

Supreme M 101

Chapter 101 Triple Casting

Linjos was very tired, his face seemed even longer than usual, with dark circles around the eyes caused by the worries and the lack of sleep.

When he heard what had happened, he only sighed, turning to watch at the forest below.

"I really envy magical beasts. Things are so simple for them, taking only what they need, without caring for petty things like gold or grudges."

Then he turned back again, looking at Yurial in the eyes.

"I'm really sorry for what has happened to you, partly is my fault. And what makes me feel even worse, is that despite all my brave talk and efforts, you are not the first victim, and likely not the last either.

The most basic move to get rid of a Headmaster, is to make the environment toxic through violence and intimidation. Academy's life is already very hard and demanding, it doesn't take much to make it unbearable.

When that happens, the number of graduates plummets, the academy's reputation rapidly declines and a new Headmaster gets chosen. Usually, it happens during the last trimester. The timing of the events suggests someone really wants to get rid of me.

I guess they didn't like me taking cheating off the table. You have no idea how many noble slackers have failed right off the bat." He sighed, again, taking no pleasure from their misfortune.

"As for the Ballots, I can't. There is none left."

"Is it because Lukart and his goons? Did they take them all?" Yurial was worried, remembering his father's words.

"Actually, no." Linjos replied with a smirk. "After what happened between Lith and Lady Hestia became the talk of the academy, a lot of first- and second-year students came for the Ballots. The ones I gave you two young ladies were among the last ones.

There were just about twenty to begin with, so I already ordered a new batch. The problem is that since their power source is the castle itself, the crafting method is quite complex. It will take some time."

Phloria swallowed a lump of saliva, regretting not having got one before.

"You have three Ballots and only five people." Linjos shrugged.

"You will manage somehow. In the meantime, I'll do everything I can to ensure everyone's safety. But remember, each floor is really big, and I have only Professors at my disposal, not an army of watchmen, so be careful."

Back in Quylla's room, Yurial, Friya and Phloria felt dejected and stupid. The world as they knew it had collapsed under their feet, the peace that they had taken for granted seemed to be about to end.

All the dreams and expectations they had cultivated during all those years in the academy seemed so stupid and insignificant, compared to the idea of a civil war that could kill everyone they loved.

And then there was the feeling of being cast aside. Even if they did it out of love, their families hadn't trusted them enough to tell the truth. Friya's case was the worst, since she now knew to be considered nothing more than a tool to an end.

Yurial was so shocked that even the earlier aggression's memory was already fading in the background.

"I can't believe I have been so stupid! Warden and Healer are just useless specializations. What my father, my family need is a warrior, a leader. If only he had been honest with me, I would have chosen wisely."

Lith kept silent, letting him vent off his frustration. He knew by experience that when something that big happened, the words of a stranger would sound empty. Yurial needed time to accept the change.

"I'm sorry guys, I don't feel like doing anything right now." Phloria said.

"I need some time to think. Most importantly, I need to make sure that my brothers are okay." Despite not having a Ballot, she darted out of the room before anyone could offer to escort her.

Yurial followed her so fast that he didn't need to hold the door open. He walked in long strides, inwardly hoping for someone to attack him again. He really needed a way to vent all the pent-up frustrations.

As for Friya, she felt enraged for her mother's condescending tone, but at the same time she was deeply scared. Too much to remain alone, she had no one to turn to for comfort, except the two that still remained in the room.

- "Dammit, this is the story of my life!" Lith inwardly cursed. "Everything that can go wrong, always does. Be it on Earth or here, nothing has changed. As soon as I fix a problem and try to get some peace, another one pops up.

At this point, these kids are just a burden. They have too much to lose, but I can't afford the luxury of being depressed. I need to gather as much as I can, in case sooner or later I'll be forced to leave this Country full of idiots." –

"If you need some time alone, I completely understand." He said to the two girls, while hiding his clenched fists behind his back.

"I'll take my leave."

"What about the dimensional magic practice?" Quylla asked.

"I beg your pardon?" Those were the last words Lith expected to hear.

"I'm sorry for what happened to Yurial." Quylla was sitting on the bed, swinging her legs in a very childish manner, yet her cold eyes were nothing like those of a kid.

"But honestly, all that happened today just proved what I said on the second day. This academy sucks, or better, the whole Kingdom sucks. All my life, I survived only thanks to my skills, and once I got here, nothing changed.

I don't care if this Country burns, it has never done anything good for me. But you guys did. You are the only ones that ever cared for me, and I don't want to risk losing you getting involved in this nonsense.

If everything goes south, dimensional magic is our best way out of this nightmarish place."

That was a feeling Lith could relate to. That speech bordering treason was music to his ears. At the moment, Quylla was the most important piece on his board, if someone could help him, that was her.

After Friya reluctantly agreed, they started practicing the Loop spell. According to the book, unlike all the other tier four spell they had learned so far, generating a Gate required handling three magic pulses at once, one for each element.

Being an educational spell, Loop required from the student only to properly handle the different energies, while the two portals' size, distance and duration were determined by hand signs and magic words.

After casting the spell for the first time, Lith generated three mana pulses of the same magnitude, one made only of earth, one of air, and the last of water magic. Following the instructions, Lith made the first two energies merge, forming a yellow wisp of light between his hands.

That was the easy part. The small energy core was highly unstable, hence the difficulty of the exercise consisted in giving it just enough water magic to quench the excess energy.

Lith tried to go slow and steady, resulting in the yellow wisp dissipating under the conflicting forces repulsing each other.

"Damn if it's hard!" Before he could start doubting about the moral integrity of Professor Rudd's ancestors, he noticed that Quylla was looking at him with admiration.

"How did you do that?"

"What are you talking about?"

"That light. Sure, there were supposed to be two small black dots instead of a single yellow one, but it's more than I achieved this whole afternoon."

Lith furrowed his brow in disbelief. That was just the first step, and he didn't even manage to do it right.

"Do you have the same problem?"

"Yeah." Friya nodded.

"Do you know how to triple cast, right?" He asked, receiving another affirmative response.

"Then show me." If what they said was true, there was no possible explanation for their utter failure. He needed to check.

Lith made them perform in turns a single chore magic spell, then they had to keep the first one active while generating a second and a third copy of the same spell.

The result was mediocre. With each copy, the size and intensity of the magical energy dwindled.

"That's not triple casting at all! It should be like this." With a wave of his hand, Lith generated three identical small flames, making them contract and expand at unison.

Soon it was clear that without solid foundations, they couldn't even attempt the first step of Loop. Lith was really conflicted about teaching them how to multi cast, it had never been part of his plan.

But during the last Master Healer class, he had understood why his mana sensibility was so low. It was because he had never practiced it. Thanks to true magic and Invigoration, he didn't need to feel the energy flow, because he could see it.

His companions, instead, could only rely on their instinct, and that resulted in honing their magical senses over time. Until that moment, he had been like a sighted man leading the blind.

But if his fears were correct, to learn dimensional magic Lith had to develop his mana sensibility. Having no idea how to do it, he would need their help.

"First of all, let's set aside Loop for the time being." He started explaining.

"Multi casting will require for you to concentrate only on first magic. The three key points are focus, willpower and visualization. It's like picturing in your head different persons at the same time." He made appear three different flames.

"If you focus too much on a single subject, the others will blur." One remained stable, while the other two started to change randomly in shape and size.

"Forget normal magic, where you can do everything one step at a time, like reading a list. You must be able to split your focus evenly, and that requires a strong willpower, and a clear visualization of the effects you want to create."

Contrary to his wishes, they spent the rest of the afternoon practicing first magic, while Lith could only assist and guide them at the best of his possibilities.

Chapter 102 Progress

Reading the reports about the internal struggle that was taking place in the Griffon Kingdom, the Mage Empress had the impression of reading an history book. Centuries ago, the Gorgon Empire had faced a similar crisis.

After Magus Lochra Silverwing had divulged her magical inheritance to the whole world, the mystical arts had started to improve by leap and bounds. The knowledge she had released, had interrupted the long stagnation period magical research had suffered.

As any change, thought, along with new solutions brought new problems. Until that moment, magic had been limited to tier three spells, and that had allowed to rich and powerful families to hold a monopoly of it.

The inheritance contained the basis for many tier four spells, and planted the seed of what would have been known as specializations. Realizing the countless military applications, the upper echelons of every Country were put in a bind.

Keeping the use of magic limited only to the scions of their families, would make achieving any progress slow and difficult. Magic had always been a rare talent, and now there was so much to study but so few mages.

On the other hand, allowing commoners to study magic would have altered the balance of power. Once they had access to tier four spells, who could guarantee that the new mages would not bit the hand that fed them?

While the Griffon Kingdom opted for the creation of the Mage Association, granting even to commoners status and riches according to their contributions, the Gorgon Empire had dismissed such idea as suicidal.

They preferred focusing on Forgemastering, investing all their resources in the development of slave collars. Thanks to these magical items, commoners could be conscript safely and their attitude for magic checked.

Every mage candidate was forced into submission, incapable of disobeying the orders of his masters. The slavery of commoner mages lasted decades, until an old and crafty Forgemaster managed to find a loophole.

Her master had asked her to create an artifact capable of temporarily disable magical items, to use it on the battlefield and cripple the enemies' resources when they needed them the most, but he never said anything about avoiding it to affect the collars.

When per his request, she showed him how it worked, the collars of all the mages in the household went off, and the revolt begin.

By combining the use of the artifact to free new mages and applying the collars to their tormentors, they slowly but inexorably exterminated or enslaved all the noble households.

The artifact was a secret, so all she had to do was to use her now obedient master as a trojan horse, letting the rebellion spread silently, until it was too late. After killing all the nobles, the mages took the power, destroying every trace or mention of how to realize the collars.

Even researching the matter had become a capital offense. From being a monarchy, the Empire became an oligarchy only based on meritocracy. Titles would not be inherited, every position would be occupied by those that were deemed worthy.

Most mages had no interest in fancy mansions or life-size gold statues of themselves, they would invest most of their income for their families and research.

The first law enacted by the first Mage Emperor and his Magic Council, had been the freedom to study magic, no matter the social status, and introducing chore magic in the core set of disciplines children had to study.

The system wasn't perfect. A good mage could be an incompetent or cruel ruler, not to mention that at his/her death, the replacement of even a local governor could take quite some time, leaving the territory open to corruption or attacks from the outside.

Also, because most of the resources were invested in constantly researching and developing new forms of magic, their human army was considered to be the weakest among the three neighbouring countries.

Nonetheless, the Gorgon Empire was now the most advanced Country in the field of magical research. The capitol was a floating fortified city, whose white walls shone in the daylight like a beacon for the travellers.

The guard towers extended above and below the wall, with giant magic crystals at each extremity, fueling the mystic rune circles, visible at the naked eye. Each tower was capable of attack or defence, according to the circumstances, making the city virtually unconquerable.

"Idiots." Said the Magic Empress. "They have only delayed the inevitable, putting a different kind of collar to their mages. No matter how long, a leash is always a leash. Order the armies at our borders to be ready for the attack.

It's only a matter of time before someone does something stupid and things escalate. We must be the quickest to reap the benefits from their folly."

The next morning, Lith had no real hope of succeeding at the second lesson of dimensional magic. After teaching triple casting to the girls, he had spent the whole night practicing, but with little progress.

When they reached the Training Hall, Professor Rudd was already there, waiting. The room was 30 meters (98 feet) long, 20 meters (66 feet) wide, and completely empty. Small circles had been drawn on the floor, indicating where the students had to position themselves.

The ground and the walls shown no trace of crevices. The room appeared to have been carved out a single massive stone rather than assembled from smaller ones.

"Begin." He said even before the last gong announced the start of the lesson.

Normally Lith would have faked incompetence for a while before getting serious, but this time he had no reason to pretend.

Professor Rudd walked slowly among them, taking a mental note of those who were actually capable of triple casting. The small yellow wisp was the indicator of that.

Lith, Lyam and only a few others were capable of completing the first step. Many students after several failures, took out their books trying to understand what they were doing wrong.

Thanks to all his training, Lith had managed to understand the timing necessary to stabilize the wisp with water magic, allowing to add more energy to the core, turning it into two small black spheres.

The problem was that he had no idea how to continue. After hundreds of attempts, he was still incapable of making them enlarge and stretch. The event horizon form was the last step before properly completing the exercise.

- "Second step already, not bad, for a commoner." – Rudd clicked his tongue, noticing the lack of progress from the rest of the class.

After one hour had passed and he had made no further progress, Lith decided to ask for help.

"Professor, I have a question."

"What a coincidence! So do I. Tell me, did you read my book yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Did you understand what is written."

"Yes." Lith understood where he was going. Something similar had happened to him during a college lesson.

"Then for your own good, you do not have a question. Go back to your place."

Fuming with rage, Lith resumed the spell.

More time passed, and since he was still stuck at the second step, he stopped for a moment to check how others were doing. Yurial and Phloria had yet to produce the yellow wisp, while Friya seemed to be able to generate it regularly.

- "Seems she finally grasped triple casting. Let's see how Quylla is doing." –

After looking around a bit, Lith was able to find her. Much to his surprise, he saw her generate the wisp, turn it into the two black dots, and even manage to start giving them the funnel shape.

Professor Rudd was incapable of deciding if to be more amazed of her, or furious with the class. Several students tried to ask him for pointers and advice, but he gave everyone the same reply he gave Lith.

When the lesson ended, no one had made any further progress. More than half the class had not been capable to achieve even the first step of the Loop spell.

"Before you go, I want you to know that I'm disgusted by your attitude." Rudd said.

"I don't believe in equality, we are all born different for a reason. I don't believe in solidarity either, an academy isn't charity. It's a battlefield where every mage fights for himself.

Yet when yesterday I told you that triple casting was essential, why no one had the guts to tell me so many of you are not at that level? Did you hope that somehow, I would go blind and not notice it?

Well, all you have managed to accomplish today, is to waste my time and patience. From tomorrow onwards, is better for those who are incapable to reach the minimum requirements to not attend my class. Dismissed."

Once outside, Lith eagerly ran to Quylla, hoping she could help overcome his bottleneck.

"How did you reach the third step? I managed to understand how to stabilize the first energy core, feeding it enough mana to grow and split. But after that, it goes nuts. Either I use water magic to stabilize one of the Gates or the other. I cannot do both.

Or better, I tried, even resorting to quadra casting to use two water magic pulses at once, but nothing worked."

"You don't need quadra magic, it's actually really simple." Quylla Replied.

"The two Gates are so deeply connected that they act as one. You mustn't treat them as separate entities, but as a whole. It's like healing someone with a dislocated shoulder and broken fingers.

Two points in space, but only one arm. You must simply make the light magic circulate through the whole damaged limb to take care of both issues. Easy peasy."

Lith casted Loop once again, doing as instructed.

- "Quylla is right! I can make water mana circulate from one end to another, Eureka!" –

Yet instead of stretching, the two black dots disintegrated with a popping sound.

"No, it's not!" He replied with a sigh.

Chapter 103 Red Lotus

Thanks to her outstanding talent, at the third lesson Quylla was able to execute Loop. Even though he practiced night and day, Lith needed until the fourth one, ending up as the tenth to complete the exercise.

At first, he had been frustrated by his inability to keep up with Quylla. Despite her private lessons on dimensional magic and the long hours of hard work at night, he was always up to two or three steps behind.

But then, he understood that being tenth on over two hundred students wasn't such a bad result, especially since most of them had a way to go. Not to mention that his mana sensitivity was slowly but steadily improving.

It was an odd experience, feeling the energy flow with the mind rather than his eyes. Dimensional spells seemed to have hot and cold spots at the same time. The secret to stabilize a Gate, was to infuse water magic only on the hot spots.

Using too much of it or affecting an already cold spot, would cause the spatial distortion to collapse.

When the weekend arrived, Lith needed to vent out his frustration, so he proposed a trip to the forest to forget about their worries and fetch some ingredients for extra points or money.

Since he got admitted to the academy, Lith had stopped working, and in case he needed to get his family out of the Kingdom and rebuild their lives from scratch, it would require a lot of gold.

But aside from Quylla, the rest of the group had its hands full between understanding triple cast and managing to complete the Loop spell.

"I would love to come with you." Quylla seemed really dejected.

"But I'm useless in battle, and you are a great healer yourself. Without someone protecting me, I would only be a burden. The best thing I can do is help them with dimensional magic and practice for the next exercise."

Hearing those words, Lith's mood went from good to great.

"Work hard for me too. If you find any trick or shortcut to it, I'll make it worth your while."

After that, he only had to go to the portal connecting to the ground floor and the academy's entrance. Before going out, he needed to get the clearance.

The clerk stationed at the front desk, besides the giant wood and metal double doors, looked at him like he was a madman.

"Are you really going out alone? Where is your team?" If that was a joke, he didn't find it funny.

"No team, just me. Can I go now, please?" Lith snorted.

"Do you realize that once out there you are on your own? Outside the exam period, you are not bound to encounter friendly magical beasts. You are just a fourth-year student, you could meet fifth years too.

Not to mention poachers, adventurers, monsters and gods know who. The academy is in the forest, but doesn't own it. It's full of resources, and everyone wants a piece of it."

"No problem, I got this." Lith took out his Ballot, receiving a contemptuous look in return.

"That doesn't work outside the academy. The only thing you can use is this." The clerk showed him a marble sized pendant.

"In case of trouble, just push its center to generate a distress beacon. But it's not a Ballot, at all. First the rescue personnel will have to find you, only then a Warp steps can be opened. It can take minutes!"

Lith smiled at the good news.

"Fine by me. It's that all?"

Grumbling about youngsters' idiocy, the clerk compiled a form and had Lith signing it.

"The castle gates are open 24/7. I recommend you not going too deep and returning for the night. That's the moment when the big predators hunt. If you still want to go, that makes two hundred points."

"Two hundred points?! I need to pay to risk my life?"

"It's the only to make you kids realize how important this decision is. Normally, the cost would be split among the team members, but since you are alone..."

Lith exchanged the points for the pendant, without a second thought.

Once he was behind the trees' cover, he put the uniform and everything related to the academy in the pocket dimension, wearing his old hunter suit instead.

With everything that was happening, it was much safer appearing as a stranger rather than a student. The clerk's words were the best news he had received in over a week.

Being alone, as long no one was able to recognize him or live to tell the tale, he had no reason anymore to hide his real power. Lith had often thought how to conceal his face, and had come with a solution during the four days break.

A mask would have been cool, but would limit his line of sight. Hoods were good only if they abode to some magical principle, preventing them to come off while moving at high speed. Not to mention the poor lateral vision.

His old self that had always loved heroes was really disappointed, but he had long learned that practicality was much more important than looking cool. So he had his mother realize a ski mask, leaving only his eyes exposed.

Once his identity was safe, he started flying among the trees, using Life Vision to check the perimeter for enemies and preys alike. Being unshackled after so many months, gave him an adrenaline rush.

Lith started moving faster and faster, alternating short flights with high speed movements thanks to Fusion Magic.

- "Solus, let me know you sense anything with a huge mana signature. This isn't Trawn wood anymore. We aren't hunting for food, but for magical herbs and mana crystals."

"Yeah, too bad that library's books can't be brought outside. The forest's herbarium and bestiary would save us so much time..."

"Who would have thought that dimensional magic was that hard? We hadn't a minute available to copy them. We'll do with what we remember." –

Lith kept going deeper into the forest, jumping from tree to tree with an agility and speed that would have put a ninja to shame. The killing intent he emitted kept normal animals and insects at bay, allowing him to move unimpeded.

After a few hours scouring the forest, his patience was growing thin.

- "Abundant resources my a*s! I haven't even spotted a single magical beast so far. Where the heck is all the good stuff?"

"Down there, look at the bottom of the tree at your left." –

Following Solus' directions, the only thing that Lith noticed was a big bush in the middle of a clearing. Switching to Life Vision the scenery changed entirely, though. The world turned into shades of grey, while the bush was the only thing of a deep green.

On the center of it, there was something that shined of purple light, the strongest magical force he had ever saw. He floated down slowly, checking to have no competition for the treasure.

- "Odd, there's nothing alive around here except for trees and plants. Maybe that thing is sucking all the natural resources. – Lith thought.

By coming closer, he was able to catch a glimpse of his prize. It resembled a red lotus flower, and it was floating in mid-air above the thick bush, emitting a sweet fragrance, like a flower bed after the spring rain.

His first instinct was to extend his arm and take it, but his paranoia took the wheel, forcing him to stop.

- "Wait a minute. I get that I'm pretty deep in the forest, but this thing stands out a lot. Why no one has found it before? And how the heck does that thing floats? More importantly, why there is no insect buzzing around? And since when plants appear coloured with Life Vision? –

Because their vitality was equally dispersed from the roots to the leaves, usually Life Vision perceived small plants as almost lifeless, while big trees had barely a tinge of red.

When he had devised that spell, Lith had planned of using it against humans and animals alike, making it more sensitive to things that had an active circulatory system.

No matter if it was mana or blood, Life Vision sensibility was aimed to things that moved quickly. The bush appearing of a blue colour was something that he had never forgot about. With a wave of his hand, the space around the lotus was invaded by flames, and an inhumane screech filled the air.

The bush suddenly moved, revealing countless green appendages hidden underground, that now it was using to smother the flames. Each of that things was as thick as Lith's arms, moving and writhing so fast that he couldn't get if they were vines or tentacles.

The red lotus swayed and moved along with the bush-thing, revealing to be connected to it through a small tendril. The thing didn't seem to have a definite shape. It was a living mass of vines that was whipping the air, trying to capture its prey.

The green appendages moved quick as snakes, grabbing Lith by the arms, chest and legs, only to discover that he had already moved, leaving behind only an afterimage.

"Whatever you are, I'm not H-game material! Back off!"

With another wave of his hand, he released countless wind blades, cutting all the incoming appendages like a hot knife through butter. The thing screeched again, its body no more lying down revealed to be at least three meters high, filling the air with snapping vines.

Chapter 104 Red Lotus 2

The wounded vines spurted a purple liquid. Lith kept his distance, dodging the unknown substance with minimal movements, to not lose his advantage.

- "There was no sizzle when it hit the ground, so it's not an acid. Could be venomous, thought." –

Lith extended his arms, releasing two jets of fire from the palms. The appendages reacted quickly, enveloping the creature's towering mass, and turning to a grey colour. The flames had no effect, leaving only a black mark, like they had hit stone.

Lith had never met a plant monster before, so he was particularly cautious. He kept several spells ready to use, weaving a new one as soon another was consumed.

- "Whatever this is, it doesn't seem to be able to move from that spot, running away shouldn't be an issue. The problem is deciding if it's worth my time or not. With my luck, if I kill, it the flower will wither instantly. –

Sending an invisible tendril of pure mana, Lith used spirit magic to tug hard at the red lotus, aiming to grab it and run. He had no desire to fight useless battles. The flower's stem bent diagonally under the strain, but refused to move.

The plant monster screeched again, this time with fury.

- "Look out!" Solus yelled. "It's coming from below!" –

Lith scoffed at the creature's naivety, activating again his flight spell. But when he tried to lift from the ground, he discovered that the grass was tightly binding his feet, preventing him from moving.

Observing it with Life Vision once more, he discovered that the patch of grass below him had become blue coloured too. Somehow it was part of the monster's body.

Before he could recover, several vines erupted from the ground, with their greyed stone-like extremities trying to stab Lith's vital organs. Knowing an attack was incoming, Lith used earth fusion to the extreme, hardening his body and using the arms to take off the brunt of the impact.

Despite his iron bracers and magical protections, the vines managed to pierce his skin, digging right into his flesh. Lith screamed in pain, while the tendrils kept digging in his own flesh, without missing a single drop of blood.

Without allowing himself to panic, Lith used his Frozen Hearth spell, turning everything around him into ice. Be them grey or green, fire hadn't done much damage to the tendrils, so he had changed element.

Having become brittle from the sudden cold, Lith managed to break free from both the vines and the grass, flying backwards trying to understand what was happening.

His wounds were covered in a purple sticky goo, he could feel his arms going numb, a tingling sensation was invading his body. After what had happened with the Clackers, he always kept a detoxifying spell ready, using it together with a healing spell to close the wounds.

- "What the heck is happening? How does it control the grass? It makes no sense." –

Lith's and Solus' minds were spinning at top gear, trying to make head or tails of the creature. While he was still in a daze, both the grass and the tendrils thawed in the blink of an eye. Like fire, water magic seemed to have little effect.

Without stopping, Lith activated Life Vision again, seeing a blue streak moving like a flash through the ground vegetation, following him closely.

- "Solus, what colour is its core? I don't like this at all!"

"That thing has no core at all. It's just a random mass of energy, I have never seen anything like that. I don't remember reading about something that even resembles this thing. It's too monstrous to forget." –

A cold shiver ran down Lith's spine. His first plant monster didn't seem to follow any of the magic rules he had learned so far. No core, resistant to ice and fire and capable of controlling the vegetation. The only words that could describe his feelings were: fear of the unknown.

He had spent years learning magic, looking out for stronger cores, but now everything he knew had just went down the gutter.

Even flying backwards in a zig-zag pattern was useless, the blue streak kept tailing him. Lith couldn't risk running into a tree, so he moved up and away from the ground.

From a higher ground, he could see that there was actually more than one streak moving, while the mass of vines the red lotus was attached to had turned grey. According to Life Vision, only the flower remained coloured.

Lith's head was spinning in shock.

- "So now the 'main body' is dead and the ground seems a disco ball? But that would mean that more than its mana, somehow Life Vision actually perceives its consciousness. That thing must be capable of switching bodies at will.

That would explain how it could control even the grass, and why there is no wildlife at all..."

"F*ck us sideways!" Solus cut him short. "The trees! Look out for the trees!" –

Despite their mind link was instantaneous, when Solus warned him the attack was already inbound.

The bark of the nearest beech had peeled off, revealing to be a mass of vines wrapped around the real tree trunk, and now were darting toward the unsuspecting Lith. Before he could turn around, they wrapped around his arms and legs, slamming him against the trunk before starting to eat him alive.

Excruciating pain assaulted Lith from all sides, yet he managed to remain conscious with sheer willpower. His hands grabbed the nearest vines while he activated one of the spells he had created after learning tier four magic.

Vampiric Touch, a twisted version of the healing spells Vastor had taught him.

While normally such spells would enhance the recovery of a patient and give him energy to survive the procedure, Vampiric Touch would heal Lith instead, draining the victim of its energy in the process.

When the plant monster realized what was happening, it was too late. The tendrils had gone too deep, and by clenching his muscles with the help of earth fusion, Lith prevented them to escape.

The dark energy devoured the tendrils, sucking them dry while restoring Lith's flesh and vitality. The vines withered at a speed visible at the naked eye, until the fake bark collapsed on the ground, revealing that the beech underneath was long dead.

The creature's consciousness managed to ran away, going back to the main body.

Lith used Invigoration to recuperate, Vampiric Touch couldn't heal so many deep wounds with such a measly meal as a foundation. After that, he shot several Plague Arrows against the other trees.

As soon as they hit, the fake bark fell off. Lith understood that the luscious forest around the creature's main body was actually a plant graveyard. Two more Plague Arrows hit the ground, even the grass writhed and screeched before dying.

"I don't know what the heck you are, but you are too dangerous to let you live. Everything has become part of your body, and I have no desire to find out how far you control can go."

Keeping Life Vision always active put a great strain on his body, but Lith understood that it was his only chance of making it alive.

Before going back to the ground, he released from his body a dark aura, the same he had used against the Wither in the Trawn woods. The darkness energy attacked indiscriminately everything in a ten-meter (33 feet) radius from him.

The grass withered, the vines hidden underground died, leaving only bare earth around him. Only then Lith started weaving his strongest darkness spell, Death Zone.

A black, thick mist appeared in front of him, resembling a small storm cloud, only twenty meters (66 feet) long and wide, around three meters (10 feet) high. After conjuring it, Lith needed only a thought to send it towards the creature's main body.

Like all darkness spells, Death Zone moved slowly, but its destructive power was unmatched. It was the perfect weapon against an enemy that could not run away.

The cloud destroyed everything on its path, while the creature's screeching turned from angry to scared, and from scared to terrified. It tried to attack Lith to stop the incoming attack, but between Life Vision and the dark aura, none of them came even close.

He could see every one of them in slow motion, not only because of his heightened senses, but also because dark magic would weaken and corrupt everything that entered its range.

When Death Zone reached its target, the creature recalled to itself all the dispersed consciousness, in a last desperate attempt for survival. Yet both Lith and his spell were unrelenting, foiling all its attacks the former, ignoring them the latter.

Whatever mass the monster managed to form, it would only become nourishment for the dark energy.

"Please, stop!" The creature spoke.

Lith remained unfazed, keeping his guard and letting Death Zone do its jobs.

"I'm just like you."

"No, you are not. You are about to die."

The main body was shrinking, without the necessary energy to sustain that huge form, it was reverting to a much smaller plant. An ivy.

- "Lith, now that all the energy is finally in one place, I can finally see its core. It's...

"

"Black." Lith completed the thought for her.

"It's another Abomination. I understood it when I saw how every life form was dead. This one seems to have managed to stabilize itself." –

"I just wanted to live. I..."

Lith didn't let it continue, shooting Plague Arrows like a machine-gun.

- "Two things I learned from horror movies." He explained to Solus.

"First, never give a sh*t about a monster backstory. No matter how sobbing, it would not prevent it to eat you as soon as you turn your back to it. Second, the moment it's down, kill it until he is really, really dead." –

With a last, roaring wail the plant Abomination died. Suddenly the whole space around Lith turned into a wasteland. The grass turned into ash, the fake bark decayed leaving only dead trees behind.

Everything in over a fifty-meter (164 feet) radius was identical to where he had fought the Wither in the Trawn woods, with only one exception.

The red lotus lied on the ground, shining bright like nothing had happened.

Chapter 105 Unwanted Guests

- "Do you see that, mister negative? The flower didn't wither after all." Solus remarked cheerfully.

"You are right! It can still blow up in our faces! Yay!" Lith replied mimicking her tone. –

Being too paranoid to touch the red lotus with his bare hands, he lifted it with spirit magic before unsuccessfully attempting to store it in the pocket dimension.

"What the heck?" Examining it up close with Life Vision, Lith could notice that along a massive mana flow, the red lotus also had a tiny speck of life force.

Neither him or Solus had any idea how it could have survived after such long exposure to an Abomination.

- "This is great. We can't hide it, only carry it around in a normal pouch, with the risk of it being destroyed or even worse, discovered when we go back. If this flower is some kind of priceless treasure, it could cause us a lot of troubles." -

Lith sighed, the idea of being forced to drop his first loot was quite depressing.

- "Let me guess, we are above a mana vein, right?"

"Exactly." Solus replied. "My hypothesis is the Abomination managed to stabilise itself thanks to the combined effect of the abundant world energy and that odd flower."

"Agreed. The only questions that remain are the following. Did it kill everything because it needed to feed or was just a way to control the surrounding environment? And last, but not least, do plant monsters really exist?"

"Only the Abomination could answer the first question, and none of us would believe its words anyway." Solus mind-shrugged.

"As for the second one, my guess is yes. Plants are living being too. Seeing how much mana has that small flower, I don't see why they shouldn't be able to evolve too."

"As long this thing doesn't turn to be an Abomination baby and eats my face, that's fine by me."— He replied, keeping the red lotus floating and away from him.

Lith was tempted to make Solus turn to his proto tower form. Thanks to Invigoration his body was in top shape, but he felt mentally tired. Life and death struggles were more than just about stamina.

Managing so many spells at once, keeping his cool while constantly fighting the fear of death, made a single real fight hundred times more vexing than cramming all night long.

But he didn't know how much time he had left, until someone from the academy noticed the bald spot in the forest and sent a scouting team.

Lith placed his free hand on the ground, using earth magic to search for the remains of the Abomination's victims. A few meters below he found a boneyard, where numerous skeletons were packed together.

Lith took only those belonging to magical beasts, ignoring human and animal remains.

- "According to Professor Wanemyre, they can be used to forge weapons and armours of superior durability, that can also be infused with enchantments much stronger than normal. With all this stuff I could equip a battalion."

"How the heck does one forge something out of bones? It makes no sense." Solus objected. "I get that they can be hard, but they should always be carbon based."

"Beats me." Lith shrugged. "Cut me some slack, I'm still at the first year of specialization." —

After storing everything in the pocked dimension, his eyes fell on his battered equipment. The hunting suit was riddled with holes as big as a thumb, while his metal bracers were damaged to the point of being useless.

Luckily, he had a spare suit. Sadly, it was also the last one.

After quickly changing clothes, Lith flew away several kilometres before stopping to decide what to do with the red lotus. He couldn't put it in the storage space, nor could bring it on himself, for two good reasons.

The first was that he didn't trust something alive to be so close to his vital organs. The second was that even if it really was harmless, the red lotus wouldn't survive in case he had to release again the dark aura or any kind of magic from himself.

No matter how precious it could be, nothing was more important than his own life. As it was, the red lotus was an even worse burden than any companion he ever had.

The only landmark he knew was the academy, so he decided to bury it near the entrance, hoping that at his return he would have devised a way to smuggle it inside unnoticed.

Yet the plan had a huge flaw. Putting a flower near fertile earth was potentially a recipe for disaster. What if the Abomination was still alive, and ready to respawn as soon as it had enough nutrients?

Lith weaved all the darkness spells he could use at once, before letting the red lotus enter the small hole he had dug.

Even before the red lotus could touch the ground, it started to grow roots that plunged down, while the earth itself moved upwards, oddly reminding Lith the "Creation of Adam" by Michelangelo.

As soon as they touched, the roots became thicker, quickly turning into vines that wrapped around the lotus, assembling what it seemed a humanoid body. Lith activated the spells, conjuring enough dark energy to turn the whole patch of land into a wasteland, yet didn't fire them.

The Abomination never had a humanoid body, also instead of dying, the near vegetation thrived. Countless flower buds blossomed at once, yellow leaves turned green once again.

Lith strengthened the spells and waved new ones, uncaring of the beauty around him.

When the thing stopped growing, Lith found himself looking at the most gorgeous woman he had ever seen. Her big red eyes sparkled in the morning light like masterfully cut rubies. Everything in her visage was perfect, from the delicate features to her full lips.

She had thick unkempt hair, red like maple leaves during autumn, that gave her a wild and unrestrained allure. Also, the fact that she was stark naked, leaving nothing to the imagination about her soft and full curves didn't hurt.

The only thing that betrayed her non-human nature was the light green skin.

"Just give me one good reason." Lith's fists had now become black due to the massive amount of dark energy they barely contained. The air around her was so full of deadly magic that the creature in her debilitate state could barely breath.

"I'm a dryad." She said like it explained it all, with a voice as clear as a mountain spring.

"I don't care." Lith made the dark energy move forward, not leaving her a way out.

"I'm one of the protectors of this forest. The monster you have killed stole and corrupted my powers to prolong his existence." She was starting to get scared, that wasn't the usual reaction she usually evoked in human males.

"Still not a reason."

"I can reward you." She bit her lower lip playing her last card.

"And in what pocket exactly would you keep something of value in your birthday suit?" The dark mass only needed one last push to obliterate her.

"In the Great Mother's name, what kind of man treats this way a maiden he just saved?" Her saviour seemed impossible to please, and completely immune to her charm.

Unfortunately for the dryad, Lith's core had stabilized enough to outgrow even his crush for Nalear. In that moment, his heart was cold as ice.

"One that doesn't think with the head below, and doesn't trust someone he just met only because she has a pretty face. Now give me one good reason. I won't ask thrice."

"Because we can help you." Said a third voice.

Another dryad was slowly emerging from a nearby oak tree, her hands high in sign of surrender. Before dropping the red lotus, Lith had activated Life Vision, in case another body swapping creature appeared from the flower.

Hence, he hadn't missed the second dryad arrival, allowing him to target her with the spells stored in his hands.

The new dryad had wheat-blond straight hair, wearing what seemed a light cotton white dress, leaving only her delicate shoulders and arms exposed. Her figure was slenderer than the other dryad's but not less attractive.

"If anything happens to me, the red head goes winter." Lith's will was the only thing blocking the barrage of dark energy, like a dead man switch.

The blond dryad took several natural treasures out of the tree. Some Lith had seen in the books, others were completely new. But every single one of them, no matter if fruit, flower or root was brimming with magical energy.

Seeing that he was still not moving, the blond dryad brought her left hand to her chest. A small yellow lotus came out, and through Life Vision he could see that she had just lost a huge part of her magical power.

"This is part of my heart." She handed it to him. "As long as you have it, my life is in your hands."

- "It's true." Solus confirmed. "There is a clear connection between them. It's like she handed you her mana core."

Lith captured the yellow lotus with spirit magic, sending his will through it. Obeying his silent order, the blond dryad knelt. The feeling he got was empowering and repulsive at the same time.

Having that degree of control over another sentient being was plainly wrong.

"How can you help me?" He felt only truth in her words.

"We can find a way to mend your soul."