

# Supreme Magus

## - Chapter 15: Break Ups

### Chapter 15: Break Ups

The original plan was to kill them all, erase the evidence and then make Orpal have an "unfortunate accident". As Lith calmed down, however, he realized that it was an idiotic plan full of holes.

"If five young men disappear suddenly in a sleepy village like Lutia, it is bound to cause a commotion. Also, Orpal knows they were here. Once he discovers they are nowhere to be found, he could come too close to the truth for comfort.

I don't want to give him any kind of leverage on me. There is also the possibility that these blockheads shared their plan with their siblings. Killing is the wrong answer here, too many things can go spiralling out of control. Worst of all, if I make Orpal disappear too, the whole family would worry and grieve for him. Most certainly I don't want to turn him into a f\*cking martyr! I want him to pay. To suffer for his whole f\*cking life!"

While in deep thought, Lith would release streams of lightning from his right hand, keep the spell active for a couple of seconds, then give his assailants a few moments of relief before zapping them again.

They had already lost control of their bladder and bowels multiple times. When they were not writhing in pain, they were sobbing and begging for mercy.

"I can't let off this trash easily either. Always remember to pause between lashes. The short interval without pain fills them of false hope that it's finally over, making the next hit more painful than the previous. To punish them is not enough, I want to break them!"

There were too many variables. Lith was sick of running circles, so he decided to resort to an modified version of his very first plan, back on Earth.

"Those guys were trash too. I wonder how they reacted after my death, when the photos got leaked all over the internet with their names tagged."

Lith had a cruel smile at the thought of his revenge, backstabbing them after so many years.

With a final spell, Lith made the five lose consciousness and started arranging their bodies with spirit magic.

"I must keep both spirit and fusion magic a secret, so I need to create a stage from which I could end up a winner with just normal magic. An encirclement is too much for a five-year old, I'll fan them out."

He put back the wooden stick in the hand of his owner, making sure it was smeared with blood.

Lith was arranging the final details, when he heard someone calling his name from afar.

"Sh\*t! I took too much time thinking. My family must have sent someone looking for me. This screws up a good part of my plan, dammit. I must play it by ear and hope they did not send Orpal, or it's going to get ugly."

Lith looked through a window, spotting Elina approaching Selia's house with long and fast strides.

"Good, it's mom! Rena or dad would have been better, but I can work with this."

When she got close enough, Lith responded to her call with a moan, slowly opening the door while begging for help.

Elina started running with all her strength, and once inside what she saw was bone chilling. There was blood everywhere, teeth on the ground and Lith was almost unrecognizable.

He was losing blood from multiple injuries. His face was swollen to the point that his eyes were barely visible amidst all the black and blue.

Lith was holding his left arm like it was hurt, and just by talking he could make her notice his bleeding gums and missing teeth.

"Mom! Mom! Thank the gods it's you." Lith voice was distorted by the injuries into a lisp. "I was so afraid they would get up before I could call for help. They tried to kill me, mom, and I have not the strength to fight anymore."

Elina quickly embraced him, feeling him yelp and shivering from the pain caused by even such a gentle touch.

"My baby! My poor baby. Who did this to you?" The two of them started to cry at the same time. Elina because she was scared to death, Lith because while in his mother's embrace he could finally allow himself to vent all his rage and fears.

"Orpal! It's all Orpal's fault! These are all his friends They even told me their plan when they thought I was about to die!"

Elina was shocked by those words, refusing to believe such a terrible thing. But those five really were Orpal's closest friends. One of them, Rizel, was even holding his grandfather's wooden stick, and it was stained with blood.

Elina looked at Lith's head, easily spotting the bruises and cuts shaped after the cane.

"Why would they assault you otherwise? And how could they possibly know that today Selia was out of town?" Elina thought out loud.

Among the sobbing and crying, Lith was inwardly smiling. Feeding her facts was a last resort, it would have a much deeper impact if she put the pieces together by herself.

"Can't you heal yourself, even a little bit?" Elina's voice was full of worry, her son's condition seemed dire. Lith was expecting this question.

"Now that I had the time to recover, I could. But I won't."

"Why?" That answer made no sense to her, Elina started worrying his injuries were affecting his mind.

"Because when you and dad decide what to do with Orpal, I want you to take a good look of what he did to me!" Lith screamed, coughing a mouthful of blood from a wound he had reopened on purpose.

"Orpal has always hated me! Always will! No matter if I help you all with chores or your health. He does not care how much game I bring to the table or money to our house, nothing is ever enough for him!" Lith kept screaming and sobbing.

"Am I such an awful son, such a terrible brother to deserve this?" Lith hugged her with all of his strength, bawling his eyes out.

Elina was at loss for words, but only for a moment. She held her son tightly, raising him up from the ground and carrying him back home.

Then she brought the whole family to Selia's house to let them witness the scene with their own eyes. The matter was too serious, she could not hide it from her children.

When Orpal saw Lith, he became pale as a ghost. Elina refused to call him by his name, and if glares could kill, he was certain that she would make him leave the fields feet first.

"What the heck went wrong? Those morons knew the plan! They had only to rough him up. Teach him respect and humility. But most importantly to force him to shut his f\*cking mouth up! Now my stupid parents will never let me hear the end of it."

And when he saw all the blood on the floor, with his friends still there and out cold, he felt his life falling apart.

As soon as Elina let him do it, Raaz embraced Lith before checking his conditions. After that he looked around the room, easily recognizing the five culprits.

"Rena, go call their parents. Take Tista with you, I don't want her to hear what I am about to say." Raaz was even paler than Orpal, clenching his fists so hard that they started to bleed.

Elina had whispered to him only three words after coming back with Lith.

"Orpal did it." In the beginning, he had refused to believe that one of his beloved children could do something like that, but the truth appeared so horrifyingly simple to his eyes.

No one outside of the family knew that Lith worked for Selia. No one else could possibly know that exactly on that day and time Lith would be left alone in Selia's house.

But the most painful and irrefutable truth was that no one but Orpal could possibly resent Lith so much. He barely knew anyone outside of his family and their closest friends.

Lith had always been working so hard to help all of them, especially Tista, that he never had the time to make friends or enemies.

Raaz felt those thoughts ripping his heart out of his chest, but he had to know.

"Did you do it?" Raaz looked Orpal straight in the eyes.

A terrible silence fell in the room, revealing the truth that Raaz was trying so hard to deny, looking for a possible alternative explanation.

But there wasn't any.

"How, how could you possibly do this to your brother?" Tears were streaming from his eyes.

"Dad, I swear, it's not like you think! I can explain!" Orpal mind was desperately trying to find a plausible excuse.

"Is there anything to explain?!?" Raaz roared out of anger.

"Aren't those your friends?"

"Yes, but..."

"It wasn't you telling them what to do? It wasn't you planning how, when and where to ambush Lith? Causing him to be almost beaten to the death? In the gods' name how could you possibly explain all that?"

"Because that wasn't the plan! They didn't listen to me, just like you! You never listen to what I say! You never let me have my way, always siding with Leech and the cripple. You are never on my side! Never!"

"They got carried away? Is that your explanation?!?" Raaz didn't know if to laugh or cry.

"Do you mean that ambushing and beating your brother, my son, is perfectly fine as long they do it with moderation?" He raised his fist, tempted to give Orpal a taste of his own medicine, but Elina stopped him.

"Too much blood has already been shed today. Don't do it. You'd only harm yourself, he is beyond saving." Elina was crying too, but her face and tone were stone cold. She had already made up her mind.

Raaz was too broken to stand anymore, he needed to sit down on a chair, weeping.

"You are right, my love. I have lost count of the times I have tried to make him understand that respect is something that you must give before receiving it yourself. That we were his parents, not his friends. We are supposed to help our children understand their mistakes, not enabling them. The gods know if I haven't tried to teach him that his siblings were not his servants, that a man's authority lies in the responsibilities he shoulders, not how strong he is. I know I have not been a perfect father, but I did the best that I could. I don't know what to do with him anymore, Elina." Raaz wiped his own tears, looking for his wife's support.

"I agree. Even now he doesn't show any remorse. He never loved his brother, stealing his food and calling him names even before Lith was able to walk. He is clearly unable to understand the enormity of what he did. I believe that if we allow this to continue, he will do it again. If not to Lith, to Tista. And I'm not going to let him doing more harm to our family."

She held Raaz's hand tight, searching for the strength she needed.

"I think we should disown him. Strip him of his name and report him together with his accomplices for attempted murder to the village militia."

"Thanks, my love." Raaz had no more tears to cry, his resolve steeled like his voice.

"I don't think I had in me the strength to say it."

## Chapter 16: Revelations

After those words, Orpal fell to his knees. His world was crumbling beneath his feet. All he knew, all he had planned and dreamed about, had disappeared in the space of a single word.

Disown.

It meant that he was dishonourably banished from his own family, leaving him with nothing he could call as his own. He had just become a nameless, penniless orphan.

When the parents of the other boys arrived, things escalated quickly. Seeing their boys broken and unconscious in a foreign house, stinking of their own feces and urines, they demanded for an explanation.

They were all long-time friends, so it was easy for Raaz making them calm down enough to have a civil conversation.

"You" Raaz ordered the nameless one "explain what you did."

Despite being still shocked, he was already angry enough to return to his old self.

"If I must go down, I'll bring them all with me. We'll share the same destiny, so I won't be alone. I refuse to be the only one to pay for this!" He thought.

The nameless one confessed that he had always hated his brother, and how he had planned to teach him discipline and respect with the help of his friends.

When he had finished, everyone in the room was appalled, refusing to believe those words. They had always known Orpal as a good, kind young man.

"Lith, can you tell us what happened here exactly?"

Lith acted like he was reluctant to leave his mother's embrace, and after a dramatic moment of pause, he stepped forward. He made sure of limping and holding his left arm, while wincing with pain at every step.

"As you all know, my family has a lot of expenses, and my sister is ill. So, since I am quite talented in chore magic, Selia pays me to clean her house too. I give the money to my parents, to help them make ends meet."

"I have carefully picked the words for this speech." Lith thought. "If they don't feel pity and compassion for a beaten up five years old after this sob story, these guys are full blown psychos."

"Today miss Selia is out of town, so I was alone in here when your sons suddenly barged in and started beating me." He held out his arms, turning around to let them see how battered he was.

"I tried to defend myself, like my dad taught me, but they were too big and too strong." Lith started sobbing again. "I had to use magic to defend myself, I was so scared! I really thought I was going to die." He returned between Elina's embrace, weeping non-stop.

"Poor kid." Said Bromann, Razel's father, picking up the wooden stick from his son's hand. "This piece of trash even dared using his grandfather's only memento. Elina, Raaz, Lith, I offer you my most sincere apologies. I have failed as a man and as a father, to raise such a snake in the grass. Whatever is your decision, I will comply without questions. But first..."

Bromann splashed Razel's face with a bucket of dirty water to get him conscious.

He needed to hear the truth from his own son. He still could not fully believe even his own eyes.

"D... dad? What are you doing here?" Razel held his chin that was throbbing with pain, when he suddenly recalled what had happened.

All the eyes were on him, including Lith's. The same cold eyes, glowing with blue energy Lith had before unleashing lightnings.

"I make the questions, young man. And if you don't want another beating or worse, you'd better tell the truth. What in the gods' names were you all doing here?"

Terrified by both his father and his tormentor, Razel could only say the truth.

One after the other, the four remaining boys were woken up and forced to tell the whole story. One of them tried to expose Lith's torture, but his father made him shut up with a strong slap in the face.

"Five against a little kid and you have the gall to blame him for going all out? Our families are friends from generations, your actions dishonoured us all! When we get back home, I will show you what real torture is!"

"What a moron!" Lith laughed inwardly. "Their credibility is less than zero, they can tell whatever they want. It will only appear as the pathetic excuse of a criminal caught red handed."

"Raaz, what do you want us to do?" Bromann asked.

"I am going to disown Orpal, and then report all of them for attempted murder. I won't ask anything from you. We all know how hard is being a parent, especially in moments like this. I just wanted you to hear it from me, before I go to the village chief."

"I will not disown my son. Not yet at least." Bromann said. "But I can promise you that I will do nothing to defend him in any way from the consequences of his actions. And when he will be back home, I will make sure that he will never have the opportunity to harm your family again!"

So, they all went to Lutia, where the village chief listened to the six boys' confessions before pronouncing the sentence.

"After hearing all the facts and testimony, I hereby sentence the six of you to four hours of pillory, where you will be shaved of all your hair and whipped ten times for your crimes. After that, you will spend three days in jail to reconsider your actions.

Any objections?" All those present shook their heads.

"I have a question." Lith said.

"For me or for the prisoners, young man?"

"For them. Can I?"

"But off course. Ask them whatever you want."

Lith nodded, and moved in front of Rizel.

"Did Trion know?"

"Off course he did!" Orpal screamed. "He is always stood by my side, unlike you, Leech." Lith ignored him.

"Did he?"

"No." Rizel looked at Orpal with eyes filled with disgust. "We planned everything when we were alone. Orpal said that he did not trust Trion enough. That Trion is a spineless coward, and that he feared that he could rat us out."

"Thanks." Lith then spoke to the village chief again. "Could you please reduce his sentence? His sincerity helps my whole family, it clears our doubts and my brother's name as well."

"But off course! If the victims asks for mercy, how could I possibly refuse? Rizel will only receive five lashes, and after the pillory time has passed, his family is free to bring him home. Is that okay for you?"



Lith nodded, and Bromann shook Lith's hand while his wife was weeping with joy.

"Thanks, Lith. That means a lot for my poor Lisa. I will not forget your kindness. I'm sure you'll become a great man, just like your father."

Lith was completely satisfied with that outcome.

"I didn't know that disowning a son, especially the firstborn, was possible. Everything went even better than I imagined. Orpal's friends can't wait to get some alone time in jail with him, and once his sentence is over, he is doomed. Either someone from the village adopts him, something that I find hard to believe, or he will be deported to the nearest orphanage. I hoped to get rid of Trion too, but maybe that's for the best. I don't think my parents can bear losing two sons at once. And between their happiness and getting even with that idiot, they come first by a landslide."

The following days were really hard for Raaz, Elina and Trion. The couple needed quite some time before overcoming their grief.

It was really hard for them to accept that the kind and bright boy that they brought up for almost twelve year was gone forever. Even worse, they started to suspect that the Orpal they knew never really existed.

Thinking back about all the bad things he did and said over the years, he might as well have been deceiving them all along,

Trion was the one having the hardest time. He had lost his favourite sibling and his family's trust at the same time. Despite Rizel had cleared his name, the suspicions remain. How could he have been so close to Orpal and yet never noticing anything?

"I can't blame them. In their shoes I too would think of me as either a liar or a complete idiot." Trion didn't know if to laugh or cry.

Lith, Rena and Tista, instead were having the time of their life, even if they did their best to avoid their parents to notice.

They would get more and better food, clothes and they did not have to tolerate Orpal's mean words and petty jokes anymore. Plus, there were all the gifts that five families sent them as an apology.

Both the girls had stopped considering Orpal as a brother from the day he had proposed to get rid of Tista, calling her a cripple.

Lith was above and beyond them, he never considered him his brother. His only worry was for his parents, so he tried to lessen their burden as much as he could.

Lith's magic was now strong enough that he could till and plough the fields with earth magic.

He could also hunt for much bigger preys, his aim set to deer, boars and bear, whose pelt could be sold for a pretty penny.

The time for the spring festival was nearing, and Lith wanted some extra pocket money to buy something nice for his parents and sisters. Trion was still a stranger to him.

The spring festival was held midspring, during the equinox, to celebrate the time when the light finally overcame the darkness and cold of winter.

Lith was happily playing around the Trawn woods, looking for the best opportunity to kill a huge boar.

"Dammit, it's neck and skin are too thick to break with my current level of spirit magic. Fire and thunder could easily put it down, but that would mean damaging either the pelt or the meat. I need to get creative."

The boar movements were easy to predict, since it would always charge in a straight line. By using air fusion, Lith's body was fast enough to dodge the charges with ease, as long as he managed to prevent the beast from coming too close.

"When an ox went mad, my father told me that the best way to put it down is to strike at the legs, instead of the head. Once you take away their mobility, beasts like this one are easy prey."

At the next charge, Lith conjured a thick layer of ice before dodging. When the boar stepped on it, it lost its footing, spinning on itself like a top.

The boar crashed against the huge oak Lith had aligned it with, its bones snapping on impact. Lith closed in enough to not miss his next shot, but always keeping a safe distance.

"A cornered prey is the most dangerous one. Always respect the prey, never underestimate it. It only needs one hit to kill you." Lith remembered Selia's teachings.

Lith made a finger gun, aligning it with his target before shooting an ice arrow that penetrated in the boar's right eye, puncturing its brain.

The beast collapsed on the ground, but Lith shot another arrow in the left eye too, just to be on the safe side.

"Okay, dead it's dead. Now the problem is how the heck do I carry it out of the woods? My spirit magic may not be enough to carry a several hundred kilograms dead animal all the way until Selia's house. And even if I actually manage to do it, how can I explain it?"

Lith was nervously tapping with a finger on a nearby tree, trying to find a solution before having to fight to defend his game, when the dead animal suddenly disappeared.

"What the f\*ck?!? Since when do boars vanish into thin air? Who's there?"

He promptly activated Life Vision, scanning the surroundings in search of his enemy, but the only living beings he could find were small birds and rodents.

"Okay, this is getting creepy, but I need to get my boar back."

The boar appeared back, very close to Lith, making him jump away in fright.

"Why are you messing with me? Who are you?" Lith screamed while checking out the best escape route.

"And invisible enemy could easily kill me. Screw the boar, I need to get out of here fast." He thought.

"There is no need to escape." A gentle feminine voice replied in his mind. "I'm not your enemy, my host."

"Okay, if you want to scare the sh\*t out of me, you're doing a great job. What do you mean with host? Where the heck are you?" Lith kept looking around, the enemy somehow was untraceable even by his magical senses.

"Stop looking around, host. I'm here where you put me. Around your neck."

Lith instinctively grabbed the pouch and threw it away. He could finally notice that both the life force and the mana flow of the stone were bigger than ever.

Lith had always kept it in a blind spot, and since it was useless, he forgot to check it with Life Vision since the day of the ambush.

"Okay, I hate riddles. Tell me who or what you are, or I'll leave. As much as it pains me losing such a game, it's not worth having a creepy, mysterious stone talking in my head 24/7."

"Please, don't!" The voice turned desperate. "I'll die without my host."

"Enough with the riddles!" Lith screamed out loud. "What the f\*ck are you?"

"Our minds are linked, it's easier to show rather than tell."

Suddenly Lith's mind was filled with images and memories that were not his own. He could have thought of having been teleported away, if the images weren't full of holes, allowing to still see part of the woods through them.

"I'm sorry, but my powers are almost depleted, this is the best I can do."

Lith could see a gigantic tower, whose vault was so deep to reach the bottom of the ocean, its top so high to touch the sky. He could perceive that the whole structure was a giant magical artifact, pulsing with mana.

At some point, the owner of the tower had died, and without his/her mana to nourish its core, the tower began to decline. Centuries passed, while the tower kept looking for its next host, using illusions to send away those it deemed not talented enough or unworthy.

Over time, the tower spent all his powers, and to avoid death it had been forced to an extreme sacrifice.

To prolong its existence, it started to consume its own walls, floors, everything within itself, even its memories.

More centuries had passed, now only the tower core was left, barely the size of a pebble. It had nothing left, except its sense of self. Preferring death rather than becoming a mindless tool, the tower core attempted a desperate gamble.

It sent a signal that any being with the bare minimum magical powers to sustain its life could perceive. The clock was ticking, every second that passed, the tower core could feel its life slip away.

When the one answering the call resulted to be a Ry, the tower core had tried to communicate with no results. The beast mind was too different from the first host, making the mind link impossible.

Hope was lost, the tower core could only wait for its end.

But then a saviour arrived, saving the tower core from the beast's maw, using his own blood to bond himself with the tower core, right before it fell into a deep slumber to recover from its wounds.

The images disappeared, leaving Lith alone with the pouch and the dead boar.

Lith's mind was overwhelmed, incapable of any thought outside stupid jokes.

"Does that make us married or what?"

## **Chapter 17: The Stone's Real Worth**

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, back on my world, being bonded for life with someone you would not have any intimacy was the joke definition of marriage."

"That's funny." The voice chuckled. "And also kind of sad."

"Never mind the jokes. Let me get this straight: you once were a mighty artifact, full of treasures and knowledge. But now everything you had and knew is lost, and you are diminished to the size of a marble. Am I missing something?"

"No, all your statements are correct."

"Also, you did not pick me because of my talent or virtue, but simply because I possess, and I quote 'the bare minimum magical powers to sustain your life'. That makes me nothing more than an off-brand life support system."

"That is not exact. I am now bonded with you until your death do us part."

"That sounds more and more like marriage." Lith grunted.

"I am no parasite, you can see me as a symbiote. We will both benefit from our relationship."

"How? Are you saying that if you manage to get your strength back, you will also recover your memories and magical artifacts?"

"No, those are lost forever. I'm just like you. When you grow up, can you spit back the food you have eaten in the past to pass it on someone else? No. The same applies to me."

"Then what's in for me? The pleasure of your company?"

"At the moment all I can offer you is a pocket dimension."

"Say what?"

"One moment, I'm looking at your memories to make it easier to understand. It works like a Dungeons & Looting's Bag of Keeping."

"That's interesting." Lith pondered. "An interdimensional space where I can store my stuff without being hindered by its weight. How big is this pocket dimension?"

"Ten cubic metres big. It can store anything that amounts up to such volume, no matter the weight, as long as it's something inanimated."

A cruel intuition flashed in Lith's eyes.

"Can it also store things like lightnings, fireballs or incoming arrows? If so, it would be an invaluable tool for both offense and defence."

"No." The voice killed Lith's hopes. "The pocket dimension is outside space and time, so it rejects both life and kinetic energy." Feeling its host disappointment, the voice added quickly.

"This also means that whatever you store will not rot, cool down or warm up. A roasted blinker would be kept hot and tasty, frozen in the moment you finished cooking it."

"That barely qualifies as a silver lining." Despite their chat was quite long, it was only happening inside their minds. Barely a second had passed after Lith had accessed to the stone memories.

"Whatever. At least you save me from my current predicament. Now I know how to bring the boar back, I just need a decent excuse to explain how I managed it."

The stone mind-shrugged.

"Keep it simple. Drop it to the edge of the woods, and tell Selia that you managed to kite it to that spot before killing it. It should be easier to believe that the truth."

Lith nodded.

"Resourceful and smart. The fact that our minds are linked still creeps me out, but thanks to that I can see you have no malice or hidden agenda towards me. If you really are what you say to be, I'll keep you. True loyalty is a too rare commodity to turn it down when you find it. So, until I am convinced of your good faith, consider yourself on probation."

Lith put the pouch back at his neck and the boar in the pocket dimension.

"By the way, I can't keep calling 'you' and 'stone'. Don't you have a name?"

"No." The voice sounded really sad. "It's lost, like everything else."

"Don't be a pouter. A name is just a name. You can call me Derek, Lith, host, CZ DELTA, whatever. I'll always be the same cynic, misanthropic, lying, cutthroat guy I have always been. Would you like me to name you?"

"Yes, please." Lith had it ready since he heard the tower core's story.

"You are supposed to be a great artifact, so I'll name you after the greatest, albeit fictional, magical forgemaster that I always admired when I was a kid. Solus."

"Thank you, Lith. I like how it sounds. And I really appreciate you named me after someone you loved, rather than give me a pet name like Happy or Lucky."

Lith had the odd feeling Solus was mind-blushing.

They spent all the time on the way back chatting. Lith was really interested in understanding the limits and use of his new partner skillset.

After assessing that both Lith and Solus could activate the pocket dimension, he proceeded to pick the right spot. It needed to be close enough to the edge of the woods and covered enough to make spotting the boar from a distance impossible.

"There are countless things that can go wrong leaving a dead animal alone, even for a few minutes. A passerby that then claims it's his kill, a scavenger believing to have lucked out a free meal, take your pick. With my luck, I never trust the odds."

"You trust no one." Solus turned to a flat tone.

"You bet. That's life rule #1. Rule #2 is 'No good deed goes unpunished'."

Lith then used earth and wind magic to mess up the surroundings, mimicking the signs of struggle left by his previous fight with the boar.

"Bah! All this effort and I get such a sloppy result. If Selia throws a second glance at this scene, she'll expose my lie. I can only hope the prize catches her eyes enough to not make any question."

He then gently dropped the pouch on the ground.

"As soon as you receive my signal, take the boar out the pocket dimension. I'll be back in a jiffy."

Without waiting for a reply, Lith started running at full speed towards Selia's house. Once out of their mind link range (10 metres/10.9 yards), Lith could finally breathe a sigh of relief.

"Dammit, leaving her like that was d\*ck move. She surely knows the real reasons why I did it. It's hard to accept someone else in your head, reading every single of your most embarrassing thoughts and memories. Not to mention that in D&L every sentient artifact was usually a bag full of troubles, trying to mind-control the owner or something. I know that it's just fiction, but still...

What if I just stumbled in this world's Lone Ring, like in Vasyli Bolkien's books?"

Lith shrugged his head, his body covered in cold sweat.

"I bet that as soon we are back together, she will have access to this inner monologue too. F\*ck my life. No pain, no gain. If she really is what she says, she's worth the risk. At least I'll have someone who finally knows the real me."

A few minutes later, Selia and Lith were approaching the drop spot, riding the two-horse cart she used to move around the heaviest goods.

"Is it really that big to require two horses?" She asked sceptically.

"I think one should be enough to move it once it's loaded. The second is necessary to drag it on the cart easily."

Once Lith and Selia jumped down their ride, he gave Solus the signal. Selia detached the horses, guiding them by the bridle.

Lith took with him the thick ropes necessary to make a harness for the boar, making it easy for the horses to drag it out of the woods and into the cart.

When Selia saw the game with her own eyes, she whistled with approval.

"Good gods! This thing must be around 300 kilograms (661 pounds)! You weren't boasting as usual."

"I never boast." Lith used spirit magic to stealthily recover the pouch, while Selia was engrossed sizing the beast.

"Please, all men do." Selia clicked her tongue. "You are not an exception. With all your magic and secrets, do you want me to believe you do not enjoy your short, dark and toothless act?" She added laughing out loud.

"It's not my fault I have a lisp now!" Lith was pissed off by her non-stop mockery of his new voice. "Will you ever let me hear the end of it?"

"I'm sorry, I really am. It's just that your tough boy attitude is even more hilarious now that you have a lisp." The first time she had heard him call her "Phelia", she had laughed hard enough to fall from her chair, hugging her belly.

"Judging from its size, it was really close to become a magical beast. We could have sold it for a much bigger sum, it's kind of sad." She sighed.

"Yeah, and if it was a magical beast, I would be much deadier now." Lith rebuked.

They kept bickering until the boar was safe and sound on the cart.

Only once they got back to her house and started bleeding out the game, Selia got her business attitude back.



"The most valuable piece is the head. If we can find a noble willing to stuff it, hang it over his fireplace and take the credit for the kill, we can sell it really well. The pelt and the meat are nothing special, do you have any plans about them?"

Lith nodded. "All this meat will allow me to skip hunting for a while, so I prefer to keep and mature it. As for the pelt, it should make a nice carpet for my parents' bedroom."

"Always a family boy, huh?" Selia ruffled his hair, this time there was no mockery in her voice. "I'm so proud of you being so considerate toward your family that I'll tan it for free. I still get half of the head price, though."

"Perfect."

"Good! Our best shot is with Count Lark himself. He is both loaded and very proud of his hunting skills. I must reach my contacts in his manor to test the waters. Fingers crossed!"

Lith suffered at the idea of losing so much money, but half was better than nothing. He didn't know how to tan pelts or stuff heads, and lacked both time and instruments to do it.

And even if he did, he had no way to sell the merchandise outside his little village.

After Lith left Selia, he and Solus started chatting again, feigning ignorance about each other's feelings.

"Solus, I think that your help will be invaluable to bring my martial arts training to the next level."

## **Chapter 18: Heart to Hear**

Until that moment, Lith's martial training had had been really sloppy. Despite all his efforts, in a whole year of practice he had barely managed to regain the skill level of a 4th kyu of aikido (the equivalent of an orange belt for karate).

The only aspects he had managed to step up to the 3rd kyu (the equivalent of a green belt for karate) were the footwork and the fall techniques, and that because the initial progression depended completely on him.

Without a sparring partner, someone that could watch his moves and help him correct his mistakes, there was only so much that he could do.

He could either make a mud dummy move or train himself, he was not at the point that he could do both at the same time. Making a rough mud doll perform human like movements required a lot of concentration.

That meant that he could only put the dummies in position and then practice while they were once again still. Lith's body was even clumsier than his original one back on Earth, to make real progress he needed to be hit, to be thrown around, to practice all his moves on a moving target.

But Lith couldn't ask for help from anyone. How could he possibly explain that he wanted to practice alien martial arts? What help could anyone give him, not even knowing the basics of the basics? That's why he usually practiced in the middle of the night.

And Solus was the perfect solution for his problem. After further merging their minds, they had discovered new uses for the tower core. Lith had just to plant her into a mud doll to turn it into a quasi-golem, finally getting his sparring partner.

Solus had all the human senses and more, and with Lith permission, she could consume his mana to perform spells he knew in his stead. Her nature was that of a magic tower, she was supposed to oversee countless floors and devices.

Even in her weakened state, moving a poor excuse of a mud golem was easier than pie. Solus further improved Lith's idea, managing to make the golem's body soften at the right times, before hitting or being hit. This way she was able to put enough strain on Lith's body to train it, and avoid any possible injury by accident.

She also had access to all his memories, including all of his masters' teachings. Solus was able to use those memories to correct Lith's mistakes and help him improve by leaps and bounds.

Thanks to Invigoration, Lith was now able to stay awake for a whole month before his performances started declining, forcing him to rest. So, thanks to Solus, whenever he would meet a bottleneck, he would train martial arts.

He only needed to take a short break when the fatigue became too much. Light magic would mend his muscles, making them recover and grow stronger in a matter of minutes, dissipating the accumulated lactic acid at the same time.

During those moments, Lith and Solus would chat heart to heart.

"So, what do you plan to do in the future? Why do you put so much effort in all this training? Magic, martial arts, hunting. Why don't you stop from time to time, just for smelling the roses?" Solus asked.

"Whenever I do stop, I start thinking about the future. And that scares me to death. I already know that death is a trap, forcing me to switch one hell with another.

I don't want to live all my life in a small village, just the idea is equivalent to the death penalty. Doing the same routine every day, in a prison without bars where I am forced to lie every single day, waiting to die and start all over again.

I can't bear this thought. My plan is to test this body's limits, get as strong as I can, so that once I reach adulthood, I will be able to explore this world, and see if it's worth living in.

If either this body or this world meet my expectation, I will strive all my life to find a way to prevent me passing into another world after my death."

"How?"

"I don't know, I'm still as ignorant as a baby about magic. All I know is its practical use, I have no idea if it's possible to create magical artifacts.

But if my hypothesis is right, I could become a lich. Even better, I could find a way to bind my soul to this world, so that in case of death I would remain here, possessing the nearest available corpse. I hope that when push comes the shove, I will also have found a way to retain both my magic core and muscle memory."

"And what if both the world and your body fail you?"

"In that case, I would not mind starting my journey once again. If I have to live a sh\*tty life in a sh\*tty world, might as well depart early.

I'll keep moving around until I roll my 100, and get born as a perfectly healthy young master of a filthy rich family, a chosen one or whatever. Is just a matter of luck."

"What about your family? Are you going to abandon them like that?" Lith pondered seriously about that matter.

"Off course not. Making them lose their son, their brother for no reason, without even giving them a body to bury is too cruel, even for me. I'll stick around until my family needs me before checking out."

Solus giggled.

"Don't you see? Things are not actually all black and white as you make them. When you awoke in this world, you couldn't wait to die. To 'reroll' as you say.

Then you chose to stay for the magic. Now you are willing to continue this life for someone else's sake. Give yourself some time.

The bad people you met have reinforced your bias on life, but the good people are also slowly changing you. At the beginning you couldn't care less about Tista's life, now it's all you think about.

You hated both Elina and Raaz even before knowing them, because of your issues with parental figures. They are not your parents back on Earth, this planet is not Earth. Give it a chance before doing something so extreme."

"How do I know you are not telling me all this stuff only to keep your host?"

"Easy peasy, read my mind." After checking it thrice, Lith could not find any hidden agenda or egotistical reason.

"Dammit, all this mind-link stuff is so irritating. I cannot get out of this argument with mistrust or doubts. It's my loss. For now, at least. You are barely a month old, life will change you. It always does."

Solus giggled again.

"Or maybe it will change you, and you will start warming up to me. And then you will have to take care of me for your whole life, hubby."

Lith felt a cold chill run down his spine.

"Please, don't call me like that. I'm ready to go again. Don't go easy on me!"

"I never do." Solus replied, getting on Lith's already shaken nerves.

Thanks to all that exercise, Lith would quickly overcome any bottlenecks, and soon he could feel the bottled-up impurities trying to find their way out again.

Lith had pondered if it was the case of getting rid of the impurities in the same way he did for the rest of his family, but after discussing it with Solus, he decided not to.

The purification treatment he had devised for Tista was an artificial method, and even though it gave the same benefits in terms of physical appearance and resistance to illness, their magic power and physical prowess never got enhanced.

Lith had no idea why the impurities had to travel to the mana core before getting expelled, inflicting such excruciating pain. But it was worth the cost.

It happened during one of their sparring sessions. As soon as Lith realized what was happening, he quickly undressed himself to not taint his clothes.

This time he offered no resistance, discovering that it wasn't so painful after all.

Lith puked much more impurities than the last time, letting them come out of all his pores and orifices.

The stench was so bad he was about to faint before managing to destroy them with dark magic.

He was completely exhausted, this time not even invigoration could replenish his energies, he needed to sleep.

"After a bath. I stink so bad I could raise the dead." Solus ignored the obvious remark.

"It's exactly as you remembered. Whatever happens to you, is like a sword getting tempered and purified at the same time. Both your body and mana core had undergone qualitative changes again.

I think your potential skyrocketed, promoting you from my bare minimum requirements. You still need to work hard to develop it, though."

And so, Lith continued his routine until the day of the spring festival came.

## **Chapter 19: The Spring Festival**

It was without a doubt the worst day of the year for Lith. He would be forced to spend the full afternoon away from home, surrounded by complete strangers and robbed of any privacy or personal space during the festivities.

All the families in the village would gather for the festival, forgetting about all their daily problems and miseries, since everything from decorations to food and drinks were paid by Count Lark.

He would also take part in the whole event, to keep his bonds with the community strong and maintain his reputation of a fair Lord, instead of being just a faceless guy who collected taxes making their lives even harder.

The festival was comprised of three parts.

The morning would still be spent like a normal day's work, to let foreigner merchants and carnies prepare their stands and arrange their merchandise.

In the evening the families would gather and check out the stands, searching for trinkets and jewellery to buy with their extra money to add them to their daughters' dowry.

The food would mainly consist of appetizers, like fresh fruit and vegetables, with skewers of different kinds of meat and even exotic food, brought by Count Lark for the occasion, like saltwater fishes and seafood.

The only drinks available would be water and light beer.

After the sunset, huge braziers and torches would be lit all around the village, while the Count's workers would prepare the stage for the festival main event, the election of the Spring Maiden.

All the girls fifteen and sixteen years-old could take part in the Spring Maiden contest, which was more like a debutante ball rather than a beauty pageant.

It was the opportunity for all the young maidens of marriageable age to show off their beauty and virtues, in hope to catch the attention of as many suitors as possible.

The judges of the Spring Maiden contest were always the same, Count Lark, the village chief and Nana.

After the election, the real food would be brought out, with lots of roasted animals, soups and caramelised fruits. Both pure and watered wines would be available, raising the spirits for the finale.

The last part consisted of a ball, encouraging the eligible bachelors to approach one or more maidens that may have caught their eye.

Each part would affect Lith's mood differently. The first would cause extreme boredom, tempered by the fact that he was still allowed of moving alone.

The second was akin to torture. He would be forced to sit on his father shoulders, staring for hours at a bunch of little girls he did not give a damn about.

The third was the best one, but only because it was very short. After some dancing, his parents were too tired to remain any longer, and would finally bring him back home. None of their children was yet of marrying age, so they had no reason to linger.

For the first time in his new life, Lith had some money in his pocket, so he could check out the carnival games that offered the best prizes.

"They cheat, I cheat. Let's play this fair and square."

Using spirit magic he won a beautiful stuffed bear for Tista, beating a ring toss game rigged by unbalanced rings. From a crossbow shoot game he got a silver coated hair comb for Rena. All he needed to do was to use two strands of spirit magic, one to guide the dart to his target, the second to force it to crumble. Last, but not least, a silk ribbon for his mother from a Wheel of Fortune stand.

The carnies were flabbergasted, but trying to bully a local child in front of so many villagers, not to mention Count Lark, would have earned them nothing more than the beating of a lifetime and a permanent ban from every event in the county of Lustria.

They started to keep an eye on him, but Lith was not greedy and left after getting the three prizes. He actually wanted something for Raaz too, but all they had were feminine products.

The carnies hoped to lure the young boys into wasting their money, trying to impress the girls with expensive presents they could not afford without gambling.

After distributing the presents, Lith searched for Nana, he wanted to have a chat about magic with an expert. He found her sitting on a bench near her house.

The first thing he did was looking at her with Life Vision. Her mana flow was way bigger than Lith's, but her life force was weaker than Tista's.

Nana was a over sixty years old woman, but she looked like an eighty-year-old Earth woman. Her back was so hunched that she needed a cane to walk properly.

She had sharp grey eyes, a face full of wrinkles and a big aquiline nose. Nana always wore a shawl over her head, to avoid her long grey hair bothering her during work.

At a first look she seemed an inconspicuous old lady, but when you got near, you could feel the raw strength exuding from her body.

"Must have had a rough life." Solus commented.

"Hello, Nana. How are you?" Lith asked politely.

"Hello to you, little imp. You sure are growing fast, aren't you?" Just like Elina had noticed back in winter, Tista and Lith were growing taller and slender than their peers. The same was happening to Rena too, after she had received Lith's treatment.

Lith was already over 1.1 meters (1'8") high, his shoulders broad like he played water polo.

Lith nodded. "Yes, I do. Can I ask you a question?"

"As long it's not about my age, be my guest." Nana laughed.

"Nana, are you a strong magician?" Nana was surprised, the question not very childlike.

"Yes, I am. When I was still a young girl, I even got a scholarship for the prestigious Lightning Griffin academy, and I managed to graduate without any problem." Nana straightened up proudly, remembering her years of glory.

"Then how did you end up being a healer in Lutia?"

"How tactful of you, Lith!" Solus rebuked him.

"Children are allowed to be rude. It's one of their few privileges."

Nana's mood turned gloomy.

"You see, Lith, in this world there are commoners, nobles and mages. A strong mage has a status on par with the nobles, depending on his/her magic power. Back then I was very strong, but not a genius. Sadly, I was also stupid and naïve, so I made some very bad choices and ended up alone, without anyone backing me. I had only two options left. Either submit to a powerful noble or living free with the status of a healer. Guess what I picked?"

Lith became gloomy too, the idea of losing everything after working so hard for it made his future look even scarier.

"There, there kid!" Nana brightened up. "Let's not spoil the mood and enjoy the festival."

After leaving Nana alone, Lith thought back at her words about his growth, and stopped in front of a mirror on display, watching his reflection.

He could only sigh in resignation.

"No matter how many impurities I expel, I managed to fail even at the gene pool lottery. I took so much from my dad and so little from my mom.

When I look at myself while brooding, rather than cool I like some kind of psycho kid escaped from juvie. If I smile, now that I miss so many teeth, I'm not even cute. Even all dressed up, I could barely pass for a street urchin from one of Dicken's novels."

Solus tried to brighten him up, but to no avail.

Later in the evening, Count Lark introduced to the village elders his guest of honour.

"Chief Yurok, sage Nana, allow me to introduce you the young Ricker Trahan, son of my dear friend, baronet Lokar Trahan. This young lad is a really talented magician, that in the future will bring glory to our county." Count Lark was a magic enthusiast, always trying to sponsor promising youths from his land.

"Nice to meet you, young man." The village chief saluted him with a polite bow, expecting the other to offer him his hand or at least reply to the bow.

Ricker instead kept looking around, his eyes filled with contempt.



"The pleasure is mine." He replied with a cold tone.

"Ricker, where are your manners?" Count Lark rebuked him mildly. "Sage Nana was a powerful and renowned magician in her youth. Feel free to ask her for advice. Her experience could prove invaluable to overcome any difficulty you may encounter during your studies."

"I have no doubt about that, my Lord." Ricker bowed this time, but to Count Lark.

Nana had seen enough nobles in her life to recognize the type. A high and mighty young master, pampered enough to believe that only nobles could achieve greatness.

The people of the village were having a hard time tolerating so much disrespect towards their elders, but for the Count's sake they limited themselves to angry whispers.

"Oh, oh, oh! You got yourself another spunky one, dear Lark." Nana laughed without any warmth.

Ricker shuddered at such lack of respect, the old bat calling the Count by his first name without honorifics. But he knew that Lark was a sucker for magicians, and judging from her attitude, he had granted the old bat the right to do so.

"He has every right to be proud, dear Nana. Next year he will turn twelve and apply for a Lighting Griffon's academy scholarship, and with a little luck he will enrol just like you did back in the day!"

Ricker failed to repress his amazement, knitting his eyebrows at Nana.

"By the gods, how could such a commoner get admitted into the academy?" He thought. "She must have cheated her way in, no doubt."

"Really?" Replied Nana with exaggerated enthusiasm "Why don't you ask him to show us what he is capable of?"

Count Lark gladly accepted, and per his request soon was set up a one meter (3'3") high stump with a head of lettuce on its top.

Ricker had to stay at least 10 metres (11 yards) away from it and knock it down. It was a very basic exercise for anyone who wanted to become a magician, often use to quickly get rid of unworthy candidates.

Only those with real talent for magic were able to use chore magic at such range. For normal people, magic had a range of a metre or two.

To learn something outside chore magic, one had to either enrol in a magic academy or buy very expensive books.

"Young man, do your best!" Count Lark's voice was full of enthusiasm.

Ricker had done that exercise countless times, but always alone. This time he was surrounded by commoners, clearly hoping to watch him fail and get the chance to ridicule him.

Even worst, count Lark was putting a lot of pressure on him. In Ricker eyes this wasn't a simple test, but a matter of life and death.

Feeling countless eyes on him, he lost his concentration while performing the hand signs and stuttered the magic word.

"I-Infiro!"

He produced a chestnut big fireball, that almost missed the lettuce. Yet with a small boom the head of lettuce got knocked off.

No one applauded except for count Lark.

More than one "That's it?" could be heard among the crowd.

Nana walked slowly to the vegetable, bringing it back for the Count to examine.

"He messed a few key hand signs, stuttered the magic word, and missed the lettuce entirely. It only got knocked off because of the explosion." Nana remarked coldly.

"I would not keep my hopes up, Lark. When I was his age, I was able to actually hit my target without performing signs nor using magic words. They admitted me only because of my perfect silent magic." Nana's grey eyes were staring at Ricker in contempt.

"Well, he is still young, that's why I brought him to you. He has another full year to prepare for the exam. There is still time to fix the small mistakes. I was hoping you could mentor him."

"I would be glad to, I really would. But between the villagers and my disciple, I already have my hands full. I'm too old to take care of two youths, and my apprentice takes precedence. As you know, a magician's word is her bond."

"You have an apprentice?" Count Lark was shocked no one had informed him about such critical matter.

"Yes." She nodded, smiling in Ricker face.

"He learned to read and write and the age of three, and by that time he had already learned chore magic all by himself."

"Marvelous!" Count Lark excitement was a slap in Ricker's face.

"Yeah, he is also my disciple." Selia stepped forward, adding fuel to the fire. She and Nana politely detested each other, but between her and a stuck-up obnoxious brat, she would always choose the devil she knew.

"He hunts in the Trawn woods from the age of four. Even if he can only hunt blinkers and critters, he would never miss a moving target, let alone some deadweight lettuce."

She then whispered to the count's ear: "He is actually the you-know-who that provided the you-know-what."

"Fantastic! Excellent! When can I meet him?" His monocle jumped out of his eye orbit from the happiness.

Ricker was on the verge of exploding out of anger.

"Can't he see they are just leading him by the nose? How can someone with such a high social status like the Count trust even one word from these commoners?

Lying and cheating is in their nature. They are just trash, trying to stoop us at their level to make themselves feel better about their pathetic lives! If that old bat is a magician, then I am the crowned prince.

Why do I have to bear with all her nonsense? And how come even a gut-stinking hunter can freely speak to a Count? This evening could not turn any worse. How the heck I managed to let my father convince me to come to this pigsty?"

"Here he is!" Bromann shouted triumphantly, forcefully dragging Lith by his arm.

He had no idea what was happening. Lith was with his family, nibbling at a caramelized apple, when Bromann appeared out of the blue, babbling about the village honour or something.

Too many eyes were on him, Lith's intuition told him that something was wrong, so he decided to play it close to the vest.

"Count Lark, I'm honoured to meet you." It didn't take a genius to understand that the overdressed beanpole with the monocle had to be the lord of the land.

Lith greeted him cupping his fist, performing a deep bow. He then proceeded greeting the village chief, Nana and Selia, making his bow deep according to the respect they deserved.

Lastly, he turned towards the ill looking kid standing next to the Count. He had to be around ten years old, 1.4 metres (4'8") high. He was wearing a silk white shirt over high-

end leather pants. His face was all red and sweaty, like he had either run for his life or been bitten by a venomous snake.

The situation made no sense to Lith, but since no one seemed worried about the kid's health, Lith did what he was supposed to.

"Greetings, honourable guest. I hope you enjoy your visit in our village." Lith cupped his fist again, making only a small bow. He had no idea who that kid was, and Ricker could not find the strength to introduce by himself.

The Count seemed to have completely forgot about his existence.

"Oh, oh, oh!" Nana laughed. "See, Lark? Manners. That's something so many youngsters lack nowadays."

Lith kept looking around, waiting for someone to explain what was happening.

"Can I be of assistance?" He asked.

Ricker once again needed all his willpower to prevent himself from throwing a fit of rage.

"This is their prodigy? A toothless bum? I should ask the Count to whip them all to death for their blatant lies! Simply outrageous!"

"Yes, Lith." Selia stepped in again. "Count Lark loves magic in all its kinds and forms, and I was just telling him about how you kill blinkers without ruining even a feather. Would you mind to show him?"

She took out a wooden stick, holding it up for the Count and everyone else to see.

Lith sighed with relief.

"All this fuss for chore magic? They almost gave me a heart attack. If it's just to entertain some bored nobles, why not? If the village thrives, so will my family."

"Brezza!" After twirling twice his middle and medium finger, a small vortex enveloped the stick. Outwardly it was just like the ones every housewife used daily to clean their houses, but looking at it closely one could notice that it was actually two different vortexes, one spinning clockwise and the other counter clockwise.

This way the spell applied a huge strain to the stick in the point where the two vortexes connected, causing it to break almost instantly.

Lith had invented it after Selia had started bothering him too much about how he killed the blinkers. He could not show her spirit magic, so he came up with this trick.

Ricker wanted to rebut saying that Lith was standing barely a meter (1.1 yards) away from the stick, but even he knew how hard it was to use two different spells at the same time. He also knew that such an objection would be met by the old bat requesting him to do the same. And he had no idea how to.

Nana waved her hand, and a villager put another head of lettuce on the stump.

"Lith, be a dear and knock that out, please."

Lith was getting more and more confused. The Count now had stars in his eyes, looking at him like some mythical beast had descended from the heavens, while the noble kid was as pale as a ghost.

"What the heck is going on here? Why the Count is so engrossed by cheap magic? And why no one cares about that poor kid? Whatever he has is getting worse."

Lith shrugged before flickering his middle finger while saying: "Jorun!"

An ice dart hit the lettuce dead center, making it roll a few meters away.

"Without using hand signs!" The count gasped, his voice so faint that Lith could not hear him.

"One last thing, dear Lith. If you manage to indulge this poor old lady, I will treat you and all your family for free until you start your apprenticeship. Are you willing to humour me one last time?"

Lith had no need to think before accepting. Despite his best efforts, Tista still needed constant care. From time to time they had still to seek for Nana's help and it wasn't cheap.

Nana smiled, full of confidence enough for the both of them.

"Bromann, toss one of those as high as you can."

Bromann threw a head of lettuce with a lob shot, sending it about three meters (10") high. When it reached its peak, Nana made a simple gesture, cutting the air horizontally with her extended hand and fingers, conjuring ten ice darts.

Five struck its left side, five the right side. When the head of lettuce started falling, Nana cut the air again, this time vertically, splitting it evenly in four parts.

Then she simply opened her palm toward the sky, conjuring four small vortexes that brought down the four pieces slowly.

"Damn! Not only Nana's mana flow is still superior to mine, but her skill level is above and beyond my expectations. I could probably achieve the same result, but I'd need both hands and something more than just a casual wave of the hand.

Now I understand why everyone in the village holds her in such high regard. She is likely to be the reason why the village of Lutia is so peaceful. If she can do so much with simple chore magic, I can't imagine what she can do with a real spell." Lith thought.

"Now is your turn. Bromann!"

Another head of lettuce, another lob shot.

Lith knew it wasn't a contest, he wasn't supposed to perform as good as Nana.

Until Lith could get a clear picture of how much talent was considered good, how much to be considered a genius level and how much for the "burn that monster" label, he had to play it safe.

When the shot reached his peak, Lith made hands signs with both hands shouting "Jorun!", conjuring four ice darts, two per side. When the lettuce started to fall, he used "Brezza" to cut it unevenly in half, using it again to summon two vortexes to bring the pieces down. Once again, they were rotating in opposite directions, the phenomenon highlighted by the slowly spinning lettuce.

"In for a penny in for a pound. They already know I can do it, if I have to entertain the Count, might as well do it with a little swag."

The crowd exploded into an applause, soon joined by and ecstatic Count Lark that still could not believe his own eyes.

Nana sent Lith away to his parents, reassuring him that she would keep her side of the bargain, before speaking again to Ricker Trahan.

"And that, young man, is what real talent for magic look like!"

Ricker could not hear her, thought. Back when Nana had showed her skill, he had fainted standing up.

His mind could not accept that all the certainties he had grew up with, had proven to be nothing more than convenient lies.

## **Chapter 20: Ambush**

After the end of the spring festival, nothing major happened, and Lith's life returned to his usual routine.

Solus proved to be of invaluable help for his magical training. Despite having lost all her past knowledge and being quite naïve in the ways of life, she was by far the brighter of the two.

Solus was not limited to the humans' five senses, but actually had twelve. Solus was certain that by regaining her powers she would be able to awaken even more.

Solus' sense of mana helped Lith to better understand the laws of magic that determined the innate talent and the mana capacity.

Her mana sense was similar to Lith's Life vision, but much more profound and accurate. Solus could see the mana flowing even from blades of grass or pebbles. When looking at someone, she was immediately able to grasp their magic talent.

Even more important, she was able to use her mana sense even on Lith's memories. According to Solus, all the information needed for the mana sense were also contained in the visible spectrum, but the humans lacked the means to interpret them.

"When you were on Earth, you had no mana core. Your native world had basically no mana at all. The same thing happened on the alien spaceship.

But when you were born here, you started with a very little blood red mana core. By absorbing and processing the world energy with your breathing technique, you managed to develop it from red to orange."

"Four years of unrelenting practice just to promote it to the next rank?" Lith was quite depressed by the news.

"Not quite. Your mana core also keeps changing and developing as you grow up, and this happens to everyone else too. At the moment of your birth, Tista's mana core was already field poppy red, and turned brighter every year. Right now it's light orange, and it would not surprise me if after her final growth spurt it turned yellow, or even green. She seems to be fairly talented for magic."

"And that where does it leave me?" Lith kept feeling worse about himself. "Am I really a complete failure in everything? Looks, talent, can't I do one thing right?"

"Stop moping around and listen to me. You keep forgetting that you are two years younger and I have no idea if males and females develop their mana cores at different rates. Also your constantly skipping steps makes hard for me to understand what your base talent is. After every cycle of expansion and compression, your mana core would turn one shade brighter. Every time you expel impurities from your mana core, it skips to the next level. Right now is deep green."

"Is it me, or this mana core strength seems to be somehow related to the light spectrum?" Lith pondered. "A prism can break down white light in its basic components: red, orange, yellow, green, cyan, blue, purple."

"Agreed." Solus mind nodded. "But it could also somehow be related to fire. Flames follow the same principle, a yellow star is colder than green one and so on. Our real question is: Is the final step for a mana core to turn purple or white?"

Lith shook his head.

"I'm starting to get a head splitting headache. We'll face this like I did for college back on Earth, one exam session at a time. Even back there, if I started to think about all the exams that I had to pass to get my degree, only to start right back for my master, I would go into a deep depression." The memory made him shudder.

"So let's focus on the present. I'm deep green, what about Nana?"

"She is the only person with a light cyan mana core. To be born with such talent, she is really impressive."

"Is there anyone else talented in the village?" Lith had to be aware of the possible competition.

"No. The ill kid count Lark brought along had a bright yellow mana core, but I don't think he lives close by."

Lith sighed, all that information overwhelming him. For so many years he had deluded himself into thinking he was special, stronger than anyone else.

Now he felt like the proverbial frog in the well, finally discovering the vastness of the sea.

"Enough moping around, let's roll up our sleeves and work hard. Nothing that's worth having comes easy."

Lith and Solus kept practicing together for the whole year, growing closer and closer like fraternal twins.

Lith's birthday was on fall, but all major activities in the village would be suspended until the next spring. Since Nana's offer was to replace the two years public school with an apprenticeship, Lith too had to wait until spring to begin his magical education.

In the late winter the weather cleared, and the trades between the village and the farm houses became more and more frequent.



Thanks to this, Nana was able to let Lith know the date she had set for starting his apprenticeship, entrusting the message to one of his neighbours that had come to her to heal a nasty wound suffered while repairing the roof.

When the day came, Lith woke up early, determined to keep his routine of cleaning both his house and Selia's before going to the village.

The huntress had done so much for him that Lith considered her as an aunt. A stingy, nagging one that would make rip-off deals, but an aunt nonetheless.

That morning the house was in turmoil. All his loved ones were so excited at the idea of having a future mage in the family, to be barely able to eat their breakfast, spending all their time and energies giving him unwanted and obvious advices.

"Do not be late. Is better getting a little early rather than late."

"Be obedient and respectful. Nana is giving you a great chance!"

The reason why everyone was on edge was that despite they considered the first day to be of vital importance, Lith he had to go to the village alone.

The house was in dire need of repairs, and with Orpal gone they needed all hands on deck to also take care of the fields and animals.

Lith didn't mind it at all, it was just a thirty minutes' walk that he had done countless times. Raaz and Elina, though, felt like they were abandoning their child in his hour of need.

Lith rushed out of his house, to escape from that barrage of worries. He had been very calm about the apprenticeship, it wasn't his first rodeo, afterall.

But they had managed to make him nervous like a teenager at his first date. After finishing the chores at Selia's house and collecting his usual payment, Lith restlessly looked at the sun.

"Dammit, it's still barely dawn. And here I was, shuddering in fear. I still have a lot of time."

Lith walked briskly toward the village, hoping that at his arrival Nana would at least be already up. Arriving so early to give her the wake up call would have been quite embarrassing.

When he arrived midway, Lith noticed something odd. There was a horseman standing on the side of the road.

It was already unusual finding a stranger so early in the morning, but what really alarmed him was that the man wasn't moving. Whoever he was, he was clearly on patrol.

As soon the horseman noticed Lith, he took out a silvery whistle from under his shirt, emitting a high-pitched noise.

Lith kept moving forward, but slowly, ready to react at any moment.

Soon the scout was joined by four other horsemen, and they started trotting toward Lith in an arrowhead formation.

Lith stopped moving, many spells ready at hand.

"Kid, are you Lith? Son of Raaz and Elina?" Said the horseman on point. He was a middle-aged man, with brown hair and eyes. He had perfectly trimmed moustaches, and everything from his straight up posture to his commanding tone identified him a military of some sort.

Looking carefully, all the horsemen had the same vibe, marching perfectly aligned. Yet they wore casual clothes, white shirts over leather hunting pants.

"Isn't a little earlier to go out without the matching leather jacket?" Lith thought. "Unless off course they need to avoid showing any household insignia."

"Who are you, mister? My mother always tells me that I am not supposed to talk to strangers." Lith decided to stall for time, while he and Solus checked their surroundings for lookouts or possible reinforcements still in hiding.

"I perceive only five human males, above average physical strength, deep red mana cores." Solus reported. It was the same thing Lith had determined using Life Vision, but four eyes were better than two.

"I ask the questions, kid. Are you the Lith that is supposed to start his apprenticeship today?"

Lith grimaced.

"Whoever sent this hired muscle, knows way too much about me."

"I am." Lith retorted fiercely. "And it's none of your business."

"I'm here to give you a friendly advice, son. Today you are feeling very ill, and it's best for you to go back home and stay in bed all day."

Lith anger started to grow and he didn't care about hiding it.

"I'm feeling perfectly fine, thank you. Now scram!"

The five men lowered their hands to the weapons hanging from their belts, the reins held tight ready to the charge.

"Last chance, kid. Turn back now. I know you have such a pretty house and such a beautiful mom. Not to mention two gorgeous sisters ripe for the taking. It would be really sad if something bad happened to them."

Lith released such a powerful killing intent aura, that the horses took a step back. The hair on the horsemen's neck suddenly standing up.

"I wanted to play this nice and slow, but I just changed my mind."

With a sweep of his right hand, five wind blades struck the horses' legs, making them whine in pain while collapsing on their sides.

"Now you cannot retreat anymore."

The man with the moustaches and his right-hand man managed to dismount with a roll, avoiding getting crushed by the falling horse. The other three weren't so skilled.

"Kill him! Go! Go! Go!"

"Kneel!" Lith voice was cold, his words fell on the two men like boulders, making them instantly fall on their knees.

Lith's spirit magic was stronger than ever, and he wasn't holding back even one bit.

"What the heck? Sarge, I can't get up!" Screamed the right-hand man struggling on the ground.

"I never allowed you to talk or to look at me. I said kneel!" Another wave, even stronger than the previous one, pushed their heads toward the ground.

Despite dropping their weapons to absorb the impact with their hands, they still hit the ground so hard that they started to bleed.

"Much better. Now let me dispose of the garbage before resuming our talk." Lith walked over the closest horseman, still under his horse, the leg stuck and broken, making him scream and wince in pain.

With a wave of the hand, turned both their heads 180°, the necks snapping like a dry log tossed into the fire.

"Stay away! Stay away from me, monster!" Screamed the next in line, crying in desperation.

"Am I a monster? Wasn't you the one ready to burn a house full of innocents, to r\*pe a barely eight years old child?" Without waiting for his reply, Lith clenched his fist, distorting the man's head before making it implode like a walnut.

"Please, please! It's not my fault! Have mercy! I was just following orders!" Said a blonde, handsome youth trying to free his trapped leg.

"Just following orders... I could lecture you about the many atrocities that men like you did with such an excuse. But you see, I'm just the same. I'm just following orders too! Mine to be precise!" A fire bolt struck both horse and rider, turning them into a pyre, screaming in agony.

Lith returned to the kneeling men. They were still struggling to escape his control, their faces pales as ghosts, gritting their teeth while exerting every ounce of their strength.

"I'm sorry." Lith said with a cherubic smile, while letting them raise their heads. "But my Puppet Master spell isn't so simple. It takes more than a touch of strength and a spoonful of wishful thinking to escape from it."

The two men wanted to beg for mercy, but their mouths refused to open. It was like their teeth were fused to each other.

"Now, I have good news and bad news. The bad news is that I don't need both of you. And between the pack leader and a lackey, the choice is obvious. The good news is that I allow you to speak. Any last words?"

"Please, don't! I just married, I needed the prize money from my Lord! My wife is expecting a child! I could not allow to lose my position."

Lith emitted a cruel, joyless laugh.

"We'll have to agree to disagree. You say wife, yet all I can hear is widow."

Lith put his left hand on the man's head, turning it into a block of ice.

It fell to the ground, shattering into countless shards of bones, skin and brain matter.

The man with the moustaches started to puke uncontrollably, but his mouth was still tight shut. Some barf managed to escape from his nose, the rest he was forced to gulp it down over and over, to avoid chocking.

Lith raised his hand, making the man with the moustaches float in mid-air upside down, so that he could watch him straight in the eyes.

"And now, you have only two choices. You can tell me what I want and die without suffering too much. Or you can keep resisting, suffering through unimaginable pain and agony before telling me what I want to know. You have free will after all."