

Supreme Magus

Chapter 31: Out of Misery

Author's note: I do research my stuff, but please remember that this is a work of fiction, not a medicine textbook. If among you there is some nit-picky doctor, please be nice and cut me some slack. Enjoy your read.

Lith spent the next few days familiarizing with the changes in both his body and mana core. Healing with true magic was much different from the on/off effects that fake magic used. Not to mention that the procedure for Tista required surgical precision.

So, he used his new job as Nana's assistant to master once again his mana flow. Lith also personally reported to Count Lark the slaying of the magical beast via Nana's communication amulet.

He gave the Count the chance to buy the perfectly preserved pelt, but for that the he needed to get in touch with Selia. Lith had no idea how to tan and preserve such magnificent fur, and neither did he know how much was its worth.

So, he had been forced to turn to the huntress for help, and Selia had accepted in exchange of 25% on the final price. The same fate befell the deer carcass.

Lith's goal was to improve his relations with Count Lark, by earning merits for both of them.

Through their confidential agreement, Lith would achieve merits because he had eliminated a threat to the County, while the Count would take the credit of the kill, being the one that had discovered Lith's talent and claiming to have entrusted him with the task.

According to the law book in Lith's possession, a noble would get great fame and honours, according to how his subjects performed.

While they would get merits, the noble would improve his social status and importance to the King's Court, raising his chances of achieving one more title with all the lands attached to it.

It was a perfect win-win situation.

Lith hoped to reel in Count Lark among his official backers. Having him as a patron was not enough. Being the Count a magic enthusiast, Lith was just one of the many talented youths he was sponsoring and nothing more.

Lith wanted their relationship to develop further, so when he finally could leave the village, he would have someone to rely on.

If there was one thing that he had learned from Nana's story, was that a country bumpkin like him was in desperate need of someone trustworthy in an influential position.

Count Lark was obviously thrilled at the idea that one of his proteges had achieved such a result. His hopes for Lith being accepted at the Lightning Griffon Academy skyrocketed, after so many failures, another success was on sight.

It would further raise the Count status in the eyes of the Court. Killing a magical beast was good, but finding and developing the talent of a powerful mage was much better. Mages were the backbone of the Kingdom, together with the military.

After settling his business with Count Lark, Lith had Solus help him completely rethink his concept of magic.

"So far I used magic just like a club, to kill and hit. But Gerda and Irtu have showed me that magic, in this world, it's not fixed as in Dungeons & Looting. I have been too narrow minded. It's not only light magic that can act at cellular level.

All kinds of magic can interact with matter, changing its properties. If Irtu could make the ground elastic, then I should be able to walk on water without freezing it first, by altering its density. I need more advanced spellbooks to understand magic's limits.

It's no wonder that Magi's talent increases exponentially after discovering true magic.

Not only they start with a better core than mine, so they can refine it to further heights, but they also become capable of replicating every single spell they saw until that point

While inventing a new spell takes a lot of time for a fake mage, finding the right balance between hand signs and magic words to obtain the desired effect, a true mage just needs to understand the underlying principles behind a spell to perform it."

Thanks to his battle with the magical beasts, Lith was able to quickly develop new spells, by either imitating their tactics or experimenting by himself.

After about two weeks, his body, mind and mana core were perfectly in tune, so Lith asked Rena to go to the village with Trion, giving him the opportunity to freely talk with his parents and Tista.

Trion and Lith were now in a more neutral relationship, there were no hard feelings left, but no trust either.

Lith had to dumb down a lot the concepts to make them understand the risks of the procedure. He was not a doctor, but they were his parents, and Tista was their beloved daughter and his beloved sister.

Lith would not proceed unless getting their informed consent, or at least the next best thing, since they understood very little of magic and nothing at all of anatomy.

"How sure are you about this thing?" Asked Raaz, holding Tista as tight as he could, like Lith was going to take her away.

"I'd love to tell you that everything will be alright, but I can't. I never tried something so big and complex. Tista, I worked years to develop this spell, just for you. The only thing that I can promise, is that I will give my best.

I obsessed myself nights and days with it, because I want you to be free and happy like anyone else, instead of being stuck in a cage, be it your body or this house, no matter how golden we can make it.

I want you to be able to run in the wind, walk in the snow. To get out of this house, to meet people, make friends, maybe someday fall in love with someone and being loved back.

I will do all I can to free you from these shackles, but I can't do it without your trust and consent."

Lith looked them in the eyes, one at a time, to show them his resolve and determination.

Tista escaped her father's arms, hugging Lith tight.

"Oh, Lith. When you talk like that you sound more like dad than a little brother." She said crying.

"Off course I trust you. You have always been by my side, taking care of me, even when I could do nothing but stay in bed all day. You worked so hard, giving me so much.

Food, clothes, you even invented the rocking chair for me (AN: is actually a swing. See chap 17 for more details). Mom, dad, I want to do it. Whatever happens, I could never regret having trust in my little brother."

Without saying a word, Raaz and Elina joined her in the embrace, all of them sobbing together, even Lith, so fond of their bond and so scared to lose one of them at the same time.

After Lith calmed down, he could finally start. On paper, the treatment was simple. By using Invigoration's real time imaging of Tista's body, Lith would use light and dark magic in synch.

Dark magic would destroy the damaged cells that composed almost half of Tista's lungs, while at the same rate light magic would enhance the healthy cells' ability to multiply, instantly replacing the lost organ tissue.

But even with his limited knowledge in medicine, Lith could see many underlying problems. The destroyed cells would release toxins and impurities in Tista's system, and if they accumulated too much she could die of shock or organ failure.

Also, regenerating a vital organ like the lungs was a delicate process, that would consume lots of her strength, and she hadn't much to begin with.

So Lith had decided to take things slow, treating only a minimal part of her lungs to begin with. Then he would use his control over her mana flow to expel from her body all toxins and impurities the dead tissue would release, and give her some time to recover before attempting another session.

During all the process, he took care of her eating and resting properly, to the point that Lith skipped hunting and magic training, only keeping his job with Nana to have a steady source of income while Tista was resting.

The whole procedure took over a month, but thanks to all his painstakingly efforts and meticulous bordering anal-retentive preparations, everything went well.

In some respects, even too well.

After the treatment, Tista's mana core had gone from light orange to yellow, and according to Solus, it kept evolving over time.

"Seems your sister was quite talented, but her illness prevented her core from properly grow."

"That's good." Lith nodded "As soon she completely recovers, I can bring her to Nana to learn magic. That way she will be able to learn a trade and achieve a social status on her own. What comes next depends entirely on her."

"Won't you teach her true magic?"

"That would be idiotic. She is just ten years old. If there's really some sort of global conspiracy and control over magic, that would mean putting her in danger. She deserves to finally have some fun. To live instead of just surviving."

"I won't drag her into a beehive unless that's what she wants."

Lith made sure that everyone in the family understood the importance of keeping Tista's recovery a secret. Lith was still a no one, if the rumour spreaded, nobles or other mages could hunt them down to get their hands on the procedure.

Despite they regretted being forced to keep Trion in the dark, they accepted wholeheartedly. None of them was stupid enough to endanger such a hardly achieved happiness just for bragging.

Since according to Nana there was a chance for Tista of healing by herself with her growth spurt, they decided to stick with that version and claim it to be a miracle of nature.

Lith had got to the point of developing a spell to alter the results of Nana's Vinire Rad Tu, so that when she checked on Tista she would still appear ill, but slowly improving. This time he would not slip on the details.

Tista had to put up a façade every time Trion was around, but she soldiered up bravely. Being sick was a second nature to her, sometimes she even fooled Lith and her parents with her acting.

But whenever she could, she would walk with Lith through the Trawn woods, going together at his secret clearing where she could finally be free to run, swim in the river, sing and dance at her heart content.

Lith didn't regret even one moment spent with her instead of practicing magic or refining his mana core. Those things were of secondary importance to him.

He had started practicing magic only because of his hunger for power, to put this new world to the test before committing suicide again. But then he had fallen in love with his new family, and magic had become a tool instead of a purpose.

And that purpose was laughing and jumping around, in front of his eyes.

Lith couldn't and wouldn't hold his tears.

"Wherever you are, Carl, I hope with all my heart you too have found someone to love and to protect. I love you, little brother, and no matter how distant we are, you'll always be with me."

A few months later, Lith received an invitation from Count Lark, to join him for a day in his manor as his esteemed guest.

Chapter 32: The Invite From Count Lark

The whole thing happened in an odd fashion. Lith received a letter instead of an holo-call, and despite being addressed to him it was delivered at Nana's house.

Being the host, Nana took the liberty of reading it before handing it to him. She was just concerned for Lith's wellbeing, off course.

The letter said in a perfect penmanship:

"Dear Lith,

Thanks again for slaying the monstrous magical beast. You have served the County of Lustria and deserve to be rewarded accordingly. To this end, I would like you to join me in my manor in ten days since receiving this letter. We have much to discuss. I urge you to contact me as soon as you can via Lady Nerea's communication amulet.

Count Trequill Lark."

"What does this mean?" Lith asked Nana.

"It sounds so serious to be ominous. It doesn't even seem something a joyful and spirited person like the Count would write."

"Hmmm." Nana nodded, eager to avoid the outrageous accusation of being nosey.

"I can smell good news and bad news.

The good news is that isn't anything serious. Despite the somber tone, worthy of a payment order, Lark used a letter, this means it's nothing urgent or important, since he could afford to wait for the delivery and the reply.

The bad news is that all the above stinks of formality and etiquette. I fear that you are in for a whole day of boredom, while attending all the official business regarding your prizes and whatnot. As I always say, little imp, no good deed goes unpunished!"

"That's my line!" Lith inwardly screamed. "Not only you open my mail, you even steal my shtick?"

Even the following holo-call was awkward. Count Lark was uncharacteristically calm and composed, managing to not make any question about magic to Lith, nor losing his monocle, not even once.

After hearing that Lith had accepted his invite, he stated that his personal tailor would stop by later to take Lith's measurements, and that he would send his stagecoach on the set date, one hour after dawn in front of Nana's house.

Then, the Count politely but promptly ended the call, saying he had many things to attend. For Lith was like talking to a complete stranger.

The tailor arrived less than an hour later, he didn't give Lith any mean look or nasty remark. On the contrary, he somehow recognized him at the first glance, complimenting him for his height.

Despite being only eight years and a half, Lith was already over one meter and thirty-five centimetres (4'6") high, and in the County of Lustria any man above 1.75 metres (5'9") was considered tall.

"Keep growing up so fast and soon you'll be as tall as the Count, young man."

After the man left, Nana whistled in surprise.

"Good gods, I know him. That's the tailor that personally prepare the dresses for the Lark's family. It's even worse than I thought. This occasion must be something really big, like being invited to a ball kind of big.

This is one of those rare moments when I'm happy not being part of high society anymore. Prepare yourself for long awkward silences, insufferable small talk and being showed around like some kind of exotic beast."

Lith spent the next ten days in his usual routine, obsessing about Nana's words was pointless, since he had already taken those things in consideration when he decided to tighten his relationship with the Count.

Except dancing, of course. Lith had always hated dancing, even back on Earth, mostly because of his two left feet. But even that wouldn't worry him much, there was no way for him learning Court's dances in so little time.

Even if he managed to find a book about it and added it to Soluspedia, knowing was not doing, he would still need to practice. He could only suck it up and endure.

When the fated day came, a luxurious stagecoach stopped in front of Nana's house. It was all white, with the décors painted gold, drawn by four snow-white stallions.

A valet descended, bowing to Lith before giving him a small wooden box.

"My Lord, would like you to change into your new outfit, before getting into the stagecoach, good sir."

So much respect was dumbfounding for Lith, so he bowed back without a word, before going into Nana's living quarters to change.

He came out wearing deep blue velvet pants over hard leather shoes, a snow-white silk shirt and a blazer matching with the pants, with the Count's family crest gold embroidered over his heart.

"Holy sh*t! I'm probably wearing more money than my family's farm is worth. Judging from the crest, I guess Nana was right, he is going to introduce me to someone, and he needs that someone to know who I belong to."

Lith was alone on the stagecoach. After opening the door for him, the valet went sitting beside the coachman.

The ride lasted over half an hour, despite the horses' remarkable speed. Having nothing to do, Lith spent the whole time using Accumulation. His deep cyan mana core had yet to change by even a shade, it definitely needed more work.

When the stagecoach finally stopped, Lith looked out of the window, only to discover they were just at the gates of the estate.

Two fully armed soldiers talked to the coachman, inspecting inside, above and below the stagecoach before letting them pass.

"Going at full speed, armed to the teeth guards, a full check on the coach. Maybe Nana was wrong, this looks more pressing by the second".

Once inside the gate, and beyond the high grey walls, the stagecoach slowed down, allowing Lith to take in the full manor view. The park around the manor extended as far as the eye could see.

The air smelled of cut grass, flower beds and finely trimmed bushes adorned the cobblestone paths that went across all the park.

Halfway between the gate and the manor, there was a plaza, surrounded by benches, and at its center a huge pedestal with a marble statue of someone that Lith assumed had to be either the first Count Lark, or an ancestor of which they were proud of.

The manor itself was bigger than he had imagined, extending for at least 3,000 square meters (3,588 square yards), divided into a main building, a left and a right wing forming a reversed U shape.

It took almost five more minutes to actually get to the manor's entrance.

The more he looked around, the more he could feel something was amiss. One of the greatest changes happened after Lith's mana core evolved to cyan, was that alongside his five senses, also his instinct had greatly improved.

He was able to sense hidden dangers, like with the Ry, and to more easily grasp someone's real demeanour and intentions. So, he didn't miss that there were too little servants around, and those few he managed to spot had all a tense expression.

A butler in a white and deep blue livery welcomed him with a deep bow.

"The Count asked me to apologize on his behalf for not personally receiving you, Magico Lith. His Lordship also tasked me to bring you to his private quarters as soon as possible, where he will explain everything to you."

The butler's poker face was impeccable, but Lith could have cut the atmosphere with a knife. He followed the butler until a double door room guarded by four soldiers.

Looking through the windows Lith could see that there were even more guards on the outside, patrolling the windows and the glass doors leading to the park.

Inside, he found the Count nervously pacing around, two youths were sitting on armchairs, and both were showing signs of anxiety, either tapping their feet or fiddling with their hair.

Count Lark hadn't changed much since the last time he had saw him in person. He was in his mid to late fifties, around 1,83 meters (6') tall with a thin build, that made him appear even taller.

The Count had thick black hair with streaks of grey, a short-trimmed goatee of the same colour. His inseparable black rimmed monocle was attached to his breast pocket with a blue silk string.

As soon as he saw Lith, his somber demeanour returned to be filled with enthusiasm.

"Good gods, Lith, you are finally here!" The Count shook his hand with such vigour that Lith thought he was actually trying to crush it.

"But where are my manners. Allow me to introduce you my beloved children."

The two youths stood up and extended their hands in turns.

"This is my third born, Jadon. He is also the next in line to become the next Count Lark. Hopefully it should happen many years from now."

Lith shook his hand. Jadon had a firm but gentle grip, physically resembling his father, except being almost ten centimetres (4 inches) shorter and with a much more muscular built. He was in his early twenties, with pitch black hair and goatee.

"And this is my fourth born, Keyla. This young beautiful lady is almost sixteen, and ready to make his debut at the King's Court. They are the only family I have left."

Keyla was a petite girl, 1,53 meters (5') high, with flaming red hair with shades of gold and emerald green eyes. She was wearing an emerald green day dress that highlighted her hair and eyes. She fitted the Count's bill, except for the beautiful part.

She wasn't really well endowed for Lith's tastes, and despite all the make up she wore it was impossible to hide such a bad case of acne. And even without that issue, he would have considered her pretty at best.

Keyla offered him her hand, the palm facing downward. Lith didn't need his etiquette book to know that she was expecting a hand-kiss.

It was awkward for him, he never did such a thing even for his past girlfriends when things had got almost serious. Luckily after being dead and reborn twice, having faced killers and magical beasts, it would take much more than that to embarrass him.

So, he made a small bow while giving a short peck on her hand.

"It's a real pleasure and an honour for me to meet you all." Lith said following the etiquette.

"Now please, you Lordship, could you explain to me the reason of my summoning?"

The more he saw and heard, the less he understood. Lith couldn't figure out why the Count was giving him all those useless details, and why the hand-tailored dress he received was so similar to what Jadon was wearing.

The Count facepalmed himself.

"Oh! Off course, I'm so sorry. I'm still so shocked by the recent events that my head doesn't work properly. Let me explain, I called you here because I need you saving our lives. My wife wants to kill us all."

Chapter 33: Dysfunctional Family

"I beg your pardon?" Lith was flabbergasted.

"Dad! How many times I have told you to start explaining things from the beginning, not the end!" Keyla rolled her eyes.

"Yes, yes, my dear. You see, when I was Jadon's age I got married.

It was an arranged marriage, with the purpose to join the resources of the Lark and Ghishal households, that back at the time were both in dire straits, to get out of the insane debts that our profligate parents had left us.

The financial side of the business was a success. Between our combined annuities and by selling some of the residual assets, I was able to have enough capitals to invest in the right businesses.

Long story short, our families went from almost broke to being again two of the richest of the dukedom. And that's when everything fell apart between us. My wife, Koya, have never been kind or lovely to me, we were just business partners.

We never shared a common interest or ideal, but until we got our money back, at least it was bearable. After that point, our marriage was purely for show, and aside from when she asked me to attend to my marital duties, we had no intimacy.

I got four children from her, after all, and even got them tested with Blood Resonance magic to be certain they were actually mine. I might be a little airheaded, but I'm not that naïve!"

Both Jadon and Keyla became bright red, up to their ears.

"Dad! Too much information! Stick to the facts, please. This situation is already embarrassing as it is, don't add oil to the fire."

Jadon said, but the Count was inflexible.

"To be able to help us, Lith needs to understand what kind of woman we are facing, or do you want to underestimate your mother again?"

At those words, Jadon lowered his eyes and sat back down. Lith was really interested in the Blood Resonance magic, but he kept the question for later. Things were already confused enough already.

"Where was I? Oh yes. Right after our households got back on their feet, Koya soon became restless. She was obsessed with us getting more titles, more annuities, more lands.

To the point that she took part in the Court's power games and intrigues, trying to make allies to weaken our neighbours and take over their lands.

But after working hard for more than twenty years, I was content with what I had. Four beautiful children, a rich and prosperous household, a thriving County.

I just wanted to slow things down and enjoy the life I had built, while expanding my power and influence through hard honest work instead of underhanded schemes.

Off course she was furious, all her plotting was useless without my consent. After all, I wasn't married into her family, she was married into mine. And being the one that did all the work I kept the biggest share of the profits.

At that point, somehow, our constant arguing and mutual spite started affecting my firstborns. I don't know if it happened because they were born when I was still too busy to give them the proper care and attention, or if they just got more from their mother's side rather than mine. Only the gods know.

My eldest son, Lorant, started taking for granted his status as my successor, neglecting his duties and doing nothing but drinking, gambling and chasing skirts. My second born, Lyka, had always been a problematic child.

She was never content with what she had, always wanting more toys, more dresses, more jewellery. Nothing was enough for her. As my constant fights with her mother continues, she became angry with everything and everyone, throwing fits of rage for the smallest things.

She started beating the servants almost on daily basis, I lost count of how many ran away from this house because of her. Between Lyka and Lorant, it was like there was a competition about who would make me monthly spend more money, trying to cover up their misdeeds and compensating their victims.

I tried sending Lorant to all the military academies I could find, hoping that some discipline would straighten him up, but he always managed to get dishonourably discharged in a few months, if not weeks.

My last resort was giving him the position of responsibility in the household, but he would either not attend at all, or show up dead drunk. But when I discovered that he had begun not only deceiving maidens with promises of marriage, but also taking them by force I decided that enough was enough.

I publicly disowned him, stripping him of his titles and annuities, leaving him enough money to live an honest life, if he quit gambling, off course. I also told him that the next time he defiled a girl he would be judged like any other scoundrel, and pay for it."

At those words, Lith thought about Orpal for the first time in over three years.

"That a*shole should be away for at least another couple years. Maybe if I decide to take part in this episode of 'Game of Spades' and we survive, I can have the Count trace and eliminate him for me. That would be nice. I hate loose ends."

After a short break for a glass of water, Count Lark continued his story.

"My wife was outraged, for her Lorant's crimes were just 'boyish pranks' that we should indulge and forgive. But it was the Lark household that he was dragging into the mud, he was throwing away my money with gambles and loan sharks.

Not to mention that my reputation had become that of a corrupt and profligate noble. Even if somehow I didn't have any decency or honour within me, how could I entrust my life's work to someone that would dilapidate it in less than a generation?

Have I ever told you why I appreciate magic so much? It's because mages and nobles are so similar and yet so different. They both hold a power that allows them to destroy or save lives with a single word, to influence their surrounding just by being there.

I consider magic superior, because a mage's might come from study and discipline, and that means that he knows and understand the values of his power and the consequences of his actions.

Nobles, instead, get that power as a birthright. They take it for granted, and some live their whole lives considering perfectly natural for them to be superior, a higher existence. That's why so many of us end up abusing our status and authority.

But I digress. After expelling Lorant from the family, Koya wouldn't listen to reason, and neither would Lyka. She really loved her brother, and after he was kicked out, she became even more angry and violent."

The Count's eyes turned watery, he had to remove his monocle to rub them with a handkerchief.

"Have you ever heard about all those stories about nobles killing and maiming commoners for trivial reasons? Well, she turned out to be the living embodiment of all those stories, and when I discovered what she had done, the body count was already over a dozen!

I had no choice but to disown her too, pleading the King for mercy and losing a lot of my accumulated merits in the process. Despite everything, she is still my daughter.

My wife was brought to the brink of insanity, saying that it was all my fault, and so she left the house for good, returning to the Ghishals. At first, I thought that being apart would allow her to regain her senses and come back.

After a while, though, I really enjoyed the peace and quiet, and hoped she would never return. But then I discovered that she had brought with her our disowned sons, breaching my trust with a blatant flaunting of the King's law.

At that point, I applied for the marriage to be annulled, otherwise after my death she could reinstate them as family members, if not even as heirs to the County.

The annulment process would take a while, but I was certain to have settled that matter.

In the following weeks, I started to feel weak and feverish, and despite all Genon's assurances, my personal magician, I could tell that something was wrong. No cold ever felt like that or lasted so long.

So I started skipping my meals in secret, eating only fruits that I picked up myself, and guess what? My symptoms faded away. Only then I remembered that Genon was from my wife's side of the family. She had hired him personally, and so she did for more than half our staff.

After firing everyone she had brought in the house, I hoped to be finally safe, but then even Keyla and Jadon fell ill. I would have never imagined she would harm her own children, just for not agreeing with her!

At that point I was in dire need of a magical aide, but who could I trust? Competent magicians are hard to find, and at this point I don't trust anyone anymore. Who knows who may actually be sent by my wife or one of her associates?

That's when I sent you the letter with the help of my personal secretary, a man that I know and trust from decades.

I couldn't call for Lady Nerea's help, without her the whole district of Lutia would fall apart, not to mention it would be a sign of weakness. Who would entrust a County to a man incapable of managing his own house?

Nana have more than once assured me that your healing skills are on par with hers, and having killed a magical beast, I'm pretty confident that you are already more competent than Genon, who graduated in a minor academy only thanks to his father's money."

Lith closed his eyes, trying to assimilate all that information at once to decide his next course of action.

"F*ck! I'm in a dead end." He thought. "If I say no and he survives I'll lose everything I built so far.

If I refuse and he dies, not only all my efforts for making him into my backer will be for naught, but this wannabe Sersi strikes me like someone that after getting rid of her husband, will wipe clean all traces of his existence, and that includes me!

Unless she is deaf, blind and dumb she is bound to know how much the Count has invested in me, that puts all my family in danger. And I definitely don't want this Lorant guy come any close to my mother and sisters."

Feeling cornered, he had only one doubt.

"I consider myself a good healer and hunter, your Lordship, but I don't see how can I help, except by keeping you safe and healthy for the time being, off course. But that would be just stalling for time. If you don't have a way to make your wife yield, it could go on for years."

"No, rest assured that it won't. As soon as the marriage is annulled, she will not be able to make demands anymore about the Lark household."

Unless I am sorely mistaken, by that time she will be knee deep in troubles caused by our disowned sons and for violating the King's law by bringing them into her family despite being marked as a living shame.

Her only way out is to get rid of me, Keyla and Jadon to make my will null and void, remain the only inheritor alive and restore Lorant and Koya status. I just need you to keep us alive until the King signs the annulment documents."

Lith's mind was spinning at full gear, consulting with Solus to make sure to keep all his bases covered.

"That can be done. But I have some demands that I would like your Lordship to agree with before accepting."

From their expression, it was clear they didn't expect such request, yet the Count nodded without hesitation.

"To be able to protect you, I need to move inside you house until the matter is resolved, right?"

"But off course! That's why you wear the family colours and crest. That dress identifies you with one of my personal aides, second in authority only to me and my children."

"Good to know," Lith thought. "That explains why me and Jadon have almost matching clothes."

"And I am deeply honoured for it, but if I agree to help you, your wife could target my family too in retaliation. If I move in, I might need for them to come along, for their safety, and someone has to take care of the farm, or they will have nothing to return to."

Count Lark facepalmed himself.

"Oh Lith, I'm so sorry for doubting your loyalty. For a moment I thought you were going to refuse. You are right, I missed this possibility. I will make them come here as soon as possible, they will be my honoured guests as well."

I will send my sharecroppers to tend to your farm until everything is settled. Anything else?"

"Yes. I need free rein within your household. If your wife still has insiders, if not spies still here, I will need to resort to unpleasant means to sort them out. We cannot expect them to confess out of the goodness of their hearts."

Count Lark took out a handkerchief, cleaning his already shiny monocle to ease his nerves.

"Do you mean torture and interrogations? Do we really need to resort to that?"

"As a last resort, but yes. Desperate times call for desperate measures. But it should not be necessary, I can easily disguise as your guest while keeping a low profile. After all no one knows who I am, except the butler."

The Count started coughing up loudly, Jadon and Keyla looked at each other, before turning towards Lith.

"Actually, everyone knows who you are." Jadon said with an awkward smile.

"Well, but that doesn't mean they know what I am capable of."

When he saw them exchanging another look, while the Count kept coughing non-stop, Lith felt compelled to ask: "They don't, right?"

Keyla cleared her throat before standing up, prompting him to follow her.

"A picture is worth more than a thousand words. I think you need to see how you are depicted in the Painting Hall."

Chapter 34: Setting Up The Board

"How I am what?!" Lith yelled, having lost his cool for a second.

Now it was the Count's turn to become red up to his ears. Lith followed Keyla, resisting the urge to demand for her to move faster. All that situation had come completely unexpected, and was heavily weighing on his mind.

Since he had heard of the painting, Solus hadn't stopped laughing, projecting in his head famous statues like the David of Donatello or the Perseus by Antonio Canova, but she replaced the facial features with Lith's and switched Medusa's head with the Byk's one, grinding on his nerves.

"I swear that if that f*cker of the Count had me drawn naked or something, I'll kill him faster and more cruelly than his psycho wife ever could."

Luckily for the Count, that wasn't the case.

The painting was quite big, one meter (3'3") large and 1.5 meters (5') high, and represented the Byk, standing on his feet with glowing red eyes in a dark forest, occupying the center and the left corner.

Lith was drawn while facing the magical beast, offering only the left profile to the viewer. His small body occupied only the bottom right corner, engulfed in a magical aura. His left arm and hand were set ablaze, supposedly because of a fire spell he was casting.

The perspective and darkness-filled background made the Byk seem big and terrifying like a dragon, while Lith appeared as the only element of light, his face filled with courage and determination.

The enormous stuffed body of the Byk was placed a few meters to the right, half hidden in an alcove, to show the visitor the ending of the story depicted in the drawing.

"Well, it's not that bad." Lith thought. "It's not the tacky horror I had imagined, and I am not even idiotically beautified. That's my actual face. Solus, is it me, or I look kind of handsome?"

"Well, I don't know." She replied. "It's definitely a version of you that doesn't glare and frown all the time. More importantly, he doesn't look like he is there because he has lost a bet, like you do when you watch yourself in the mirror."

Lith sighed in relief. At least he wasn't portrayed in his birthday suit or in some kind of arrogant or overbearing pose. That would have been really embarrassing for him.

"What's the problem with the painting?" Lith asked, scratching his head in confusion.

"The problem is that my father showed it to every guest, servant and passerby that was willing to listen to him, recounting how you single-handedly defeated the malevolent beast in an epic battle of magic and wits." Jadon answered.

"That's quite an accurate recollection of the events, albeit entirely made up" Solus commented. "The Count would make an excellent story teller."

Lith dismissed Jadon worries with a wave of the hand.

"You are overthinking it. No one actually witnessed the fight, the pelt is almost completely intact, and everyone knows about Count Lark's obsession with magic and sponsoring promising youths.

They would more likely believe that either I lucked out or that the Count gave me some help, and is trying to lie me into a hero. No offence, your Lordship."

"None taken." The Count replied. "So, do you like it?"

He was itching of impatience, waiting for Lith's reply.

"What's not to like?" He shrugged. "I'm not an art expert, but it seems well painted. Both me and the Byk are depicted realistically. The only question I have is how could the artist know my..."

Then Lith's eye noticed the painter signature in the bottom left corner. It was a squiggly line, but with a leap of imagination one could actually read the name 'Trequill Lark'.

Lith turned around abruptly just in time to get a glimpse of Count Lark jumping with joy, before regaining his composure.

Having cleared that issue, they silently returned to the Count's private quarters, before resuming their conversation.

Lith pretended to be casting a fake magic spell, while actually casting his Hush spell. It would create a spherical air vortex that would make eavesdropping by conventional means impossible, by distorting the sounds coming out of the room.

"That will prevent anyone from listening. As I was saying, taking everything in account, no one would actually believe such a story. Off course the fact that everyone knows my face complicates things, but a covert operation is still feasible.

For how I see it, we have two options. Option one: I pretend to not live up to what the Count said up until this point and act like a half-baked magician. This will give the enemies inside and outside the house the confidence to carry on with their plans, like I am not even here.

It should make easier to capture whoever tried to poison you, but it also means that the assassin will embolden and attack more often. Consider that such person or persons, could be a small fish, hence even eliminating him/her would do us no good, they would be easily replaceable.

Option two: I play it big and loud, confirming all the rumors about me. That should put your wife on alert, forcing her to reconsider her plans and become more cautious.

That would mean a temporary peace, but the next assassination attempts would be conducted by a skilled person that would strike only after a careful preparation, giving him/her high chance of success.

At the same time, it wouldn't be easy to find another trusted mercenary on such short notice, if we manage to eliminate the first one.

Both paths are filled with thorns and dangers, so it's up to you to decide."

The room fell into silence, the three nobles were pondering about how they wanted to bet their lives.

"Isn't there a third option?" Keyla asked.

"If you can find one, sure. I am open to suggestions." Lith shrugged.

"I say that our best option is discretion." The Count had made up his mind.

"We aren't trying to beat Koya at her own game, we just need to stall for time. If we managed to survive on our own until now, with Lith's help things should be much easier.

Let's keep our real strength hidden as long as we can, so that when she finds out the truth, hopefully she won't have enough time to take the best countermeasures she could.

I know her well, she is cold and calculative, but under pressure she is much better at taking orders rather than giving them. It's happened multiple times in the past, and now it's not any different.

She could have pretended to accept my decision, to stay by my side despite our differences.

That way, even the first poisoning attempt would have succeeded, since my suspects arose mostly because I knew she wouldn't stand idly while losing the status and money that the title of Countess gives her.

But as always, Koya's bad temper got the best of her and she made a mistake after the other. So, what's our next move?"

"Until everything is resolved, don't hire new servants, it's too risky." Lith said.

"Aside from that, there is not much we can do, we are still on the defence. The only thing that comes to my mind is to introduce me to your staff, one small group at the time.

Those who are still loyal to you will look at me with curiosity and benevolence, while those who are your wife's payroll may feel pressured and lose their cool. It's a longshot but it's better than nothing."

Lith's plan was actually more complex than that, but it wasn't something he could share.

Between his Life Vision and Solus' mana sense, he would take note of everyone whose physical strength exceeded their occupation requirements or had at least a yellow mana core.

"Our best bet would be a male, middle aged with a strong body and mana core. It would make the perfect suspect." Lith thought.

"Why a male?" Solus asked.

"Because men are physically superior, even in this world. A woman would better suit a honey trap, but we already know that the Count doesn't fiddle with maids.

Middle aged because it should be someone the Countess planted long ago, to let him gain the trust and authority necessary to freely move in the manor. And a strong mana core would be a great tell for a hit man.

I doubt anyone with enough talent for magic would settle for a manual labour job without a really good reason. Also, if something magic related happens, it would be the perfect diversion, since women would always be the prime suspects being naturally more talented."

When the Count had told him to have fired half of the staff, Lith had deluded himself into believing that would make things easier for him to control. But reality begged to differ.

The remaining personnel still amounted to over fifty units, and that was only after not taking into account gardeners and stable workers, since they did not have access to the main building.

"Fifty-four f*cking persons! It's more than the whole village population. It took me hours just to meet them all!"

None of them had shown signs of stress meeting him, making his official plan a complete failure. The silver lining was that he had actually found possible suspects, the problem, thought, was that there were too many.

Lith had found among the staff sixteen people that stuck out for their physical or magical abilities. Yet he had no way of performing a background check outside directly asking them or their colleagues, but that would make his intentions too obvious.

He couldn't rely on the Count or his children for that, they barely knew their names and roles in the household.

Lith decided that for the time being, the best he could do was keep his own family in the dark. As long as he played his role as a weak magico, the safest place for them was the one further away from the eye of the storm.

He kept thinking and thinking, but he couldn't find a way out.

"Dammit! I'm really starting to believe that this time I am way out of my league. I'm no detective, just an out of practice chemist that now practices magical arts! This is not a problem that I can solve by killing or burning stuff.

The situation resembles more and more a frigging game of chess, and I hate chess! I suck at chess when the fight is fair, let alone when all I have is my queen (me), the king (Count) and two pawns(heirs)!"

Solus giggle was the first good thing he had heard the whole day.

"Well, if the board is so unfavourable, have you thought about cheating?"

Suddenly Lith's stone ring turned to liquid, splashing on the floor before returning to the form of a marble. Eight little legs came out of the stone marble, making it resemble a spider that started to move in circles around Lith.

"Nice little trick, don't you think?"

Chapter 35: Solus' Adventure

"I wanted to give this a try since I gained the ability to change shape at will." Solus explained.

"It's amazing! What you can do in that form?"

"The same as always. Store things and use magic you know by consuming your mana. If you allow me to do it, obviously."

"Then what's the point? Last time we checked, our mind link was around 10 meters (10.1 yards). Sure, I could plant and use you as a bug, but then I would need somehow to retrieve you without raising suspicions. How far can you move on your own?"

"We are about to find out!" Solus started moving fast, first on the floor then up the wall, until she reached the ceiling. Then she moved on the opposite side of the room, putting 5 meters (5.4 yards) between them.

"So far so good. I feel I can move even further."

Lith opened the door of his room, checking with Life Vision that there was no one hidden in some corner or behind a secret passage he was unaware of.

Then he let Solus get further away from him. She kept humming the entire time, making possible to Lith to determine how the strength of their mind link changed with distance.

At ten metres (11 yards), it was perfectly clear, like she was still on his finger. After twenty meters (22 yards) it became muffled, he could still share her senses and communicate with her, but it required focus. At thirty meters (33 yards), her thoughts were barely a whisper.

"I don't feel so good, I'm afraid that this is my limit. If I get any further, I won't be able to receive your mana anymore and I will begin to consume my life force in order to move. My reserves are not depleted as when you first found me, but the idea of being all alone, bleeding energy at every step frightens me quite a bit."

Lith could understand her fear. She had already got very close to death once, and in order to survive, Solus had to pay a terrible price.

"If mana is the problem, let's see if I can do something about it." Lith created a string of mana with spirit magic, and used it to connect to Solus.

Suddenly everything was clear again, he could even feel her little body perform a joyful dance. Solus was able to proceed swiftly until the distance between them was fifty meters (54.7 yards), the new limit of spirit magic's range.

Sending her mana over a further distance required increasing focus and energy consumption on Lith side. It was like casting and keeping active several spells at the same time.

For Solus to reach the servant quarters, Lith required such concentration to become blind and deaf to whatever was happening around him, going into a meditative trance.

"This is completely unacceptable! I need to babysit the Count and his kids at all times. What would happen if we got attacked while I play the sleeping beauty? Not to mention how can I possibly explain to the Count my 'narcolepsy' without either losing his trust or revealing Solus' existence?"

Lith tried to open his eyes, to listen with his own ears instead of using Solus' senses. It didn't come easy, it was like pushing a car uphill, the slightest mistake and he would be back to square one. After numerous failures, Lith snapped.

"F*ck! If finesse doesn't work, let's go brute force!"

Lith forcefully awoke, his room was as he had left it, the door still barred from the inside since Solus had gone beyond his line of sight. He could hear and see again, but the burden on his mind and body was unchanged.

He could feel his mana being drained, his mind slower than usual. It was like trying to do mental calculation despite a commercial jingle you couldn't get out of your head. The mind link was still there, but it was blocked.

"Seems at this range I can either use my senses or hers, not both. It's not great, but still an improvement. I won't have to fall asleep at the weirdest times at least."

After closing his eyes again, Lith asked Solus to come back, and after her return, they planned their next moves.

In the following days, Lith would stay with the three nobles at all the times, barricading themselves in the Count's private quarters and surrounded by guards.

That way from the outside it would look like Lith's arrival had changed nothing, but appearances couldn't be more different from the truth.

Lith would make them drink only water he conjured, and before letting them eat even a single bite of any food, he would use magic to search for poisons and detoxify them.

He would also use Vinire Rad Tu, the light magic diagnostic spell, to cover up his use of Invigoration, his body strengthening/imaging breathing technique, to check up their bodies for slow release poisons they could have ingested before his arrival or any relevant anomalies.

The poison was mostly in the food, covered by spices and sauces and the only anomaly he could found was Keyla's acne.

"Poor girl! This sh*t doesn't cover only her face, it covers also her back and shoulders. I guess for her debut in society she will have to pick a dress that leaves a lot to imagination."

But while Lith was seemingly holed up, he was actually checking on his suspects, one by one. To avoid useless energy expenditure, he would establish his mind link with Solus before attaching her to a plate, tray or under a servant's collar.

She would then travel to the kitchens in search of her target, and only then she would send a small burst of energy to signal Lith to start feeding her again. She would then follow the suspect during the day, hoping to caught him or her red handed.

Usually she would get nothing out of it, but just the gossip was worth the trip.

"Sigh, since the Countess left, so many bad things have happened." Said a maid in her late twenties.

"Yeah, first someone tried to poison the Count, and then he kicked out a lot of our friends! I get that he is scared, but that was unfair." Said a valet that was barely eighteen years old.

"Shut up, idiot! And thank the gods we still have our job and references. This isn't a good time for slackers and whiners." Replied harshly a chubby maid over her forties.

"Personally, I have always considered her Ladyship nuttier than a fruitcake." Chimed in Poltus, the butler and head of the staff that had welcomed Lith at his arrival.

"Always nagging to the poor Count and asking for money. But this time, I think she may have a motive, that it pains me to admit, is almost justifiable." He said dramatically looking over his shoulder, like someone that knows too much.

"What do you mean? What do you know?" Soon Poltus was hard pressed to reveal his juiciest discovery.

"Isn't it obvious? I mean who in his right mind would stand up for those two worthless scums? They are nothing but human faced monsters, not even the Countess would dirty her hands with that trash!

I'm so happy they are finally gone. My daughter is getting lovelier by the day, you know. During the last year, I have spent every day in dread, hiding her from that walking d*ck of Lorant."

"Who cares about your daughter, old fogey, spill the beans!" Said the chubby maid.

A small crowd of servants had gathered up around him, and even if there was no one else around, he whispered like he was about to reveal a forbidden secret.

"I think that the kid that just arrived is the Count's fifth son!" All the presents gasped in astonishment.

"Think about it. Pitch black hair, very tall for his age, obsessed with magic. They are clearly made from the same mould! Otherwise why would the Count personally paint him and put the picture in the Painting Hall, among his family members?

Why would he send the family tailor to make him his dresses and ask the kid to join him in his time of need? A family must stick together!"

Soon the whole room erupted with shouts and chatter.

"That's why the Countess was so angry!" "It explains everything!"

"Do you think he could be the next in line of succession? Poor Jadon."

While everyone's imagination was going wild, Solus was really happy of being a magical construct at the moment.

She was laughing so hard that she could barely keep her form. If she had been inside a human body, she would be rolling on the floor, hugging her belly and gasping for air.

The gathering was going to last long, but luckily her mark wasn't that much interested in gossip and started to move toward the servant's quarters.

Solus promptly detached from the apron she was hiding under, and followed her quietly until she was able to latch on her shoe.

The maid was one of Lith's prime suspects, a member of the personnel that had access to all the family's meals and with a physical and magical strength above the average. Not much, but it was all that they had.

All the other previous suspects had been nothing but a bust. Sure, someone would steal silverware, another had an affair with another staff member, but that wasn't what Solus was looking for.

The young girl opened her room with a key and then walked in. All the staff's bedrooms were identical, eight meters (8.8 yards) long and six meters (6.6 yards) large.

There would be one bed next to the wall on the opposite side of the door, and two more beds alongside the side walls. The only source of light outside of oil lamps, would be a single big window, and each bed had a wooden chest where the servants could store their belongings.

As soon as she was alone, the maid started grumbling out loud.

"Those idiots! All they think about is gossip and make everything related to nobles' relationships out to be sordid. Who cares who f*cks who? I can't wait for this mess to be over. Since the staff was halved, I don't get to slack off anymore.

The Count has lessened our workload, sure, but with half the house to clean, now Pontus has double the time to check on our work. If I get any more demerits that old b*stard will take money out of my salary! Gods, I'm so tired."

She closed off the curtains, and then changed into her nightgown before going to sleep. Solus could only inwardly sigh.

"Guess this is just another bust. She really doesn't seem to be a cold-blooded killer. She is really cute, though, especially without all those baggy clothes on. I wonder if hers is the body type Lith likes, or if he will indulge on these images."

She chuckled.

"Guess not. Based on his memories it's too soon for his body to have those urges, and his mind couldn't care less. Even when I told him I got into the women quarters he didn't check my memories even once, he only listened to my report."

Solus used the Hush spell to prevent any noise to wake up the sleeping maid, adding a touch of dark magic to turn the room pitch black.

She then proceeded to open the chest. Using a mix of spirit magic and her body shifting abilities, picking up the lock was easy as pie.

While rummaging through the maid's personal belongings, Solus wondered about her life.

"It always feels so odd be away from Lith. I'm so used to constantly hear his thoughts, worries and memories that all this silence in my head feels really lonely. Even when he sleeps his mind always keeps me company.

After all these years, I still haven't figured out what he is for me. A companion? A host? A master, or rather my mother? He gave me a second life, after all, and my first happy memory begins with him.

The only reminiscences I have before meeting him are filled with the fear of dying or losing myself."

The search had given no results, there was nothing outside casual clothes, shoes, family mementos and harmless mails between her and her loved ones.

"Sigh, according to Earth's detective stories, the culprit should have with him/her a detailed letter from the instigator, money, a signet, a flask of poison or whatnot."

Being already in the room, Solus decided to also check the remaining beds and wooden chests, starting from the one on the left side of the room. It turned out to be even more bland than the previous.

"Two down, one more to go."

Solus opened the last lock, going through the clothes, the letters and the trinkets contained in the last chest. She turned an old pair of shoes upside down, when a hidden treasure fell into her hands.

"Well, well. What do we have here?"

Chapter 36: Screams Of Terror

Later, that day, when Solus returned with the identity of the culprit, a sample of the poison and the hilarious new gossip as prizes, she had expected Lith to be excited or at least relieved.

Instead he was brooding, with the same annoyed face he had when he was forced to spend quality time with Trion.

"Why so gloomy? We did it, we can take her out anytime we want. Smile a little."

"I would indeed smile if we managed to find her at the first or maybe fifth attempt.

Unless math has become an opinion the last time I slept, searching thirteen rooms out of eighteen, means you have searched thirty-nine persons, more than two-thirds of the staff members.

At this point we can as well sweep the remaining five to verify if she has accomplices. Not to mention that this maid wasn't even on my list, the psycho wife would have bested me if not for your new ability."

Lith started pacing, his mind analysing the choices at his hand.

"You are a real party pooper, you know?" Solus pouted.

"Sorry, you did a great job, but put yourself in my shoes. First, it took us so long to find her that I am pretty sure the Countess has already noticed that something is wrong. The Count and his heirs have been poisoned daily, yet they are perfectly fine.

It's safe to assume that soon she will resort to a more direct approach. We need to move fast, before her pawn flees from the scene.

Second and most important, this new piece of gossip you brought me is a nightmare! Sure, is all fun and laugh, until you realize that if the rumour reaches the Countess' ears, she may even believe it.

And while I don't care being a target, the same can't be said about my mother! We must wrap this up quickly, and try to get as much evidence as we can, so whoever is handling the annulment process will be forced to speed his bureaucrat a*s up.

Then, I can ask the Count to bring my family here as soon as possible. When those blabbering fools see that I am the spitting image of my father, that stupid rumour will die out. Only then I will be able to focus on protecting the Count again."

"Well, yeah." Solus shrugged. "But you are forgetting about the bright side. If the Countess falls for this rumour, she will get really angry. And when she's angry she makes really stupid mistakes. Always such a pessimist. And you even dare to question why you look like cr*p in a mirror."

Ever since Solus had started following the suspects, Lith hadn't been sitting idly either. To make use of whatever she would find, he needed a plausible excuse.

At random times during the day, he would pretend to go investigating on his own, leaving the three nobles with the guards, while he would actually always remain in the vicinity, ready to intervene if necessity arose.

Also, he had asked the Count to give him a tour of his magical library, getting the opportunity to borrow some tier four books and store them inside Soluspedia.

Even when they were apart, Lith could still access both the dimensional storages, it would just take some effort to operate them.

That allowed him to further expand his knowledge about the possibilities of magic, and gave him several new ideas.

The next day, after Solus identified at least one of the Countess' agents, Lith started to prepare the final steps for his new plan, while Solus searched the remaining seven rooms.

It turned out they miscalculated, since both the butler and the head of kitchen had their private rooms, because of their status and seniority. Her task was made faster and easier by the fact that she had not to tail a target for a whole day anymore.

Solus could just get inside and search for evidence as soon the coast was clear. On Lith's side things were a bit trickier. First, he had to identify the poison from the sample Solus brought back. It was a colourless and odourless liquid.

He spreaded a small drop of it on his finger and another on his tongue, without swallowing it. It tasted sweet and acidic at the same time.

"What the f*ck? A pineapple pizza flavoured poison? This is disgusting! And here I hoped to have left that cr*p on Earth."

While his stomach was turning at those horrible memories, the areas where he had spreaded the poison became numb. After a while they became red and swollen. Since breathing was getting harder, Lith immediately neutralized the poison, before looking for it in the Count's books he had stored in Soluspedia.

"Thankfully, in this world they shouldn't have synthetic poisons outside the magical varieties. It shouldn't be hard to find the right one."

It turned out to be an extract from a rare type of blackberries-like fruit that usually grew in marshlands. The whiteberries, more commonly known as doomberies, in their natural state simply had a sweet smell and disgusting taste, but their juice if properly distilled and condensed was highly toxic.

Its low dosage symptoms matched the Count's story, like the effects Lith had experienced fitted the description of its concentrated form.

At that point, the final issue lied in finding a way to get a full confession without destroying the good image Count Lark had of him. Lith didn't miss how disgusted the Count had reacted at the mention of tortures.

Lith had no interest in arts, but from the way the Count had painted him, it was clear that in his mind the young magico was valiant and righteous, rather than a cold -blooded schemer with a penchant for inflicting pain.

"This is so stupid. Not only I have to save him, but I also have to do it in a way of his liking. Having a good man as a backer is both a blessing and a curse. I need to get creative."

Having almost run out of options, Lith needed check out books he had never thought could have any use to him, before going to the Count and explain to him the only plan crazy enough to have a ghost of a chance.

A few days later, Lynna Crestwick was at her rope's end. The Countess was sick and tired of her failures, and had clearly told her to either get to job done or start running for her life.

"That ungrateful b*tch! After so many years of loyal service, always covering her sorry a*s, even volunteering to get rid of her deadbeat husband, that's how she repays me? Now I get why the sod wants to get rid of her.

I'll make a last attempt before getting out of here. I'm sick of being caught between a rock and a hard place, always watching my back. If even this fails, I'll escape to the Gorgons empire. I should be safe there."

She had no idea what could have possibly go wrong. Before getting fired, Genon had told her that the doomberry kiss was a powerful poison that even he would have a hard time to detoxify. Could the Count have an inhuman constitution despite being so thin?

During her shift in the kitchen, she waited for the plates to be left unattended before adding two spoonsful of poison into the Count's plate. It was impossible to miss, since even the napkins had the initials embroidered.

That dose would be enough to kill a dozen men, but she was tired of slowly rising the amount, day after day, waiting for something to happen.

Some hours later, she finally succeeded. After eating the soup, the Count had started to have difficulty breathing, his tongue swelling like a sponge.

Both the so-called-magician brat and Pontus, which back in the military had been a field medic, couldn't help him. The b*astard was finally dead!

Lynna, just like her co-workers, started sobbing uncontrollably. But while they were grieving, she was weeping with joy. Now she was safe, and with the sum she had agreed with the Countess, she could finally turn her lifelong dream into reality.

She didn't need anymore to work her a*s for someone else, it was her turn to live in a beautiful house, surrounded by servants.

Off course, first she had to wait for the investigation to be concluded.

Jadon, the new Count, imposed the martial law, prohibiting anyone to go out of the house without his permission. Lynna had nothing to fear, thought.

As soon as she spiced up the late Count's plate, she had thrown away the remaining poison and carefully washed the flask, before putting it back in the kitchen pantry.

During the rest of the day, every room was combed and every member of the staff had to undergo a long interrogation. When they finally let her walk, she was exhausted, all the stress and emotions had taken a big toll on her.

Also, she was starting to realize that she had actually killed a man, and a good one too. She tried to ease her guilty conscience by thinking of her future wealth and happiness, but instead she ended up second thinking everything she did so far.

"What if that b*tch breaks her word? Is not like I can expose her crime, after all. Even worse, what if my reward turns out to be a knife in the back or a poisoned drink? She doesn't need me anymore, I'm just a loose end.

Good gods, what have I done? Have I really killed a harmless buffoon, just for pile of gold?" The words 'pile' and 'gold' still had a soothing effect on her, so she decided to go to bed and put all that story behind her.

"What's done it's done, all the remorse in the world can't bring back the Count, may the gods rest his soul."

The problem was that her roommates wouldn't stop talking about what happened, it was the first time in years that a murder occurred within those walls.

After some yelling and bickering, she managed to get convince them to close the curtains and turn off the oil lamp.

Lynna had just closed her eyes when the doorknob started turning ad rattling, someone was trying to get in!

As soon as the light was lit again the rattling stopped.

"What was that?" "It must be another of Syka's stupid pranks! She's such an as*hole!"

"And how could she do it if all our rooms are closed from the outside? Martial law, remember?" Lynna pointed out.

When they were still trying to find an explanation, suddenly the room became so cold that they could see their breaths condensing, their room's window got all fogged up.

One of her roommates became really scared, banging on the door and calling for help, but no one answered. All they could do was to wear their heaviest clothes and cover themselves with the blankets.

Then, the oil lamp went out. No matter how hard they tried, it was impossible to lit it again. Panic started to ensue when the knob rattled again, even stronger than before, while their beds shook like during a quake.

"It's like in the old stories my grandmother used to tell me when I was little!" Screamed one of the maids.

"A vengeful spirit is trying to get in!"

"Grow up, Seria! There are no such things as ghosts!" Lynna was a woman of action, she never believed to folk tales. She raised her nightstand, to use it to smash the window that refused to open, when she saw him.

The late Count Trequill Lark was in front of her, despite her room being on the first floor. His whole figure was pale white, glowing in a dim light like a firefly.

His eyes were all white with no pupils, shedding tears of blood. Small blue flames were erupting from his snow-white hair, dancing around him while emitting screams of pain.

Their eyes were locked, Lynna couldn't look away, her whole body frozen stiff, the nightstand still raised.

"How could you do this to me?" The Count's voice sounded distorted and distant, barely a whisper, but they could hear it clearly as a shout.

Screaming in terror, the three women ran to the door, trying to open it and calling for help. When they looked back, the Count was already floating inside, despite the window being still locked.

When he extended his hand, they felt a jolt running through their spines, falling into a cold oblivion.

Chapter 37: No Rest For The Wicked

When Lynna woke up, she discovered she wasn't in her bedroom anymore. The moon was covered by clouds, and with only the dim light of the stars, she couldn't figure out her new location.

Lynna only knew she was now in the open. The cold night breeze and the rough feeling of the earth under her hands left no space for doubts. As her eyes started to adjust to the penumbra, she noticed some humanoid forms laying on the ground, only a few meters away.

Glad of not being alone, she slowly crawled towards them, while trying to remember what had just happened. Lynna was about to shake her roommates, when the moon shined through the moving clouds, revealing them to be skeletons.

Lynna started to scream, and when she recognized the nightgowns they were wearing as those she had seen countless times on her friends it turned into a shriek.

Around her, multiple figures started to move and moan. She tried to run away, but tripped into something soft and squishy, tumbling on the ground. When she opened her eyes again, she was staring at a tombstone where was engraved:

"Here lies Croblan Lark, beloved father and husband."

Lynna suddenly realized what was that place, why it did feel so familiar. That was Lark's family burial ground, where all the forefathers of Count Lark lied in their eternal rest.

In that moment, she remembered everything: the poisoning, the twisting knob, the ghost. She wanted to believe it was all a bad dream, but her foot still hurt after the fall. Lynna was about to lose her mind, when the moonlight revealed that the moving figures weren't undead, but other members of the staff she knew all too well.

Two of them were actually her accomplices, Zamon, the second oldest butler after Poltus, whose loyalty actually lied only with the Countess, and Bisya, a young maid that had been planted a couple years ago to keep an eye on the Count's private quarters.

The three of them had been tasked by the Countess to ensure her return to power, by eliminating all possible obstacles. It was only thanks to Zamon's and Bisya's help that she had been able to slip the poison in the food unnoticed, even when she wasn't supposed to be in the kitchen.

Either by relying on Zamon's authority or Bysia's flirting charm, she had managed to complete every task assigned to her after the Countess forced departure.

There were also two more staff members with them. Refia, a young valet she had often worked with, and Olmund, one of the many butlers of the household.

"Lynna, is that you?" Bisya looked confused, shaking her head, trying to regain her focus. "That scream of yours almost made my head explode."

"Where in the gods' name are we? Why I'm not in my room? I clearly recall..." Zamon's voice was cut short, the blood draining from his visage as he remembered the last events.

"The Count!" He exclaimed.

At those words, all five of them froze up in place, swept away by the terror caused by the unnatural encounter.

"The Count is back!" Refia said with a choked voice.

"And the gods know why, but he believes I'm responsible for his death!"

Soon they all started looking around, finding the corpses of their roommates. Their clothes were unscathed, while their bodies seemed to have aged centuries.

"Rorryk, why did this happen to you?" Olmund fell to his knees, near the remnants of his oldest friend, crying desperately.

"Shut up, you fool!" Zamon forced his mouth shut with a hand.

"In case you haven't noticed we are in a cemetery! Is better not to wake which can eternal lie." Zamon didn't dare emit more than a whisper, he was very superstitious.

Usually Lynna would mock him for his cowardice, but that night was different. She could feel her guts twisting and turning in fear, her body begging her to run away.

Suddenly the ground trembled, and a raging fire erupted from an open grave.

Count's Trequill Lark grave.

"How could you do this to me?"

The Count's spirit slowly emerged from the flames.

"Prepare to be judged by my ancestors."

From the tombs nearby the Count, three skeletons arose, unearthing themselves up to the waist.

"Murderers!" Wailed an old man's voice.

"Traitors!" Yelled a woman's voice.

"Vermin!" Said a man's voice.

The three skeletons were struggling to get free from earth's embrace, while announcing their verdict. The dirt, tattered clothes they wore kept ripping apart.

"The die is cast!" The Count's spirit said with an otherworldly deep voice.

"Confess!" He was pointing his finger towards Refia, who suddenly felt pushed down on the ground by an invisible force.

"I'm innocent! I swear!" He said, sobbing uncontrollably.

The three skeletons started to wail as one, in a cacophony of indistinguishable voices. Their hollow orbits emitted a red glow, like a candle had been lit within, and like the Count, blood tears started to endlessly flow along their cheekbones.

"Liar!" The Count yelled, and Refia was dragged by the invisible force towards the Count's open grave, whose flames started to rise and roar loudly.

The others tried to hold him by the arms, but the spirit's pull was too strong. When Refia was thrown into the fiery pit, he emitted an inhumane shriek while the flames turned from bright red to an ominous purple.

"He will serve me in the netherworld, to atone for his sin." The Count's spirit said.

"Confess!" This time he was pointing at Olmund, who promptly complied.

"I confess! I confess! It was me stealing the silk bolts, exploiting my inventory duty. That's why there was never enough."

"And how do you atone?" Said the spirit, its eyes reduced to two flaming slits.

"I'm so sorry! I swear!"

"Words are not enough!" The corpses on the ground arose, their orbits brimming with a red light. They lifted Olmund with their skeletal hands over their heads, and threw him into the pit.

"Rorryk, why?" Was his final scream before disappearing in the flames.

Before the ghost could pass his judgment, Lynna kneeled deeply, head on the ground, begging for forgiveness.

"I confess! It was me poisoning you, and those two are my accomplices!" She said pointing at the two survivors.

Zamon and Bisya tried to take a step back, but the skeletons had returned, surrounding them again.

"Because of you my children are alone in this world!" The ghost wailed in pain.

"It's only a matter of time before they join me in death! How do you atone?"

"I'm so sorry! I've been stupid, I have no proof. I threw away the poison and burned all her Ladyship's letters."

"Then burn yourself!" Lynna was then dragged by her dead roommates in the pit, only the flames put an end to her shrieks.

Zamon and Bisya kneeled too, going straight to the point.

"I can save your children!" Yelled the young maid. "I'm not stupid, I never trusted that b*tch as far as I can throw her. I kept all her letters, her orders, in case she broke her word! I keep them all under a loose board in the kitchen's pantry."

"As did I! Also, I know where she keeps hidden all her personal correspondence." The old butler rushed to add, fearing of becoming useless to his captor.

"She ordered the poison months ago! And there so much more to it! It's all in a secret compartment right under her bed. I swear, that's all that I know! Please have mercy of this old fool!"

"Magnificent!" Said the Count with his usual joyful and enthusiastic tone, clapping his hands in delight.

Suddenly he didn't sound otherworldly at all. The skeletons fell down like puppets whose strings had been cut, the fire went out and the Count came down to the ground with a thump loud enough to be heard.

"Was this all..." Zamon couldn't believe his eyes.

"A farce?" Poltus completed the sentence for him. "Yes, old weasel. I knew you were always up to no good." The traitorous servants were able to put a face to the old skeleton's voice.

"Jadon, Keyla, be a dear and go retrieve the evidence. At this point I can't trust anyone else." The Count's heirs came right after Poltus, nodding, before running back to the house.

Knowing he was doomed, Zamon still found the strength to watch into the open grave, finding out that everyone was still alive, just bound and gagged by tendrils of earth.

Thinking about what would befall to him and his family, the old butler was filled with regret. The long years of loyal service, the savings of a lifetime, all those careful plans for his retirements, shattered together with his hopes for a better tomorrow for his sons.

Lith sighed with relief, he could finally come out in the open. If he could, he would pat his back by himself, the results had far exceeded his expectations.

Since Solus couldn't find anything in the remaining rooms, Lith had her follow Lynna day and night, taking note of all those she was the most in contact with, to round them up all together for the final act.

Which by the way, had been quite a hassle to arrange. To avoid blowing his cover, Lith could only resort to chore magic and spells up to tier three, like the Hovering spell he had applied to the Count.

He had explained everything in detail to the Count, to avoid him being scared or surprised by the special effects he had in mind. Lith, off course, said he would move the skeletons with air magic, while he was actually using spirit magic.

The blood tears trick was an easy one, chicken blood that he prevented to clot with light magic, while using water magic to make it go down the cheekbones, pass behind the ear and through the hair to get an endless stream effect.

The single steps were easy, but keeping all those spells active at the same time, manipulating flames, blood, skeletons, had been quite exhausting, even with Solus's help. She had taken care of half the stage, but the mana she used was Lith's.

They were like two divers with a single oxygen tank.

The Count too was very happy with the result.

"Ah! Ah! Ah! I always knew that magic is awesome! Flying has been such a memorable experience. Not to mention their faces!" Count Lark was laughing like a kid after a successful prank.

"You should have seen their faces! Priceless! I never had so much fun in my life." He patted Lith's shoulder, covering him in white powder.

"Who would have guessed that old ghost stories from my books could be so effective. With a little tuning here and there, off course!"

"For being a goodie-goodie two shoes, the Count is quite a trickster." Lith thought.
"Despite being so averse to torture, he had no qualms scaring so many people sh*tless. Guess he never heard about psychological torture and PTSD."

As soon as they got their hands on the incriminating evidence, Count Lark immediately used his communication amulet to contact the King's Bureau of Law and Order to submit them.

The night clerk assured him that they would move his paperwork on the top of the list, and that they would send royal investigators to shed light on the case.

Translated from the bureaucratic lingo, it meant that the Count's case would now take days instead of weeks. Lith wouldn't take any risks, not after showing so much of his prowess, so he had the Count make his whole family come to the estate the very next day.

He sent them also some clothes he had prepared beforehand. In such a palace, the lowest stable boy was better dressed than them, even if they wore their best suits.

When they arrived, one way or another, all the staff was assembled to see first-hand the mysterious woman who had spawned the Count's alleged fifth son.

They expressed much admiration for his mother's and sisters' beauty, and even Raaz received a lot of attentions.

When Lith sent Solus to check if the rumour had finally died out, she replied with endless laughing out loud and an unbelievable story.

According to her report, the household was now split into two factions.

The first one, that she dubbed #TeamLith, was leaded by Poltus, which refused to step back from his initial theory.

"Who would have thought that such an airhead like the Count could also be such a schemer? Not only he got himself such a beautiful and young mistress, he also had the smarts to choose a woman whose husband resembles him so much that he would never suspect the son isn't his own! That witch of the Countess can't hold a candle to such gorgeous woman."

The second one, #TeamRaaz, was leaded by Hilya. She was the head of the kitchen staff, first chef and also Poltus oldest rival in terms of both authority and gossip skill.

"Are you gone senile or what? The Count is too noble and chivalrous to cheat, even on such a treacherous hag! Clearly, he had an affair before their wedding, and Sir Raaz is the offspring of that love.

That means that not only he is the real Count's fifth son, but that the young mage and his beautiful sisters are all his secret nephews! That's why he cares so much about the boy, and why he has brought them all here now that the Countess is dead set to wipe out the whole bloodline!

How noble of him! He probably has protected them from the shadows all these years, to keep them safe from his wife's jealousy and ire."

Lith didn't know if to laugh or cry.

"How the f*ck did we come to this?"

"Sorry." Solus shrugged. "It seems that the Count's staff has the hobby of making everything related to nobles look sordid. Thinking ill of something makes even coincidences look interesting, don't you think?"

Lith shook his head in desperation.

"Poor mom. She is just a forbidden love triangle away from becoming the main character of one of those chick flicks that were all the rage a few years ago on Earth."

Chapter 38: Burying The Hatche

Aside from the gossip, life in the Count's private quarters was really peaceful.

Count Lark took the initiative to explain everything to Lith's parents, taking the blame entirely on himself, and giving only words of praise to their son.

Raaz and Elina were actually quite angry, and wanted to give Lith a solid piece of their mind. But after the Count apologized, even bowing to them, they were too embarrassed and flattered to say anything, at least in front of him.

The whole family could not stop staring at the house. Walls made of stone, the luxurious furniture, the carpets. Everything seemed to come out straight from a fairy tale. Until that day, they had always thought they would never see such riches.

Lith started to wonder how long would it take for them to come back down to earth, when breakfast arrived. The delicious and sweet smell of the pastries immediately caught their attention.

"Just great." Lith sighed inwardly. "I could expect my family's reaction to the Count's house, and luckily our hosts are overlooking their quite rude behaviour.

My only hope is that they don't jump on the food like starving wolves. That would be too embarrassing!"

"Party pooper! Let them be happy, so maybe they'll beat your a*s less when you get back home." Solus rebuked.

"Point taken."

As soon as the cart entered the room, Lith's family mimicked their hosts behaviour, politely sitting around the table in an ordered manner, waiting to be served.

That was also the first time someone outside the family was treating them with such care, the girls couldn't stop giggling.

"What the f*ck?" Lith was fairly surprised.

It wasn't a maid pushing the cart full of delicacies, it was Hilya herself, accompanied by some kitchen personnel that Solus identified as her posse. It was the first time that Lith saw her in the flesh, and soon he understood why.

Hilya personally served the Count's family and then his own, showering everyone with compliments and attentions.

Her followers did the same, but with more tact and less enthusiasm. When they left, there was enough food on the table to feed a battalion.

"#TeamRaaz rules, b*tch!" Solus screamed.

Count Lark was both embarrassed and flabbergasted. Hilya barely served him on his birthday, and he had no idea why his usually impeccable staff had taken such liberties with his esteemed guests.

Lith signalled him that he would explain later, before stopping everyone in their tracks, preventing them to take even a single bite.

Usually that would have garnered him a lot of nasty words, but in front of their host they had to shut up and listen.

The mention of the past poisoning attempts made them inwardly perform a 180° turn, going from demanding revenge to gratefulness in just a few words.

Lith wasn't willing to let his guard down, he kept checking every single plate and forcing them to drink only conjured water.

It was really depressing for his family, since he was the only one having tasted hot chocolate back on Earth, but they soldiered up.

In the following days, the forced cohabitation would have been much more awkward, if the Count's private quarters had not been bigger than their house.

The women, leaded by Keyla, took for themselves the bedroom, the biggest and most comfortable room, while the men had to settle up for the anteroom and its soft sofas.

There were no more assassination attempts, since all the gathered evidence had caused a fuss for the Countess, and by remaining stubbornly holed up in the best guarded and easily defensible part of the house, the Count left her with no openings.

Koya Lark had looked in every nook and cranny, searching for leverage, but the Count had no weakness she could exploit, and that nasty magico kid was even worse.

After a thorough background check, she discovered he had no friends and no family outside those he had brought with himself.

Killing or kidnaping his lost brother, Orpal, could be considered making him a favour at best. The only person remaining was Nerea/Nana, his mentor, but that was suicide. If the kid was so powerful, what were the limits of that old hag prowess?

The Countess could only curse herself for always ignoring his husband hobbies, she had no idea who she was, or what repercussions messing with her could have. She knew nothing about magic, except what her cousin, Genon said to her in the past.

And even then, she had only pretended to listen to him most of the times. She decided to keep that as a last resort, if everything else failed.

Meanwhile, Lith's family was quickly getting accustomed to living in such a splendid manor, wearing only beautiful clothes and eating delicious food.

Aside from the random scare caused by a guard's sneeze or an animal in the garden, life had turned into a fairy tale for them.

Lith, instead, was quite annoyed. Since the first day, the Count, Keyla and Jadon had showered with praises Elina, Rena and Tista for their perfect skin and luscious hair.

"I'm so envious of you, girls. I wish I could get rid of these things on my face." Keyla sighed. Over time the camaraderie between the young ladies had grown strong.

"Yeah, you are already so pretty. If only..." Tista threw Lith a meaningful look, that he pretended not to notice.

Jadon interest toward Rena was embarrassingly obvious, and while he tried looking at her stealthily, such attention in turn got him as many stone-cold glares from Lith.

"I get that he is just twenty and horny as a boar, but she is just fourteen. Back where I came from that's bad. Plus, unless he wants to marry her, I'd rather neuter him. I won't allow him to ruin her future, treating her like a fling! Over my dead body!"

Rena was flattered by both the young man's attentions and his little brother care. Yet she was just dazzled by the house, not stupid. Elina had warned her many times about the young men, nobles or not, that would try to take advantage of naïve young girls.

She would accept compliments, but refuse any improper gift and avoided remaining alone with him. When Keyla and the Count noticed that if Lith's glares could maim, Jadon could easily fit into an envelope, they had a private talk with him.

After that the air in the room became a lot lighter.

Finally, the Count received the notification via the communication amulet that the annulment was finally done. He was once again a free man.

After confirming that Koya had been notified too, hence she had no more reason to plot against him, he could finally relax and step out of his room for the first time since weeding out the traitors.

The first thing he and Lith did was to contact Nana to explain her everything.

"That's why you were so serious." She pondered. "And why you took away my only helper. Lark, when we meet again, we have to talk about compensation, my business suffered because of your family squabble." She nagged.

"There, there, Lady Nerea. It was a matter of life and death, and the young Lith proved to be decisive in solving the matter."

"Hmm. Sorry, but I have to go. I have a business to attend. We'll talk later, especially with you, young imp. This lack of trust wounds my old heart." She said trying to act all old and frail.

Lith bowed and asked for her forgiveness, but his thoughts were quite different.

"Do you even have a heart? I'd bet all I have that the only reason you are pouting is that you have missed such juicy gossip for so long."

Contrary to their expectations, Nana called only a few hours later, and their next conversation had an entirely different mood. Nana was laughing her a*s off the entire time, managing to speak only briefly while gasping for air.

"Ah! Ah! Ah! You can't believe what just happened to me! Someone just tried to kidnap me. I'm serious!" A long laughing pause followed.

"It made me feel young again, like when I was still an adventurer. Guys dressed in tacky full black clothes, coming at me from all directions, it was hilarious!

You should have seen their faces when I took them down at once with a Corona Discharge!"

According to the Count's books, it was a very strong tier five lightning spell, Nana's true specialty was air magic, after all. Lith had no idea what it was exactly, it was mentioned, but not described.

He had already enough troubles understanding tier four spells, they were on a league of their own compared to the magic he had previously learned.

"They were so cute! They even had some minor magical items on them. I have no use for such trinkets, but I can still sell them for good money."

Lith was so envious. Magical items! He had yet to find any.

"Hey, that's offensive!" Solus pointed. "I resent that!"

"You are not an item, you are a friend." The pure sincerity of that thought sent Solus giggling and blushing in a corner of her mind, away from Lith's perceptions unless he explicitly searched for her.

"That makes the three of us even." Nana said.

"I hadn't this much fun in decades. I was almost considering to let some of them go and not submit a report to the Mage Association. Almost. So, Lark, this is my annulment gift for you.

From now on, you can choose to introduce yourself as bachelor or a widower. I'd go with widower, is more dramatic, chicks dig rich lonely men and makes less awkward explaining why you have two children already. Ta-ta!"

After the communication ended, both the men were shocked to their bones.

"You told me that your wife handled stress badly, but this is beyond idiotic!" Lith even forgot the most basic etiquette.

"Indeed." The Count didn't seem to notice. "The only explanation is that Koya had arranged Lady Nerea's kidnapping in advance, and when she received the news about the annulment, it was too late to call it off.

She is a close friend to both of us. Koya's plan would make sense if Lady Nerea wasn't the strongest magician in all the County. Not to mention that even if the plan succeeded, the result would be disastrous anyway."

Count Lark sighed.

"Koya, you never listened to me when I talked about magic and its rules. I hope they don't make you suffer too much. You are still the mother of my kids."

Thinking about the destruction that was about to befall the whole Ghishal household, including his disowned children, he could not avoid shedding tears of regret and compassion.

Lith moved behind him, patting his back while using his sheer willpower to suppress a hysterical laughter.

Lith and his family spent two more weeks as the Count's guests, fully enjoying his hospitality and the beauty of the whole manor, especially the park.

Now everyone had a room of his own, there was no danger anymore. That meant that away from prying eyes, Rena and Tista could freely mock their little brother for the Count's painting and the heroic aura he had depicted him with.

Living everyday with Lith, they really couldn't see him as someone great or overbearing. He was always their little brother.

Lith paid them no mind, their laughter was something he had fought so hard to protect. As long that they laughed happily with him, instead of him, sibling mockery was perfectly acceptable.

Elna and Raaz, instead, were really scared by the stuffed Byk, considering that their son had been reckless enough to face such beast on his own. When they would get back home, they would give him a talk, but not now.

There was no point in spoiling their first vacation in over thirty years. For farmers vacations were just myths, like dragons.

Lith used that time to get acquainted with the huge magic library the Count had assembled over the years, finally discovering what Blood Resonance magic was.

It was a recently discovered branch of light magic, and by using it a mage could ascertain if two people were blood related or even to whom a blood sample belonged.

"Interesting, back on Earth this could become the foundations for forensics analysis. Seems that this mage, Duke Marth (AN: name, not title) is still alive and well, teaching magic in the White Griffon Academy.

This makes two famous mages residing there. Maybe Nana went to the Lightning Griffon because of her air magic prowess, while the White Griffon specializes in light magic. Or maybe is just a coincidence, whatever. It's too far from here for me."

Returning home revealed to be a bit traumatic for his family. No more servants, no more slacking off, no more all you can eat buffet 24/7. It took many days and even more sighs, but soon they returned to their old routine.

The Count's sharecroppers had done an excellent job, they even repaired and reinforced the house, making it seem brand new. The Count had also sent them home with lots of gifts.

All the clothes that had been prepared for them, a lot of make up from Keyla, and a whole crate of food from Hilya. The cook was really fond of the family, and couldn't wait to have them back in the manor.

A night, Lith was training his martial arts together with Solus, when she felt an unknown mana core approaching. More curious than worried, he made her return to his finger and set up various layers of protection around the house.

Whoever he was, he was alone and not very sneaky. Now that he had stop practicing, Lith could hear him getting closer. The night birds and insects had gone silent.

"Who the heck are you?" Lith asked as soon as their eyes met.

The man in front of him wore an expensive robe, worthy of a magician in Dungeons & Looting, but now was all dirty and ripped in many points. He was unshaven, his hair was muddy too, and with only moonlight Lith couldn't discern its colour from the dirt.

"You!" The man had a pleasantly surprised expression on his face. "You have finally returned! I have waited for weeks, sleeping in the mud and eating only acorns and berries, but it was worth the wait."

"I'll ask you only one more time, who are you?" Lith yawned, the man was not making any sense.

"I'm Genon Ghishal! You killed my entire family! Prepare to die!"

Lith reacted by laughing his a*s off.

"Oh! I get it now! Bravo on surviving despite belonging to a family of braindead idiots!"

"How dare you! I'll kill your whole family, like you killed mine!"

Lith started laughing even harder.

"You?! With your pathetic yellow mana core? Even my little sister is stronger than you." Lith's words and countenance made no sense to Genon.

Outraged by such lack of respect and fear, completely different from how he had imagined the face off, while enduring all the hardships, Genon started casting a Lightning spell.

Lith responded by bringing his index finger on the lips whispering:

"Hush! We don't want to wake up the neighbours."

A second air dome, beside the one that Lith had previously set up, enveloping the whole house, surrounded the two men, covering a thirty-meter (33 yards) radius.

"Brezza Inidra!" Genon completed his spell, a bolt of lightning shot toward Lith, which was still laughing.

"Look up!" He said pointing to the sky, and like an obedient dog, the bolt turned 90° up, rising harmlessly in the air before dissipating.

"Seriously?! A tier two spell? How the heck did you manage to graduate from whatever backwater academy they sent you?"

Genon suddenly felt scared, what he had just saw made absolutely no sense. Not even his teachers had ever done something like that.

"You know, I am really stressed." Lith stopped laughing, his tone turning cold and detached, like he was talking to himself rather than to his opponent.

"I have spent weeks holed up, pretending to be weak and harmless! Playing the good f*cking kid role! But now I can finally be myself."

For the first time since he had achieved the cyan mana core, Lith went all out. His body released a brilliant cyan aura, filled with killing intent. His bones and muscles started to pop and creak, moving to accommodate that sudden surge of power.

His eyes glowed like torches, emitting an ice blue radiance while his smile went to ear to ear. His teeth shined like fangs in the full moon light.

Genon was scared but not frozen, starting to cast a tier three fireball, the strongest spell he could cast safely without risking it to backfire.

Lith stood there, tilting his head left and right, waiting for him to finish.

The fireball was a five meters (5.5 yards) radius sphere of raging flames, but the closer it came to Lith, the more it shrank, until it became the size of the marble, allowing Lith to catch it with his open palm and squeezing it out with a puff.

"Tsk, ts. You can use everything but fire magic. The noise isn't a problem, but the light could alert someone, and we don't want that."

Genon had no idea what was happening, but he knew that remaining there was too dangerous. That wasn't a magico, but a monster. He tried to run away, but before he could get out the Hush zone Lith was already pinning him down.

"First you threaten my family and now you want to leave? That's rude! The night is still young, and I have so many things to experiment on you, yet. Let's play!"

Despite the protective barrier, deep in the Trawn woods, the Ry, king in the east, could feel the magic turbulence growing stronger.

"Take heed, my pack. Some human has threatened Scourge's cubs. Let's learn from his mistakes and pray together for his soul, so in his next life he will be wiser for this."

The entire woods resounded with howls until dawn came.

Chapter 39: Challenging Times

The next day, Lith was happy and relaxed. He kept humming the whole time while he cleaned the house and prepared breakfast, reheating the pastries to make them regain some of their fragrance.

The long permanence in the Count's manor had proved to him how stressful it was being constantly forced to hide his skill and powers. Being born in a backwater village, where no one knew jack about magic was a blessing in disguise.

He had got too used to the freedom and isolation living in a farmhouse guaranteed him, to the point that holding back and constantly pretending to use fake magic for a prolonged period was akin to torture for him.

After a long discussion with Solus about the problem, they decided that the best course of action was to find a way to not attend any magic academy.

According to the magic annuals he had read in the last weeks, it was possible to become a member of the Magic Association despite being home-schooled. It just required a longer and more difficult exams session.

The biggest difference between a home-schooled and a magic academy graduate amounted only in a matter of fame and prestige.

By being admitted and successfully passing the tests devised by famous and talented magicians, the student was bound to have an easier time whatever was the path of his choosing.

A home-schooled, instead, no matter the score he could achieve, would always be seen like a rogue magician with no references. He would first need to prove himself, by either performing voluntary military service or becoming an adventurer.

Achieving merits was the only way for a rogue magician to have access to a prestigious and well-paid job. Lith didn't care for any of that, he just wanted to develop his powers, staying away from the spotlight until he reached sixteen years.

At that point, he would be considered an adult, and could finally leave Lutia to start exploring the world in search for a solution to his reincarnation problem.

If achieving true death turned out to be impossible, he would need to work his way around by either becoming an immortal or binding his soul to the current world.

That would be the worst-case scenario, but at least if he died, he would still be reborn with all his magic knowledge and have Solus by his side.

Thanks to the money he got from the Count for saving his family, Lith had no need to keep working as a healer. Only when Nana was on house calls or away for personal matters, he would take her place in the home office.

Many farmers relied on his presence and discounted prices to afford all the medical care they needed, Nana's fares were too expensive.

Just because at the moment he had no need for an extra income, it didn't mean he had already forgotten how bad it was for a family being forced to watch one of their loved ones suffer, the helplessness felt when money dictated the difference between living and barely surviving.

Lith would spend most of his mornings exploring the Count's library, in search for tomes to borrow.

It was a room twice the size of his house, at least one hundred squared meters (109 squared yards) big, located in a corner point of the main building.

Both the west and north side of the room had huge windows, arranged so that the sun would manage to perfectly light it until dusk.

The bookshelves were placed from wall to wall, parallel to each other, and spaced so to avoid ridiculous domino effect in case one fell over, creating four corridors. In the center of the room there was a luxurious desk and a couple of armchairs.

The books covered all the topics, not just magic, it was the sum of all the knowledge the Count had accumulated through the years. Every time Lith returned home from the library, he would carry over a small chest full of delicacies.

Hilya would never let him go away empty handed.

The first book Lith picked up, was the Lightning Griffon Academy rulebook. Together with useless information, like how submit your application and what were the most common admittance tests, he found an answer to an old question.

The academy would last five years, and each year the student would need to prove a rising level of mastery of magic. The first year required learning at least twenty tier one spells, the second one thirty tier two, and so on.

"So that's why spells are divided into tiers. It's to identify the skill level of the magico compared to the official academic course."

Tiers from one to three were comprised of simple spells with a single effect. Tier three was basically the same as a tier one, but much more powerful and with higher requirements in terms of talent and skill.

From tier four, the effects would be much more complicated, like when Lith weaved together different spells with true magic. Tier four and five, based on what he could find, seemed to be greatly similar to true magic.

"That's probably why most mages never learn the truth about magic. Once they think they have reached the pinnacle, they simply stop asking themselves questions. They put too much attention to the destination and too little on the trip itself."

Aside from magic, Lith was also burdened by an annoying personal problem. After seeing his family, the Count was begging him on daily basis to help his daughter get rid of her acne.

"Please, the Debutante Ball is when a young noble gets introduced to society as an adult, in the presence of the King's Court. It's a very important event that can affect her whole life.

It can change not only her chances of finding a good husband, she could also be handpicked by the Queen as her personal attendant or even lady-in-waiting."

It wasn't that Lith didn't understand, such events had existed on Earth too, more like he didn't care much. For his canons, only one person could keep a secret. Two were a risk, three a whole crowd. Adding a fourth one wasn't much to his liking.

"Solus, what do you think I should do? The Count has done and is still doing so much for me, a hard pass would be extremely rude on my side. At the same time, I don't know how much I can trust Keyla, being a teenager."

"I'd say to play it smart. Nana was extremely vague about what you did, and the Count has no idea about the before and after, since he only saw your family after the treatment.

Explain to Keyla the dangers you are putting yourself in just by helping her, and after you are sure she has understood, cure only her acne, nothing more. This will minimize the risks.

The fact that you saved her life should matter to her. Not to mention that after what her mother put Keyla through, she shouldn't be that naïve anymore. She knows what does it mean to live under a sword of Damocles."

Following Solus' advice, Lith and the Count explained to her all the possible consequences of breaking his trust, both for Lith and her family.

Keyla was a smart girl, so she felt kind of offended by receiving such obvious warnings.

"First of all, thank you for your trust. First you saved my life, and now you are willing to risk your own safety to save my social life too. This is a debt I will never be able to fully pay back.

Second, don't worry for a second about my silence. An advantage is called like that because you are the only one who has it. I would rather cut my tongue than allowing my competition to get their hands on something like that.

No offence, dad, but I know all too well we are just small-time nobles in a backwater County. I need all the help I can, and even with no acne, with our status and riches we are still leagues behind the big noble families."

Lith choose to play it safe, making the process last weeks instead of seconds, so that her skin treatment would go unnoticed.

They kept Jadon in the dark, and he only noticed the changes when her skin had become smooth and her make up much lighter.

Thanks to Solus he was also able to keep the female staff under his watch, and when not even them noticed anything strange, Lith could finally sigh with relief.

By that time, the Count's mansion was back at full staff, and the whole house was busy preparing for a big party. The Count wanted to celebrate two happy events.

The first was the annulment, while the second had been something completely unexpected. Based on his prenuptial arrangement, the Crown had decided to assign to him all the lands and annuities of the Ghishals after their untimely disappearance.

Sadly, he wanted Lith to attend, to introduce him to all the neighbouring nobility.

"It's really important for you, I managed to get even Marchioness Mirim Distar to attend. She is for me what I am to all the Barons and Baronets in the County. Her Marquisate encompasses all the region and its Counties.

If you can, prepare a good gift for her. The only suggestion I can give to you is to prepare something with your hands, or even better, with your magic!"

Lith was unimpressed and uninterested, but having to live another eight years in the Lustria County, he could only soldier up and move on. Making a gift for a woman was already hard, making one for someone much richer than him was a challenge.

"Does she like games?"

"Yes, she loves all kind of strategy games. She is a smart and cunning woman, if there will ever be a war, gods forbid it, she would make an excellent general."

"And I suppose she is the head of the Distar household, right?"

"Once again correct. Her spouse married into her family, he is like a prince consort, his title as Marquis is purely nominal. Don't tell me you already have something in mind?"

Lith nodded and left, very sad at the idea of wasting a whole afternoon and evening being a wallflower.

His destiny was akin to that of Gerda's corpse, something to show and brag about, before completely forgetting about it and move on next gossip piece.

Chapter 40: Challenging Times 2

Count Lark had another dress prepared for Lith, specifically tailored for the occasion. It was very similar to the other day-dress he had received in the past, but black in colour and with a more elegant cut.

"It's amazing how similar party dresses are compared to Earth customs. All men wear almost the same dress, the only significant difference is the household crest embroidered on the chest pocket.

Instead, the women all wear different types of dresses, varying in colours, neckline and embroideries. Not to mention the jewellery. Aside from family rings, men wear only monocles or pince-nez. They really resemble a flock of penguins."

Lith kept himself from the crowd as long as he could, there was nothing he could gain except awkward memories or curious looks.

Marchioness Distar revealed to be really important to Count Lark, to the point that he arranged their meeting privately in his quarters, while the party was taking place in the ballroom.

"Thank you so much for coming, dear Marchioness. You have no idea what it means for me having the possibility to share such a happy moment in your company."

"The pleasure is all mine, dear Lark, I wouldn't miss it for anything in the world." Her lips were smiling, but her eyes didn't.

Lith's instinct could tell that she was actually quite bored, and that she was there only because the Count must have persevered relentlessly to make her attend. He knew from experience how stubborn he could be.

Based on what the Count had told him, Marchioness Distar should be a woman in her late thirties, but even with the little make up she wore, it was hard to imagine her a day older than thirty.

She had a beautiful face with great proportions, eyes brimming with intelligence and curiosity. She wore her waist-long straight hair down, with no hairpin or barrette to adorn them.

She had dark brown hair, with shades of blue all over it. It was almost hypnotic to look when she shook her head.

Her evening dress was of a pale blue, with no neckline, covering even her shoulders. In contrast to all the other noble dames, the Marchioness wore evening gloves, and there were no gemstones embroidered in her attire.

She had clearly chosen a plain dress, hoping to either go unnoticed or leave early.

"This is the boy I talked you about so much." The Count laughed. "He is incredibly skilled, wise beyond his age and according to Lady Nerea, he is blessed by the light."

"Really?" The Marchioness didn't believe a word, but ruffled Lith's hair nonetheless.

Lith could feel that such gesture of intimacy was out of place, coming from such a grand dame. It also had no warmth at all. It felt more like a dog show judge checking the fur, rather than a caress.

"Sigh, as predicted, Trequill has once again wasted my time." The Marchioness thought. "It's just another of his childish delusions, finding a talented male mage in such scarcely populated land."

I would really love to tell him that the reason why women and magical beasts have coloured shades in their hair is the sign of the blessing from the six gods of magic. It would save so much of his efforts and my time.

Too bad that the Mage Association would make a huge fuss if I did. Those old fogeys and their reluctance to reveal even such an open secret. Everyone in the King's Court knows it, be him/her a mage or not."

Lith could see she was disappointed, but had no idea why. Eager to go back home and do something actually meaningful, he bowed to her.

"My name is Lith of Lutia, your Ladyship. I'm glad and honoured to make your acquaintance. Please, accept this humble gift. Is not much, but I made it myself."

The Marchioness was pleasantly surprised.

"At least this country bumpkin acts humbly and knows the proper etiquette, instead of being all arrogant like he owns the place, unlike all his predecessors."

"Thank you, I'm much obliged." It's what she actually said even before opening the envelope.

It turned out to be a square shaped wood board, with sides about fifty-one centimetres (20 inches) long, with eight columns and rows of black and white alternating colours of wood.

After checking it with the Count, Lith couldn't be bothered much finding a proper gift, and went straight plagiarizing the game of chess.

The Marchioness interest was piqued, she had never saw anything like that before. The board was accompanied by the chess pieces and a booklet explaining all the rules.

Th differences from the common chess game were few but significant. First, the king and queen roles were swapped. Lith had to suck up to an important woman, making the king the game goal was plainly stupid.

Also, he renamed the bishops as mages and the pawns as commoners. Everything else was as it was supposed to be.

The Marchioness read the rules so fast that Lith thought she was simply skimming, instead she asked him a precise question.

"Why the commoners can become any chess piece if they reach the end of the board?" Although he had considered unlikely, Lith had prepared for this question, giving the answer the usual fortune cookie wisdom that the Count so much liked.

"Because when someone, even a commoner, completes his journey toward wisdom, life holds endless possibilities. After all, even the King's ancestors at some point have been simple commoners, before rising to power."

The Marchioness giggled softly.

"Well, it seems that at least the part about the wisdom is true." She thought.

"Fancy a game? Seems really interesting. You could show me the ropes. It would be a nice way to get to know each other better. You can understand a lot about a person based on how he plays, wins, but most importantly how he accepts loss."

Such outcome was completely out of his expectations. Lith was taken aback, he knew very little about chess, aside from the rules. He had never liked the game much, he found it to be too long and boring.

Why waste time with some pieces of wood, with so many VR games available on Earth? He had learned to play when he was very little, after reading a wonderful book about a chess player, but his experience had been far from pleasant.

He was too reckless and impatient, barely able to think one move ahead. Lith found no pleasure or emotion while playing chess, to him it was like a solitaire where you have to wait minutes to turn a single card.

Luckily, he was never alone. Solus had fallen in love with the game since she saw it in Lith's memories, viewing all the matches he had in the past and the ones he spectated.

"Solus take the wheel! Save me, please!"

"It would be a pleasure, your Ladyship."

After sitting at a table, the games began.

Even from her first game, the Marchioness proved to be incredibly intelligent, cunning and bold. She was able to think at least five moves in advance, always trying to figure out Lith's intentions and weak points.

Too bad for her, Lith barely knew what he was doing. He was the perfect straw man for hiding Solus real plans. He would just move the pieces as she instructed him to.

"You defeated her in barely thirty moves. Shouldn't you be a little more kind to her?"

The Marchioness clicked her tongue, asking for a rematch.

"To a smart woman like that? She would notice and get offended, naïve man."

"Maybe if you went easier on her earlier, she wouldn't notice now!"

"And where's the fun in that?"

Lith was flabbergasted.

"This is not a matter of fun! We're sucking up to her, remember?"

"Opps! My bad."

"Opps my pale a*s!"

Solus started to slow things down, but after just a few moves the Marchioness showed a displeased face before toppling her queen.

"I clearly underestimated you and your game. I need more time to get acquainted with all the possibilities." She extended her hand, and Lith shook it.

She had a gentle but firm grip, Lith could feel no hostility from her.

"Mind if I show it around? I need opponents to get some practice."

"It's all yours. You can do anything you want with it."

After that, Lith left the two nobles discussing between them, all too happy to get away from that torture chamber.

After asking Jadon if he was finally allowed to leave (in a polite manner, off course) and getting a no as an answer, Lith was left pondering on what had just transpired.

"Hmm, maybe there is a silver lining in you crushingly defeating that woman."

"Really?"

"Yes. If we want to avoid being forced to enrol in a Magic Academy, we could just as well sabotage ourselves a little.

We already know that the Count has not the means to ensure our admittance. If we piss off the nobles a little, just enough for them to not back his recommendation, we'll avoid the whole thing without offending the Count."

"Good idea! Even if indirectly, you have already caused both the Ghishal and Trahan households to fall. Probably in the nobles' eyes you already have quite some demerits. You are already halfway there, you're quite good at being disliked."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." Lith turned sour.

Solus inwardly cursed herself for the slip of the mind, and avoided apologizing. In that moment would only add fuel to the fire.

For the first time in years, Lith was actually hurt by those words, his anger silently rose.

When he heard someone belittling his endeavour of killing Gerda, he sized the opportunity to set his plan in motion.

It was a couple, likely father and son, commenting on the stuffed Byk exposed in a corner of the room.

"It's not that big." Said a chubby middle-aged man that barely managed to reach Gerda's navel with his head. "I'm sure you could have killed it too, Frenon."

"I don't know dad." Replied the ten years old kid that shared a striking resemblance with the man, only younger and thinner. "It seems big to me. And look at those fangs and claws. This Lith must be crazy to get near something like this."

"Bah!" Scoffed the man, making his double chin and his waxed brown curls tremble. "If you kill it with magic, there is no need to get close. It's just that simple. How can you be less bold than a commoner? I pampered you too much."

"I beg your pardon?" A stone-cold voice reached them from behind.

The two turned around, trembling visibly. They had recognized Jadon's voice, the future Count Lark and lord of their lands.

Even in his anger, Lith wasn't so reckless, he just ratted them out to his noble friends, leaving the dirty job to them.

"That was quite a rude remark, Baronet Hogum." Keyla's voice was fierce and loud, resounding through the whole room.

Lith was many times her benefactor, and hearing such a blatant lack of respect in her own house was simply too much to bear. Jadon thought the same, but his sister had butted in at the right moment, forcing him to step back momentarily.

"Ah! Ah! Ah! There's a misunderstanding." The Baronet title was the lowest, getting on the Lark's family black book was beyond bad.

"Are you implying we are both deaf or just stupid? Did you hear what I did too, dear brother?"

"I heard a nasty remark about one of our honoured guests, dear sister."

Before things could escalate further, the Marchioness chimed in.

"There, there. It's a party, let's try to be friends and not spoiling the mood."

Her appearance made all heads turn, the chatter instantly stopped.

"Besides, it's so simple to separate the wheat from the chaff. What about a little magic challenge?" The room roared in an applause.

Under the Marchioness lead, the crowd moved outside. The park was already perfectly lit up, since after dinner the party was supposed to move outside, to enjoy the fresh night breeze while drinking properly aged liquors.

She made the two boys stand twenty meters (22 yards) from each other, before explaining the rules.

"This will be a friendly match, so it ends on first blood. Only magic is allowed. I want no underhanded tricks, also seriously harming the opponents is prohibited. A mage without control is no different from a violent drunkard."

Strangely, the Marchioness said that while looking only at Lith, and that pissed him off even further.

"So, just because I'm a commoner, she treats me like a barbarian? So much for losing with grace! Such a hypocrite."

"I'll be the judge. If I say stop, you better stop." Fuel was added to the fire.

Both the youths nodded. Lith put his arms behind his back.

"You know, I really wouldn't be in your shoes. If you win, you prove nothing. You would have just beaten a lowly commoner, like everyone expects you to. But if you lose..." Lith paused dramatically, still waiting for the start signal.

"Wouldn't be terrible, losing in front of all these people, proving to be less talented and bold than a commoner?"

The young Baronet started gulping loudly, turning constantly toward the crowd, suddenly realizing the pressure of the challenge.

"Begin!"

When the Marchioness voice rang out, he was so stiff that he had yet to move, when Lith opened his palm while yelling.

"Scram!"

A powerful gust of wind made Baronet Hogum fall on the ground.

"Lith of Lutia wins!"

The crowd was surprised, a murmur started spreading like wildfire.

"Why did she stop the match so suddenly?" Everyone asked.

The Marchioness helped the boy to get up and brought him closer for them to observe. There was a shallow cut on his left cheek, going from his nose to the ear.

"Just with chore magic?" "From that distance?" "Impressive. That's how he has single-handedly killed a Byk."

Lith puffed his chest, his anger subsiding enough for him to avoid further mockery on the expenses of his defeated opponent.

A small girl quickly rushed to the Marchioness, making a perfect bow to her while whispering something, her face all smiles and pleasantries.

She was so petite to appear ageless to Lith. She could be eight years or thirteen years old, he couldn't tell. She was definitely flat as a board, with gold blonde hair with shades of red. Her dress had gemstones the size of an acorn embroidered into it.

"The brat must be loaded." Lith thought.

"Be careful. While the boy was just a yellow core, she has a green one." Solus warned him.

Lith inwardly scoffed.

"Lucky b*stard."

"Lith, this is Minnea Tristarm, daughter of the Viscount Tristarm. Minnea, this is Lith from Lutia."

"Nice to meet you." The girl performed a barely noticeable curtsy.

"The pleasure is all mine." Lith returned the rudeness, by performing such a small bow that it could be easily confused with him checking if his shoelaces were properly knotted.

"Minnea was really impressed by your feat, and would like to challenge you to a different kind of competition."

"It would be an honour performing for her Grace. My father had tried for so long to get an audience with your Ladyship."

"Obnoxious brat!" Lith thought. "She has been watching the Marchioness the whole time, speaking like I'm not even here. You are in for a surprise."

They moved back into the ballroom, where the servants promptly prepared a small round table. A single candle was standing on its center.

"This is a magical competition that's really popular within the capital." The girl kept looking at the Marchioness, while she explained the game with a condescending tone.

"Real mages are not mindless brutes. Real power comes from the mind."

"Spare me the details and explain the rules." Lith's tone was even more condescending.

"It's really simple." Minnea looked at him for the first time.

"Each of us picks a colour, the one that manages to keep the candle of the chosen colour for ten seconds is the winner. Is it clear?"

Lith yawned.

"I'll take the yellow."

"And I'll take the red, like my hair. Is my favourite colour."

When the Marchioness gave the start signal, Minnea tried her best to turn the candle to red, while Lith was checking his nails' length, yawning from time to time.

Soon the ten count was completed, and he tried to walk away.

"Wait! I demand a do over." The girl was bright red from the embarrassment.

"Why?" Everyone asked.

"Do you realize that keeping control of a flame is much easier than taking it over?"

Lith could easily see through her allegations.

"Are you insinuating that by exploiting the natural colour of the candle I took control of it before the challenge started, getting an unfair advantage?" He laughed.

"You can understand a lot about a person, based on how she plays, wins, but most importantly how she accepts loss." Lith quoted, looking straight in the Marchioness' eyes.

"Let's have a do over, then. This time I'll pick cyan. Feel free to get a head start. I'll commence my attack only when the flame is completely red, so we'll be even. Agreed?"

Eager to restore her wounded pride, Minnea nodded while she was already turning the candle to a bright red.

"Can I?" When both the Marchioness and Minnea nodded, Lith started sending tendrils of mana toward the candle.

Slowly but inexorably, many cyan spots appeared inside the flame, taking it over in less than a minute.

"I yield." Minnea didn't wait for the ten count, the outcome was painfully clear to her.

"Do you want another do over?" Lith hissed bending forward, getting really close to her face, his eyes reduced to fiery slits brimming with mana.

"Lith, your mana is overflowing." Solus warned him.

"Let it burn."

Minnea shook her head, before running back to her father.

No one dared to challenge him anymore.

The rest of the evening was full of chattering and gossiping, but otherwise uneventful.

"This should be plenty enough to make any academy in the region reject our application

End of book 1