't you use it against Kulah's door or the Golems? It would have saved us a lot of time."

"You misunderstood me, young spirit." Yondra laughed. Her giving Lith the same moniker Nana used for so many years stung at his heart.

"Kulah's door was solid and its array was fueled from the inside, just like the Golems. The tanks, instead, were made of a material that would have shattered after being hit by our spells if not for their ability to absorb our mana.

"My dampener simply jammed such ability so that our spells could demonstrate their real prowess. There is no such thing as a skeleton key for arrays, otherwise the Kingdom would have made me a Magus rather than a Professor."

"Do you mind if I examine it with a spell of mine?" Lith asked.

"Be my guest." Yondra smiled. "I'll consider it as a proof of your goodwill in becoming my heir. You can tell a lot about a Forgemaster's talent by how much information they can acquire with their spells.

"We and Healers have a lot in common. Diagnostic spells are the foundation for both specializations."

Lith spewed gibberish before returning the Dampener.

"That's truly a masterpiece. I can see you have infused it with at least ten spells."

"Twelve actually, but still pretty close." Yondra put it back into her pocket. Lith was actually capable of determining the number of spells held by an enchanted item by studying its pseudo core and mana pathways, but he preferred to play it close to the vest.

He'd rather like to be considered brilliant than threatening.

"Thanks, but one thing surprised me quite a bit. How come there are runes on it?"

"Your spell allows you to see runes?" Yondra was flabbergasted.

"A few months ago, I found this inside Huryole." Lith took the rune covered sword out of his pocket dimension. "I've been studying its runes ever since, and after Professor Neshal explanation about the ancient runes, I was surprised that no one taught me about them at the White G..."

"Put it away before someone sees it, you idiot." Yondra said. "You are lucky that no one is around."

## Chapter 675 Conflicting Desires Part 1

Luck had nothing to do with it. The topics Lith usually talked about with Yondra were too boring for Professors and too difficult for assistants, so after a while, they would always be alone.

Lith had waited until only those on guard duty were awake before showing her the sword.

"Why the fuss? The Kingdom allows Rangers to keep everything they find inside the lost city of Huryole."

"That's because aside from the Warden, Forgemaster, and Alchemical lab there's nothing worth the trouble of entering that damn place. You hit the jackpot and if you had told anyone else, they would have taken it away from you." Yondra explained.

"So I'm right. Huryole is an academy." Since Yondra seemed more worried about his safety rather than his discovery, Lith decided to strike the iron while it was hot.

"Hush, young idiot, and yes, it was an academy. That's why now choosing a Headmaster is such a big deal and because only they can interact with the power core of an academy."

"The Kingdom allows you to raid Huryole because that way you are more likely to kill the creatures trapped inside its forest and in case someone finds something valuable, it gets snatched the moment they start researching its nature."

"Dragons and undead in an academy's forest? Who was the madman who devised such a dangerous environment?" Lith asked, pretending to be flabbergasted.

"Does the name Arthan ring any bells?"

"The Mad King! But why?"

"Because he hoped that at least one of them held the secret of immortality. Clearly, he was right, but something went terribly wrong and instead of subjugating them, the power core gained sentience and unleashed its prisoners against the academy staff. According to the chronicles, we lost several geniuses that day."

"Please, let's talk about this another time. I'm getting a headache."

'Rather I have no interest in history lessons. I must avoid changing the topic.' Lith thought.

"I still don't understand. The Undead Courts use runes and so did the Odi. Why is the sword I found such a big deal?"

"Dammit. Since you decided to trust me, I can tell you at least this much. Do you remember how hard enchanting the Orichalcum was?" Yondra asked.

"Yes. It took me countless attempts and a lot of effort. Why?"

"Back when Forgemastering didn't exist, the ancient runes were used to imbue a spell inside anything they were carved onto, but they were delicate and expensive. After Silverwing's legacy became available, it was discovered that they could still be used in the preparatory phase of Forgemastering to lower its requirements."

"It makes sense." Lith said. "The enchantment of the blade is too strong for the mana crystals that were used to craft it and such a cheap metal is supposed to be unable to withstand powerful magical energies."

"Then you already have half the answer, what you lack is the other half. Runes allow weak metals to hold powerful spells, but when applied to powerful metals, like Adamant, they are the only way to unlock their full potential."

"Without runes, once you use the Bonding spell to embed purple crystals on Adamant, its mana flow becomes so strong that it becomes impossible to Forgemaster it. Do you understand now why it's such a big deal?" Yondra's eyes were dead serious. She kept looking around, to be sure that no one was overhearing them.

"Yes, thank you." Lith replied.

'Thanks to Bohr we didn't use the Adamant Forge for the Skinwalker armor!' Lith thought. 'We've dodged more than one bullet there.'

'By my maker! Now sure it makes sense why Runesmithing is a secret. This way, only Royal Forgemasters can use Davross and Adamant to create the ultimate artifacts, giving the Royal Family the monopoly over them.' Solus replied.

'Even better, we now know that Runesmithing is part of the preparatory phase, so it has to be performed either after or before Bonding. That's an invaluable information that will save us countless failures.' Lith pointed out.

"That's enough for tonight. Please, don't ask me anymore about runes unless you accept becoming my disciple. If anyone discovers what I told you, I might be charged with High Treason, and my whole family would be wiped out." Yondra tried to stand up but Lith stopped her.

"I can't make you any promises about the apprenticeship, I like going solo. Yet we have yet to finish your treatment. Your life force has recovered enough to allow me to further rejuvenate your body."

Yondra didn't miss how the timing of her treatment 'casually' matched that of her lesson about runes and she didn't care. She remained silent the whole time, admiring Lith's focus and the subtle changes in her own physique at the same time.

'Shameless kid. I bet that runes are the price he was hinting at when I asked him to rejuvenate me. Either I'm too paranoid, or this whole conversation was staged from the beginning. I must make him my disciple.' Yondra thought.

'Crafty bastards achieve greatness whereas goody two-shoes die early because they're too stupid. That's how Mogar spins. I must be careful to feed Lith enough information about runes to keep him hooked, but not so much that he can work the rest out by himself.'

By the time they were done, Yondra's body once again had the prowess of its thirties, even though she still looked like a sixty years old woman. She was also exhausted from the treatment and fell asleep the moment her head touched her pillow.

Two days later, while planting patches of moss inside Kulah, Lith left Solus inside the military compound. With her mana sense, she could easily dodge the Odi's traps as well as the other members of the expedition and find the perfect place to assume her tower form.

'I'm honestly conflicted about this Phloria thing.' Solus thought while dodging and copying the Odi's arrays at the same time. 'On one hand, I'm happy he is finally opening of his own will with someone. Sadly, Protector and I do not count.

'On the other hand, I'm jealous. I would like to be able to spend some time with another man, just to see how Lith takes it. I'm feeling a bit neglected recently.'

To be fair, Lith would always talk with her and ask her opinion about everything. Even in that moment, he was working hard to fuel her with mana despite their distance, to make sure that Solus wasn't forced to spend an ounce of her own life force.

When she finally found a spot with no arrays and hidden behind a building tall enough to completely eclipse the tower, she made her attempt.

'What the heck?' She thought. 'The mana geyser is almost completely spent, but this doesn't make sense. It doesn't take that much energy to fuel these many buildings and their arrays.'

'Even when we perform our experiments, my tower consumes barely a fraction of the geyser's energy flow. For so little world energy to reach the surface, there must be something below that is siphoning it near its source.'

'That's why the Odi used the cables! It's not a design flaw so much as a way to divert the minimum amount of energy necessary from whatever they are doing. I must inform Lith.'

## Chapter 676 Conflicting Desires Part 2

Despite her initial panic, Solus quickly regained her cool and started to look around Kulah, searching for clues about the nature of what could possibly require an entire mana geyser as a power source.

Yet the buildings' repetitive nature gave her nothing to work on. On top of that, between the internal and external arrays, she was unable to pry inside the military compound with her mystical senses.

'Solus, are you alright? I'm getting tired here. What's taking you so long?' Lith's message made her realize she had lost track of time.

'I'm peachy! Sorry to make you worry, I'll be there in while.' She replied while rushing to Lith's position. When her detailed report received a lukewarm reaction, she felt forced to ask:

'You're taking this way better than I expected. Not even a swear word. What makes you so confident about our predicament?'

'Whenever we found a city built above a mana geyser, we have always been forced to make camp on another geyser. I hoped that the Odi might have not been able to fully exploit the world energy, but the more we are discovering about them, the more I realize mine was naïve thinking.' Lith replied.

'We must consider Kulah as if it was a lost city. If there are any more flesh factories around, then the number of our enemies is nigh-infinite. It was a long-shot and we failed, nothing to mope about.' Lith mind-shrugged.

The following day, after lunch, the Professors shared with the rest of the expedition team their discoveries about the Golems' remains. Constructs were the apex of a mage's work, so they had pooled their resources to grasp how dangerous the Odi were at the time they had founded Kulah.

"I'm sorry, but we have only bad news." Professor Gaakhu said. "After a thorough analysis, we concluded that even though the Golems had an outdated design, they had all the necessary firepower to wipe us out if not for our protective arrays."

"The constructs weren't as powerful as modern ones but their ability to process information and coordinate their attacks was something unprecedented. At first, we couldn't understand how it was possible, but after receiving Archmage Ernas's report, everything changed."

'Orion is an Archmage?' Lith was flabbergasted. 'Everyone always referred to him as Lord Ernas and I've never seen him wearing a robe.'

'It's not that surprising after he created the Gatekeeper so easily, crafted the anti Balkor weapons, and him being a Royal Forgemaster. It's just that the title of Archduke is probably more important. Now shut up and listen.' Solus said.

"We examined the internal structure of the Golems again and discovered cerebral fluids and brain matter mixed with their power core fragments. Our hypothesis is that they contained a Forgemastered brain." She took a pause, to let her audience understand the implications of their discovery.

"Do you mean they were alive?" Morok asked. His tone was more curious than disgusted.

"An organ can't survive for centuries without a body." Gaakhu shook her head. "Yet it's likely that the regenerative properties of the Golem kept them intact and in turn used them to compensate for the lack of improvisation that arrays have."

"The reason I'm telling you this, is because if we face more defensive mechanisms with an odd behavior, then they are likely to be bio-weapons, just like the Golems. The only silver lining is that if we destroy their biological component, they should become inactive or at least have their abilities crippled."

'Forgemastering organs? Solus, is that even possible?' Lith asked.

'In theory, no. The mana of the person receiving the enchantment and that of the one casting it would just cause a mana poisoning, unless...'

Phloria made Solus's same objection, but out loud, receiving a shocking answer.

"You're right Captain Ernas. It's indeed impossible unless the Forgemaster sacrifices their life to become part of their own creation." Neshal replied.

"That's sick! What mage could possibly do such a thing?" Phloria was hating her mission more with each discovery they made.

She had the impression of looking at the twisted reflection of what the Griffon Kingdom might have become if the Mad King hadn't been stopped.

"A dying mage, for example." Yondra replied. "Once you're old, you've got nothing to lose. Or simply a mage without any other choice. If you think about it from a ruler's perspective, you're turning a mage in an eternally loyal and unfaltering guardian."

'Forgemastering my own flesh is something I have never thought about.' Lith was shocked. 'Maybe that's my solution.'

'Or not.' Solus said emitting a retching sound. 'We have no idea what the aftereffects of the procedure would be and you have only one shot at it. I believe that altering your life force might also alter your mind to the point you'd become another person.'

Lith's mind stopped in its tracks. After arriving on Mogar, undeath seemed the perfect solution to his problems, based on Dungeons & Looting rulebook at least. Reality had begged to differ enough that Lith had been forced to discard the possibility of turning himself even into a Lich.

'Okay, sorry. We'll think about it when we have more data.' He replied, making her sigh in relief.

"After contacting the Headquarters, our first priority is to find anything we can about Forgemastering life force and its opposite process: sacrificing lives to give inanimate matter a mana flow. Everything else is of secondary importance." Gaakhu continued.

"Aside from guard duty, all other activities are suspended." Phloria said once the Professors finished their debriefing. "Rest and recover because tomorrow we'll split into groups again and resume our search. Professor Neshal, what's our arrays' status?"

"Better than ever. I brought them to such a level that they are almost as good as permanent arrays."

"Perfect! Can I come with you then?" Quylla asked.

"Absolutely not! Three days of training are just like three days of a diet, barely a start." Phloria replied. "As you are now, you would just be a liability."

"That's not true! I can Warp you all to safety, without the need for Lith to remain behind. Are you really willing to use him as a scapegoat every time something goes wrong?" Quylla's words stung at Phloria.

'Dammit, from her point of view what I did was heartless. Quylla has no idea of what Lith can do and to be honest, neither do I.' Phloria thought.

"No, I'm not, but that doesn't change the fact that you can't come with us. Retreat is our last resort, which means that during the fight someone should protect you. Or do you think you are capable of defending yourself?" She actually said.

"Fine!" Quylla stomped her feet and walked away before saying something that she was sure she would have regretted the moment after such cruel words escaped from her mouth.

Rainer followed her, trying to calm her down. The youth was charmed by both her ingenuity and strong character. At the same time, however, he was scared by her reckless attitude.

"What's wrong with you? Your sister is only trying to protect you, to protect us Assistants. We are not trained for actual combat, so the least we can do is not drag them down." He said.

## Chapter 677 Body Modification Center Part 1

"What's wrong with me? More like what's wrong with you! Are you really willing to live all your life on the sidelines, letting others risk their lives for you? Back at the academy, the three of us stood through thick and thin, but now I'm just a dead weight.

"What if something happens to one of them because I'm not strong enough to be of help?"

"It would be nobody's fault but the Odi's. They were the monsters that..."

"Really? Blaming dead people for our own incompetence? Would you be able to say such words if something happens to Professor Yondra or would you blame her teammates for letting her die?"

Quylla cut Rainer short, making him turn pale at the idea.

"I would blame her teammates." He admitted after a second.

"Great. At least we're on the same page about you being a coward."

"I'm not a coward! You have no idea what I had to endure at the Black Griffon just to survive my fourth year during Balkor's attack, not to mention the mana poisoning and the hazing from my peers.

"I choose the academic career because I was sick and tired of fighting. I choose Forgemastering because it's a challenge with yourself rather than others. Does that make me a coward?" He asked.

"No." Quylla replied with a warm smile.

"That makes you a coward who dares patting himself on the back!" Just like her mother, she would always caress before landing a death blow. "Cry me a river, I've survived the same events you speak of, and if it wasn't for Nalear's betrayal, I would be able to fight alongside them instead of being this...."

Quylla waved at herself, unable to express the self-loathe she felt. After attempting at Jirni's life and killing Yurial, she had refused to learn offensive spells because she felt guilty for being still alive while so many had died that day.

Because she was afraid that another Nalear would come and force her to hurt the people she loved again. Yet after Phloria almost died in her arms, after seeing Lith and Phloria risk their lives time and time again to protect her, Quylla had changed her mind.

She wasn't angry at Rainer so much as at herself. Quylla was so harsh with him only because he had made her same choices. She had focused solely on Healing and Forgemastering for the same reasons Rainer did.

"Oh Gods, I'm so sorry. I forgot you are from the White Griffon." Rainer said, realizing his blunder.

"I'll accept your apologies only if you accept mine." Quylla replied. "I shouldn't have taken it out on you, it's just that before this trip, I've never realized how helpless I am and it's driving me crazy."

She apologized to him again before turning around and entering the women's quarters. Rainer stood there for a while, unable to stop thinking about Professor Yondra.

'She is the only family I have ever had and she has supported me during my academy years. How can I be happy to be left behind after she had almost died for saving me from that fungus? How can I be so relaxed despite the fact that she might not return from Kulah? Maybe Quylla is reckless, but I'm really an idiot.'

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The following day, the Professors, Lith, and Phloria entered the first building together, leaving all the soldiers and the Assistants behind the protection of the arrays.

Since the Weapon Research Center, the second building, had collapsed, Phloria had decided it was best to clear at least one facility before splitting the group again. Now that the pseudo-Balor was dead, nothing stopped them from moving forward.



Behind the door, there was the usual metal corridor. A huge plaque was hung above the entrance and several doors led inside what looked like hospital rooms. Part of the walls was comprised of reinforced glass panels that allowed the group to look inside.

"What's written on the plaque?" Lith asked.

"Body Modification Center." Professor Gaakhu replied, grimacing in disgust.

While the Professors scanned the corridor for traps and arrays, Lith used Life Vision to search for any life force. His sight was partially blinded by the mana coursing through the building, but he was quite confident they were alone.

Each room had a single bed and was quite spacious. It would have put the White Griffon VIP ward to shame if the beds didn't have multiple means of restraint and the inner walls weren't heavily padded.

Lith used Invigoration on the nearest wall, to confirm his hypothesis.

'Each wall is half a meter (16.5 feet) thick and enchanted to be soundproof. There is no offensive spell nor array. This must be a psychiatric ward of sorts.' He thought.

"Something is off." Professor Yondra said. "This is too clean to be a place for members of the 'lesser races', I mean only one bed per room?"

"Agreed." Ellkas said. "The lack of safety measures is disturbing too. The paddings usually are to protect the patient from themselves and the Odi do not strike me as caring."

The corridor was U shaped, ending with an administrative office and a reinforced door with no signs. Half of the team run through the files in the office while the rest examined the door.

"Judging from its position and the size of the nearby room, the door must lead downstairs." Phloria said. Once again, disabling the arrays only required to pull the plug, but a password was still required to safely open the door.

"No bets this time." Morok said. "One mistake and we'll have more Golems on our tail and another collapsed building once we defeat them."

"It's worse than that. There are more arrays on the other side of the door. Triggering them might be even worse than Golems."

Lith used Invigoration on the door, even spotting the cable fueling them. He sent a strand of mana as thin as a hair through the door, having care of moving it slow and easy as he looked out for alarms.

Unfortunately, the arrays on the other side completely sealed the door, blocking even light, sound, and mana. As soon as the spirit magic strand touched them, Lith felt their power change.

He had been delicate enough that the defensive system had mistaken his mana for an energy fluctuation and was trying to restore the balance. Lith made the strand disappear and everything returned to normal.

He then focused on the holographic pad and much to his surprise, he could see how the mana composing each letter was linked to a specific quadrant of the display.

Most of them went straight for a single relay, whereas a few of them were connected to two different relays.

'The good news is that I know what characters the password is made of, the bad news is that I have no idea about their order, if they have to be repeated, and more importantly how the heck I can share the information with the others.' He thought.

The metal cylinders of the lock were also connected to the arrays on both sides of the door, making it impossible to move them by force.

Lith was out of options, and due to the limited space, only two people could examine the door at once without their spells interfering with each other. He left his spot to Neshal, letting her coordinate her efforts with Yondra's.

He beckoned Phloria to come close and conjured a Hush spell to not be overheard.

## Chapter 678 Body Modification Center Part 2

The Professors kept their composure and managed to avoid chuckling at the expense of their comrades. Ranger Eari was much funnier to those who weren't the targets of his rude, inappropriate remarks.

Lith was getting tired of his shenanigans, but being Morok one of the only three people in the entire expedition capable of holding their ground in a hand to hand fight, he soldiered on.

Phloria was used to inappropriate comments since she had joined the army. Every time someone got close to her, people would spread rumors about her alleged affairs.

"Insubordination and slander of a superior officer might not get you court-martialled, but I'm sure that my disciplinary notes will impact the amount of money you will receive for your retirement as well as this mission." She said while adding the episode to her report.

"I'm sorry, Captain. I was just joking." Morok inwardly cursed at himself for his stupidity. Rangers had a great amount of freedom, but the army was very strict about respecting the ranks.

"I'm sorry too. I wish I could kick your ass, but I need you alive. Yet. Now, unless you want to overhear state secrets that could compromise our mission and put your life at stake, I suggest you shut up."

Just because such comments were common, it didn't make them less annoying nor hurtful. With her perfect record, those who were envious of Phloria could only badmouth her for her personal life, making it even harder for her to find a boyfriend or just a friend.

"What were you saying?" She asked, both her face and voice were stone-cold.

"I know the characters that make up the password, but I have no clue how to make use of such information without screwing up my life." Lith said.

"Did you discover them with your special eyes or with one of your personal spells?"

"Both. Just as I analyzed your hairpin, I studied the holographic pad. It only has two relays: right and wrong." Lith had no intention of lying to her. He knew that despite her expression, Phloria was likely to be hurt by his fellow Ranger's outburst.

Lith had noticed that her mood got worse every time he lied to her and got better when he was honest.

'She already knows enough about my skills that this piece of information is irrelevant. Besides, she's putting a lot at stake to help me with the runes, the least I can do is return her trust.' He thought.

"I can try something, but Dad is likely to get pissed off. Some of the spells he taught me he keeps them a secret even from the army. Just like you do." She smiled, raising the temperature in the room of several degrees.

"We're done examining the administrative office and for once, may the gods bless paperwork." Ellkas said. Those who were able to read the Odi language were translating several pages, giving each member of the expedition a copy.

"The first floor was the medical center for the Odi. Once they were done experimenting on the 'lesser races', they would attempt body modifications on their own people." He pointed at the padded rooms.

"Just like Assistant Ernas assumed, major changes in the life force also brought severe mental damage, that the medical files we found describe as temporary. My guess is that Quylla is right and that these alterations permanently affected their minds, bringing the entire Odi race to consider madness as normality."

"Below us, there are several underground floors where according to these files, experiments on both incurable diseases and life force modifications were conducted. Those floors are bound to be messier and more dangerous.

"Some diseases may still be active, so before opening the door, everyone put on a safety mask." Professor Gaakhu handed to each one of them a plague doctor mask identical to the one Lith wore back in Kandria, but this one was enchanted.

"They are Alchemical items, so they are not reusable." She explained. "They offer good protection from pathogens but are not suited to fights, so in case something goes wrong, retreat is our first priority."

"Good to know. Our problem here is opening the door." Yondra said. "Each one of us has managed to discover a few characters of the password, but we have no idea how to piece them together."

Both Lith and Phloria were flabbergasted. Royal Forgemasters really were on a league of their own.

"Show them to us. If we're lucky, it's the anagram of an actual word. If it's just random letters, we're screwed." Ellkas said.

"They missed a couple of them." Lith whispered in Phloria's ear after Hushing them again.

"Dammit. Which ones?"

"The M overlapping with the reversed P and that R with a dot in its middle."

"It's official, we're screwed." Gaakhu said. Luckily, everyone was too busy looking at the password to notice their exchange.

"There's no word comprised of these letters, so either the password is random or we are missing some characters."

"Let me give it a go." Phloria stepped forward, taking her silver wand out of her dimensional amulet. "I was supposed to do this earlier, but someone distracted me."

She threw Morok a look that gave his future grandchildren frostbite and then she cast one of Orion's spells on the pad. Just like Invigoration and the Professors' spells, it was able to pick the residual traces of mana that the repeated input of the password was supposed to have left.

She moved her wand over every single character as silver filaments probed them. Phloria was actually ignoring most of the characters and focusing solely on those Lith had pointed out to her.

It took her a while, but she managed to pick a very faint energy that her spell enhanced, making it visible. She pretended to also scan half the panel before giving up.

"I'm beat, I can't focus anymore without affecting my ability to fight." Phloria was panting. The trace was so faint that she had to pour quite some mana to find it.

Yondra performed her spell with her silver wand again, this time focusing only on the new characters.

"Good gods, we really missed two of them. You must have an exceptional perception, Captain, to sense such a small amount of mana." She said.

"Thanks, Professor, but it's mostly due to my father's spell." Phloria said. Orion's masterpiece would have also revealed the relays' position if she hadn't dispelled it in time.

"Those are very uncommon letters." Gaakhu said. "They are bound to be rarely used and have the faintest signature. Excellent job, Captain. I believe we have our password. Ascension."

The Forgemasters scanned the pad's most uncommon characters again before inputting the password, just to be safe. When the holographic display beeped and the metal cylinders were retracted, the memory of their past failure made the members of the second group shiver in fear.

Lith put on his plague mask and a thin white layer of solid white energy covered every inch of his body.

'This is Manohar's spell.' Lith recognized the effects of Life Ward he had witnessed during Othre's mission. 'It seems that the Mad Professor also dabbles in Alchemy, but I doubt he does it of his own will. This must be rare equipment since even in Kandria we didn't use it.'

Everyone prepared a couple of spells before opening the door. The moment the metal turned on its hinges, a black and green fog invaded the corridor as what looked like veins made of black mold grew with the speed of a hungry beast.

## Chapter 679 Survival of the Fittest Part 1

The living fog tried to invade the bodies of the members of the expedition team as well, but Life Ward burned it on contact. Whatever the nature of the fog was, it emitted a sizzling sound as the protective spell turned it into ashes.

"Be extra careful not damaging the suit's external layer." Neshal explained. "If any of us gets infected, we might need to quarantine them or worse. Remember that in this facility the Odi were researching the deadliest diseases."

"Yeah, but that was centuries ago." Lith said. "Magic has progressed by leaps and bounds since then. I might not be immune to all their mad creations, but I know all the most advanced decontamination protocols by heart."

A wave of his hand released a pulse of darkness magic that made the black veins expanding on the metal corridor wither and disappear while the fog was pushed back behind the door.

"Everyone stays behind me and each one of you prepare at least a darkness magic spell. Captain Ernas, if anything happens to me, Blink me to Quylla. She'll know what to do."

Quylla was the only Healer that Lith considered on par with Manohar. He was even considering to teach her how to produce holograms. According to Professor Manohar, Lith had almost grasped the secret behind offensive light spells, but even after months of practice, he was still swamped.

Quylla had silver-colored streaks in her hair and was a genius with light magic. If she managed to find the missing link between holograms and hard light constructs, Quylla would then explain it to Lith, allowing him to become even stronger.

Yet his trust issues prevented him from sharing his secrets with even Phloria, let alone Quylla. If because of his teachings Lith triggered her Awakening as well, Quylla would become another person who he would need to take care of.

'Dammit. According to Kalla, I'm responsible for the Awakening of both Phillard and my sister. If they mess up, my line is on the line along with theirs.' Lith thought.

Even after repelling the fog, the stench of death and decay was revolting. The filters on the plague masks weren't enough to protect them from the rancid smell assaulting their senses.

"For the gods' sake, don't use air magic." Lith said while releasing a second pulse that made the air breathable a split second before he started puking.

Yet it was a second too late since a few people were already barfing their guts out, Morok included. Luckily, the masks were equipped with puke bags placed right under its beak-like protuberance, making Lith's teammates soon resemble pelicans rather than crowns.

'You're lucky that between your enhanced body and darkness fusion you're immune to most of this crap.' Solus said.

'Yeah, but I can't last long. This space is too big and every step requires another pulse of darkness magic.'

The staircase didn't go deep, but the lower they went the denser the fog became. Even to reach the door at the end of the stairs a group effort was necessary.

"I'm terrified at the thought of what kind of slaughterhouse can produce such a stench." Yondra said. "Do you think there could be survivors?"

"Survivors, no. Specimens, yes." Morok replied. "Am I the only one wondering how the fuck can mold grow on metal? Isn't it supposed to need food, humidity, or something?"

"Good point." Everyone was flabbergasted. It was the first sensible thing that had ever come out of his mouth.

'Solus?' Lith asked while activating Life Vision. The air in front of him lit up like a Christmas tree, forcing him to turn it off.

'Working on it.'

The fog was so dense that the air around them was green and black, giving everything an eerie feeling. Once they stepped inside the next room, a squishy sound and an agonizing moan broke the silence.

Everyone had the impression of walking on small, wet garbage bags filled with rotten food.

"Whatever you do, don't look down." Lith said. He had understood what was happening the moment he noticed that the moans were timed with their steps.

"Dude, what could be possibly worse than..." Morok released a pulse of darkness magic that dispelled the fog enough to allow him to take a look at the floor. Green entrails that looked like huge rotten sausages covered the ground.

With no more fog to block his view, Morok could see that they were moving like brain-damaged snakes. The entrails were trying to wrap around his legs to feed upon the intruders with small mouths full of teeth that covered their surface.

Only Manohar's Life Ward was keeping them at bay, burning the living viscera on contact.

"Oh gods!" Morok said while puking his guts out. "I'll never eat sausages for the rest of my life." Once full, the vomit sack detached and was replaced by an empty one.

As the group advanced, the fog became denser, forcing them to increase the intensity of their light spells just to be able to see farther than their own nose.

'I've got bad news.' Solus contacted Lith while they were exploring the first underground floor. Unlike the Odi's medical center, the rooms were smaller, not padded, and with at least six beds each.

The doors had been ripped off from their hinges from the inside.

'I know how this thing is still alive and how it can grow on metal. It's because it's feeding on the light element, just like an Abomination.'

'What? How?' Lith asked.

'First, I don't know. I'm here for less than a minute, so sorry if I don't understand years of research at a first glance. Second, a little thank you wouldn't kill you.' Her voice oozed sarcasm.

'I'm sorry, you're right. Thank you, Solus. I guess you've spoiled me so much with your abilities that I consider you nigh omniscient.'

'You're welcome.' She said with a giggle, happy for the heartfelt praises. 'I'll let you know as soon as I discover anything else.'

With that new piece of information, Lith could now decipher what had happened there in the past. The cells were filled with corpses sucked down to the bones and from each one of them departed colored veins that covered the entirety of the floor.

Whatever the Odi had infected their prisoners with, had grown by feasting on their flesh before searching for more food. The Abomination-based disease had then forced its way out, probably by sucking dry the light element from everything that kept them locked.

Then, it had engaged the strains born in the other rooms in a battle for dominance.

Burnt marks of different colors covered the walls where the creatures had fought, allowing Lith to determine who had come out victorious from each conflict. The winner would consume the loser and then move to the next cell.

'This seems the horror version of a survival game.' Lith thought. 'The question is: is the fog black and green because two creatures are still struggling, or is there only one and the black is due to its Abomination nature?'

When they reached halfway of the U-shaped corridor, the fog was now surrounding their hands, smothering the light they emitted to the point that it was impossible for them to see in front of them.

"I've bad news." Lith said borrowing Solus's words. "This thing is feeding upon the light element we employ to light our way. I've no idea what might happen if we give this thing a full course meal, but I'm ready to bet good money that we'd be its dessert."

## Chapter 680 Survival of the Fittest Part 2

At those words, everyone unleashed the darkness spells that they had kept at the ready. The agonizing shrieks rose in intensity and made their stomach churn, but their survival instinct beat their compassion by a landslide.

The air turned immediately clear, but the flesh tentacles at their feet reacted with violence, attacking Lith's group from all sides. Luckily, centuries of feeding only on the light element that seeped through the two layers of arrays blocking the door had left the creature severely weakened.

Each one of their hits was quick and well-aimed, but it lacked the strength necessary to pierce the enchanted protections. Life Ward further protected the expedition members, inflicting deep burns to the entrails whenever they struck at the white membrane.

A second volley of darkness spells killed the attackers and cleansed the air enough for the ward's in-built lights to allow the Professors to read the documents they had brought along.

"This should be Project Evolution." Professor Ellkas read.

"The Odi had discovered that Abomination don't suffer from aging nor diseases, so they attempted to fuse the Abomination's life forces with that of members of the 'lesser races' before infecting them with incurable ailments. I'd say they failed big time."

"Idiots." Lith was enraged by the Odi's reckless approach to science. "They failed to understand that if creating hybrids was so easy, everyone would do it. Their foolish experiment didn't bond the Abomination with their specimens, but with the diseases!"

"How do you know that?" Phloria asked. The Professors were flabbergasted as well. None of them was a Master Healer, but Lith's comprehension of the Odi experiments was too accurate to not be creepy.

'Oh crap!' Lith thought. 'I forgot that the others don't have Solus to explain everything to them almost in real-time. I've got to play my genius card.'

"Isn't it obvious?" Lith acted smug. "The fog is clearly alive and has been feeding on our lights ever since we stepped down here. The moment you told me that Abominations were involved, all the pieces of the puzzle fell into place."

"No, it's not obvious at all." Gaakhu said. "How do you explain the things that just attacked us? That was no disease."

'My money on a partial success.' Solus came to the rescue. 'Probably one of their victims partially fused with both the Abomination and the disease. It gave them the edge they needed over their competition but at the same time it trapped them in here.'

Lith repeated her words and added:

"That's why we hear screams and why the door upstairs was still standing. Probably the hybrid has a real body somewhere and can't get too far from it."

His brilliant deduction surprised everyone, Phloria included. She knew that Lith was brilliant, but not that much. Yet she said nothing aside from praises and kept her questions for later.

The carpet of entrails led them to a cell near the access leading to the next underground floor. Just as Lith, or rather Solus had predicted, the heavy metal door had been ripped off as if it was made of paper.

Nothing remained of the arrays or the holographic pad. The only thing left was the mana crystal cable, around which the only healthy tentacle was tightly wrapped.

"I guess that explains how the hybrid survived for so long." Lith said while pointing at it.

Inside the cell, there was something of vaguely humanoid shape. The creature had a spongy look, as if a black and green moss had entirely covered a man's upper body, from the head to his midriff.

Yet it wasn't moss and there was no underlying body. The creature could twist all of its parts like a rag doll, forming unnatural angles while it tried to escape from the shining red chains that bound its arms to the wall.

Its pseudo skin bubbled like a boiling liquid at each attempt. The creature was featureless, with only the red eyes made of pure energy typical of Abominations and an open mouth. It allowed Lith's group to see that there was nothing inside its body, just a uniform mass of moss.

The tentacle-innards were generated from its midriff, the creature had no lower body. Seeing the fresh, juicy prey willingly stepping inside its cage, the hybrid twisted its arms with enough strength to rip them off at the wrist level to get rid of the chains.

Yet the enchanted item created red lines of power on the creature's body, forcing it to heal and reattaching it to the wall time and time again. The hybrid gurgled in outrage while the group decided what to do.

Suddenly, a humane voice made came from the creature's entrails.

"Please, kill me." It spoke in an unknown language, but for some reason, Lith understood its words. A human head was emerging from the tentacles that the creature had amassed, preparing for an attack.

"I beg of you, don't let it..." The creature roared, cutting the person short as it stretched its neck enough to bite the newborn head off, causing red blood to spray through its cell.

"Good gods! What was that?" Gaakhu asked, on the verge of puking.



"I was right, the fusion is incomplete." Lith explained after consulting Solus. "This is a pathogen-Abomination hybrid and that was its host. The hybrid is the dominant one so it treats the host like a parasite. Neither of them can kill the other."

"Anyone wants to take scans of this horror?" Phloria asked. Her question was followed by pent up barfs and shaken heads.

"All those in favor to put it down?"

Everyone raised their hands. Half the group kept the creature away from the mana cable while the others bombarded the hybrid with tier four darkness spells. Once the creature's body disappeared, so did the living fog and all the black veins covering the floor.

The ward's lights now allowed Lith's group to take a good look around. Now that the living entrails were gone, they could see that dozens of corpses littered the floor. The first underground level was a mass grave for both prisoners and Odi guards.

All skeletons had been sucked dry, but the Odi's were easily recognizable. They had no imperfections, with ivory white bones that seemed out of an anatomy book. All males were identical to each other and so were the females.

If not for the struggle signs and the black aura of undeath that Life Vision revealed, Lith would have thought they were just mass-produced skeleton mannequins.

"What's on the next floor?" Phloria asked.

"This was the Immunization Ward. Next should be the Body Enhancement Ward. I think it refers to their enchanted human program." Ellkas said.

"Can we go outside and take a break?" Morok asked. "I've seen a lot of disgusting things in my life but this one takes the cake."

"I wish." Neshal explained. "Once we take our Alchemical protection off, it will be gone. We could rest here."

Everyone looked at her as she was raving mad.

"I mean on the ground floor, not here-here."

They went back to the Odi ward, but the nightmare followed them. Even though the place was pristine and with perfect lighting, they kept seeing everything in shades of green, as if the living fog was still there.

Only when the creature's screams stopped resounding in their ears and their steps emitted squishy sounds no more did they go for the second underground floor.