

Supreme M 681

Chapter 681 Mysteries Part 1

'Solus, how could we understand a dead language.' Lith thought after replaying the events in his head until he was certain that it wasn't just a hallucination.

'Not "we", you did. I heard only gibberish until you translated it for me.' Her answer hit Lith harder than everything he had witnessed so far. He even asked Phloria and the Professors, but they confirmed to him that all they heard was unknown words.

That bit of news shocked Lith. The last thing he needed was more unanswered questions.

The door to the second underground floor was ripped off as well, but the signs of struggle stopped halfway through the U shaped corridor. The creature's limited range of action had prevented it from conquering the whole building.

The floor was empty, only corpses remained and this time they all belonged to prisoners that the Odi had left locked inside their cells. The administrative office was intact, so while the language experts studied the medical reports, the others examined the bodies.

The first thing they noticed was that once again the cells were small and cramped with up to six beds. Lith noticed that some of the inmates had runes of power surgically carved over their skeletons. Most of them, however, shown bite marks and the only clean bones were as brittle as breadsticks.

'I can understand the cannibalism. If the Odi abandoned them here, hunger must have driven them insane, but why a set of brittle bones in each cell?' Lith thought and even Solus had no explanation to offer him.

Since there was no threat, no relic, nor anything worth studying, the Forgemasters went examining the next holographic pad to discover its password while waiting for the linguists.

This time they didn't need Lith's help. The Professors had learned their lesson and thoroughly examined the uncommon characters too. Ellkas and Gaakhu only needed a glance to guess the password.

"Seems that enchanting living being was a total bust." They explained. "There were only two possible outcomes for the Odi's experiments. The first and more common was death by mana poisoning.

"Those who somehow adapted to the foreign mana were barely one in a hundred and they would die in a way as slow and painful as mana poisoning that the Odi called 'mana drain'.

"Basically, their bodies were unable to fuel the enchantment with their innate mana and would collapse over time. They tried to fix the problem by Bonding the specimens with mana crystals, but the survival rate was 0%."

There was a total of five underground floors and each one of them recorded a different kind of madness. The third floor was for intellect enhancement experiments, but aside from failure reports and corpses with deformed skulls, there was nothing to see.

The fourth one was the Immortality project, but since all the prisoners were dead there was no doubt about its failure. On the fifth floor, the Life Merging process truly scared them.

The whole floor was empty. There was no corpse lying around nor documents left in the office.

"Oh shit! I think this one succeeded." Morok said. "Also, there must be a secret passage around here. Otherwise we should have found much more Odi corpses on our way here."

"Indeed." Yondra nodded. "If the Odi locked themselves in here to escape from the hybrid, they would have died like all the others. Instead not only did they manage to continue their experiments, but they also had the time to clean everything."

After searching the floor, they discovered the existence of an elevator in the wall near the stairs. It wasn't actually hidden, just hard to notice since on Mogar elevators didn't exist and its doors were so perfectly sealed for security reasons that nothing distinguished them from the nearby metal walls.

Unfortunately, it was useless. It required both a password and a key to access to each floor, clearly to keep the different research teams in the dark about what others had achieved.

It was barely past lunchtime, but everyone was exhausted, so they decided to call it a day and go back to the camp.

Lith and Phloria spent all of their free time with Quylla. Lith explained to her all the failed experiments they had witnessed and their consequences.

"Gods, I'm really starting to believe that the Odi's life force underwent so many modifications that they became utterly insane." Quylla could tell by Phloria's face turning green at the recount of the events that Lith was sparing her the most gruesome details.

"Body Sculpting is named so because it's almost a work of art. The smallest mistake can scar forever your patient, that's why we practiced so much on slimes before treating people. The Odi, instead, seemed to hammer randomly and hope for a masterpiece."

Quylla's words sparked a crazy idea in Lith's mind, something that gave Solus the creeps.

"What do you think they could achieve with the Life Merging project?" Lith handed her the translated documents that they had retrieved from the main administrative building.

"I understand all the other projects, but this one is beyond me. It has no military application nor it would have brought the Odi any closer to achieve eternal life."

"Maybe, and maybe not." Quylla moved closer to Lith, sitting beside him before Hushing the area around them.

"Good gods, that one too? Leave something for the rest of us. That's not cool bro." Morok said before hitting on Jerth and being hit in return.

"As you know, life force determines the life span of an individual. By merging two life forces, you could in theory live twice as long." Quylla ignored the Ranger, explaining her hypothesis.

"Of course there would be the problem of split personalities, the fight for dominance, and the risk of rejection that could kill both subjects at once. So maybe the Odi were trying to remove the side effects. We know that it's possible because Thrud succeeded."

"I know that, but Thrud had centuries at her disposal as well as Arthan's Madness, whereas the Odi society collapsed soon after they began their experiments." Lith said.

"Your theory would make sense if they experimented on other Odi, but judging from the cells, they kept working on 'lesser races'. Also, there's the contradiction that they apparently succeeded and yet there isn't a single Odi alive.

"What did they use such technology for, then?"

"I have no clue, but I'll see if there's anything useful in these notes." She said hugging Lith a bit too close for comfort. "Don't worry, we'll figure it out. Where there's a will there's a way."

At first, Phloria thought that Quylla was just talking about the current mission, but Lith's shocked expression told her otherwise.

"How do you know about it?" Lith asked.

"How does she know about what?" Phloria echoed, reminding him of her presence.

"Smooth move, Lith. All my efforts to be as vague as possible are ruined. Do you tell her or do you want me to do the honors?" Quylla said, letting him go and allowing herself to sniffle a little.

"You have yet to answer me. How do you know about it?" Lith said.

"Everyone in the light department knows. The Professors treated you after Balkor's attack, remember? Do you think they could miss such a thing? I..."

"What are two hiding from me?" Phloria cut her short, her patience was running thin.

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"Saving Protector gave me Death Vision because it crippled my life force." Lith said. He could only blame himself for losing his cool earlier.

"What does it mean?" Phloria actually knew enough about light magic to put the pieces together, but her brain refused to.

"It means that he is dying." Quylla said, making her sister turn pale as a ghost.

"I hope you haven't focused on Body Sculpting because of me." Lith said.

"I'm not doing it only for you, but also for people like Zinya. Body Sculpting is the next frontier of healing magic, yet few people practice it because of its risks. I researched the Odi because I think they might have found a solution to your problem."

'What the heck? Quylla came here for the same reason.' Solus was shocked and so was Lith.

"I'm not in love with you, but I care for you deeply. You're part of my family." She said hugging him again. Hearing Quylla using almost the same words he had told Phloria at the beginning of the expedition, gave his cynical heart a blow too many.

Lith returned her embrace, not caring anymore about keeping up appearances and stupid rumors.

"Seriously, what the fuck?" Phloria demanded an explanation and this time Lith went into details, even telling her how much he was supposed to have left to live. By the time he was done, Phloria's outlook on their mission was completely changed.

If before it was just a detail mission, now it was personal. Phloria took a walk to clear her head. To her, Kulah was no longer a threat to defend against, it was a fortress to storm which potentially held a priceless treasure.

Her instincts told her to put her suit back up and keep exploring the city, but it only lasted an instant. She knew that raw power and will could only take her so far. The key for that peculiar vault was knowledge, not violence.

The Odi had left too many self-destruct mechanisms that she was unable to deal with on her own. She needed to rest and she needed to wait.

Morok approached her to ask if since there were two of them and one of Lith they needed a fourth player, but before he could even open his mouth, Phloria glared at him.

It was a look that all of Jirni's victims knew all too well, holding a promise of infinite pain and misery. In Morok's case, it reminded him of the look of the Phoenix that had caught him in the attempt of taking one of her eggs to check if a Phoenix omelet was as spicy as legends said.

He had survived the encounter only because after throwing him off the top of her mountain with all of his spells sealed, the beast hadn't bothered confirming the kill. Having learned from his past mistakes, the Ranger gave her a salute before remembering about a very important matter he had to attend to somewhere else.

In the following days, they kept searching one building at a time. The second facility had collapsed, leaving behind no trace of the Odi experiments to create artificial Adamant.

After discovering the records of the umpteenth failed monstrosity, the team had decided to explore the right area hoping to have better luck. What they found out, instead, was that while the left side of Kulah held labs and research facilities, the right side was composed of the personnel living quarters.

They found shops, restaurants, and even a library. Unfortunately, it was a civilian library, so it only contained books unrelated to the Odi research. It was a gold mine for an anthropologist, but just a pile of garbage to the expedition team.

Just to not leave any stone unturned, they explored one building of each side per day.

"If we find Kulah's upper echelons' apartments, we might find the key to decipher this mystery instead of just clutching at straws." Phloria pointed out.

Even though the Professors thought it was just wishful thinking, Lith supported her idea for several reasons. After the Golems had been destroyed, both sides of Kulah were lit up with mana, so their existence couldn't be as simple as it appeared.

Also, every time they deactivated an array or cut a mana cable, there was more world energy available, so it was only a matter of time before Solus could take her tower form.

Last, but not least, he could bring Quylla to the cleared buildings and use her help to understand what could have happened to the Odi. When they had arrived, Kulah was sealed, so the rebels had failed to find it.

Yet there were no corpses, no graveyards, nothing. Too many things didn't add up unless the Odi had simply disappeared off the face of Mogar leaving behind a perfectly functional military facility.

The worst part of their situation was that despite the fact that the living quarters were big, spacious, and were equipped with comfortable beds, the place felt so creepy on so many levels that no one wanted to sleep inside Kulah.

It only made them homesick, lowering their morale even further. The soldiers and the Assistants felt more useless by the day. Their pride crumbled with every challenge the first squad overcame.

The Professors, instead, were starting to be affected by the Odi's abominable experiments. They were academics, after all, they had seen their fair share of atrocities but Kulah was undermining their trust in the magical research.

Not only they were questioning their mission, but also their entire careers, debating more and more often if it shouldn't have been better to just raze Kulah to the ground.

One building held a research lab focused on robbing magical beasts of their true magic. Each one of its floors contained the results from fusing together a beast and a member of the 'lesser races', no matter their age or gender.

According to the notes left by the mages, the hybrids would live a few minutes in excruciating agony before dying by mana poisoning.

Another building gave them a pleasant surprise. The Odi had tried to bestow their specimens a 'potion organ', something that would make them capable of enhancing their bodies in a way similar to fusion magic.

Each floor was dedicated to a different element and all of them were littered with corpses of both Odi and inmates. The victims had been granted unstable powers that crippled their life span but gave them the opportunity to bite their oppressors back.

The project had been dropped because the more the procedure was perfected, the more casualties the Odi would sustain, especially on the air and fire fusion floors.

"Do you see what I mean?" Lith said to Phloria and Quylla once he was sure that they were alone.

"I get that they modified their bodies to reach what they considered perfect beauty, but aren't these skeletons too similar between each other?" He said pointing at both female and male bodies.

"Also, why none of these women has given birth, not one of them. Their pelvic bones are too perfect."

"If they body-swapped, why give birth?" Phloria shrugged. "They couldn't keep a bloodline just like they couldn't keep their bodies."

"Point taken, but isn't it strange that despite having a young, healthy body, none of them had children? Kulah has no nursery, no school, nothing. These kinds of experiments lasted years, isn't it unnatural that no one had a family?"

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Phloria thought about the apartments they had visited. Some of them hosted more than one person, but always adults. There were enchanted photos in each room, but none depicting children.

In the meantime, Quylla and Lith studied the skeletons in the old-fashioned way, with magnifying glasses and picking samples to analyze later.

"It's indeed odd." Quylla said. "Even discoloration streaks on the bones seem to have developed the same way for all same-sex Odi. Another thing that I noticed, is how well preserved the corpses are despite centuries have passed."

"Do you have a theory to explain all of this?"

"I have. It's farfetched and creepy but I think it fits this place perfectly." Lith replied.

"Let's consider what we know. The Odi first defeated all illnesses by dramatically altering their bodies, correct?"

Both women nodded.

"Then they moved on altering their physical appearance to achieve perfect looks, but doesn't that mean they were basically copies of the same mold?"

"Oh gods." Quylla had no concept of things like DNA or cloning, so she managed to grasp what Lith was saying, but her mind needed some time to consider the implication of such practice based on what she knew.

"Okay, what?" The discussion was way above Phloria's head. Her confused expression made Lith chuckle, creeping both of her friends. They hadn't seen him laughing ever since he had lost the Gatekeeper.

"I'll make it simple. Imagine that to achieve perfect health, all of the Odi subjected their bodies to the same, identical alterations." Lith said.

"I got that. I'm not stupid." Phloria pouted.

"Never even thought that." Lith gave her a soft smile, making something in her stomach flutter.

"Then they wanted to have the same looks, maybe changing just their hair or skin color, but can you picture a society like that?"

"Gods, it would resemble a world full only of purebred dogs." She said.

"Exactly, and what happens when you inbred often to keep the so-called purity of any race?" Lith asked.

"Are you saying that the Odi were sterile? All of them?" Phloria asked.

"Well, if he's right being sterile was the least of their problem." Quylla said.

"Madness, reduced lifespan, and congenital diseases are all things that would require even more Body Sculpting, with easily predictable consequences. Yet it seems a bit rushed conclusion to me. What makes you think their situation was so dire?"

"Lack of children, identical bodies..." Lith wanted to use the term clones, but Mogar's language lacked such a term. "...and your earlier observation, Quylla. This is not medical research, it's too random and desperate."

"As you said, they were hammering rather than chiseling."

"Why aren't we telling this to the Professors as well?" Quylla asked while putting together the various pieces of the puzzle.

"First, mine is just a groundless theory. I'm afraid that after hearing it, their judgment of our future discoveries might be biased. I want to see if they reach the same conclusion on their own.

"Second, I don't trust them. They are facing the same problem the Odi had. They are old and they know they are going to die. Flawed or not, this technology would allow them to prolong their existence and keep their physical appearance."

Lith's paranoia was contagious and suddenly Quylla was almost happy that Professor Phesta had died. Each Professor had conveniently arrived with a talented Assistant/spare body, according to Lith's idea.

Clearing the labs brought them more questions than answers and the private quarters confirmed at least part of Lith's theory. The people in the enchanted pictures looked awfully similar, to the point that the Odi had to embroider their names on their clothes to recognize one another.

Another week passed and the expedition was done exploring half of Kulah. With time, they had grown insensitive to the various horrors and since they had grasped how to safely crack the defensive systems, they could explore multiple buildings in a single day.

Now what slowed them down was the fact that only two Professors were able to read the Odi language and the number of documents they had to read to understand each building's purpose varied greatly.

While they deciphered the papers, the others explored the private quarters, searching for Kulah's supervisor's office.

"I think I need help." Said Jerth while standing in front of a closed door, apparently identical to all the others. Yet she had opened so many of them that she couldn't miss the presence of two extra runes in the array sealing the door.

"Good call." Professor Neshal said. "Those are not extra runes, there is actually a fourth magic circle hidden below the first three. Cutting the mana cable would have triggered it and probably activated more Golems."

Neshal followed the hidden array's power nodes, discovering several hidden doors behind which she could sense the presence of Golem charging arrays.

'Damn. Even Life Vision couldn't spot the trap with all that frigging mana flooding the walls. What about you, Solus?' Lith thought.

'Same. All the buildings are just a white mass to me. I think that the Golems' destruction has triggered some kind of alert. We are one mistake away from activating either Kulah's defenses or its self-destruct mechanism.

'At this point, I can't find any other explanation for keeping all the buildings charged up with mana.'

Once again Lith cursed at his inability to share such precious information.

'What about your tower?'

'Not enough world energy for the full form, let alone for a Warp.'

Once Neshal deactivated all the arrays, she scanned the area again and so did Lith.

"I think we have found the headquarters." The Professor said after opening the door.

The building was clearly an office of some kind. On the right, there was even a reception where the desk sergeant would sort visitors based on their rank. Even though there was no trace of danger, they scanned the place at each step.

Now that they were inside, both Life Vision and mana sense worked properly, allowing Lith to evaluate the importance of each room. Hidden arrays were only good as traps, to keep secret documents secure active spells were necessary.

Phloria teamed up with him as soon as she saw his eyes flaring up from time to time with mana. Lith gave her a small bow as a thank you. With her by his side, he would have had an easy way to justify any discovery he might make.

They navigated the floor quickly, taking just the time Lith needed to scan for hidden arrays. From the front desk departed several corridors, each one identical to the others. They encountered several doors along the way, each one was warded by arrays and had a golden tag at the eye level.

Lith had no idea what was written, nor did he care.

"What if they hold something important?" Phloria asked. "Otherwise why keep them sealed with arrays?"

"Paranoia." Lith replied and Phloria took his words at face value. It was the opinion of an expert, after all.

"They are just offices. There's nothing magical inside, just desks and cabinets. That room, instead, glows like Kamila's smile. Someone took a lot of energy to protect it."

Phloria had yet to recover from the small sting she had experienced when Lith had used another woman as a benchmark to describe something beautiful that he Hushed their surroundings and shared with her Solus's hypothesis about how dangerous Kulah's glowing buildings were.

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"Good gods, one mistake and we might blow up?" Her survival instinct took the wheel and her Forgemaster wand appeared in her hand.

"Maybe. I'm paranoid, but the Odi were crazy, so it's not so unlikely that..."

"You're not paranoid. I mean, not this time." Phloria cut him short.

"Once a safety protocol is breached, the defense readiness condition is raised. Unless the Commander promptly resets the system, two things are bound to happen. The first is the call for reinforcements, which probably failed, being the Odi dead.

"The second is triggering the failsafe mechanism protecting a base's secrets. It usually implies self-destruction so to kill the invaders and prevent state secrets from falling into the wrong hands."

"Can you reset it?" Lith asked.

"Maybe. So far the Odi protocols are not so different from those of the Griffon Kingdom."

'If she manages to do it, we might have enough energy for the tower!' Solus thought.

"Let me guess, that's where we're headed." Phloria pointed at a room that was double the size of those they had encountered so far.

It had ample glass windows which allowed them to look inside and there was a small antechamber in front of it, with a desk for the secretary and seats for the guests.

"Five arrays, three mana cables, twelve purple crystals. This is going to be tricky."

During his stay in Kulah, Lith used Invigoration so many times to scan for dangers that he had discovered new ways to use it. He placed his hands on the walls nearby rather than directly on the arrays.

He made his mana travel from a safe distance, closing it in to the magical formation to make sure that he could study them without triggering their defense mechanisms.

"Or not." Said Phloria, while walking to the secretary's desk. "Secretaries are usually the real second in command. They know everything about their boss and organize their workday, so they have access to pretty much everything."

Lith had already cleared the area, so she could cast some of the spells Orion had taught her. Silvery strands of energy came out from her wand, highlighting several secret compartments where Life Vision showed nothing.

"Wait, what?" Lith asked both Solus and Phloria.

'Beats me. To my mana sense, it's just a normal desk.' Solus said.

"Paranoia." Phloria quoted the book of Lith, chapter 1, verse 1. "The spell I just used specifically reveals cloaked spells. Dad developed it right after studying how such spells work."

"I'm really tempted to ask you what the heck that wand is." No matter how much Lith looked at it, it appeared as a conducting baton made of silver to him.

"You'll have to keep your curiosity to yourself so that my father can keep his head." She replied as several silvery runes appeared over the desk.

For the first time, Lith was interested in Royal Forgemasters' spell, looking at Phloria's actions in the detail. The magic words she used were mostly unknown and the few he recognized derived from Forgemaster spells.

She formed hand and wand signs, using both to draw energy runes in the air. After a few seconds, all the compartments opened at once. One was full of paperwork that Phloria stored for the Professors, one was for office supplies, and the last contained a small keyboard.

"Gods, even the Odi suffered from a bad case of stationery thefts if they used secret compartments for them."

"Paranoia should tell you they are enchanted." Lith replied with his eyes ablaze with Life Vision.

"My bad. My spells can take me only this far and the buttons all look the same. What do you make of them?" She asked.

Lith placed his hand on the desk and performed a thorough scan, hoping that Orion's spell had missed something.

'Apparently, it's as good as Invigoration and it doesn't require contact. Yondra's apprenticeship offer is becoming more interesting by the second.' Lith thought.

Once he focused on the buttons, he could follow their enchantments as if they were power lines and discover what they were connected to.

"One button is for the door, one is for the arrays, and the other two go too far for me to follow them." Lith said.

"They must be the one to call for the security and another to raise the alarm." Phloria suggested.

"Do we really want to bet everything on a button?" Lith asked. The array was a minefield but facing it head-on felt safer to him.

"Do you really expect a secretary to be a Master Warden that every day has to defuse and reactivate that kind of array?" Phloria's reasoning made a lot of sense.

After Lith nodded to her, she pushed it and the arrays disappeared. Another click and the door opened.

Once inside, they ignored the papers and scanned the room for secret compartments. Lith noticed with Life Vision that almost everything in the office was enchanted, especially the desk.

It was filled with mana crystals, resembling a huge wooden communication amulet. Invigoration allowed him to peek inside its drawers, but there was nothing worth mentioning.

"More paperwork and enchanted stationery. What about you?" Lith asked.

"I can feel something enchanted behind this library, but I can't find a magical switch to open it." Phloria replied.

Much to Lith dismay, the library behind the commander's desk was completely ordinary, so Life Vision, mana sense, and Invigoration showed nothing.

'Okay, it's my time to shine.' Solus slipped off Lith's finger and inside the shelves in her liquid form, exploring every nook and cranny, until she found the hidden mechanism. Then she backtracked its workings until she found its trigger.

'Oh my! It seems that the Odi had developed something similar to C-4.' She said. 'I've stored everything for research purposes, but before opening the library I'm going to check for more surprises.'

It was the first time since he was reborn on Mogar that Lith heard about explosives, so he asked Phloria about them.

"It's ancient stuff, no one uses it anymore. Spells are much more powerful and more easily controlled. Also, if someone wears decent protection, you can't kill anyone with explosives unless you make the ceiling collapse on their heads. Why do you ask?"

"Because it's the only thing I could think about to activate the underlying arrays if we just ripped the library off the wall." Lith said.

"That would be an incredibly crude but ingenious way to fool a Forgemaster. Good thinking." Phloria nodded.

'Thanks.' Solus replied in Lith's mind while Phloria and he looked for some kind of switch. Luckily for them, there was only one switch and no traps. After removing the locks, the library easily moved on its hinges, revealing a safe and a block of explosive that Solus had left to prove Lith's theory.

The safe was a small rectangular door, covered by several overlapping arrays, each one fueled by several purple crystals. Above them floated a small holographic display.

"Dammit, the magic crystals powering the safe are the same that fuel the arrays. I can't deactivate them without triggering the safe defense mechanism." Lith said.

"Unless we know the password." Phloria pointed at the holographic display, showing only numbers. She used another of her father's spells and the numbers lit up, revealing that each one of them was connected to two different relays.

One was linked to the safe and the other to the arrays.

"Great! The password contains all the numbers, so they can all be right or wrong depending on their sequence and repetition. I don't think even the Professors can crack it this time." Lith said.

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"I wouldn't be so sure." Phloria shrugged.

"Why, exactly?" Lith asked.

"Well, this safe is really old. I've seen a lot of them in the army. Heck, I even have one in my own office and none of them is a hybrid between Warden and Forgemaster magic. Maybe this was cutting edge technology centuries ago, but magic never stopped evolving."

Phloria went to call the Professors while Lith examined the safe with Invigoration. Solus had already slipped back to his finger, helping him to sort that mess.

'Dammit, if it wasn't for the Odi's obsession with explosions, there are a lot of things I could try. To make matters worse, I need what's inside this safe, so I can't risk getting it damaged.' He thought.

'Consider this a learning experience.' Solus said. 'Phloria is right, we've never met a safe before, so they must have weak points that dimensional items do not have. Otherwise everyone would use them.'

"Nice work getting here so fast." Yondra said, quickly followed by her peers. "What do we have here? A Nightmare Safe! It's the first time I see one outside of books."

"Can you open it?" Lith asked.

"Of course we can." Neshal laughed like a madwoman at the sight of the ancient relic. "It's just like Kulah's door, an unbeatable conundrum unless you know the trick."

"Do you know why no one uses safes nowadays?" Yondra asked, making both the youths shake their heads.

"First, their ungodly price. Having one Forgemastered or array protected would cost much more than a dimensional item and it would be much less safe. Second, any Forgemaster can crack a safe if they have enough time, the same stands for arrays. But this? This is just idiotic."

Yondra's laughs forced Neshal to continue.

"You see, the safe is password protected, which means that the arrays must also recognize it as well, correct?" More nodding ensued.

"Hence, if you use a very simple array detecting spell..." Neshal made the full form of the array appear, revealing its runes.

"Here says that the array must trigger unless the number 3 is pressed." She deciphered the runes for them. "Then, that it must trigger unless the number 9 is pressed within one second..."

"Are you saying that the password is written on the array and cannot be changed?" Phloria's mouth was agape.

"Yes. Unless you redo everything from scratch, the password cannot be changed and it would still be written as clear as day for any Warden worthy of their title."

Yondra pressed the numbers in quick succession, opening the safe.

"Wait, what about the combination for the door locks in the labs?" Lith asked.

"It was different. The arrays and a holographic pad were two distinct protections, in fact we safely deactivated the array first and then worked on the pad. Heck, the password would have been inconsequential if we could have reached the arrays on the other side of the door." Neshal explained.

Inside the safe, there were several folders that were given to Gaakhu and Ellkas, a metal key, and what looked like a keycard to Lith.

While the linguists deciphered the papers from both the safe and the secretary's desk, Yondra worked on the commander's desk, opening all of its drawers. Countless reports were orderly disposed, making the linguists moan at the idea of having to read them all.

Since their presence was no longer necessary, Lith and Phloria left the commander's office and moved to another building. Life Vision didn't spot any more hidden areas and just to decipher so many papers, it would take the linguists quite some time.

By the time dinner was ready, Lith had cleared three more buildings without finding anything interesting. The Professors were still working on the folders found inside the safe, so after finishing his meal, he decided to give his handler a call.

Lith hadn't heard from Kamila in over a week and he was starting to get worried about her. She replied almost immediately, but the vision he saw sent shivers down his spine. Kamila looked terribly pale and had huge bags under her eyes.

Her skin was stretched, like she had lost too much weight too fast, making her almost unrecognizable.

"Thank the gods you are alright. I was starting to get really worried. Wait for a second, please." Only her radiant smile was still the same. The contrast between her joyous expression and her physical appearance made Lith feel as his heart had been caught in a frozen vise.

A familiar voice in the background snapped him out of his reverie.

"Of course, dear. Royal override. Identification: Archon Jirni Ernas. Password of the day: Abomination, Balkor, Die, Manohar."

"Thanks, Jirni. Now you can talk with both your handler and your girlfriend." She giggled.

"Kami, are you alright? You look terrible. Did something happen?" Lith blurted out the second they were alone again.

Those weren't the first words she had hoped to hear from Lith after such a long separation, but the honest worry in his voice more than made up for it.

"Physically, I'm fine. The rest, not so much. It's a long story, do you have time for it?" Lith nodded for her to continue and Kamila told him all that had happened after Fallmug's attempt on her life.

"That bastard!" Lith yelled when her story was over, slamming his fist against the ground with such strength to crack it. "I told you we should have dealt with him the hard way." freewebnovel.com

Kamila flinched, quivering like a puppy and making Lith feel terrible.

"Oh gods, I'm so sorry. I'm not angry at you, I just wish I was there to rip him apart, limb from limb."

"That's exactly my problem." She said. "Right after the attack, I was so enraged that I had him arrested and asked for the maximum sentence. Now, however, knowing that he is still alive, getting tortured every day, I feel terrible."

Kamila started to sob.

"I can't sleep, I can't eat. I'm barely functional. Why did I take this job? Everything was much easier before."

Lith let her vent her pain, whispering her sweet words from time to time, before saying anything.

"I would like that Fallmug died a horrible death, but if it's affecting you so badly, then ask for mercy and have him executed. He's not worth a single hair on your head, let alone one of your tears."

"After so long, would it even matter? I helped Constable Ernas capture many people, but it's the first time that my job and my personal life get mixed. I never realized the pain I bring to those who get arrested." She replied.

"First, you didn't do anything wrong. He attacked you, and no matter your role in the army, his sentence would have been the same. Second, what about Zinya? What about all the victims? Why are you worrying for the culprits instead that for yourself?"

"If you didn't stop those people, a lot of innocents would have got hurt. Your job is as necessary as mine. As for Fallmug, yes, his death matters. It will give you closure. Kami, you are not a bad person and his fate was never in your hands, but his own."

"What do you think would have happened to your sister and her children if you didn't step up? Nothing you did was meant to hurt him, only to have justice for them, so please stop torturing yourself over such a dirtbag."

Chapter 686 Last Stop Part 2

Kamila pressed a button on her amulet, making Lith's hologram become life-sized and he did the same. She tried to grab the hologram's hand, but there was nothing to touch and it wasn't even warm.

Lith kept his hand open, letting her palm touch his, in the only form of contact they could share.

"You know what? You are right. I think I wouldn't feel so bad if I had asked Jirni to have them immediately executed. It's just that even though Fallmug is a scumbag, I attended to their marriage. I even spent some time with him when Zinya was giving birth.

"He's still someone I know, not just a faceless criminal with a record I have to study." Kamila said.

"I also think you have yet to recover from the attempted murder." Lith said. "The first time is always shocking."

The memory of Fallmug's attack, with all its possible implications, made Kamila shiver and seek the comfort of a heavy blanket.

"When will you be back?" She asked. "I miss you so bad that it hurts."

"Wish I know, but soon." Lith sighed. "Once I return, I promise you that we'll spend a lot of time together and that I'll cook you all of your favorite dishes. We need to get some meat back on those bones."

"Thanks. Your words mean the world to me." Kamila said.

Their conversation continued for a while, but before passing the amulet to Phloria, Lith spoke a bit with Jirni.

"You promised me that she would have been safe." He didn't mean to sound aggressive, but between gritting his teeth and pulverizing rocks with his bare hands to vent his stress, any other person would have found him terrifying.

"And I kept my word. She was never alone, not for a single moment. I gave Fallmug only enough rope so that I could build an airtight case against him." As a married woman, Jirni could understand his distress.

If Orion ever ended up looking like Kamila, she would demand an explanation, and an excellent one at that.

"Then why didn't you kill him on the spot? You know how soft Kamila is, and killing someone in self-defense is much different from doing it in cold blood. The guilt is eating at her alive." Lith rebuked.

"I hoped to make her harder, stronger. In our line of work, what Fallmug did is barely a practical joke. I can only tell you that compared to some of the criminals I arrested, the Odi were amateurs." Jirni said.

"Please, have Fallmug killed as soon as you can and then bring Kamila to my home. The kind of help she needs is something that only her sister and my family can provide to her. No offense." Lith knew that Jirni was right, but also that demanding from Kamila to react like they would was going too far.

"None taken. Any preference on the execution method?"

"I prefer not knowing." Lith replied with a cruel smile. That way, if Kamila asked him anything about how gruesome Fallmug's death had been, Lith wouldn't be forced to lie to her.

The next morning, Lith heard words that he had always believed to be just a myth.

"We have great news." Professor Gaakhu said, handing an abridged version of their findings to all the members of the expedition.

"No bad news? At all?" Phloria spit her breakfast in surprise.

"Nope. Not even good news, only great ones." Ellkas replied with a warm smile.

"The documents we have found in the commander's office were the most recent reports and updates about all the experiments conducted in Kulah. Needless to say, most of them were a complete failure.

"Archmage Ernas was right in his estimates. Both Forgemastering living beings and the attempts to create artificial adamant proved to be impossible."

"You said most were failures." Yondra pointed out. "What about their successful experiments?"

"I was getting to that." Gaakhu said. "According to the reports, the Life Merging, Mana Reactor, and Flesh Golem projects were brought to fruition. In the upper part of Kulah, the Odi continued to work on their failed experiments whereas they moved the three successful projects in the lower levels of the city.

"There is an underground facility even better equipped than the one right under our feet. We have all the data we need in our hands, so as soon as we collect the evidence from the under-underground lab, we can finally leave this place."

Gaakhu's words were greeted by a round of applause, yet neither Lith nor Phloria took part in it.

'That's why so much world energy is being siphoned. The Odi must have focused on improving the technologies that actually worked, giving to the other projects just the necessary scraps to keep the base operational.

'Life Merging, Mana Reactor, and Flesh Golem. I have a faint idea of what each one of them does and I like none of them.' Lith thought.

"What about their 'Meat Factories'?" Phloria asked. "Shouldn't we give those poor creatures relief from their life of torment?"

"They'll die once we cut off the power lines to the complex." Ellkas replied.

"No, that's just what you hope for. What if the modification they underwent allow them to survive? What if after a lifetime in slavery, we leave them for dead while they slowly die of hunger? Even worse, what if by doing so we set them free to roam the Griffon Kingdom?" Phloria's words made sense.

The Odi were crazy enough to unleash the horrors they had created against the 'lesser races' in revenge. After all, they were as dead as a doornail, whatever happened wasn't their problem anymore.

"We'll move to the underground floor only once we make sure that not a soul stays trapped in this nightmare a second longer than necessary." Phloria was pretty sure that without their life support systems, the creatures would die. Pain was the only variable.

She hadn't forgotten about the Teks and her failure to locate them. The image of the Tek younglings eating each other still haunted her dreams. After such a terrible parody of life, she wanted to grant them at least a merciful death.

"That shouldn't take long." Ellkas nodded. "We have a list of the facilities and based on the buildings we already explored, we now know which is which."

There weren't many labs left where live specimens had been used, so before moving to their last stop, the group explored them. They made sure that no creature like the pathogen-Abomination hybrid was still alive.

Yet no matter where they looked, they only found either empty buildings or mass graves.

"This really doesn't make sense." Lith said. "Why some places have been cleaned while the rest appears as if the Odi just left, leaving their guinea pigs to starve? It's like a sudden crisis forced them to run away."

His words pictured in everyone's head the image of the Odi still alive in the safety of their underground lab, waiting for them like predators stalking their prey.

"It's worse than that." Phloria said after checking their maps. "Why are the meat factories empty? These rooms are nothing like the one Lith and I witnessed."

The buildings where the creatures that had assaulted Morok's first group on multiple occasions were supposed to be, turned out to be just warehouses filled with junk. There was no trace of dimensional runes, working arrays, or even defensive systems.

"I think I know the answer." Neshal said.

Chapter 687 Death Trap Part1

"Such an extensive automatic breeding facility like the one you described couldn't be used to just breed warriors in case of an assault. The magical beasts were probably used as prototypes for the Flesh Golem project as demonstrated by the brains embedded in the constructs we fought.

"Hence they have probably been moved to the underground lab." Neshal said.

The other Professors nodded, cursing at their own stupidity. It was now too late to enter the underground complex. Even though they had fought no enemy, deactivating arrays and constantly scanning their surroundings was quite a tiresome job.

Still, to Lith it hadn't been a fool's errand. They had now cut off enough mana cables that Solus was almost able to assume her tower form.

Lith used that forced break to use Accumulation a lot and call Kamila again. After seeing her in such a bad shape, he had decided to try and support her to the best of his abilities despite the distance separating them.

Lith spent dinner with her and thanks to his company, Kamila managed to eat a full bowl of soup instead of just nibbling at her food before sending it back to the kitchen.

"It sucks having no one waiting for you but Mom and Dad, uh?" Quylla asked Phloria. She was knee-deep in sheets of paper filled with her notes about the Life Merging reports they had managed to find.

"Well, at least you have Anathor." Phloria said, realizing she had been staring too much at Kamila's hologram and averting her gaze from the couple.

"I don't know. I haven't thought about him once since we got here. I think it's a pretty bad sign. Are you interested in hearing a crazy theory of mine?"

Seeing that Quylla wouldn't stop working even during dinner unless someone actively conversed with her, Phloria nodded.

"I think that all the three successful projects were means to prolong the Odi race's existence. Life Merging probably exploits their artificially identical life forces to avoid rejection when assimilating one another, just like Thrud does with her meat puppets."

"Flesh Golems should be a perfected version of the constructs we have already faced, capable of implanting their minds in a Golem's body, whereas the Mana Reactor should be related to convert mana into life force." Quylla said.

"Is any of these three things even possible?" Phloria was suddenly very interested in the matter. The first two were revolting, but the third option might allow them to give Lith a normal lifespan if they found its blueprints.

"In theory, yes. In practice, maybe. The only problem I have with my crazy theory is that it doesn't explain why the Odi disappeared even though all three projects worked. I mean, I get that the rebels might have killed those on the surface, but what happened to the Odi residing in Kulah?"

"Also, I don't get how they were supposed to find life force donors for the Life Merging project. If Lith is right and the Odi were sterile, then their numbers could only decline with time."

"Couldn't they use Body Sculpting on the Teks and absorb their life force?" Phloria asked.

"No, that's impossible. Even with heavy modifications, a magical beast's and a human's life force are too different. My hope is that we find enough about the Mana Reactor to at least repair Lith's life force since it's the only way to help him that doesn't involve forbidden magic." Quylla replied.

There were few things that she wouldn't do to help her friend, but killing people was among them.

Lith tried to give Kamila his undivided attention, but his enhanced senses heard Quylla's words and he got curious. When he listened to her reasoning, he couldn't disagree more with her.

'Her idea of Life Merging kind of makes sense, but the rest is just wishful thinking. If the Odi were willing to consider becoming Golems as a form of eternal life, they would have much more easily turned themselves into undead.

'As for the Mana Reactor, mana and life force are two entirely different things. With Invigoration, I can have my mana core produce as much mana as I want, yet I can't repair my life force.

'Either Quylla sees so far that I can't even comprehend her theory or she's completely off track.'

Lith thought.

"Why are you sighing so much?" Kamila asked. Lith didn't want to burden her with his problems, so he replied with a white lie.

"I can't wait to be done with this awful place. Having you so close and yet so distant is killing me." His words managed to make her laugh and eat some bread.

The rest of the evening was uneventful and so was the night. The guards had become so relaxed with the prolonged quiet of those last few days that they had a hard time not dozing off from time to time.

The following morning, despite all of Quylla's pleas, the expedition team was once again split into two groups, leaving the Assistants and the soldiers in the camp while the Rangers, the Professors, and Phloria went to collect the last data.

"I'm sorry, Quylla, but if those we faced so far were the security measures for almost abandoned projects, I can't imagine how tight the security will be for the successful ones." Phloria said.

Even though she appeared to be calm, she was actually on edge. She had searched thoroughly Kulah's commander's office, but she hadn't found the device to reset the base's DEFCON level.

According to Lith's estimates, they were one mistake away from a gruesome death. By keeping her sister as far away as she could from Kulah, Phloria could better protect her life and give her the opportunity to escape if the worst happened.

The elevator for the underground facility was located inside the administrative building, right past the commander's office. Just like the other elevators they had encountered, its metal doors were nigh identical to the walls, making it hard to spot, if it wasn't for the small keyhole at its side.

The moment Phloria put the metal key in the lock, it was ripped off her hand before she could turn it. A thud could be heard as a bright yellow light became visible through the elevator's crevices, accompanied by a rumbling sound.

"Oh shit!" Phloria unsheathed her sword and conjured an energy shield around those close to her. The Professors reacted as well, taking their best equipment out from their dimensional amulets.

"What did you do wrong?" Morok's said, his hands above his weapons as he was uncertain of what form shapeshift them into to better face the metal monster in front of them.

The panic in the air amused Lith, who had to repress his chuckle.

'I guess they have never heard a mechanical elevator moving.' He thought.

A ding accompanied the metal doors opening, revealing a lift big enough to easily accommodate 20 people or a stretcher and a medical team. The key was waiting for them on the inside, behind a glass panel right beside a card reader.

"What the heck is this?" Gaakhu asked. "There are no buttons and no runes, how do we command this thing to move?"

"It seems that the elevator only makes one stop." Lith explained. "We need the other key." Mogar's language had no word for 'keycard', so he just pointed at the other item they had found inside the safe.

"How do you know?" Gaakhu asked. She was a historian and she had never heard of such a device. Before Lith could cook up an explanation, the ground below their feet began to rumble.

Chapter 688 Death Trap Part 2

The activation of the ancient elevator had also triggered a device placed several hundreds of meters below them. It awoke the Odi from their long slumber, signaling to them that rescue had finally arrived.

They were many and there was only one monitor, so they crowded in front of it while shoving each other away to see which one of the ancient noble families had managed to find a cure for their condition and repress the revolt.

What appeared in front of their eyes was much worse than the dreamless sleep they had just escaped from.

"What does this mean?" A male asked. "Those aren't even Odi possessing human bodies. According to the sensors, they are actual humans, or at least most of them are."

Nimble feminine fingers ran across a keyboard, activating the surveillance devices scattered throughout Kulah. The cameras showed them the camp on the outside and how many buildings had been breached.

"These people are no helpers, but raiders." A female said. "We need to exterminate them before going back to sleep."

"Don't be so hasty." Another woman replied. "Look at their equipment. I've never seen anything like that. They might hold the key to resume our research."

After a quick debate, an agreement was reached.

"Fine. Let them come like lambs to their slaughter, but we must make sure that no one of their slaves manages to escape." A second male voice said while pressing a button which activated their ultimate defense mechanism.

In the meantime, Lith could see with Life Vision that something was terribly wrong. The world energy compressed and accumulated inside Kulah's buildings was being released all at once while more was being pumped from the mana geyser below.

"This is a quake! We must make sure that the people at the camp are alright." Yondra said, worried about Rainer.

Yet it was no quake. The world energy was being converted into a thick, black miasma that was flooding the whole underground cave and its tunnels, consuming every form of life on its path, even the moss they had painstakingly grown during the last few weeks.

The camp was already submerged in darkness element and the only reason its occupants were still alive was the multi-layered array that Neshal and the other Professors had left. Yet it wasn't going to protect them for long.

The dark energy was eating at the magical formation, whereas the miasma could slowly pass through it. Barriers wouldn't prevent air and light from entering, making the situation of those at the camp even more desperate.

Luckily, the cave was now filled with air, allowing them to use fire magic to destroy the toxic gas before it got too close. Without all the moss they had planted, they would have had no defense against such an attack.

Jerth was about to contact Phloria, but she beat her second in command to the punch.

"Is everything alright at the camp? The quake..."

"Is caused by a mass destruction spell that's consuming the whole cave." Jerth cut her short, the external layers were already crumbling. "What do we do?"

Jerth pressed a few buttons on the amulet, allowing Phloria's group to take a look around.

Lith didn't waste time, opening a Warp Steps right in front of Quylla, quickly followed by both Phloria and Yondra who had started to chant as soon as they had seen Jerth's terrorized expression.

Only thanks to the three dimensional corridors did the rest of the expedition team manage to get to safety before the array collapsed.

"And now what? We can't get outside and we have no idea how much further that thing reaches the tunnels." Almost as a reply to Morok's question, the black miasma started to flow inside the administration office through the ventilation system.

"Give me the card!" Lith took the keycard from Phloria's pocket, quickly swiping it from both sides, just to be safe. The metal doors closed in the nick of time and the elevator started to move down, allowing them to survive.

"Amazing!" Said a woman. "They managed to use dimensional magic without runes! We must interrogate them thoroughly and learn their secrets."

"You're insane, Leela." Replied a man. "They speak gibberish and none of us is willing to waste their time teaching a bunch of monkeys our language."

"Talk for yourself, Rizo." Said another man. "If we learn their language after we steal their bodies, we could get outside and learn how close the Odi empire is to defeat the rebels."

"Are you insane?" Rizo's voice was full of poison. "Taking the body of a monkey? Have you forgotten why we hid inside Kulah? It would mean throwing away all of our efforts and sacrifices!"

"I haven't forgotten, but have you seen how low have we stooped? What we have become to remain alive and preserve our magical talents? I'd say that even a monkey's body is better than this thing you call life."

Rizo was about to kill Jiira, but many seemed to share his vision and even more blocked Rizo's arm, keeping it away from his sword.

"There's something I don't understand." Leela said, ignoring the commotion around her. "Why did they save their slaves instead of using dimensional magic to escape? How can a bunch of children be worthy of their masters' lives?"

"The answer is simple." Jiira said. "Either those are not slaves or their spells are flawed and can't bend space far enough to escape. By the way, I call dibs on the brown-haired youth. It's the less disgusting among them."

No one wanted the Professors because they were too old, also in the following quarrels for who would obtain the Assistants' bodies, the Odi agreed on only one thing: the non human had to die.

'Solus, what was that thing?' Lith asked.

'Some kind of poisonous gas strengthened by darkness magic. In a way, it's worse than the explosion we were afraid of. No matter how powerful, we could have avoided the explosion by Blinking away whereas we have no idea how long will it take for the gas to disperse.' Solus replied.

Phloria was checking that Quylla was alright, casting all the diagnostic spells at her disposal. Yondra was doing the same for Rainer, while the other Professors were too worried about themselves to care about their Assistants.

"Captain Phloria, how in the gods' name one can fail even to use a goddamn key?" Gaakhu's fury hid the terror she felt for being trapped hundreds of meters below the ground, without knowing if she would ever see the sky again.

"I made no mistake nor I triggered any alarm. You checked the door yourself." Phloria kept her voice calm. The only thing worse than being underground was to remain imprisoned in a metal box with no way out.

None of them had ever been in a mechanical elevator before, all those they had experienced in the past were magical in nature. The buzzing of the engine and clanging of cables were upsetting everyone but Lith.

"Then how do you explain our situation? We did nothing and the Assistants were too far to mess up!" Gaakhu wasn't willing to let it slide. Each squeaking she heard felt as if someone was hammering nails into her coffin.

"I don't owe you any explanation. I don't know what happened, but I know that arguing won't take us anywhere. We need to keep calm."

When the elevator reached the bottom floor, the structure jolted to a stop, making the group yelp.

The metal doors quickly opened, forcing the two women to interrupt their quarrel. It was best to not ignore the welcome committee waiting for them.

Chapter 689 Conflicts Part 1

A small army of Teks, Thorns, and Koas unleashed a barrage of spells against the intruders as soon as they had a clear line of fire. Thorns were creatures born from the Awakening of bushes, or in the case of an underground environment, of moss.

Their bodies were short, barely reaching one meter (3'3") of height. They looked like octopuses made of mold, with glowing yellow eyes and odd protuberances on their backs that almost resembled wings.

Koas, instead were fish type magical beast, about 1.5 (5') meters tall. They had big green eyes and humanoid bodies covered in silvery scales as hard as metal. Their razor-sharp claws and teeth made them formidable opponents in close-quarter combat.

All of them had been born and bred in an environment that only allowed to the most aggressive of them to survive, so their first reaction was always to try and eat each other. The bloodbath between the different species ended only when the elevator's doors opened, revealing its cargo of soft, tender meat.

Once again, the entire structure was made of metal, making earth magic impossible to use. The Teks attacked with a hail of ice shards, while the Thorns released their darkness infused spores to weaken their prey enough to feed upon them.

The Koas preferred a much simpler approach, releasing their bolts of lightning against everyone but themselves. Unfortunately, both Teks and Thorns were immune to lightning, so electricity was a threat only to the expedition group.

Between the sudden crisis and the fear that the mechanical elevator had caused them, the humans had no time to prepare their spells. Phloria stepped in front of Quylla while injecting mana into her Skinwalker armor.

The few projectiles that hit Phloria before her conjured tower shield could take form didn't even put a dent in the silvery layer covering her skin. The soldiers reacted in unison, each one stepping forward to protect the civilians while activating their energy shields and using their wands to return fire.

They had learned from the previous attack that in such a confined space, darkness was the best choice. The projectiles were slow, but the creatures had no camaraderie and would hinder each other's movements in their attempts of dodging the darkness bolts.

Lith and Morok Blinked almost at the same time. Before the first blood could be shed, they appeared respectively on the left and the right side of their assailants. Morok crossed his blades right in front of his eyes as he whispered: "Infiro."

The two short words emitted a red light that scorched everything on its path, while Lith released a stream of blue flames from his hands from the opposite direction, leaving the creatures no way out but to move toward the black bullets.

The red light and the blue flames burned the Thorns while heating the Teks' exoskeletons and Koas' scales to the point that they ended up cooking rather than protecting their internal organs.

Lith would have liked to use Origin Flames, but ever since they had activated the elevator, Solus had spotted magical cameras, warning him that they were being watched.

"What the heck was that?" Lith asked while using the army signal to alert the others about enemy spies. To a casual onlooker, they would just appear as a nervous gesture.

"I thought your weapons didn't have energy-based attacks."

"And you were right about that. The spell was mine, my weapons simply absorbed the flames and released only its heat. I'm not as confident as you are in controlling my spells." Morok nodded in understanding.

"This is all metal, there's no way to start a fire." Lith said, noticing that aside from Yondra, the Professors had only shielded themselves. If not for the soldiers, most of the Assistants would have died.

The two Rangers continued babbling for a while, giving Phloria the time to decide their next move while keeping the enemy focused on them. She retrieved the metal key from behind the glass before stepping outside the elevator.

The compartment had opened after Lith had swiped the keycard the right way, but between Gaakhu's yammering and the creepy noises from the elevator, Phloria had almost forgotten about it.

"We need to find an easily defensible place." She said. "Our first priority is to avoid getting blind-sided again. Then, we must find and destroy the meat factories. I don't care if the magical beasts are willingly helping our enemies or not, they are part of the Odi's automated defences and we'll treat them as such."

Neshal hid behind Phloria to cast a Detector array, following the orders hidden behind her words. The magical cameras emitted a glow visible to the naked eye for a split second before a snap of Neshal's fingers turned them into dust.

"What the heck is this stuff?" Yondra said while studying the devices' remains.

They looked like small metal cylinders with a glass lens mounted at their extremities. They would have reminded Lith of some kind of security cameras if not for the fact that they were covered in runes and powered by magic rather than electricity.

"First the card, now this. How did you notice them without an array?" Gaakhu had shifted her rage from Phloria to Lith.

"The lenses reflected the lights from our spells." Lith lied through his teeth. "Also, I get that you are scared, everyone is, but that doesn't give you the right to vent your stress on those who just saved your useless life."

"Captain Ernas, I propose to leave Professor Gaakhu here. It's because of her that the enemy ambush almost succeeded. She's a liability." Before she could retort in outrage, Lith lifted her from the neck with one hand.

His grip was so strong that she couldn't breathe and he only needed a flick of his wrist to break her neck like a twig. Except for the Orichalcum boosted by mana, enchanted armors offered little protection against that kind of attacks.

"All in favor?" Phloria asked.

The Assistants, the soldiers, and Morok raised their hands.

"The majority agrees." She said while looking into Gaakhu's desperate eyes. "Luckily for you, this is not a democracy. You're the best linguist we have, so your usefulness outweighs how annoying you are. Yet."

"So, I'm willing to give you a last chance. Keep your emotions in check and help the others to survive, because the next time you mess up will be your last. Release her, Ranger Verhen."

Lith opened his hand, making Gaakhu fall butt first to the ground, gasping for air. She was outraged by the treatment she had received, but she kept her mouth shut. Her colleagues had opposed to her execution, but none of them had said a word to defend her nor tried to prevent the judgment from being carried out.

Gaakhu was alone and Phloria's ultimatum was still ringing in her ears.

'Damn old fossils. I'm too young to die.' She thought. 'As much as I would like to teach these arrogant kids a lesson, I need them for my survival. The moment we're out of here, I'll use all of my resources to ruin you and your precious careers.'

The group started to move, but no one helped her to get up. The Professors were busy studying and scanning the space in front of them while the soldiers focused solely on the Assistants.

Gaakhu decided to swallow her pride and prove her usefulness to them. She had no idea what that place was, but her instincts told her that she wouldn't stand a chance alone.

Chapter 690 Conflicts Part 2

The lobby in front of the elevator was a rectangular room, 2.4 meters (7.9 feet) high and 7 meters (23 feet) wide. It reminded Lith of the company he had worked for in the Q\0026A department.

There was no furniture, only tags and signs to navigate the facility. The walls had been painted of a pale green while the metal grate that covered the stone ceiling was white.

The magic cameras had been hidden between the grate and the stone, making them almost invisible to the naked eye. After a thorough scan of the room was completed, Phloria said:

"First the gas and now another ambush. If this is the response of an automated defense, then it's like to be a sentient cursed object. We're too much at disadvantage here to safely continue the mission.

"Does anyone have an idea if it's safe to go back upstairs and leave Kulah? I'll take full responsibility for the decision."

The Professors pondered for a while before replying.

"I've seen that gas before." Yondra said. "It's a neurotoxin laced with magic crystals' powder so that it can carry and amplify darkness magic pulses without being destroyed by them. Its half-life is about three days, so we'd have to wait at least a week before leaving this place.

"Otherwise even if somehow we carry with us enough fresh air to survive, another black pulse would travel through the toxin so fast that we would die before having enough time to open a Warp Steps."

"We'll be all dead before a week." Morok said. His words caused more nods than glares this time, making Phloria realize that her real first issue was morale. Gaakhu was a symptom, not the illness, just like Morok had simply stated what everyone was thinking.

"What about the signs? Is there any indication of an emergency exit?" She prayed to the gods for good news.

"They only say: 'Main Lobby'..." Gaakhu pointed at the tag in front of the elevator.

"...'Living Quarters' and 'Research Area'." Those were the signs respectively pointing left and right.

"Good." Phloria nodded while everyone looked at her as if she had gone insane.

"The Living Quarters are bound to be a safe spot. The Odi would never place a meat factory near their lodgings. Let's move." Phloria was way less confident than she appeared.

Yet she had to find a place where to leave the Assistants before exploring the rest of the compound. Such a large group would be too difficult for her to manage. Along the way, they kept finding working cameras that were regularly disposed of, leaving the enemy blind.

The corridor was quite long and full of surprises. First, they found leaflets of bright colors hanging on the walls. According to Ellkas, they were just propaganda inciting the scientists to fight for the Odi cause and not lose hope.

Then, there were traces of ripped leaflets, replaced by what looked like a kid's drawing of the outside world that covered most of the walls, until it turned into a wall text of gibberish repeated over and over.

"It says 'doom'." Ellkas said, noticing that it wasn't the work of a single person. The word was the same but the handwriting was different. The nail marks and the almost faded bloodstains on the walls told them a creepy story.

No one would ever let such an unsettling message, let alone the blood if the phenomenon hadn't become so widespread that the authorities had given up on removing the madmen's message and leave one of their own.

A message of violence.

Luckily, the double metal door at the end of the corridor was pristine, lifting their spirit. The Odi hadn't let the insanity spread too far, so the humans could still hope to find a haven rather than an asylum.

The Living Quarters had another card reader. Phloria had seen Lith using the keycard and managed to swipe it right at the first attempt. The display turned bright green and several letters appeared.

"Commander card recognized." Gaakhu translated without even giving Phloria the time to ask.

Phloria nodded and opened the door, revealing a space that extended as far as the eye could see, almost as big as Kulah's residential area. Judging from the distance between the doors, each apartment was quite spacious.

The area was clean and perfectly lighted, with no sign of vandalism. The pavement was covered by a soft red moquette and the cream-colored walls made everyone relax the moment the heavy door closed behind them.

"We have only a keycard." Phloria said pointing at the card reader at the side of each door. "So, we'll have to live together until we find a way out. Professors, please scan the area. I'll look for the biggest apartment while the rest of you stay here."

As soon as Neshal signaled her that the coast was clear, Phloria went to the nearest door and swiped the keycard, obtaining only a beep and a red light in return.

'Maybe this is the commander's personal key and it can open only their own apartments.' She thought, but the idea of a commanding officer needing more than once key made no sense to her, so when after the second door refused to open as well, Phloria called for Ellkas.

"What does this say?" She asked after the swipe.

"Access denied. Permission revoked." Neshal turned pale and started to chant a spell.

Phloria gave the alarm as she walked back to the entrance and swiped the card at the door that they had opened barely a minute ago.

"Access denied. Permission revoked." Neshal read the message accompanying the red light.

"Dammit, it's a trap! This is no automated defense, someone has trapped us here." Phloria could cast a Warp Steps to get them out of there, but her problem was that she had no idea where to go.

The apartment's doors opened all at once and a small army of Golems stepped out of them. The constructs were nothing like those the expedition group had faced outside Kulah.

They were all humans, but their bodies had been heavily modified, replacing most of their flesh with stone and metal. Huge mana crystal had been grafted on all their limbs, including their head.

Thin tubes came out from their backs and pierced their abdomen. Their skin was deathly pale, their eyes bloodshot with the veiled pupil typical of corpses, yet they were still alive.

Lith looked at them with Life Vision as his worst fears about the Flesh Golems turned into reality. They still had a faint trace of life force, but no mana flow except for that exuding from their artificial parts, which bore an inhuman energy signature.

Morok didn't wait for orders, he struck at the closest construct after shapeshifting his weapons into war hammers. The Golem reacted as fast as a magical beast, shapeshifting its hands into shields to block the attack while breathing fire against Morok.

The Ranger crouched down to avoid the attack and struck at the construct's kneecaps at the same time, swinging his hammers in an X shaped motion. The impact was so strong that it shattered them but instead of falling the Flesh Golem simply floated while its limbs regenerated.

"Kill me." It said in an unknown language as its hands emitted streams of lightning bolts that sent Morok slamming against a wall and into a seizure.

Once again, Lith somehow understood its words. He recognized that state, he had seen it happen once in the past when Protector was about to die.

The Odi had solved the mana poisoning issue by somehow destroying the mana core of their victims.