

# Supreme Magus

## Chapter 21: Truth

At those words the man steeled his resolve, recovering the courage worthy of a soldier that had looked death in the eyes many times on the battlefield.

When Lith allowed him to speak, he wasn't afraid anymore.

"I am knight, my honour lies with my Lord! I will never betray his trust, you filthy mongrel!"

"Oh my, you're so helpful! Thanks to your friend there, I already knew there is a Lord behind the ambush. But I thought you were just mercenaries. Are you telling me you are actual knights? Maybe his personal guard?"

Realizing his mistake, the knight bit his tongue, literally, trying to die before letting anything else slip out his mouth.

"Tsk, ts! Not so fast!"

Lith froze him in place again, forcing the teeth away from the tongue before healing it with light magic.

"You are way dumber than you look." Lith never stopped smiling, talking to him with the calm a collected manner a mother would use with a small child.

"I'll spell it out for you. Not even death can save you from me. I can take you apart, piece by piece, and then put you back together, like the flesh puppet you are."

Lith's eyes lost any trace of humanity, his voice exuded only hatred and rage.

"But if it's pain that you want, I can give you plenty."

Lith clenched his fist, and suddenly the knight felt his nether regions squeezed and crushed, like into a vise. The knight's eyes filled with tears, his mouth was only able to emit gargling sounds.

Lith would release the grip from time to time, giving him some rest, before twisting and turning his hand and so the knight's gonads.

"Are you ready to talk?" The knight was still in so much pain he could barely understand his words.

"No? Not a problem, I just wanted to test my new and improved Plague Arrow."

After a bolt of darkness hit the knight in the chest, Lith released him from the Puppet Master grip, letting him sprawl on the ground.

"One."

Before the knight could start looking for his weapon, he found himself shivering in cold, while his teeth were rattling uncontrollably.

"Two."

He ended curling up, hugging himself trying to find some precious warmth.

"Three."

Suddenly the cold was gone, the knight started sweating bullets. He felt terribly hot, like when he had been forced to stay on guard for hours under the scorching summer sun.

"Four, five."

He felt suffocating, so he tore away his shirt, gasping for air. The knight's throat was so parched that he started gulping down handfuls of snow, thanking the gods for its fresh relief.

"Six, seven."

Then it was like his blood had started flowing in reverse, all his body was coursing with pain. The whole world had become the knight's enemy. The ground hurt his skin, the snow his throat, the light his eyes. There was no safe position he could find, he could only switch from one torture to another.

"Eight, nine."

The knight's veins were full of poison, his own saliva tasted like acid. The knight started to puke uncontrollably, until nothing but bile remained inside his intestines.

"And ten! Ready to talk now?" Lith dispelled the Plague Arrow using light magic.

"Please, no more. No more! If you waste any more hours you'll play right into their hands!" The knight was barely alive, but at least had a sliver of hope. By enduring all that torture he now had a bargain chip.

"Hours?" Lith laughed.

"I killed your soldiers in what, three minutes? Barely another minute has passed since you told me about your knighthood. Even rounding that up, it make five minutes at worst. What hours are you talking about?"

The knight was shocked, that couldn't be right. He looked at the sun, searching for a proof to expose that cruel lie.

But the sun was still raising over the horizon.

"Gods have mercy, how can all that pain and misery last a minute? It seemed hours long."

"You really are stupid." Lith paralyzed him again. "It's a minute from the moment you tried to bit your tongue off. The Plague Arrow lasted barely ten seconds. Didn't you hear me counting out loud?"

"It seems that the Plague Arrow distorted his sense of time." Solus was studying the specimen's body reaction to the new spell. "His lack of mana must have allowed the dark energy to reach his brain, altering his perceptions."

Lith was on cloud nine, it was all too perfect.

"I'll ask you only a second time. Are you ready to talk?"

The knight's mind broke down, forgetting all about his vows and his honour. All he wanted was the pain to stop. Even death seemed alluring in comparison.

So, he told Lith everything. About how after being humiliated during the spring festival, Ricker Trahan had reconsidered Nana's worth.

He had understood how lacking his preparation was, and had become determined on becoming her only apprentice.

After taking the matter to his father, Baronet Trahan had explained to his stupid son the enormity of his mistake. Nana held a huge grudge against nobles, and since they had started off in the worst possible way, begging or bribing her would be useless.

The only option available was to remove the competitor out of the picture, hoping that Nana would be willing to replace one pupil with another more reliable.

The reason why they ambushed Lith was the same that prevented Baronet Trahan from coercing Nana to do his bidding. He could not afford to make her angry, otherwise the whole Trahan household would be wiped out.

Despite Nana's fallen status in the mage association had stripped her of most of her privileges and authority, she was still a member nonetheless.

In the County of Lustria she held an authority equal if not superior to that of Count Lark himself, and that meant that she was free to execute lesser nobles like them on a whim.

Nana would not even need to justify herself for such an action, just explain her reasons to the association by writing a letter. A mere formality.

That was why Baronet Trahan had sent his personal guard on an undercover mission. He had stressed countless times the importance of not creating a fuss.

Nana should never come to suspect anything.

Their orders were to make Lith drop off from his apprenticeship by intimidating and threatening him. If none of the above worked, their job was to make him disappear without leaving any trace.

"During the spring festival, Nana told me that powerful magicians are like nobles, but I never expected that she actually was such terrifying existence. Seems like my choice of becoming a mage has much more ramifications that I imagined.

Status of a noble, even a frigging mage association! All this stuff is giving me a headache. Now, what to do with this dirtbag?"

It was a rhetorical question, but Solus replied anyway.

"Disposing of the bodies would backfire on us. If we want to make this Baronet pay, we need the bodies and some proof that links him to the ambush."

Lith mind nodded. "My same thought exactly."

"Last question. Where are the leather jackets with the Trahan family crest?"

"W-we left them at home. We could not allow anyone to notice us, it would mean implicating the Baronet."

The knight was terrified. Lith's eyes were turning black, glowing with dark energy.

"Wait! The whistles! We brought along the silver hunting whistles the Baronet gifted us when we swore our allegiance to him! They bear his family crest too!"

"Thanks, a deal is a deal." Lith double tapped the knight's head with ice arrows, killing him painlessly.

He then collected all the whistles from the dead bodies, taking care of erasing the traces of his spirit magic.

"Those twisted necks and imploded head could rise too much questions. Let's cover our traces. I simply need to cut off the former and freeze the latter."

After that, Lith used air fusion to rush toward the village. Being forced to wake up Nana was now the last of his worries, he wanted revenge.

Air fusion allowed him to reach a speed of 60 km/h (37mph), so he arrived in less than two minutes, but once at the village's outskirts he had to cancel the spell.

"I can't allow anyone to see the fastest kid alive. Damn, I want those books so bad! I need to know if spirit and fusion magic are of public knowledge or still unknown. I can't risk exposing my aces in the hole unless is a matter of life and death."

Lith kept running until he could spot Nana's house on the distance, and when he saw a luxurious stagecoach right in front of her door, he pushed the pedal to the metal.

"Lady Nerea, I beg of you, be reasonable. Consider the bigger picture!"

Lith could not hear from that distance, and even if he could, he was too focused closing in to pay attention. Solus had no such problems. In the last year she had not acquired new abilities, but her senses had become much keener.

"A farm boy has so many things to take care of. Magic is a strict mistress that demands time and resources, all things that my dear son can provide aplenty."

"I'm sorry, dear Baronet." Nana's voice was polite but devoid of any warmth. Her hands were clutching so hard on her cane to turn white.

"A magician word is her bond. I'll wait for Lith all day, if necessary. And in my opinion raw talent and a sincere disposition are much more important foundations for a magician.

Things that your son is clearly lacking. Or do we want to pretend that his rude words and acts during the spring festival never happened? I may be old, but my memory has yet to fail me."

Ricker Trahan was pale as a ghost. So far, his father's plan didn't seem to work. They had spent the last half hour in a one-sided negotiation.

If everything failed, he knew that his father would skin him alive in case he didn't manage to enrol in the Lightning Griffon academy.

Baronet Trahan had invested countless resources to give his son all the books and teachers he could afford.

The idea of all that money and efforts, wasted because of Ricker's arrogant ignorance while dealing with the best magician in the County, was enough for the Baronet to disown Ricker.

"Ah ah ah! Now let's not be so hasty, Lady Nerea. It's normal making mistakes when we are young. The important is to learn from them and never repeat them.

I know that Ricker has quite a temper, and I apologize for his behaviour. I can assure you he is terribly sorry for what he did"

Ricker had never felt so humiliated. They kept talking about him like he was not there.

"Also please, consider that punctuality and reliability are very important when walking the path of magic. Yet I do not see this Lith anywhere near, while my son is right here.

Don't you think that maybe a farm boy cannot understand the privilege you are granting him? Life in the wilds is very hard on the youths, I honestly fear his parents had not the opportunity or the time to impart him a proper education.

I can understand your position, you gave him your word and knew him for so long. But I can't stand the idea of such an opportunity wasted on someone that cannot give you the respect you deserve.

Also, I can guarantee you that if you take Ricker as your disciple, I will reward you handsomely. Not to mention that in case he got admitted to the Lightning Griffon Academy, we will never forget your help and generosity.

I am ready to commit as of now that if my son reaches the greatness he deserves, he will do anything in his power to clear your name. What do you say?"

Nana snorted.

"I would like to say many things, but it doesn't seem to be necessary. The reason why you don't see him is because you are looking in the wrong direction. Lith is the panting little imp right behind you."

## **Chapter 22: Annihilation**

At those words, father and son turned around just in time to see Lith rush past them, stopping only when he was already in front of Nana.

Now that he was close enough, Nana could notice that Lith's body was covered in cuts and bruises. Some were quite deep, but had been already roughly treated with light magic. They were still bleeding, but Lith's life was in no danger.

"What in the gods name has happened to you? As far as I know the roads to the village are safe." Nana did not miss the panic flashing in the expression of the two nobles in front of her.

Lith was still bent downward, hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath.

"Was it really necessary inflicting yourself all those wounds before coming here?" Solus asked, still worried about Lith.

"No pain, no gain." Lith responded telepathically. "Coming unscathed out of a sink or swim fight, alone against five knights, would have been too suspicious. These wounds serve two purposes.

First to make Nana angry enough to do what must be done. Second and most important, to avoid any further investigation. If there's anything this mess proved, is that too much attention is bad. The higher I get, the more dangers I will have to face.

Right now, I have no backer. All that stands between my family and the Baronet is Nana. I can't protect them at all the times. It was a stroke of luck that they had to target me.

In the future I must be careful of not crossing the wrong people, at least until I get enough power or backing. I don't care about magic or wealth if I don't have anyone to share them with. No one will ever be taken away from me. Never!"

The whole conversation with Solus lasted barely for a second.

Still panting and wheezing, Lith told her about the ambush.

"When I was coming here, five horsemen tried to coerce me into giving up on my magic schooling. When I refused to submit, they tried to kill me! Thank the gods I managed to kill their leader before they got too close.

With him dead, their formation went in disarray and I managed to kill them before they killed me." Lith sniffled, covering his eyes with a hand, pretending to be fighting back tears.

"Gods, I don't know I managed to do it. It's all a blur."

Nana performed skilfully a series of hand signs before saying "Vinire Lakhat!"

A warm sphere of light magic enveloped Lith's body, healing all his injuries.

"That's enough, Lith. I can easily imagine the rest." Nana caressed his head, trying to comfort him.

"You did your best to treat your wounds, before rushing here to warn me against this scum noble." She raised her cane, pointing it toward the Baronet's face with an intimidating manner.

"Please, Lady Nerea, don't rush to judgement, I..."

"Enough with your fake sycophancy!" Nana was bursting with rage.

"Do you want me to believe that all your talk about respect and punctuality and the attack on the boy's life happening today, at the same moment, is just a sheer coincidence? How stupid do you think I am?"

Baronet Trahan knelt down, his hands on the floor in submission.

"Please, Lady Nerea, believe in my good faith. I know nothing about it. The kid is still scared and traumatized, maybe his memory about the assault is confused. Also, he doesn't have any proof. Don't take hasty decisions before considering all the facts."

The sight of his father, kneeling to a commoner, shocked Ricker deeply. Yet he kept enough of his cool to remember what was at stake, so he knelt too, begging for mercy.

"Good faith my wrinkly a\*s! I have met enough nobles to understand how your kind thinks, and how cheaply you value a commoner's life. I think..."

Nana stopped talking, Lith was tugging her arm repeatedly. She knew he was smart enough to understand that she was fighting for him. For interrupting her like that, Lith must have had excellent reasons.

He was showing her five silver whistles, one of which had burnt marks. Nana took one and started examining it.

She barely needed a second to recognize the Trahan family crest engraved on it's top.

"Well done, Lith." She whispered. "Even in the face of danger, never let your emotions cloud your judgment. That's the way of a true magician."

She was kindly smiling at him, like a grandmother proud of her grandson achievements. Then, always keeping her back at the Trahans, she quickly performed some complex hand signs before whispering "Ekidu Ruha."

Nana's eyes briefly glowed black with dark energy.



Ekidu was root magic word for darkness magic, like Vinire for light magic or Infiro for fire magic.

She was casting a dark spell, Lith couldn't wait to see its effects. At the same time, though, the way she used the spell threw him in confusion.

"Why taking the trouble of performing hands signs and using words? Nana knows silent magic, I've seen her do it already.

Couldn't she just do it silently in front of them? I can't believe she is using a complex spell that requires that much caution just for those weaklings."

Nana turned around, poking father and son both with her cane.

"She has just hit them with her spell." Solus notified Lith. Everything had happened in an instant, without releasing even a magic spark. If it wasn't for Solus' mana sense, Lith would have missed it entirely.

"Enough with this charade. Do you want proof? Is this proof enough?"

She shoved the silver whistle in front of the Baronet's face, that turned red, then white and finally green. He had to use every ounce of self-control he had to stop himself from panic puking.

"Now get out of my sight! If anything ever happens to my apprentice or his family, even if one of them breaks his fingernail, it's you that will pay the price."

The two of them got back on their feet, running toward the stagecoach without saying a word. Lith was both shocked and disappointed by Nana's behaviour.

"So much for her hatred toward nobles. Who would have thought that after everything she went through, she would still be so merciful? F\*ck!"

Nana went to the bakery, to talk to the coachman that was eating some pastries while waiting for his master.

"Hey, kid" The man was actually in his mid-twenties, around 1,77 metres (5'6" tall). He had blonde hair and a kind, perfectly shaven face. "What's your name?"

"Andy." He replied while nibbling at a cream puff.

"Andy?" Nana raised an eyebrow. "Gods be my witnesses, it's a really strange name."

Andy shrugged.

"Is actually just a nickname. Better than my real name, though. Many people found Hasa Diga Eebowai too hard to pronounce."

Nana was flabbergasted.

"Anyhow, what do you need me for, Lady Nana?"

"You seem a nice man, so here is a friendly advice. Bring your master back home as fast as you can, then find yourself a new job." She winked.

Andy dropped the cream puff like it was hot, deeply bowing to Nana before running to the stagecoach.

Nana returned to her house, opening the door to let Lith go inside.

"And now what?" He was barely repressing his disappointment. "Do we wait for their next move?"

Nana laughed heartily.

"Their next move? They will drop dead before arriving to their pompous home. What do you think that darkness spell was for? I just wanted to avoid making a fuss in front of the whole village."

Lith suddenly felt very stupid.

"Well played! This will teach them a lesson." He could finally sigh with relief.

"Far from it." Nana said with an ice-cold tone. She went into her private quarters, quickly followed by Lith.

Nana's house was really similar to Lith's, but the dining room was smaller, and instead of three bedrooms there was just one. The other two rooms were occupied by a study room and an alchemic lab.

She went in the study room, opening one of the desk's drawers with a key she wore around her neck. Nana then took out a wrapped cloth, revealing a silver amulet.

It had a nut-big gemstone in its center, with arcane glyphs engraved all over.

Lith didn't need Life Vision to know it was a magical item.

"This is a communication amulet. Every member of the mage association gets one. Now give me a minute to do a full report about Baronet Trahan's attempt on my disciple's life.

They hate when some small-time noble messes with us. Before I put this back into the drawer, their whole bloodline will be wiped out. That will teach all those damn nobles a lesson."

Lith deeply bowed to Nana, inwardly apologizing for doubting her character.

"Master, your disciple awaits your command."

The report was indeed brief. Once activated, the amulet generated a small 3D hologram of a middle-aged bald man, sitting behind a clean and orderly desk.

All Nana had to do was to introduce her disciple, say the name of the noble and the mage on the other side had already started giving instructions.

Nana gave nonetheless a short description of the facts, showing the silver whistles as proof. Lith could see from the man's expression that he could not care less about such minor details.

He still took note of everything, even somehow scanning the whistles through the amulet.

After everything was said and done, Nana gave Lith his first assignments.

"Start by reading 'The basics of magic'. Is the book you tried to borrow three years ago." Lith nodded.

"Read it carefully, if there's anything you don't understand, feel free to ask me. In case there is a client, wait for me to finish. If there's no emergency I'll answer you, otherwise you will have to wait.

You can use my study. When you have finished with the basics, I'll give you your first tier one magic book."

Lith ran back in the waiting room, fetching his prize. After sitting behind the desk, with the thick book in front of him, he could not avoid thinking back at all those years spent cramming during college.

He was back being a student, a familiar and reassuring feeling.

Lith pushed emotionalism aside, and opened the book, reading it from the author's foreword.

"My name is Lochra Silverwing. I am known as the wisest sorceress of the Griffon kingdom, and also the only one of my generation to achieve the title of Magus..."

"What the heck is a Magus? Isn't it just a synonym for mage?" Lith paused for a second, taking the mental note to ask about the magicians' hierarchy.

"... I want to dedicate this book to all my female readers, in hope that they can make good use of it and unleash their superior potential.

In a world scourged by wars waged by men, it's of the utmost importance for us women to keep our leading position in the magical field. Let our calm minds soothe the savage fury that dwells in their hearts."

"What the actual f\*ck?!" Lith cursed, jumping off the chair.

He ran straight to Nana, the book still in hand, in dire need of explanations.

"Sorry to be the one to break it to you, but it's the truth." Nana chuckled.

"Like men are stronger physically, women are more apt towards magic. It's the nature of things." (see chapter 12 for more details)

"F\*ck me sideways!" Lith inwardly screamed, amongst Solus giggles.

"Does this mean that I start right on the back foot?" Was what he actually said.

"Yes, little imp. Be it the Griffon kingdom, the Gorgons empire or the Blood Sand desert tribes, usually women hold most of the key roles in the various mage associations. Even I never expected to have a male disciple.

Back when I attended the magic academy, 70% of the students were female. I don't think things have changed much. If you aim for the top spots, they'll be your fiercest competition."

"Great." Lith felt dejected. He wasn't the kind of man to discriminate, he despised humans regardless of their gender. What dispirited him was the idea of being once again on the losing side of life.

"Not rich, not talented, not handsome. I even managed to be of the fairer magical sex. Just splendid." He thought.

"There, there." Nana patted his head. "Don't be depressed. History is full of very powerful male mages. It's the talent that matters the most, not the gender. One day you could even become a Magus."

"Oh, yeah. I almost forgot, that was my second question. What's a Magus?"

## Chapter 23: True Magic

"The magic community is like a separate society, and just like any society it has a clear hierarchy. First there is normal people.

Anyone is capable of using chore magic, but their range barely reaches two metres (2.2 yards) and are incapable of executing any complex task. They are not even considered people. Most mages refer to them as cattle.

Then comes those like you, that can use all the six elements, can perform complex tasks with magic, but lack a proper magical education.

They are referred to as magico (males) or magica (female) and are the real grassroots of the magical community, from which mages can expect a magically talented offspring.

Even if it's considered uncommon, a magica can sometimes be accepted by a magic academy and become a full-fledged magician, like it happened to me.

A magico usually becomes a medicine man in a village or city, depending on his talent. A magico becoming a magician is even more uncommon, but far from rare.

Terms like mage, witch, sorceress, warlock are all just different words that identify someone that managed to enrol in a magic academy and complete the five years course necessary to be recognized as a true member of the magic community.

At that point, one has just to follow his ambitions. You can become the personal mage of a noble, I you enjoy life at Court. Others choose to devote their whole life to study magic or create specific artifacts.

As long as you don't do anything to contribute actively to the development of the Kingdom or the Mage Association, you'll only remain just a mage, no matter how powerful you are or what you accomplish with your experiments.

Remember, no mage can be forced to share his/her spells or discoveries in the magic field. Not even the King himself can openly violate this rule.

But what you keep for yourself has no worth for society, hence it gives you no merits.

Only by sharing your knowledge or by using it to perform tasks from which the Kingdom or the Magic Association take great benefit, you can be elevated to the status of archmage.

They are for the mages what dukes and marquises are for the nobles.

And finally, there is the Magus. A Magus is someone whose power is equal only to his outstanding merits toward the community and the knowledge he shared with the Magical Association.

A Magus usually ensures to those who come after him a deeper understanding of magic, and the means to achieve better foundations than their predecessors.

A Magus is a King to mages, and a god to men. Very rarely there has been more than one. Whenever any country has two or more Magi, it's considered to be in its golden age, everything becomes possible."

Lith was far from impressed.

"Basically, is just a fancy title that some old fogey forces on you after milking you dry. I don't know if by becoming a Magus I would feel just sad or simply lose all my self-respect."

"You insolent whelp!" Nana was outraged by such disrespect. "Without Magi like Lochra and their legacies, people like me would never get the chance to pass the entrance exam of any academy, no matter how small or insignificant.

It would remain a privilege for those with an outstanding talent, or that come from noble or magic families.

Simply by writing that book, she willingly sacrificed a great advantage she had over all the rest of her peers!"

Lith shook his head.

"I see it differently, Master. In my opinion, you do have an outstanding talent. If in the past even those gifted like you wouldn't be accepted, in the long term this would have led the magical community to dwindle, if not to completely disappear.

Being born in a wealthy or talented family only gives you more resources and schooling, but the talent is decided at birth.

Hence Lochra must have written that book not out the goodness of her heart, but to correct a dangerous flaw in the magical community. It's true that magic allows to beat quantity with quality, but there is still strength in numbers.

Without people like you, maybe even like me, there wouldn't be enough new blood, and magic would sooner or later disappear. This is the reason why I can't see her book as a gift. She needed us, and badly."

Nana opened her mouth to rebuke Lith, but stopped halfway. She pondered a while before speaking again.

"Dammit, Lith, whatever your mother fed you with as a baby, I wish I had it too when I had your age. I never looked at it from this perspective, yet I can already sense enough truth behind your words to not dismiss them as child babble."

She sighed deeply with regret.

"I wish I was so profound back in my days. I would have avoided so many stupid mistakes."

"Yeah, sure." Lith thought. "A over thirty years old man that comes from Earth and is not able to see that much would be a complete idiot. Scholarship here or on Earth are the same."

Either a way for the rich to get rid of some of their sense of guilt for being filthy rich, or the manifestation of their fears.

The fear of not having a doctor, a lawyer or any professional help when they need it. If just having an offspring would suffice for their needs, they would have closed the schools centuries ago."

The door of Nana's waiting room opened, the first client of the day had arrived.

"Time to make some money. Do you have any other questions from the foreword?" She tried being sarcastic, but was still dwelling on Lith's words, so she lacked the proper tone.

"Only one. I may need to take notes. Is there anything I could use to write?"

"But off course." After confirming that the woman and child that just entered the waiting room simply needed a medical check, Nana asked them politely to wait for a minute or two.

Nana and Lith got back to her study room, where she gave him a big, thick book with a red hard cover. Its pages were completely blank.

"This will be your first grimoire. Treasure it dearly. Paper is rare and expensive by nature. It's sold by weight, and it's more precious than silver."

Lith was stunned by such news. The book was twenty-seven centimetres (10.7 inches) long, seventeen centimetres (6.7 inches) large and three centimetres (1.2 inches) thick. It was huge.

"I-I..." Lith stuttered for the second time in his new life. "I don't know what to say. I can't believe you would do such a thing for me, it must have costed you a fortune. I'm deeply moved." A tear appeared on the back of his eyes.

Nana laughed heartily.

"Oh! Oh! Oh! So wise yet so naïve. You bet I wouldn't! Money doesn't grow on trees. If it were for me, a few pages would have sufficed, little imp."

The warmth in his heart died as quickly as it had appeared.

"Then who do I have to thank for it?"

"Count Lark, who else? That noble is a magic enthusiast, he sent it to me as soon as he was informed of your apprenticeship. Now more studying and less flapping your gums. You are here to learn magic, not to chat!"

Nana left in a hurry, hoping to avoid her waiting room getting clogged up with patients.

Lith sat back behind the desk and resumed reading. Most of the contents of Lochra's book were old news to him. He had discovered them by himself through countless trial and error experiments.

He could only sigh in regret.

"If only I had this book as soon as I was reborn. I wonder how powerful I would be today."

Whenever Lith would find something noteworthy, he would write it down in his grimoire. Lith could not trust his bad handwriting, so he would dip his finger into the inkwell and then use water magic to spread the ink on the page, and then to dry it.

The result was a whole page written with an outstanding calligraphy, even copying illustrations when necessary, in perfect English. All in just a second.

"Ah ah ah!" Lith inwardly laughed. "I don't need a secret code. I am the only one that speaks English in this world. My secrets are safe with my grimoire."

"They would be safe either way. Don't forget my pocket dimension." Solus chimed in.

"One more layer of protection never hurts. There is no such thing as too careful."

Lith found the sections about fire, water, air and earth quite bland. He already knew almost everything written in the book, but he read carefully every word.

Nana allowed him to read only until lunchtime, then he was forced to go back home and resume his previous routine, switching the hunting time from morning to afternoon.



It took him three days to get to the juicy part. Lith was aware that being a self-taught, light and dark magic were his weakest subjects. They were the only two elements that didn't exist on Earth, after all.

He spent a whole week on the light and darkness section, taking countless notes and finally understanding how shallow and rough was his mastery over those elements.

"Amazing, simply amazing. It never ceases to impress me how profound is Lochra's understanding of light and darkness. Her description of the mana flow in the patient's body is just peerless. I would have never thought of that on my own.

Only now I finally understand why she wrote about them in the same section. Light and darkness are not separate elements, but two sides of the same coin. Darkness is of paramount importance for healing diseases and congenital conditions.

Once I have fully absorbed all this new knowledge, I might even be able to cure Tista for good. If I really manage to do that, I will rethink my view about being a Magus."

Lith read that section again and again, until he became certain to have not missed anything. His magic power hadn't increased much, but his comprehension was now on another level for all the six elements.

Lith was sure he would be able to achieve even stronger foundations, also improving his spirit and fusion magic. But with his confidence, also new doubts arose.

"The more I learn the less it makes sense. How is it possible that with all this knowledge in her hands Nana didn't manage to cure Tista over the years?

Why she needed both hand signs and a magic word to kill Baronet Trahan and his son? A finger snap should have sufficed."

Lith decided to postpone those question until he had fully understood Lochra's book. Maybe he was missing some key element, or maybe it wasn't as easy as it appeared.

Nana was delighted learning that he had finished the whole book in just a week, and immediately gave him his first tier one magic spell book.

"Let's see if you are good at practicing magic as you are with its theory."

Lith took the book from her hands, treating it like a precious gemstone that could easily break. He walked solemnly to his desk, opening the book full of anticipation.

He would have never imagined to be disappointed to such a extent.

"What the f\*cking f\*ck is this? Is this how a spell book is supposed to look like?"

"By my core, what is this cr\*p?" Solus cursed for the first time in her life.

Both Lith and Solus were too flabbergasted to make any further comment. So, they closed the book, re-opened it again, discovering it was unchanged.

They had expected for it to be filled with instructions about how to manipulate the mana flow in the mage's body, how to better connect with the world energy to obtain spells whose power was incomparable to those they already knew.

Instead all they found was an odd mix of a spelling book and a hand signs instruction manual. Not to mention that they already knew all of those tier one spells, just with different names that Lith had invented over time.

"Blasting Sphere is just a Fireball, Piercing Ice is identical to my Frost Lance, if not worse."

Lith did go back to the foreword, noticing that this book had not been written by a Magus, and was just a collection of the most common spells.

By reading the instructions for Blasting Sphere, Lith noticed how the author stressed out the importance of executing the hand signs in the proper order with precise movements.

Even the magic word was split into syllables, to help the student learn the correct pronunciation and accent. After skimming through the whole book, Lith couldn't find any mention of how to perform them with silence magic.

Becoming more and more confused, Lith went to Nana for advice.

"I'm sorry Lith, I had forgot how frustrating and painful is going from the simple and easy silent chore magic to the much more complex real magic. Only tier zero magic can be silently cast. All the superior tiers of magic require both hand signs and proper spelling of the magic word."

Lith's head was spinning so fast he had to sit down for a moment.

"This makes no sense at all." He thought. "I use silent magic with my ice spears and fireballs all the time. I wouldn't be alive otherwise."

Then a sudden thought erupted in his mind.

"Maybe I am special, after all. Maybe I use a different kind of magic because I came from Earth. Maybe I am some sort of chosen one!" Lith was both scared and flattered at the idea.

"None of the above." Solus words abruptly doused his enthusiasm.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. Much appreciated. What's your explanation then?"

Lith could feel Solus's mind spinning so fast that it was hard for him to follow her reasoning.

"If my hypothesis is correct, then you, like Lochra Silverwing and all the other past and present Magus, are one of the few people in this world to actually use true magic."

## **Chapter 24: True Magic and Fake Magic**

"What do you mean with 'true magic'?" Lith said.

"At this point is still too early to tell. Off course if you are too curious you can look at my mind right now, but I don't know how helpful could it be."

Lith merged his mind with Solus, discovering she wasn't exaggerating at all. Her mind was full of 'ifs' and 'buts', constantly examining facts, revisiting memories, making one speculation after the other before dismissing them.

"What can I do to help you?"

"I need two things. First, all the books about the history of magic you can find. Second, we need to get out of here and do some experiments. I'll explain everything later."

Lith went to Nana, asking her for help.

"Sure, I have a magic history book. But is not such an interesting topic, so I only purchased one covering the last couple hundred years. Is that enough for you?"

Lith shook his head.

"Can you please contact Count Lark and ask him if I can borrow some more from him?"

"You sure are an oddball. First you beg me to teach you magic..."

"I never begged. It's you who offered to teach me and I accepted."

Nana pretended to not have heard anything and continued.

"... and now that you get an opportunity to practice real magic, you want to bury yourself in history books?"

"After pondering about what you told me and what Magus Lochra wrote, I understood that I need to understand the past to comprehend the present and plan for the future." Lith improvised, digging up an old family motto.

"Makes sense, sort of." Nana conceded. "I'll contact Lark via the communication amulet and see what I can do."

"The Count has one too?" Lith asked in surprise.

"It's not some sort of secret or anything. Nobles, merchants, soldiers, no matter your background, as long as you can afford the price, you can get yourself one."

Lith thanked Nana before returning to the study room. The book was very detailed, recording both historical turning points and lore.

Lith didn't know what they were looking for exactly, so he read carefully, skimming only the parts about conflicts between countries or Magic Associations. Instead he focused on studying the life of influential mages, archmages and Magi.

After spending a few hours researching the past, he had already found a recurring pattern in the rise of the Magi. Some were recognized as geniuses at an early age.

But most of them had started being considered mediocre at best, never achieving noteworthy results until at some point their talent simply skyrocketed.

It usually happened between the thirty and the forty years of age, well past their supposed prime, when the magical community had pretty much forgot about them.

Of course, the author had no idea of what happened to cause such a turnaround, so he just presented the theories most popular at the time. Too bad that those paragraphs resembled more a work of fiction than history reports.

According to some rumors, Magus Elista had married in secret the god of magic, while others claimed that she had found a mystical amulet from a lost civilization that was able to grant her unlimited mana.

The same had allegedly happened to Magus Morgania and Frejik. An obscure start, followed by a sudden rise in power and glory, with no plausible explanation outside fairy tales and divine encounters.

"Could this be what Solus was looking for? Maybe what changed them wasn't some insane stroke of luck, but the discovery of the 'true magic' Solus mentioned before."

Lith was about to close the book, having ran out of Magi, when Solus stopped him.

"Turn the page, please." Lith had no idea why, but did as instructed. By quickly reading through the page, he noticed it was about some disorders in a faraway place, during which several low ranked mages had died.

Solus had him flipping every page until the book ended.

It was already lunchtime, so Lith started walking back home.

"Did you find anything important?"

"Yes, I think so. I just need us to perform some experiments to put my theory to test. If I am right, once you experience the difference between fake and true magic, you'll be able to understand my reasoning.

I hope that once you do, you can help me fill the holes I am unable to explain."

Lith's mind and heart were in turmoil, the road seemed to stretch endlessly in front of him. Even when he sat around the table together with his family, he was unable to hide his unpleasant feelings.

"Dammit! Dammit all this cr\*p! First my real origin, then spirit magic, fusion magic and now this? How many secrets do I have to keep to protect myself from this world, to protect my family from me?

Couldn't I just find a magical hammer or something, granting me godlike powers? Or maybe just be handpicked by an ancient magician, to become the champion of order just by speaking one frigging word? Why does everything have to be so complicated?

I really love my family, except for Trion, but I can't be honest with them. At this rate, I will never have friends, a lover, anything. I will be forced to spend my life alone with my secrets."

"No. Not alone." Solus's voice resounded in his mind, full of kindness and affection. The tower core around Lith's neck pulsed, releasing gentle waves of mana that enveloped his body like a warm embrace.

Lith's mood lightened a bit, allowing him to have a pleasant meal and conversation with his family, telling each other the respective day's work.

After doing the dishes, he was finally able to leave home and go to the Trawn woods. Lith had his own special glade, deep in the woods. A place spacious enough to train his magical skills without endangering trees or wildlife, away from prying eyes.

Lith and Solus double checked their surroundings for intruders or magical beasts. Finding none, Lith could finally take out his grimoire from the pocket dimension and start memorizing the simplest tier one spell he had found in Nana's book.

"We don't need something powerful or complex for our experiments. Only something to compare with your own spells. The faster you master it, the sooner we'll have our answers." Solus explained.

The spell was Piercing Ice, a watered-down version of the Ice Spears spell that Lith used against huge opponents like the Ry or the boars. Its magic word was "Joruna Lituh", with accents on the u for Joruna and the i for Lituh.

The hand signs required to start with the indexes' fingertips touching themselves, before pulling them away, drawing in the air a 7 with the right index while the left one had to execute mirrored movements at the same time.

After that, the left hand had to stop, while the right index had to rotate, drawing a full circle before pointing at the target.

The expected result was conjuring and shooting a giant ice shard against an enemy.

"Holy sh\*t! And this is a simple one. So much effort for so little return."

At his first try, Lith managed to conjure some kind of giant fork that travelled forward for a couple of meters (2.2 yards) before crashing on the ground.

"You did not aspirate the h." Solus remarked.

Then it came a boomerang that almost chopped his head off.

"It's Lìtuh, not Litùh!"

After a series of non-life threatening failures, Lith had to admit he wasn't able to learn both the pronunciation of the magic word and the hand signs at the same time. So, he had to sit down and recite the spell until he got it right.

After that, he had to face head on his poor hand-eye coordination.

"That's not a seven, more like a one. Do the second line steeper!"

"You are supposed to draw a circle, not an egg!"

"Will you stop your left hand during the last movement, please? Otherwise we'll never see the end of it."

Failure after failure, Solus kept nagging in Lith's mind, correcting the many mistakes he did during each try.

"If you are so good, why don't you do it yourself?" Lith rebutted, bursting with frustration.

"Sorry, I do not have a body. Not to mention I cannot perform any spell unless a) you first know how to do it and b) you give me the permission for it."

It was a long afternoon for Lith, full of cursing, sweating and casting, not necessarily in that order, before he finally managed to get Piercing Ice right.

He kept repeating the spell until it became a second nature to him.

"I can't believe I had to work so hard for the simplest spell. I have barely an hour before the sunset. Hey, Solus is it enough time, or do we wrap things up for today and go back home?"

"Is more than enough. Tell me, how does it feel using magic that way?"

"To be honest, it does not feel at all. I'm so focused on all that cr\*p that I can barely breath."

Solus mentally nodded.

"Perfect. Now cast your Ice Spears spell, shooting only one spear."

Lith was so tired to need to actually use the magic word.

"Jorun!" With a flick of the wrist, Lith conjured a slender, sharp ice javelin that struck the nearest tree faster and harder than the Piercing Ice.

"Now focus, how did you do it?"

Lith couldn't understand all those apparently stupid questions, but he trusted Solus enough to know she wasn't just trying to piss him off.

"Like usual. First, I mentally visualized the effect of my spell, things like the shape of the spear, the trajectory, etcetera.

Then I used my mana core to generate enough mana to support my spell, taking in account the size of the spear I wanted to conjure and how strong I wanted it to strike.

Finally, I projected my mana on the outside, mixing it with the world energy to have access to the water element and voilà! Order up."

"Okay, now use Piercing Ice, again. This time do it slowly, try to feel how your mana flows according to the spell."

Lith needed a few tries before succeeding in the task Solus had assigned him, the result was astonishing.

"What the heck? As soon as I start with the hand signs, a portion of my mana leaves my body. And there is more. The magic word determines how my mana interacts with the world energy, in this case the water element, while also giving the spell its shape and size."

Lith could tell that if Solus had a face, now she would have had a smug grin from ear to ear.

"You are almost at the finishing line. Do Piercing Ice again, but try making the ice shard bigger."

"I can't." Lith was flabbergasted. "If I try adding more mana the spell becomes unstable and dissipates."

Solus asked him to try generating a second ice shard, then to make the single shard faster and finally to alter its trajectory right after it materialized. Lith's answer was always the same.

"I can't. The whole spell is set in stone. Once I learned the proper signs and pronunciation, I became nothing more than a mana source and a targeting system. My mana core and imagination play no part in this type of spell casting."

Lith suddenly reached enlightenment.

"And that's why you consider it fake magic!"

"Calling it fake magic is a little extreme, but for simplicity's sake let's call it that."

Lith could sense Solus brimming with pride.

"Now I can finally share my theory with you. First of all, I'd like you to think back about all the steps necessary for you to use true magic."

Solus paused for a moment, giving Lith time enough to think.

"What's your point?"

"My point is that what you so casually dismiss as 'usual', is actually a really complex feat, much harder than fake magic."

"Hmmm. Sorry, I still can't follow you."

Solus mind-snorted in frustration.



"True magic isn't as simple as you make it out to be. It requires to be aware of your own mana core and to be able to generate the right amount of mana for each and any spell. Too much mana and it would backfire on you, too little and it would not succeed.

It also requires to be able to project your mana outwards, reaching out to the world energy by yourself. I doubt even Nana would be able to do that."

Lith found that last part hard to believe.

"When you put it that way, sure, is not an easy feat. But is what everyone does with chore magic. What's the difference between true and chore magic? Why no one else uses it?"

"The difference is in the amount of mana required. Chore magic needs little mana, so you can use it even without activating your mana core, while true magic may require great amounts of mana, according to what are you trying to accomplish."

Seeing as Lith was struggling, Solus started to use a monotone, lecturing tone.

"Chore magic is the very foundation for magic, it teaches you everything you need except how to activate the mana core. Fake magic is like a crutch, a foolproof 'magic for dummies' spellcasting method.

You only need to learn a few words and gestures and it does everything by itself, as long as you have enough mana. My hypothesis is that chore and fake magic are taught in this order as a training course towards true magic.

But only few, like the Magi, understand that fake magic is not about finger movements and spelling words, is about perceiving the mana flow and learning how to control it.

Your breathing exercises are a crutch as well, but a good one, since they helped you accessing the mana core, making you aware of the mana flow. Fake magic, instead, is a bad one, since it makes its users too reliant on its power.

Most fake magic users are so obsessed by details like hand signs and pronunciation, that live their whole lives without noticing what lies beyond. Fake mages, especially those with great talent, become so complacent being able to do what no one else can, that they never stop for a moment to ask themselves why. Is kind of ironic."

Lith was astonished. Everything made perfect sense.

"But if you had all this figured out, why didn't you tell me? What are those holes in your theory you mentioned earlier?"

Solus was embarrassed, but replied nonetheless.

"Because I can't answer some key points of my own theory. If I am right, why is fake magic the only one available for everyone? Why true mages kill whoever tries spreading it to the whole world?"

"Say what?!?"

Solus merged their minds, showing to Lith all the things she had noticed reading the history book. How so many theorists and rising mages had all died in accidents or mysterious circumstances, often right after announcing to the magical community a ground-breaking discovery.

Others, instead, would be dismissed as frauds, before going mad and disappear.

Lith could only laugh his heart out.

"Oh, my. Solus, you are so smart and yet so naïve in the ways of mankind. The answer is really simple. Do you know why back on Earth we had traffic jams? Because everyone could get a car.

Would you really let any madman, any naïve fool gets his hands on this kind of power? Fake magic is a mean to control the masses, it's not the final test like you think.

After one discovers true magic, the final test is proving to be smart enough to silently join the club and reap the benefits. And if you don't like the club rules, the only way out is death."

## **Chapter 25: True Magic and Fake Magic 2**

When they finished comparing notes about Solus' explanation for true magic, it was already late. Lith had to rush to get out of the woods before it became too dark. He wasn't afraid of night time predators, his mother Elina, though, were another story.

"If I come back too late, I'll get grounded for weeks. Darn it all, I hate curfew so much!"

He did not want to come back home empty handed, so he took out of the pocket dimension a couple of fat blinkers he had saved for moments like that.

The next day, Nana informed Lith that the Count had agreed to help, and that some of his best books were on their way.

Lith was forced to pretend being still engrossed in Nana's history book, it was too big to finish it in one go. He spent that day abridging all the tier one spells on his grimoire, keeping only the name, hand signs and pronunciation instructions and a short description for each spell.

"I don't need to waste precious pages on this cr\*p. I can fake out the hand signs by moving my hands fast, but I still need to remember each new magic word when I pretend to use fake magic.

Also, if Nana wants to put me to test, I need to show her my proficiency. Sigh, all this brainless memorizing will drive me crazy. The silver lining is that by learning this stuff I can predict an enemy's spell and counter it if necessary."

More than once, Lith found himself wishing Solus could move his body at will. She had a much better memory, and it would save him a lot of time and effort.

The only spell Lith was really eager to try was the air magic Floating Body. With this incantation one could make float in mid-air anything or anyone weighing less than one hundred kilograms (220.5 pounds).

It had many uses, like braking a free fall, moving a severely injured patient without bumps, or moving without leaving traces and making noises while hunting or on scouting.

This was something that Lith had attempted many times on his own but with no success. He could easily make others float with spirit magic, but not himself. It was really hard balancing his whole body while focusing on the spell, the same could be said about using air magic instead of spirit magic.

A minor mistake would make him float upside down or make him spin like in a washing machine. Lith never managed to float properly, let alone moving.

"If Solus is right and fake magic is a training course, I can use this Floating Body to learn how to float for good. Then, the most natural step is evolving it into a flight spell. I can't wait to soar through the skies like my childhood heroes!"

Right after lunch, Lith went back into the woods and started practicing. Floating Body's magic word was "Brezza Ri Lak", so he had no problems with pronunciation. The hand signs, instead, were quite complicated.

Having learned from his mistakes, Lith first made sure he had got the magic word right before moving to the hand signs. He took it slow and easy, he didn't need to learn how to fast cast it, only to learn from the spell how to distribute the energy.

After only a few tries, Lith managed to cast the Floating Body properly. It was an odd feeling, much different from what he had expected.

To float it did not require a single strong updraft, but hundreds of them at the same time, each one pushing upwards with the same force to keep the balance in check.

"This is much worse than I had anticipated. No wonder I always failed in the past. Now, according to the book, Floating Body makes me weightless, standing in place. To move I need either external support or air chore magic."

Lith started to generate weak winds, moving around like a toy drone.

"This feels great! This spell has countless applications, I wonder why it's just a tier one despite being so elaborate."

"Because it lasts only one minute" Solus reminded him while Lith was already falling to the ground.

After experimenting with Floating Body a few times, Lith used his own mana flow to replicate the spell. Soon it became apparent that he wouldn't be able to do it in a single afternoon. True magic, after all, was really more difficult than its fake counterpart.

Angry and frustrated, Lith started grumbling non-stop.

"It's all so annoying, having to learn two kinds of magic for every damn spell. I'm telling you, Solus, I have seriously considered using Floating Body instead. But if I am stupid enough to do so, then I would be forced to learn all its upper tier versions, and who knows at what step lies actual flight.

This way, instead, once I get some solid foundations, everything else should come easy. Or at least I hope so."

Lith spent all day and night practicing his new spell, Levitation, but when morning came, he had yet to succeed.

The following day, a small crate of books was delivered to Nana's house, and she promptly handed it to Lith.

"If they were mine, I would never allow you to bring them out of my house. But the Count explicitly told me you are free to bring them home as you see fit. Lark is a very generous man, don't abuse his trust."

At first, Lith was really pissed off. He had completely forgot about his plea from help, and now he was flooded with useless books that he had to pretend to read. After two whole days as a shut in, his body was craving for some action.

But then he noticed that there weren't that many history books, most of them were biographies and autobiographies of past and present prominent mages, archmages and Magi. He finally had at hand the information he needed about how much talent he could reveal safely.

Lith could finally see a light at the end of one of the many tunnels he was stuck in. So far, his apprenticeship had only added more problems to his life, getting lucky for once, made him feel really good.

He took note in his grimoire of all the feats his role models accomplished and at what age they managed to do it. Then it came the most serious part, deciding how far to push his act.

"I'm of humble origins and with no backer. Mimicking a Magus is like courting death. If even revealing less talent than Nana brought a noble to try to kill me, showing so much skill would put me on the hit list of all the major families."

"Agreed." Solus chimed in.

"The best choice is to keep being below Nana's talent. If Count Lark starts protecting you, you can ramp you up to her level. A male mage of that skill would definitely be noteworthy. From then, is better to adjust your power talent based on how things develop."

"My thoughts exactly." Lith mind nodded.

During the following weeks, while at Nana's house, Lith and Solus split the tasks at hand. Lith crammed all the tier one spells while Solus would read the Count's books and take note of every relevant detail.

Lith gave her control over both spirit and water magic, making her possible to flip books and write an appendix on the grimoire.

During the afternoon, instead, they would try to make Levitation work. Little by little they were working out all the problems, sometimes even improving Floating Body foundations.

Lith completed Levitation after over a month of hard work, and by that time he had also already mastered all the tier one spells, but he was forced to wait. According to the Count's books, that was a feat worthy of a future archmage.

So, he had to wait for another half a month before revealing to Nana the fruits of his endeavours. She was truly impressed by Lith's skill and determination.

Nana had told him that back in the day she had needed less than a month to memorize all the book, and despite Lith being of lesser talent, he had managed to accomplish the same result with just two weeks of delay.

Nana had expected that it would take him no less than two whole months.

Nana offered him to help her during the busy hours, and Lith gladly accepted. Until completing Levitation he had not hunted for over a month. Not only the reserve of game he kept in the pocket dimension was almost depleted, but that huge break had also costed him a lot of money.

Lith needed to make up for the lost time. Officially he only knew two tier one light spells, Vinire Rad Tu (the illness/injuries detecting spell) and Vinire Dan, a basic healing spell, capable to treat coughs, light colds and not too deep cuts.

Hence, most of the times he would only get the diagnosis fee, since it would be Nana treating the patients. He could only get to heal minor injuries, yet his profits weren't that bad.

Nana's business had deep roots, people from all the neighbouring villages would come to seek her aid.

By spending more time in the front office, Lith discovered that Nana was so much more than a healer for the people of Lutia. She was also their protector and the strongest law enforcer.

Simply by living there, most bandits would avoid the village, and those who were brave enough to attack would quickly meet their maker before doing any real damage. Nana was also the shield for all the local merchants and population.

No foreigner merchant, young master or young mistress could bully the people of Lutia without incurring in her wrath. Sometimes she would be called even to put an end to a drunken brawl.

Lith found hard to believe she had such disposition toward the people she served, always standing ready to intervene whenever was necessary.

One day, after Nana taught a lesson to a young noble and his bodyguards, believing that he could forcefully take any maiden that suited his taste, Lith decided to find out the truth.

The old hag had already proven that she cared about money more than everything. Lith had fallen for her kind act more than once, so he wanted to know what her real angle was.

Being rude to his mentor was definitely a bad idea, so he went with a subtler approach.

"Master, I really don't know how to express my admiration for you. Taking care of the safety of the village, basically all by yourself, and asking nothing in return. It's really impressing of you."

Nana laughed out loud, sounding ominous like the plumber, back on Earth, that once Lith had been forced to call during a national holiday.

"You really are hilarious, kid. Sometimes you are so wise I almost forget you are just six years old. But whenever you come out with this nonsense, you really look like a naïve child. Off course I get something in return. Have you ever wondered why my treatments are so expensive?"

## **Chapter 26: Kindness and Retribution**

"Actually, yes. Many times. But I always thought those were the normal fares for a healer." In the moment he said it out loud, Lith remembered how ignorant he was in the ways of the new world.

"They are not." Nana shook her head. "Listen, little imp, in a few years you are going to get out of this village and face the world. Not everyone is kind as your parents, and most nobles are not like Count Lark.

For the average person life is hard, most of the time unfair, and hard work means nothing without luck and opportunity. I don't tell you this because I want to scare you, only because I don't want you to make my same mistakes.

You need to wise up, so let me tell you a story. Once upon a time, a mage fallen from grace decided to return to her old village, to settle in and forget about her failures. At first, people were scared of her, thinking she would abuse her power and authority to settle old feuds.

But the mage was too tired and bitter for petty revenges, she only wanted peace. So, when she became a medicine woman, doing nothing but tending to the ill and wounded for a fair price, the villagers were really happy

And when they noticed that since her arrival brigands, merchants and nobles treated the village with much more respect, they became ecstatic. But bad things kept happening from time to time, since the mage had no interest in playing hero.

So, the people in the village offered her a deal. They would pay her a certain sum in exchange for her help. Everything was perfect, and everyone was happy for a while. Then, the villagers, the only ones whom benefited from her protection, decided to make a little change to the initial deal.

Sure, peace and quiet were doing wonders for business, and the presence of the mage brought so many people from the neighbouring villages to get treatment, but that sum each year was a burden to their profits.



Not even the fact that the County's most important noble had made the village the permanent seat for the local spring festival was enough to satiate their greed.

So, they decided to convince the local farmers that it was in their best interest to help the villagers cover the sum they had agreed to pay to the mage. You may ask how did they managed to do it. Well, let's just say not appealing to the goodness of their hearts.

They simply threatened the farmers to change the exchange rate of their goods to the point of making their life a living nightmare. And what could the farmers do about it? Nothing.

They needed the blacksmith for their tools, the merchant to buy and sell cattle and crops. You can easily imagine the rest. Without the villagers, the farmers were cut off from the rest of the County.

By refusing, every single farmer would have to travel for days, each year, even to buy a new plough. Not to mention how hard and perilous would it be moving the cattle and the crops to the nearest merchant, all while leaving family and fields unattended."

Lith nodded, a ferocious expression on his face.

"Let me guess. According to the new deal, every time the farmers needed the help of the mage, they would pay a share of the agreed sum."

"Just like everyone else." When Nana had finished her story, she, could read the rage and disgust in the eyes of her disciple.

"There, there, Lith. I didn't mean to make you angry, the purpose was to show you what normal people, even good people, do to each other on daily basis.

We are good friends and all, but that is until our pockets or families get involved, then one own's priorities come first.

Life is hard for everyone, but for mages is even worst. Normal people see them as monsters, nobles as something to submit or exploit.

But the worst comes always from your own. Even in the magical academy you will find hidden ranks, hierarchy, and the competition will be tougher than you can imagine.

The pressure both families and teachers put on those poor kids quickly turns them into ferocious beasts. They get measured, judged and looked down upon for every mistake they make.

Social status, wealth, talent, the more they have the higher the expectations for them."

Lith was starting to get confused.



"So, do you want me to go easy on them? To don't judge hastily? To try making friends rather than enemies?" He was inwardly scoffing.

"Gods forbid it! The very opposite!" Nana yelled in desperation, flapping her arms like a hysterical bird.

"I already told you, you need to wise up. Don't fall for the first nice act someone performs. How do you think they will treat a dirty poor country bumpkin?

How do you think they treated me? At first you will easily make friends with the students from the lower classes, but as soon you'll reveal any talent, you'll be surrounded by only two kind of people.

Those who want to destroy you and those who want to suck up on you. Stay away from the former, and ever further from the latter, otherwise you'll end up like me.

Naively believing to have lots of important friends, until you make one single mistake, and then they pile up on you like everyone else, leaving only scorched earth around you." When she finished talking, Nana looked really tired and bitter, staring at the floor with watery eyes, she seemed to have aged about twenty years.

Lith pondered for a while on her words, before giving her his answer.

"I appreciate the thought and will treasure your words forever. But I also hope you'll understand that your story kind of pissed me off big time. So, here is my plan for the immediate future..."

When Nana finished listening to Lith's idea, she laughed heartily, going back to her old snarky self.

"That's what I am talking about. Good boy! I'm finally starting to rub some good sense on you. You have my permission, but do it only in my absence, it would be bad for my revenue otherwise. If anyone complains or tries to do something funny, I'll cover for you."

In the following months, Lith had to prove time and time again his magical skills as a healer, before Nana gave him a tier two spellbook to learn from. This allowed him to expand his official skillset and be recognized by the people of Lutia as a true healer.

Lith was finally able to enact his plan.

Nana wasn't always at her home office. Sometimes she had personal business to attend to, but most of the times it was because she had to do house calls for patients that cannot be moved.

During those times, Lith was in charge of everything. Those who could afford to, would wait for Nana to return. Lith was still six-year-old after all, he didn't seem trustworthy enough to put someone's life in his hands without Nana's supervision.

But emergencies couldn't be planned, so there was always someone desperate enough to come for his help. His first real patient ended up to be Lukah, Rizel's youngest brother (see chap 21).

He was just a toddler, so his mother, Lisa, had a terrified expression when she brought him in. Lukah was crying desperately, his left arm purple and swollen, bent in an unnatural angle.

Lith hadn't even finished pulling the curtain to give them some privacy, that Lisa laid Lukah on the bed and started to beg for Lith's help.

"It's all my fault, I'm so stupid. I was cradling him in my arms, while preparing lunch, when he started squirming and fell. Can you please help my baby?"

Lith quickly waved his fingers into a "Vinire Rad Tu!" A small wisp of light danced around the baby before penetrating his chest. The light spreaded to all his body, becoming dimmer around his chest and left arm.

Immediately after, Lith faked a "Vinire Lakhat!" Guided by his willpower, the light magic first dulled the pain, then it made the bone fragments reattach themselves to the ribcage and the arm.

Lith used his Invigoration breathing technique on the baby, using the imaging it provided him to make sure that the bones were perfectly healed and aligned before interrupting the spell.

"He had a broken arm and cracked ribs, but now is as good as new." Lukah was still crying, but now he was moving both arms, his skin pink and with no traces of bruises.

Lisa sighed in relief, thanking Lith with a deep bow before handing him the money.

It was Nana's usual fare, four copper coins. Enough for a family of four to eat well for one day.

Lith took only two, what she would have paid without the village protection tax. Seeing that she was confused, Lith whispered:

"I know about the deal with the villagers, and I am not Nana. I protect no one. Also, us farmers need to stick together, am I right? Please, keep your lips sealed about it, otherwise the next time I will be forced to ask you for the full price."

Lisa was chocked, her eyes watery. She did not know what to say.

"Then can I ask you to check my leg too? It hurts from a while, and the pain is not getting any better over time."

"Is that how the little Lukah managed to slip away?" Lith asked.

"Yes. A few weeks ago, I took a bad fall while repairing a hole in the roof. At first it didn't hurt much, and with a baby we could not afford a visit for every small thing."

Lith used Invigoration again, using the injury detection spell as a cover.

"Holy cr\*ap, her leg is badly cracked. It's a miracle she was still able to walk without a limp."

After healing her, Lith was conflicted about taking the rest of the money. He could see Elina in her, all the sacrifices his family had made just for keeping Tista alive were always vivid in his memory.

Lith couldn't avoid empathizing with the daily struggles his neighbours had to face every day, perceiving them as real persons, like him, instead of dismissing them as trash, like he always did with those he killed in the past.

Luckily Lisa took the choice for him, handing the money and opening the curtain before he could say a word.

"What a proud woman, truly deserving my respect. Next time she comes, I'll perform the healing while checking up the wound, so she won't get to pay."

Those four copper coins were the heaviest Lith's hand had ever held. Lisa's family would have to skip a meal or two to cover for that expense.

From that day onward, Lith would do the same thing for all the farmers, always prompting them to silence. Soon his reputation grew wildly outside the village's borders.

Inside those same borders, though, things were quite different.

On another occasion, when Nana had been called away, another kind of patient walked in. It was Renkin, merchant and richest man in the village, barging in while carrying his son on a makeshift stretcher, with the help of one of his assistants.

"Nana! Where in the nine hells is that wretched healer when you really need her?!"

"She is away at the moment." Lith moved forward, making way for the stretcher. The boy was around fifteen years old, his black hair stood out on his pale face. He was bleeding from his leg, despite the wound was tightly wrapped up.

"Where is she?" Renkin yelled.

"The men repairing the Colen bridge had an accident, she will be back on the afternoon at best."

"You idiot, can't you see my son is dying? I do not have that much time!"

Lith snorted in annoyance.

"If you have to yell and be rude, that's the door. If you want me to take care of him..."  
Lith extended his right hand, while pointing with the left at a sign on the wall that said:  
"Payment up front. No refunds."

"Paying you?! What are you, four?"

"Almost six and a half. Again, if you aren't going to pay, make space for real clients. If you want miracles, feel free to pray. But do it outside." Lith's tone was stone cold.

"Okay, okay!" Renkin gave up. "Here is you goddamned four copper coins."

"Eight." Lith stopped him before he could take the money out of his pouch.

"That's clearly a deep wound, requiring two tier two spells, if not even a tier three. Either way the price is set to eight copper coins." Lith pointed to another sign, stating the prices:

"Check-up: 1 copper coin. Tier one spells: +1 cc. Tier two spells: +3 cc. Tier three spells: +7 cc"

"But those are Nana's prices! You are not Nana!"

"Really?" Lith mimicked his Master's snarky tone. "What gave me away? The age? The height? The gender? You are really perceptive, worthy of a merchant."

Renkin was choking on his own anger. Such an arrogant little brat!

"I meant that you shouldn't ask so much! Didn't your Master tell you about our agreement?"

Lith just pointed to the end of the second sign, where "No discounts, ever" was written in big bright red words.

"Don't you have a heart? How can you ask so much? You are so young and inexperienced, after all!" In all his years as a merchant, Renkin was proud to have never overpaid any product. He was determined to get a discount at all costs.

"I could argue that I don't think you ever gave a discount to someone just for pointing out your age or likeability.

Also, which one of us his bargaining on his son's life? I doubt all healing magic in the world would do him any good once he bleeds out."

Finally remembering about his beloved Garth, Renkin finally paid the fee, letting Lith do his job.

"What happened?" Lith asked after using Vinire Rad Tu coupled with Invigoration, sensing a deep cut wound that missed the femoral artery by an ich.

"This blockhead and his idiotic best friend had the brilliant idea of practicing their swordsmanship with real swords, that's what happened."

"He lost a lot of blood." Lith said after completely healing the leg. "Keep him at rest and make him eat rare meat."

Later, that day, when Renkin returned to complain to Nana about her disciple, she laughed hard in his face for a whole minute, before shutting her door in his face.

## **Chapter 27: Merits and Trus**

Two more years passed, Lith was now eight years old. During that time, he had mastered all the spells contained in Nana's books, which brought his official skill set up to the most common tier three spells.

Books about superior tiers were extremely expensive, and Nana had no interest in acquiring them. She had her own grimoire, after all. The books she bought over the years were mostly for display, to show her clients what they could purchase.

But while his skill in fake magic stagnated, Lith used those years to deepen his understanding of true magic. His grasp on its profoundness and foundations had improved greatly.

By practicing true magic every day as a healer, he had gained such fine control on both light and darkness magic that he had finally acquired the necessary skill to permanently get rid of Tista's congenital condition.

The problem was that despite all his efforts, his mana core was not strong enough to perform the treatment Lith had devised.

During those years he had used Assimilation whenever he could, making his mana core going through multiple cycles of expansion and compression, turning it from deep green to bright green.

But it was still green. Lith's impurities had yet to reach the mana core, and until that happened both his mana and body would not undergo through qualitative changes.

He had reached a bottleneck, and had no idea how to overcome it.

Solus too had changed quite a lot. She was no more limited to her pebble form, but could actually turn into any shape while retaining the same overall mass.

That allowed Solus to take the form of a smooth stone ring, that Lith wore on his right middle finger.

When she asked him why a ring on the middle finger, Lith replied with an odd short poem related to a green ring of power. It was something related to his childhood, of which he was really fond of.

Along with some of her power, Solus had also regained a new function, something that Lith called Soluspedia. It was another pocket dimension, but specifically crafted for books and any means to store knowledge.

All the books that Lith stored in the Soluspedia, he could consult with but a thought. For example, by storing his grimoire he didn't need to memorize anymore the magic words and hand signs for the fake magic spells he had learned.

Lith still had to practice the hand signs and pronunciation, but he only had to think about what he needed to remember everything up to the smallest detail. The same applied for maps, herbals and bestiaries.

Lith had given almost everything he had earned as a healer to his family, allowing them to have a much easier life and accumulate a decent dowry for Rena and Tista.

Whatever he kept for himself, he would use to buy the most detailed compendiums he could find about the most useful topics, like law, court etiquette and even a vocabulary.

As long as they were in the Soluspedia, Lith knew them inside and out. What made him inwardly gloating, was the fact that he could buy even those items that were almost crumbling or defective, resulting to be highly perishable.

That wasn't a problem for him. Just like for the pocket dimension, they would be frozen in time, and hence potentially last forever.

After his eight winter ended, Lith received a call from Count Lark on Nana's communication amulet. The event took him by surprise, the Count had never contacted him before.

Having had plenty of video calls and job interviews on Discort and Skope back on Earth, he was familiar with that kind of meeting. Lith bowed deeply as a salute, while cupping his fist.

"Dear Lith, you are always so polite. No need for all the formalities, you are among friends now." Count Lark had a convivial and friendly demeanour, making him seem more like an uncle calling his nephew rather than a Lord.

"Count Lark, to what do I owe the pleasure of this call?" Lith looked at Nana, standing beside him, in search for approval. She nodded while staring at the magical hologram of the Count.

"You have accumulated quite some merits, I wanted to know if you plan on using some of them." Merits were something that anyone who contributed to the welfare of the kingdom would receive and could be exchanged for privileges or commodities.

A convict could have his sentence shortened by serving in the military and earning merits, a farmer could get more land for free, a scholar could get a recommendation for a government job.

"Merits?" Lith was taken aback. "I didn't do anything to earn such things."

"Quite the contrary, dear Lith. Every year I receive hundreds of commendation letters from the farmers and their families, about the outstanding job you are performing as a healer."

Since Lith had started to give treatments for half the price to the farmers, they would wait for Nana to leave the village before going to get medical care. Nana knew it and did not care.

They still needed her for the emergencies, and the house call extra fees covered whatever profit she may have lost.

"A letter counts for earning merits?" Lith asked, still confused.

"One letter, no. But dozens, hundreds of letters all about the same person for a prolonged period of time, off course they do. Do you have anything in mind the kingdom can help you with?"

Lith pondered for a while, while accessing the law book in Soluspedia. More land was suicidal, his family was already stretched thin, and they cannot afford hired help.

The kingdom would not trade merits for money, but Lith could still get the next best thing.

"Do I have enough for my family to be exonerated from taxes this year?"

Count Lark dropped his monocle from the shock, the mouth ajar.

"Taxes? Your family still pays taxes?"

"Yes, we are law abiding citizens, your lordship." Lith was almost as confused as the Count, but with a better poker face.

"I'll flay my accountant alive!" The Count jumped off his chair, his face red from anger.

"I told that incompetent fool to exonerate your family since the day Lady Nerea took you under her wing! I swear to the gods, I'll fire that man with such bad references he will never find another employer."

Lith tried to calm the Count down.

"Maybe is for the best. I'd prefer to be exonerated because of my merits, rather than for being a magician in training."

The Count sat back down, a perplex expression on his face.

"Why? The result is the same, and you would get to keep your merits for future needs."

"It may seem just a matter of semantics but is not." Lith explained.

"If my family gets exonerated, sooner or later it will come out, and what happens next will depend on the reason why we got it. If it is because of my status, in the eyes of the community it would be an unfair privilege.

That could generate envy and grudges, and in such tight community it could prove to be toxic. Help and support from the neighbours are of paramount importance for a farm, and I will not stay there forever.

If we get exonerated because of my merits, instead, it would be something that the community has bestowed on me, as a sign of gratitude for my good deeds.

Being able to somehow repay their benefactor, would make them feel happy, and prevent them from harbouring ill feelings."

During all the explanations, Lith was inwardly crying out of joy, congratulating himself about purchasing the vocabulary.

"I can finally talk like I used back on Earth. The inability to express myself correctly has always been such a burden." He thought.

"Magic is indeed the supreme form of art." Count Lark nodded in agreement. "Only a magician can be so wise despite being so young. I am honestly impressed."



"A dragon whelp is still a dragon, after all." Nana chimed in. "The boy is not only wise beyond his age, but also is blessed by the light. He is talented enough to have already invented his own light spells.

Lith's skill as a healer is almost at the same level I had back at his age, and he even created some cosmetic spell for his sister. She has the fairest skin I have seen in my whole life. This is just between us, off course."

Lith was smiling and nodding, but he was actually scared to death. Nana seemed to have seen through some of his deception.

"Wonderful! Just wonderful!" The Count jumped off his chair out of joy, losing once again his monocle. "Thanks for your trust, Lith. I will keep your secret with me at all costs!"

After the call ended, Lith stared at Nana, unable to express his questions out loud. She laughed out tauntingly as usual.

"Don't be so shocked, I'm a mage too, after all. When some of your patients came back for a second opinion, after describing me their injuries, I was bound to discover the truth. Some of those wounds were supposed to be beyond your skill.

As for your mother and sister, you just overdid it, little imp. Whatever you did, made them too gorgeous. I commend you for doing it slowly and over time, but whoever knows a thing or two about magic would suspect something.

As for the Count, he too would notice, once Rena first and Tista later take part in the Spring Maiden contest. Or do you think he has acorns instead of eyes? It's better to play it this way. Lark is an honest man, the best noble I have ever met.

If he thinks he has your trust, he will do his best to uphold it. You are still his precious pet project, after all. I doubt he would risk to lose everything he has invested so far for such a trivial matter."

Lith could do nothing but agree.

"Master, you do not trust anyone, do you?"

Nana snorted.

"I barely trust myself. Besides, I am the only one who always fought for my best interests."

Lith bowed deeply, his fist cupped.

"Master, your disciple thanks you for your guidance and help. I will take your words to heart."

In the following days, Lith could not stop blaming himself for making such stupid mistakes.

"Dammit! Always so full of myself! I need to stop thinking I am always the smartest in the room. I can't keep screwing up on the small details, in the long run it could be prove to be fatal. Having such a bitter and cynic Master is a blessing in disguise.

We are basically two peas in a pod. She still suspects nothing, and I have to keep it that way. Having her by my side can help me grow as a mage and protect me from my own stupidity at the same time."

Aside from that, Lith's family got exonerated from the annual fees thanks to his merits, and as he predicted, that caused only joy and happiness in the neighbours. It had happened thanks to them, after all.

It was a slow day at Nana's house office, when two hunters barged in, bringing on their shoulders two more hunters, covered in blood.

"A magical beast!" The hunter in the lead shouted. "A magical beast is rampaging through the Trawn woods! Please, you have to save my men. That monster almost ripped them apart"

## **Chapter 28: Hunter and Prey**

The people in the waiting room made space for the hunters, while Nana and Lith quickly dismissed their previous patients, leaving the beds free for the wounded men.

They were so desperate, that no one complained about Lith's age or diminutive stature. Before any of the two hunters could say anything, both healers spoke as one.

"Close the curtains and let me do my job."

They performed "Vinire Rad Tu", but rather than to find the cause of the affliction, which laid bare in front of their eyes, it was meant to check if there was a sliver of hope saving them.

Lith didn't even had the time to activate Invigoration, before noticing that the woman was already dead. He tried nonetheless, but there was no mana flow to manipulate, no life force to enhance with light magic.

"I'm sorry." Lith said closing the dead woman's eyes. "She was already dead before you got here."

Before he could continue with his bedside manners, Nana yelled to him.

"Get here, quick! We can still save this one if we work together!"

Lith rushed to the other bed, positioning himself at the man's feet while Nana moved behind the head. They both needed space to operate at their best.

Nana was right, Invigoration could still feel a mana flow, despite it being weak. The hunter's wounds were very deep, Lith doubted that fake magic could help him.

Fake healing magic would spread to the whole body, before focusing on the injury, and that caused it to need a few seconds to take effect. Even worse, the spreading and focusing process would cause the spell to lose some of its effectiveness.

True healing magic, instead, would directly affect the wound. Thanks to Invigoration, Lith was also able to pinpoint where to send the light mana with surgical precision, maximizing the potency of the spell.

"Nana's specialty is not light magic, after all. If she called me, it means that she hopes my personal spells can save this man."

For a moment, Lith hesitated. He would have loved to have the time to ponder about the risk reward ratio of that scenario.

He couldn't care less about the life of a stranger, he was much more scared of exposing his secrets, losing everything in the process.

"Screw it! Sooner or later I'll have to reveal my spells. I want to believe in Nana and give all this 'blessed by the light' cr\*p a go. Play scared, die scared."

Lith started performing quick hand signs, mixed with ninja hand seals he remembered from an old movie. He had prepared that choreography since the last conversation with Count Lark.

"Vinire Eskla!" The light magic flowed straight through the hunter's blood vessels, repairing them and stopping the blood loss. With Nana keeping his conditions stable, Lith was able to bring the hunter to the point where fake magic could save him.

After that, he had to lean against the wall and slide down to the ground.

Lith was exhausted, he had never attempted something that required so much focus and mana for a prolonged time.

"Damn my stupid green mana core! If it was already cyan, maybe I wouldn't be forced to leave halfway through the procedure."

Luckily, Nana took all the credit for the success, relieving Lith from any possible questioning about his unknown spell.

After taking her forty copper coins, she warned the hunters' leader.

"He is alive, but barely. I don't know if he will make it or not. I can't even assure you a full recovery. His injuries were too deep, we did the best that we could."

"Forty copper coins, almost a f\*cking half silver coin and that's all you have to say? A bunch of ifs and wishful thinking?" He yelled.

Nana clearly understood that the man wasn't really angry with her or Lith, he still could not accept the loss of one, if not both of his friends.

Yet she did not care.

When it came to anger, Nana was second to none. She had been the scapegoat for others' misbehaviour enough to last for a lifetime.

"Listen to me, young man, and listen well. I dare you find any village that hosts not one, but two healers capable of casting tier three spells!

If you want certainties, go find Krishna Manohar, the god of healing! He lives in the White Griffon Academy, just five hundred kilometres (311 miles) from here! And now get out of my house, before I make you!"

Even a grieving man knew that to further antagonize a mage whose eyes were brimming with power and whose voice generated wind blows was plain suicide.

The two surviving hunters could only comply.

While Nana was clearing the blood spattered around the room, Lith had managed to use Invigoration enough to recover some of his strength, so he followed them outside.

Trawn woods was too close to his house for comfort.

"Sir hunter, please wait!" They were already halfway toward the tavern.

The hunters' leader really wanted to vent his frustration on the little pest, but he had regained enough of his cool to admit that the kid was blameless. If anything, he had contributed saving the life of his little brother.

That and he was still scared sh\*tless by Nana.

"No need for honorifics, young man. My name is Ekart Longran, and this is my sworn brother Flek Irotia."

"My name is Lith." The three men bowed to each other.

"The man whose life you saved is my little brother, Otum Longran. If I can do anything to return the favour, you just need to say the word."

"Could you please tell me more about this magical beast?"

Ekart shivered for a moment, his eyes closed by the fear that memory generated in his heart. But he was a great hunter, who had danced with death countless times. With every passing second, he was recovering both his courage and spirits.

"It's a huge Byk, do you what it is?"

Lith nodded.

According to the bestiary in the Soluspedia, a Byk was a bear that had evolved into a magical beast. They were in tune with earth magic, in rare cases also with fire magic.

"It all started around a month ago. The farms on the east side of the Trawn woods were being attacked by a mad beast. At first it would just slay some cattle, before returning to the woods.

But then that harpy of Baroness Rath put a huge bounty on the Byk, in hope to avenge his mad son. She believes he has fallen prey to the beast months ago."

"Rath." Lith thought. "The name sounds familiar."

"The psycho that tried to rob you of your bunnies." Solus reminded him.

"And that was the beginning of the end. After slaying some wannabe hunters, lured by the promise of easy money, the Byk got a taste for human flesh. From that moment, it started to hunt down his pursuers with elaborate traps.

When we understood how smart the Byk is, it was already too late. We managed to get away only because he was too engrossed in his last meal to chase us."

Lith bowed again.

"Thanks. I live near the woods, and your information may have just saved my family. Consider your debt settled."

Before he could turn around, Ekart grabbed his shoulder.

"I have been long enough in the business to recognize a fellow hunter when I see one. Listen to my advice, don't go after it. That beast is unnatural. Not only is smart and cunning, it also moves at unbelievable speed.

No matter how fast you run away or chase it, it keeps switching places, li-like a ghost. I know it sounds stupid, but I believe it to be a vengeful spirit."

Lith thanked him again, before going back to help move Otum in one of the tavern's rooms and to clean the blood on Nana's house floor.

When he finished, Nana handed him twenty copper coins, half the fee.

"Go home and rest. You really are talented in light magic, but that spell is too draining for you. Use it only in case of emergencies."

Lith nodded, but before going back home he needed to purchase some things. He kept discussing the matter with Solus the whole time. Facing such a monster without more than one plan and enough preparation was idiotic.

After warning Selia, he spent the whole day resting and using Accumulation. In a life or death situation even a small power up could make the difference.

That night, he slept for the first time in two months. Lith wanted to be at his peak condition, he wasn't willing to take unnecessary risks. He woke up before dawn, leaving a note for his parents.

He then wore his brand-new leather hunter set, with metal protectors for the forearms, shins and heart, his last line of defence in case everything else failed. Once outside, after checking there were no witnesses, he casted the Soaring Hawk spell and took flight.

The Trawn woods was too big, and moving on foot was too slow. Using both his Life Vision and Solus' mana sense, he started looking for his prey, while moving near the top of the trees.

It didn't take long to find it, the Byk wasn't even trying to hide. Lith could trace it thanks to the bear claw marks on trees and rocks, until he found it eating a deer.

"So much for smart and cunning. How the heck can it still eat? It should have filled his belly many times already." Lith thought. "Nevertheless, let's see if I can kill it nice and easy."

The Byk was on the ground, while Lith was in the sky, the distance between them about 30 metres (33 yards), well within the spirit magic's range.

Lith sent a huge wave of mana, meaning to snap the Byk's neck in one go.

The Byk instinct was sharp. Even if it was still unaware of the new hunter, it could feel that something was off.

It infused his whole body with earth magic, so when the two mana flows clashed, the spirit magic was diminished to a neck rub.

"F\*ck my life! Again with that sh\*t, just like the Ry."

"It seems that magical beasts are able to use fusion magic to some extent." Solus commented.

"No duh, Sherlock. And what's worse is that fusion magic is spirit magic's bane. It can disrupt my mana flow making it useless. But that stands only for direct attacks..."

Having his first plan failed, Lith hid behind the tree while moving away from the Byk. Casting spells in mid-air still required too much effort, he also wanted to keep his ability to fly a secret from the prey.

Once on the ground, he took a roundabout path toward the Byk, using Float to not make noises, and a subtle dark aura to cancel out his smell and aura.

When Lith found the Byk again, it was still sniffing the air, looking at its surroundings.

Lith moved right behind its back, before unleashing a lightning as big as the crouched Byk.

It had no effect, aside from angering the magical beast and blackening some of its fur.

"Holy sh\*t! I would have never suspected that earth fusion could shield from lightning."

The Byk roared its challenge, standing tall on its legs.

It was an enormous beast, at least four meters (13 feet) tall, with a weight close to a ton. Its fur was deep brown with shades of green, and its green eyes were staring at Lith with malice.

"Too big for comfort!" Lith summoned a strong wind, hoping to take advantage of that unstable position to topple the Byk and prevent it from charging ahead.

The Byk channelled even more earth magic, becoming heavier while digging deep into the ground with its claws. It managed to return back on its four, now standing 1.6 meters (5'3") tall at the shoulder.

"Magnificent display of earth fusion!" Solus couldn't hold her admiration. Lith was the same, but much more scared.

"Yeah, I'm clearly a noob compared to it. Ice Spears!"

Countless spears of ice appeared out of thin air encircling the Byk. Each one was two meters (6'8") long, ten centimetres (4 inches) thick and razor-sharp.

It was Lith's sure kill spell.

The spears came down at the same time, like a deadly rain.

The Byk didn't seem scared, though. It roared again, getting partially up on its legs, before slamming the front paws on the ground, creating a spherical shielding made out of earth and rock.

The spears crushed against the summoned barrier, inflicting no harm to the Byk.

Both Lith and Solus cursed as one.

"F\*ck me sideways! Magical beasts use true magic too!"

## **Chapter 29: Unbelievable Speed**

Lith's and Solus minds were spinning at full gear, but for entirely different reasons.

"What if magical beasts are the primordial true mages? What if human mages learned true magic by watching the magical beast hunting, like Chinese martial artists derived their moves from Earth's animals?" Solus pondered in amazement.

"What the F\*ck can I do? I just revealed my trump card for nothing and my fusion magic is useless, since if that thing closes in, it needs only one hit to rip me in a half. Not to mention that air, earth and spirit magic would probably be useless against it.

I am only left with light, dark, fire and water magic!" Lith trembled in fear, but his body was ready to move, his mind never giving up on life.

The Byk charged through its own shield, intending to make things up close and personal. Lith reacted promptly, using air fusion to gain speed and keep their distance in check.

"You may truly be immovable as a mountain, but you sure can't keep up with someone fast as lightning!" Yet the two enemies' speed was the same. The Byk was indeed heavier, but the difference in physical prowess was enormous.

Not to mention, they were both slowed down by trees, rocks and undergrowth.



Lith felt reassured noticing that the Byk couldn't close in, since he could still resort to fly as a desperate measure.

"Unbelievable speed my pale a\*s! This thing is fast, but not that much. Ekart and his men were either too scared or hallucinating."

The game of tag went on for a while, with Lith throwing ice spears whenever he could spot an opening, and the Byk using rock projectiles trying to shoot him down.

Lith knew that bears weren't supposed to smile, but on the Byk's muzzle he could clearly see a smirk, sometimes even emitting a "Hurr, hurr" sound.

"Is that a laugh? Is that b\*stard actually just having fun?!"

While running, Lith moved the fight to his private clearing. He had finally found a path to victory, but he needed to have both hands and legs free, without worrying about tripping on roots or pebbles.

Also, the river Philo flowed nearby, greatly enhancing his water magic. Not having to conjure it anymore, Lith could focus only on the manipulation aspect.

The Byk moved forward slowly and triumphantly. It knew the prey was now cornered. In front there was only the raging river, while the Byk was plenty capable of cutting off any other escape route.

But soon it noticed that something was off. Not only the smell of fear was gone, the prey had ceased to run, standing firm with the river at his back, watching the Byk's every move with defiant eyes.

The Byk slowed down even further, trying to suppress its overbearing bloodlust and looking again at the surroundings. Suddenly it remembered about all those dangerous ice spears, realizing it was a trap.

But it was too late, it had already got too close to the river. Tendrils of water grabbed its legs, trying to drag the Byk in the water. The Byk reacted promptly, making tendrils of earth envelop his legs and body stopping the water in its tracks.

It knew it could not play only on the defensive, so it fired a barrage of stones against the prey. Lith didn't move and inch from his spot, either dodging the rocks, or using his own earth magic to deflect those he could not avoid.

It soon became a war of attrition, about whose mana would run dry first.

After a few of such exchanges, Lith infused himself with fire and earth magic, performing a roundhouse kick to send a huge stone back to the sender.

The Byk didn't miss that anomaly. The prey had never done such a thing, it was clearly a deception. As soon the stone come near enough, the Byk deflected it with a flick of a claw, using earth magic to avoid touching it.

That way it noticed that right behind the rock there was a dense black mass, Lith's Plague Arrow.

The Byk followed its instinct, and tried to dodge that slow bullet, but its own tendrils of earth were keeping it stuck in place! Before the Byk could summon any sort of magical protection, the Plague Arrow had hit his mark straight in its huge chest.

Pain started blinding the Byk, that became unable to notice Lith closing in while shooting six more Plague Arrows. The first to the chest, again.

The easiest target to enhance the crippling pain. Then he followed striking the four limbs once, to prevent the Byk from fighting back.

The sixth and last one to the head, almost at point blank, for the kill.

It all happened in barely three seconds. In that very short lapse of time the standstill had turned into a victory for the prey.

And that saved Lith's life that day.

As soon as the Byk let out an agonizing cry, a second one, even bigger came out rushing from the woods.

"It wasn't fast! There were two of them! That's why they could play with the hunters like a cat with a mouse."

Lith used air fusion to stay away, keeping the distance the same he previously had with the other Byk.

Luckily the second Byk didn't seem interested in pursuing him, and started to lick its partner affectionately.

"From its size, it should be a male. The only notable difference is that his fur has shades of black instead of green. No wonder the hunters weren't able to tell them apart." Solus observed.

"You better make use of this time to replenish your mana. We don't know what it's capable of."

Lith immediately used the Invigorating breathing technique, letting the world energy replenish his lost mana and washing away his fatigue. Thanks to the good night sleep, Invigoration effect was at its peak, and it would not take Lith long to recover.

After all, his body was in perfect condition, only his stamina and mana had been consumed during the fight.

"Filthy human! How dare you kill my spouse?!" The Byk spoke.

Lith had no time to be surprised, so he kept his breathing rhythm steady, aiming to stall as long as he could.

"Wow, you talk! I didn't know bears could talk."

"Lowly maggot! I'm not a bear! I'm Irtu, the new king of the woods, and she was my queen, Gerda."

"Sorry, your majesty, but if you wanted to live happily ever after, you should have respected my turf. I don't care what you do on the east side of the woods, but the west side is mine! Not to mention that I know a Ry that could refute your claim."

"A Ry?" Irtu moved away from the carcass, putting enough distance from the river to be safe from the man pup tricks. "You mean that weakling! The mutt is as good as dead." Irtu grinned while slowly moving forward.

"Don't come any closer!" Lith ordered. "If you leave now and promise to never return, we can close it here. Otherwise one of us will have to die."

"Hurr, hurr, hurr." Irtu laughed. "You will not die, murderer. I will just rip off your legs and arms. Then I'll follow your scent back to your burrow and will devour your family alive, in front of your eyes. Only then we will be even!"

Lith dropped the act like a live grenade.

"I never intended to let you walk away alive from here. I only had doubts about how much make you suffer. Thanks for clearing them up for me."

"Such arrogance for a weak man pup! I will not fall for your trickery, like my poor Gerda. I have watched the whole time. The only reason you are still alive is that she loved so much playing with you vermin, before biting your head off!

It's all my fault. I shouldn't have indulged her so much. If I had killed you back then, she would still be alive!" Irtu roared, getting even closer.

Lith had already fully recovered and some more.

"If you want so bad to apologize to her, let me send you to the other side!"

Despite all his provocations, Irtu remained calm and collected, always keeping a safe distance from the waters.

"He is too confident, I have a bad feeling about this. Why does he keeps advancing despite what happened to the other Byk?" Lith fought back the temptation of using all the extra mana from the world energy in one go, limiting to a single Plague Arrow.

Instead of dodging it, Irtu stood up on its legs, laughing cruelly.

When the Plague Arrow hit the Byk's heart, Lith could see thanks to Life Vision that instead of attacking its vital organs, the dark energy was being assimilated by Irtu's core.

"Hurr, hurr, hurr. Did you really think to be the only one that have mastered dark magic, maggot? Now die!"

Irtu jumped forward, and before Lith could take advantage of its inability to dodge in mid-air, four rock formations abruptly erupted from the ground, right were Irtu's paws were going to be.

That way the Byk was able to jump forward once more, his speed further increased by the four rock's borrowed momentum.

In less than a second Lith was robbed of his opportunity to counter attack, while Irtu had turned into a one-ton bullet.

To evade the attack Lith had not only use air fusion, but also to roll forward. The Byk was too fast for a real dodge, his only option was to pass under it.

After that point, things got worse. When Irtu landed, instead of creating a crater, the ground stretched under its legs like a trampoline, allowing it to resume the chase without a second of delay.

"What the f\*ck?! You can do that with earth magic?" Lith bit his lower lip hard, cursing his own ignorance. He was a self-taught after all, the only knowledge he had about true magic was what he discovered experimenting by himself.

Clearly the Byk was a natural at magic, and had refined its mastery over earth through the years, aptly adapting it to best suit its hunting techniques.

Making a split-second decision, Lith kicked the ground with his left leg while using all the mana he could to infuse himself with earth magic, boosting his defence.

Thanks to the clean cut in his previous trajectory, Lith got only grazed on the chest from Irtu's claw. Yet it was enough to rip off his chest protector and graze the underneath skin.

Lith instinctively used light fusion to stop the bleeding and gain a healing factor.

The mid-air strike had messed up the Byk's tempo, so after the second jump it was forced to stop.

Lith used that moment of pause to activate Soaring Hawk and take flight. The opponent was clearly superior, he had almost run out of options.

"No escape!" Irtu roared, shooting a rain of rock debris against him.

Lith mimicked Gerda, using air instead of earth to generate a fast spinning barrier that deflected the sudden attacks. Yet his flight was interrupted, and he started to fall down.

Irtu grinned, getting up on its back legs, ready to catch him. He could already feel in its mouth the crunchy taste of the prey's limbs.

Lith was almost out of options. Almost.

From that angle, Irtu could not notice that Lith's right hand was now holding something, removing the stopper with a snap of the thumb.

At the last second, Lith stopped in mid-air with Float, while the substance in the flask kept falling and hit Irtu right on the head.

Suddenly the Byk was blind, his eyes burning like fire. A strong smell inundated his nose, making him sneeze and rendering it unable to sense Lith presence anymore.

"When I bought this horrible perfume, my idea was to use it to make a Byk lose my traces in case the worst happened. I never expected being forced to resort to such a gamble. Luckily Irtu does not know about Solus, nor her pocket dimension."

The flask materializing out of thin air was something unconceivable for the magical beast, taking it by surprise.

Irtu was still roaring in pain, the paws rubbing his eyes, when he got stabbed from all sides.

Thanks to the river, Lith's Ice Spear spell needed just a split second to strike.

Lith waved his hands non-stop, sending a barrage of spears until Irtu's corpse was so riddled with holes that he could see through it. And even after that, he sent another one piercing its head, right between the eyes.

"I always hated how in horror movies no one ever makes sure that the frigging monster is really dead, only to get backstabbed during the credits."

"You took a huge risk there, pretending to have lost control of the flight spell and going into free fall." Solus had objected to that last-minute contingency plan from the second Lith devised it, deeming it too reckless.

"What if the Byk impaled you with a rock spear? What if instead of waiting for you to come down, it had jumped to finish you off?"

"That would have been merciful. Irtu was too cruel to do such thing."

Lith replied without hesitation.

"It wanted me to feel despair and helplessness, to be conscious while it ripped me apart. In some ways we were quite similar, both hell-bent on revenge and inflicting pain to our enemies.

The only difference between us, is that I would never allow my bloodlust to drive me crazy. Gerda and Irtu were a threat to my family. That's the only reason I came here.

I prefer giving my enemies a painless death, even making Irtu's pelt worthless, rather than taking the smallest risk that they could harm one hair of my beloved ones."

Lith had just collected the two magical beasts' carcasses inside the pocket dimension, when his body started trembling in pain. A familiar hot sensation rising from his mana core.

## **Chapter 30: Prizes**

"Not here, not now!" Lith inwardly screamed. "Until it's over, I will be a sitting duck!" He knew that it was impossible to hold back the impurities refining process until he was back home.

He had no choice but to offer no resistance, making it as fast and painless as possible.

Soon, black ooze started being excreted from all his pores and orifices. Lith's eyes and throat were burning from the nasty feeling the impurities inflicted on their way out.

Lith felt like a river of bile was coming out of his body.

When it finally ended, he was kneeling, hands on the ground. A huge puddle of the tar-like substance was below him, tainting the air with its putrid smell.

"Congratulations on evolving your mana core to deep cyan!" Solus voice was full of joy.

"You also should have lost at least a kilogram or two (2.2 or 4.4 pounds), judging from how much impurities you expelled this time. I can already feel the quality of your mana flow improving. My meals have never been so tasty!"

"Deep cyan?!" Lith coughed up some impurities that got stuck in his throat.

"All these years, the hard work, even risking my life against not one but two consecutive magical beasts, just for the worst cyan core possible?" He couldn't help but feel depressed and frustrated.

"I'm still below Nana's level, and she was born with that core! If she practiced my breathing techniques, there's no telling how strong she would be. She could probably already topple mountains and split the sea."

With a pulse of dark magic, he banished all the impurities into nothingness.

"Look at the bright side. Thanks to the break through, you should finally be able curing Tista. Isn't that what you wanted from the beginning?" Solus tried to console him the best that she could.

At that thought, Lith's mood lightened up immediately.

"You are damn right! Sometimes I am just a self-centered a\*shole."

"Sometimes?" Solus sarcastically remarked.

"Okay, fine! Most of the times I let my hunger for power get the best of me. Happy now?"

Solus giggled.

Despite having yet to use Invigoration, Lith could already perceive the world around him more vividly than ever. The colours, the smells, the sounds everything was different. It was like being born again and experiencing the world for the first time.

Still feeling light headed, he splashed the river's cold water on his face, trying to regain his focus.

Suddenly, Lith could feel a shiver on the back of his head, his neck hair suddenly standing up.

Lith abruptly jumped back on his feet, turning around to discover that a Ry, the very same Ry from two years ago was silently walking toward him.

It had become bigger, its height at the withers reaching 1.6 meters (5'6"), and its red fur had gained shades of white, dancing in the sunlight like a wildfire.

Just trying the Soaring Hawk spell almost made Lith faint, so he was forced to cancel it while using Invigorate to regain his strength once again.

Yet Lith's mana core was still unstable after the evolution process, and therefore unable to assimilate more world energy.

"F\*ck my life! I can only escape on foot."

Sniffing his stress and fear, the Ry spoke up.

"Fear not, Scourge, I mean no harm. On the contrary, I have come to give you my thanks. It was my duty stopping Irtu and Gerda, but you managed to precede me."

It threw a magnificent deer he was carrying on its back at Lith's feet. Both the skin and the antlers were in perfect conditions, aside from a single bite mark on the neck, where it had been cleanly broken.

"I noticed you humans prefer them like this, since after eating the meat you can exchange the rest for those things you call 'money'."

Lith didn't feel much reassured, he decided to keep stalling while he was catching his breath and searching for the best possible escape route.

"So, you can talk too, uh? Why didn't we have this conversation two years ago, instead of fighting?"

"Stop eyeing for an escape route. If I really wanted to kill you, I would avoid useless talk and strike when you are at your weakest. I am not arrogant and cruel like Irtu. I would not make the mistake of underestimating you again.

As for your question, it was you that attacked me first.

Also, do you know what happens when one of us speaks? Either the human faints or runs away. In both cases, they come back in numbers, even setting the woods on fire trying to kill us all."

The Ry growled at that unpleasant memory.

Lith relaxed a bit.

"Yeah, humans get scared easily. They think themselves all high and righteous, and don't like when someone or something they don't recognize as an equal threatens the status quo.

By the way, sorry for the sneak attack, but you were big, scary and destroying something really precious to me."



A light of understanding lit in the Ry's eyes.

"You mean the annoying rock that now you wear at your finger, I see. Then it's my turn to apologize for damaging your property and trying to kick you out of the woods. I only wanted the noise to stop, and you ceasing your attack."

"If I have to believe your words, why do you call me Scourge? Isn't that kind of offensive?" Lith kept moving, very slowly, towards the fastest way home, one step at the time, like he was just shifting his weight from one foot to another while chatting.

The Ry snorted, pretending to not notice it.

"It's no offence. You killed the king in the west, and with its life you claimed its title as well."

"That would make you the king in the east, I suppose. What's your title?" Lith moved another step.

"The Protector. My role is to keep both humans and unruly magic beasts at bay."

"It has a much better ring than mine. By the way, your majesty, I am not interested in kingships or messing with your turf. Feel free to take over Irtu's region or whatever it's called. I only hunt for my survival, not for sport or pleasure."

"And that's why you are still alive." Seeing that the human was too self-conscious about his weakened state, the Ry gave up and turned back, walking towards the woods.

Lith was still scared, yet had the presence of mind to store the deer in the pocket dimension. As soon as the magical beast disappeared from his sight, Lith ran out the woods, always making Solus look out for any possible menace.

Once outside, he changed into his usual clothing, deeming the claw rip on the chest too unsettling for his parents.

The closest he got home, the weaker he felt. The adrenaline rush was fading away, his body and mind were both battered from all that had happened. A splitting headache arose, making difficult for him to think.

When Lith finally arrived at destination, he was too tired to speak or even walk to his bedroom. He sat down on the nearest chair, sighing in relief, allowing himself to relax.

The next thing he knew was that someone had put him into bed, and judging from the lighting it was already night. He closed his eyes, pondering about what to do next, and when he opened them again it was already dawning.

Tista and Rena were still asleep, Lith decided to get up and prepare the breakfast for everyone, following his normal routine. It was in that moment that he realized how much had he changed overnight.

Not only his body was brimming with strength, he could also perceive his own mana flow without the assistance of any breathing technique. Lith needed but a thought to start floating, managing to get out of the bedroom without making the wood creak.

What had required so much focus just the day before, now barely needed his attention.

"If a tier one spell has become so easy, what about chore magic?"

Lith discovered that now he was able to use up to six spells at once, without the use of any gesture or magic word to help coordinate them.

Soon many small vortexes were cleaning every nook and cranny of the dining room, the air in the room getting warmer by the second, while plates and cutlery floated in their place.

By the time the table was laid, he had also finished washing and drying the floor.

"I have performed in less than a minute what usually took me half an hour! I have still a lot of time before having to wake everyone up. Solus, how do you feel?"

"Now that I know you are all right, just peachy. But since you were referring to my abilities, instead of my feelings..." From the tone she was quite pissed off.

"...both the Soluspedia and the pocket dimension have started expanding since your mana core stabilized."

"And what about you?"

"Thanks for asking without any subtle hint from my side." The sarcasm was palpable. "I am still recovering from the huge scare you gave me yesterday, but I'll live."

"I'm sorry, I know you wanted me to escape from Irtu and not take unnecessary risks, but I couldn't run away and live in fear, waiting for him to find and attack my family.

I have lived too long in terror of my father, back on Earth, to let the same thing happen again. I hope you can understand."

Wanting nothing more than change the subject to escape that awkward silence, Lith asked:

"What about Gerda's carcass? Can we take credit for the kill or would it arise suspicions?"

"There is no problem for Gerda, history is full of promising mages, even younger than you, killing a magical beast. Since there is no way to determine how strong it was, you can say that you ambushed it successfully.

Irtu, on the other side, is more problematic. Not only his pelt is useless, making him only good for racking up merits, but its corpse shows signs of a spell that should be around tier four or five, if not above. I'd say to save it for rainy days."

After deciding what to do with the various carcasses, Lith used the remaining time to practice Accumulation, while thinking about how to announce to his parents the treatment he had devised for Tista.

Among all the things he had gained since arriving in the new world, his family's happiness was still the greatest prize he could strive for.