

## Supreme M 47

### Chapter 47 Odd Developments

It was in moments like that that Lith felt how heavy a bottleneck was. Normally, in such a situation, he would use Accumulation, turning a downtime into a training session while also studying how his body was developing.

But now that option was unavailable, and being stuck in such state for almost a year, he knew his body inside out, to the point of memorizing where every impurity was located.

After half an hour, he was about to fall asleep.

"Hope the Count doesn't mind me snoring a little."

"Lith, why don't we open Nana's goodbye gift? I'm really curious." Solus said.

"I'm not. That stingy old hag just gave me a piece of paper. I bet it's a list of souvenirs she wants me to buy for her."

A small friendly bet was better than doing nothing, so he took out the small envelope and read its content. Lith had lost the bet, it was a brief letter.

"Dear Lith,

Now that you are going to a Magic Academy, away from the prying eyes of your parents, you deserve to know the truth. Chore magic holds a forbidden spell that I never taught you. Now you are old enough to know."

It followed a short but precise description on how to use darkness magic on himself to avoid unwanted consequences from the intimacy with girls. It was a birth control spell. The letter closed with a

"Remember to always be a gentleman and have fun! You'll thank me later.

With love, Nana"

"What a dirty old lady. I'm not even twelve." Lith couldn't stop from laughing out loud. The idea of Nana being the one worrying about his sex life was hilarious.

"It's this about something Lady Nerea wrote? An anecdote? Can I see it too?" The Count was very curious, seeing Lith laugh was a rare occurrence.

After reading the message, Count Lark became purple from embarrassment. The scene made Lith laugh even louder.

"Oh my, the Count is such a softie. Getting flustered by such stupid thing. Sometimes he seems straight out of a manga."

"Lith, this is no laughing matter." The Count said.

"I appreciate Lady Nerea concern, but I still find it ill-timed and vulgarly expressed. The matters of the heart should be treated with more tact, especially with someone young as you are."

Lith couldn't help but renew his laughter.

"He really called it 'matters of the heart'! It's just sex, man!"

The light mood didn't last long, the long trip soon made both the men fall asleep.

When the coachman woke them, they were already arrived.

The sight of the Lightning Griffon academy was truly impressive.

The building itself seemed an enormous castle, straight from the wet dreams of a medieval engineer. Yet it was impossible to see it clearly, they were still too far.

The academy was in the center of a huge forest that extended in all directions as far as the eye could see.

"That explains why it's so distant from populated areas, is basically a County of its own. The forest may even have an extension superior to the Trawn woods." Lith thought.

"Why do we stop here? We are still very far, how are we supposed to reach the academy?"

The Count was excited like a kid in a candy store.

"Don't worry and follow me."

He brought Lith to a small brick house on the edge of the forest, where two men were sipping tea while idly chatting.

The Count introduced himself and showed them their permits.

The man that was now holding the papers whispered a few words, the ink rearranged itself, coming out of the sheet and forming some kind of magic circle on the ground.

"Even the permits are a magical item?" Lith was shocked.

"I sensed some mana coming from them, but I supposed it was just some kind of magical seal of authenticity, not something this complex." Solus explained.

"Sh\*t! We are completely in the dark about magical items, and there's no mention of it in any book we read so far. Either we find a way to correct this situation, or our travels will be much more difficult in the future."

Following the man's instructions, Lith and the Count stepped inside the circle, that instantly became a translucent yellow sphere.

It gently rose up in the air, before starting to fly at break-neck speed toward the castle. Despite it was moving faster than Lith ever did before, they felt no different than standing on the ground.

"This thing is like gyro-stabilized! What a brilliant idea!" For the first time Lith was almost regretting his choice. Almost.

The trip was short, but Lith still managed to see many huge magical beasts running inside the forest. They even almost collided with an eagle the size of a piper aircraft. Its eyes were full of scorn, shrieking at them something that sounded a reprimand.

"Is it me, or there are only magical beasts in there?" Lith asked the Count, who nodded.

"Yes, magical beasts and monsters, of course. They'll explain everything to you once you enrol." The Count had a fatherly tone, but Lith could clearly hear a hint of condescension 'I told you so'-like.

The sphere landed on a balcony before dissipating. A twenty-year-something girl wearing a magician robe was waiting for them.

She guided them through magical escalators and corridors, before leaving them into the Headmistress antechamber. She had talked via a small communicator amulet the whole time, giving orders about menial duties.

In Lith's experience, that meant bad news. Whenever he had a job interview, the secretary attitude towards the applicants was a tell about how the company treated his employees and what were their expectations about a candidate.

She had ignored them the whole time, not giving them a tour or an explanation about any of the magical marvels they had encountered.

For someone who wanted to be rejected, though, it was good news.

The Count was too mesmerized to notice, his eyes were moving to every single piece of furniture, his mouth agape in admiration. The room itself was a prodigy.

Despite no visible source of light, be it windows, torches or light stones, every nook and cranny were lighted as the morning sun was shining above their heads.

"What do you think of this?" The Count asked as a rhetorical question, expecting Lith to show an enthusiasm equal if not superior to his.

"Honestly? I find it pretentious and stuck-up. Everything in the room feels like his master is looking down on us, trying to intimidate the guest and put him in his place."

"Really?" The Count's dream bubble popped up abruptly.

"Yeah. I mean little splendour is fine, but this? It's too much." He pointed at the gold decoration that kept shifting to silver and platinum, and at the gemstones embroidered at every corner, like shining eyes staring at them with contempt.

"Also how do you explain otherwise that girl rude attitude? She barely looked at us at all."

"Oh dear." The Count gulped. "Now that you point that out, this room resembles very much the King's antechamber for the unwanted guests."

"Is there such thing?" Lith was curious.

"Yes, is kind of an open secret. The King's room has more than one waiting room, depending on how much he cares about the visitor. The one for the unwanted guests is filled with tacky stuff like this, to remember the visitor the Crown's power.

It's also filled with painting depicting the previous Kings and Queens slaying rebellious nobles or mages. Depends on whom he wants to pressure."

"Like these ones?" Lith pointed to many magical paintings, all of them where short movies, showing how the Mage Association got rid of entire families of unruly nobles throughout history.

The event depicted would go to the point of showing the bloodshed, the mansions set aflame, before starting to tell their story back from the beginning.

"Precisely." The Count swallowed loudly.

Expecting to have to wait for hours, Lith made himself comfortable, trying to get asleep again. He wasn't disappointed. When the Count woke him up, he could see from his face that he had quite some pent-up stress.

He had waited patiently for long enough to get the message.

"Don't say a word. If we want to salvage this thing, we need tact and diplomacy. Leave everything to me." Count Lark said with barely a whisper.

The Headmistress' office was much less tacky than her antechamber, resembling very much a common principal office from Earth. She was a woman at least as old as Nana, but time had been kinder to her.

Her face was full of wrinkles, but her eyes were full of energy and life. Unlike Nana, she was ready to live a long life and stood straight as a string

Her hair was almost completely grey, only some shade of yellow still remained. She wore a robe with the colours of her academy, it was of a light blue, while all the decorations were of a bright yellow, most likely gold.

The way its fabric had been woven, made it seem like every movement of the Headmistress was the wind moving through the sky, while the gold embroidered appeared and disappeared like sudden lightnings.

She had only smiles and nice words, but Lith's instinct could sense no warmth in her.

"Dear Count, we haven't met for too long!" She extended her hand to him.

"You are too kind. It's only my fault that I can't bring you enough promising youths." The Count's poker face was impeccable. All traces of stress and anxiety had disappeared. His words were calm and gentle, like meeting a long-lost sister.

"Please, have a seat. Sorry for the long wait, but as you know this is the busiest time of the year." The apology sounded fake like a three-dollar bill.

"Do not apologize, I completely understand. Now, sorry if I go straight to business, I do not want to waste any more of your precious time."

The Count took out a folder that contained a chronicle of all feats Lith had accomplished, together with his official merits count.

The Headmistress pushed the folder back.

"No need. We always do a full background check on every applicant. I must say that you brought me a really interesting fellow."

This time it was Lith turn to gulp loudly, cold sweat going down his spine.

"What the heck did I do wrong?"

She took out a folder of her own, much thicker than the previous one.

"I can see that this young man, Lith, has earned a lot of merits by healing the poor and by getting rid of many of the menaces that threatened your County. Did you know that the criminal underworld has nicknamed him Scourge?"

"Beats me how the heck my beast title reached their ears. How can delinquents and magical beasts view me in the same way?" Lith thought.

"It seems that he likes his bounties dead as a doornail, and that's good. Being merciful with the scum of earth can only bite you in the back, sooner or later. He also had quite a number of magical challenges with some noble youths."

"And that's bad, right?" Lith clenched his fist, full of expectation.

"That's good too. A true mage must not fear to defend himself or his name, in our business talent and power are more important than etiquette.

Not to mention that those who have not the skill, should not fly too close to the sun and then complain about getting burned."

Lith felt like the earth was collapsing under his feet.

"So instead of sabotage I self-promoted all this time?! F\*ck me sideways!"

"But..." Suddenly Lith's hopes revived, like a phoenix risen from its ashes.

"... sadly, I must say that he doesn't meet the requirements for a scholarship. I'm really sorry."

"F\*ck yes! I forgive you, deceiving b\*tch! I did it, and that's what matters."

The Count turned pale as a ghost.

"May I know why? Talent, skill, heart. I dare to say he is the best one I ever brought here so far." His voice was broken, Lith felt bad for the poor man.

"Off course you can, you deserve to know. You see, the real problem lies not in your protégé, but rather in his mentor."

"Excuse me?" Blood flushed back in the Count's face.

"Nerea is a fallen mage, akin to a disowned son of the academy, if not of the whole Mage Association. Like for nobles is forbidden to help a relinquished of their own, the same stands for us, or at least for me.

She has brought shame to the institution, and up to this very day she keeps meddling with us. Not to mention that even if indirectly, Lith has been involved in the purge of two noble households.

As a mage, I can't stress enough how despicable I find dragging the Mage Association into every single petty squabble. It's an abuse of power, and I want to send a message to all the rogue mages out there by rejecting her disciple.

You can try bringing him to other academies, but I think their answer will be the same."

"What?!" The Count was now bright red, his eyes almost popping out from the rage.

"Lady Nerea has protected and helped Lustria County for years, while everyone else did nothing! This young man saved my life, my family.

He did what he did only for self-preservation, and you are telling me that you are willing to ruin his life for your own petty revenge? For politics?"

"How dare you speak to me like that in my office!" The Headmistress jumped up from her armchair, her eyes glowing with power.

"I dare! I double dare and call this bullsh\*t!" Lith never thought the Count to be such a brave fighter.

"You are just sacrificing a mage, and a powerful one, for your own political gain! Lith, let's go. The air stinks in here."

Before going out the door, the Count turned back, yelling.

"This doesn't end here! I'll let everyone know how the Lightning Griffon has stooped. You'll never get again a single copper coin from my County or any of my retainers. And by the way, he is the inventor of the chessboard on your desk."

The door slammed behind them, without giving her the opportunity to rebuke.

"Man, seriously? So much for tact and diplomacy. You are a mall cog in a big machine. Your threats are nothing but wishful thinking."

Lith happiness was clouded by the worries about the consequences that the Count's fit of rage could have on both his homeland and his friend. Count Lark had fought for him fiercely, and that was something Lith would never forget.

## Chapter 48 Helpless Rage

The Count was true to his word, and the news about what happened in the Lightning Griffon academy spread like wildfire in Lustria County.

The villagers of Lutia and its outskirts were simply outraged. Life was already hard as it was, the idea that even if talented a commoner had to suffer from political plays was a slap in the face of all their hopes and dreams.

Despite her attitude, Nana was a saviour to most of them, to the point of considering her part of their own family. Countless people knew all too well that without her, too many babies would have never been safely delivered.

Seeing their benefactor treated as a plague, tainting everything she touched, was too much to bear. The same thing applied to those few noble families she associated with for her personal affairs.

Hundreds of letters were sent to Count Lark, who in turn forwarded them to the King's Court. Now that he had regained his cool, he realized how of little importance was his County and funding to such a large institution like an academy.

Even if coupled by so many letters, his official complaint about the Headmistress violating the rules to pursue her political agenda, was bound to rise little if no interest in the Court.

He sent it anyway, surrendering to fate without even attempting to fight was something that he would have regretted his whole life.

Lith's family was as furious as helpless, cursing the academy for its unfairness and themselves for their impotence. Lith was the less disappointed one from such turn of the events.

One way or another his plan worked, and that was good. On the other hand, though, that trip to the academy had been an eye opener about how ignorant he was about the new world and how fake magic had developed through the centuries.

Solus had confirmed to him that while the rude secretary had a deep cyan mana core, the Headmistress had a fully developed blue one. Lith had always felt so proud being one of the only two cyan core holders of the County, but not anymore.

He started regretting not having the possibility to at least check the other students and personnel of the academy, even if just to collect data about what was the average power level in the outside world.

Now that he was forced to follow his original plan, he had discovered so many unexpected flaws in it. The first and most annoying one was being forced to rot for another four years in Lustria County, where his talent was doomed to stagnate.

On their way back, the Count had confessed to him that rather not wanting to purchase tier five books, it was actually impossible for him. It wasn't only a matter of price, that would be enormous anyway, but he lacked the connections to obtain them.

He had already acquired all the books he could, which included only those that the Mage Association was willing to share with the general public. To get more he would need either a stroke of luck or the Association had to change its rules.

Both the events were highly unlikely. That meant that he was stuck with tier four spells that he had learned without understanding their purpose.

It was frustrating for him, like memorizing a mathematical equation just to pass a calculus exam, but knowing that you had been incapable to comprehend the underlying meaning of it.

And during all those years of boredom, all the other magicians in the world would continue their education, shaving off four years of magical practice from the advantage he held.

Lith was still better than his peers because while they started their studies at six years of age or later, he had already started as a newborn. But soon all his hard work, the sacrifices, the hunger, would all turn out to be a fool's errand.

The second flaw was that he had completely underestimated the importance and distribution of magical items. He hadn't seen much, but it had been plenty enough to give him an itch in his head he could not scratch.

If it was possible to create such useful items with fake magic, then with true magic he would likely be able to wield and create superior version of those items, getting an even upper hand against other magicians.

Now, instead, he had no idea how they worked or how to acquire them. With enough knowledge, it could be even possible to help Solus regain her powers faster, maybe even reforge her or something.

"F\*ck, I'm not just a frog in the well. I am a frog in a well in the middle of nowhere. Considering everything I saw in less than an hour, is not surprising at all that true magic is still a secret.

A fully magically equipped fake mage could probably fight with me on equal footing. I have no idea of the scope and availability of magical items.

Even if somehow, I manage to keep expanding my knowledge, my future travels are bound to be much more difficult than I had previously anticipated.

The only silver lining is that outside the biggest families, they should not be too much common, and that I managed to avoid five full years of being a bullied cripple.

But before calling myself lucky, I need more information. I am starting to suspect that I underestimated my circumstances a lot. Nana and Lark have a lot of explaining to do."

Lith took flight and moved towards Nana's house. The Count was just a magic enthusiast, after all, while she had actually attended to one of the six big academies, so she was bound to have much more inside knowledge.

At his arrival, he found out that Count Lark was there too, and had sent some villagers searching for Lith. Both of his patrons wanted to speak to him.

Since the waiting room was filled with patients, Lith helped Nana and Tista clear the queue so that Nana could leave Tista in charge and take a break for their talk.

Once inside Nana's living quarters, the three of them sat around her kitchen table.

"First of all, Lith, allow me to apologize. I never expected that old hag of Linnea to be willing to escalate our enmity to the next level. Making you pay for my mistakes, whether true or alleged, is beyond unfair.

But aside from that, from what I hear from Tista, you are taking this situation all too well. You still don't understand how wronged you have been, and that's also my fault. I stupidly respected the academy rules and kept its open secrets.

But since they are playing dirty and Lark is still willing to submit to apply in your stead for the remaining five big academies, I need to play dirty too and violate my oath.

If you want to have even a 1% chance of being admitted, you need to give your 100%, if not more. Enough with this crappy 'whatever' attitude of yours. There's a lot at stake, and we need you to take this seriously."

Lith knitted his eyebrows.

"What oath? What secrets? What are you talking about? I read that stupid academy pamphlet countless times. Sure, unless some miracle happens, I will not get to study tier five spells, but that's it. I can still become a member of the Mage Association.

To be honest, the idea of spending five years locked up with arrogant rich kids trying to stab me in the back is far from alluring. I can easily imagine what they would put me through, day after day.

So, if it amounts to just some books, then thanks but no thanks."

Nana shook her head.

"It's so much more than just books. You see, you are right about the being look down upon and the daily bullying. The problem is that you are wrong about everything else. In your case, just like me, you wouldn't need five years, just two."

"How, exactly?" Two years were still a long period of time, but much more manageable than five, he had to concede her that much.



"The first three years cover the basics of magic. They teach things like the importance of accuracy in hand signs, accents, that kind of stuff.

Unlike you, many kids have to learn etiquette, history, geography, all kind of topics, not just how to read and write.

Otherwise they would be an embarrassment for their parents. In the Court life, they must also learn how to ride a horse, swordsmanship, playing an instrument, everything their parents need to brag about during social events."

Lith nodded.

"That off course takes time. Time that they cannot dedicate to the magical arts, hence needing to study the basics of the basics, even chore magic. You don't expect a young duke doing chores, do you?

Those like us, instead, need to go to the Academy only for the last two years, and the endless benefits it brings!"

At the words 'endless benefits' Lith's mouth was watering, his mind starting to second guess his decisions so far.

"What kind of benefits?"

"Have you ever thought why even the rich and the nobles send their kids there? If it was just about books, many students would rather avoid all the competition, just like you, and study in the safety of their homes.

What makes entering in one of the six big academies so alluring are the three benefits that only them can grant:

the access to all kind of spellbooks, the possibility to take one or more specialization courses and even more importantly the free access to magical items!"

Lith mouth was agape from the shock. Nana used his uncharacteristic silence to strike the iron while it was still hot.

"No matter what the tier, there are countless spells out there. Those you have studied here and at Lark's house are simply those that the Mage Association deems so common to be released to the public.

All the best spells, especially from tier four and five, are strictly controlled, and getting hold of even a sliver of knowledge is incredibly hard.

Only in a great academy you have free access to every topic, without restrictions, allowing you to build a great grimoire even before you set your foot out of the door.

If you get admitted to the fourth year, everything of tier four or below will be yours to take."

"What about the specializations?"

"Hmmm. That's complex to explain, let me make you a simple example. You are a healer, right?

Should you choose to become a master healer, not only you would be taught spells that even allow to regrow lost limbs, but most importantly, the secrets on how to more easily create your own light spells. The same applies to every specialization."

"What's your specialization?" Lith asked.

"I'm a war mage!" Nana puffed her chest with pride. "I was taught the secrets behind air magic, and back in the day I could have wiped out whole battalions all by myself.

Lightning hasn't many applications, but when it comes to destruction, is second to none.

But now let's get down to the juicy part, the one that I still regret the most.

The possibility to have access to a myriad of magical items."

#### Chapter 49 Doubts And Regrets

Lith's interest was really piqued, so he let Nana continue, keeping his questions for later.

"Based on how a student performs, she is able to gain or lose points..."

"Individual points or group points?" Lith felt so dumb. He had not even finished his previous thought, that he already had been forced to contradict himself.

"I swear, if there's some kind of retarded household competition, I'll take back every second-guess I had about my choice."

Nana raised her eyebrows in disbelief.

"Do you even remember what did I tell you the last time about the academies and their students? Should you put a juicy slab of meat in front of ferocious hungry beasts, do you expect them to cooperate for it?

No! They would rather eat each other heart out. Off course the point system is individual. It's very similar to the merit system, but instead of gaining credit from the Kingdom, you gain it from the school itself.

The points are the only currency allowed inside the academy, and with them you can afford lots of things. Magical potions, enchanted items and even rare ingredients for you experiments. Obviously, the higher the value, the higher the price."

From the long pause, Lith assumed that she had finished and was waiting for his questions.

"What are magical potions? It's the first time I hear about them."

"Magic potions are like special spells in a vial. The most basic are alike to healing spells, but between the infirmary and the fact that everyone knows light magic, they are rarely purchased.

The more precious are those that allow the user to become temporarily faster, stronger, or even harden her skin if she suspects she will be forced to a melee fight."

"What about mana potions?"

"Mana what?"

"Isn't there any kind of potion to quickly restore one's mana?"

Nana laughed heartily.

"Kid, knowledge is shared on voluntary basis. If any master Potionist ever discovered something like that, he would keep it for himself. At least that's what I would do."

Lith was underwhelmed, potions seemed a poor imitation of his fusion magic.

"Not only they are consumable items, but you even have to waste your time bringing them around and replenishing your supply when needed. Plus, fake mages don't even have something like Invigoration.

The only good thing about potions, is that I can pretend to use them while I use fusion magic instead. Aside from that, they are not very interesting."

"I understand." Is what he actually said out loud.

"What kind of magical items can be purchased?"

"Every academy has at least ten Forgemasters residents. They act as both teachers and researchers in the magical field.

They usually put out for sale their lesser works, but they can even bring out high grade magical items, when the academy wants to stir up a rat race, like right before the final exams.

The most useful items I had, were a dimensional amulet and rings from tier one to three. The dimensional amulet allowed me to bring around whatever I needed without suffering its weight, while the rings were able to store spells of the same tier, allowing for an instant cast."

Lith didn't miss the strict use of the past tense while referring to her possessions. He felt sorry for her, but instead of hyping him, her speech was having the opposite effect.

"A dimensional amulet? Is it some kind of magical storage item?" He played dumb.

Nana nodded.

"Brilliant as usual. Yes, dimensional rings and amulets can store anything inanimated up to a fixed volume of space, regardless of the weight.

The lowest class has only a few cubic meters available, the highest class can store even fifty cubic meters (65 cubic yards). The size of a whole small house."

The underwhelming feeling was getting deeper.

"Solus, how much can our pocket dimension store?"

"At the moment the storage can hold thrice as much the so-called highest class, and is still expanding. The library space, or Soluspedia, as you call it, is now around thirty cubic meters (39 square yards) big. And it's also expanding."

Lith's poker face was good, but not that good. Nana could see that he wasn't impressed at all.

"What's with that face? Do you understand or not that whatever you get during your studies, you get to keep it once you graduate? Have you any idea how difficult and expensive is to purchase even the lowest magical item?"

Lith closed his eyes while rubbing his forehead.

"How can I even pretend to be interested in something that I already have or I can do better? Sure, those things would help me greatly keeping hidden my true magic. Whenever I employ an instant cast, I could use the rings as a cover. But that's it."

Being an expert liar, Lith knew what his limits were. So, he changed topic.

"The Forgemaster's job seems really interesting. Is it possible to specialize in such field? Does one need to also be a blacksmith to become a Forgemaster?"

"Yes, it's among the available choices. And no, blacksmithing is not required. A Forgemaster does not create anything, he just imbues objects with magical properties, be it a ring, an amulet, a chair or even a day dress.

They can't possibly master all the craftsmen jobs. Most of them prefer to just learn the basic of their favourite trade, though. So, a Forgemaster specialized in rings will know something about goldsmithing, and so on."

"That's really interesting." And for once Lith wasn't just pretending.

Out of the three topics, the only ones that really interested him were the books and the specialization. With an endless supply of knowledge, he could easily recreate or invent all kinds of spell with true magic.

But that was still something that he could figure out on his own, with time and experience. Becoming a Forgemaster, instead, would be a priceless treasure for him.

Lith had no knowledge about such arts, hence he could never grasp even the basics without an external help.

But once he had uncovered the underlying principles of forgemastering, coupling them with true magic and the academy's library, he would be able to unlock infinite possibilities.

Just the ideas about magical items that came to him on the spot were enough to give him an adrenaline rush.

But when his excitement was at his peak, a sudden thought sent chills down his spine.

"Before getting my hopes up, can you explain to me how one does get points? There is no such a thing about daily challenges between students, tournaments or something, right?"

Nana laughed her a\*s off.

"That's such an idiotic idea! Not even the wildest rumours would go that far. Otherwise they would be called magic graveyards instead of academies. There's already enough violence going around as it is.

If any Headmaster started to reward students for their behaviour, only a dozen mages would graduate each year, and no one would make their children enrol. A war battlefield would be much safer."

Lith could sigh with relief, one of his biggest worries had just faded away.

"Points are earned mostly through how a student performance in class and during practical exercises. Any feat that benefits the academy, like sharing personal spells, gives additional points.

But the real motherlode are the quarterly exams and the finals. All points can be converted anytime, even after graduating successfully, that's why there is so much competition for the top spots.

Beware, thought. Even if discipline won't give you any extra point, it can easily make you lose a lot of them. Aside from failing tests repeatedly, is the only way to lower your score.

If it goes to negative, you'll be forced to compensate by giving back everything you might have already bought. That's how I lost everything I had."

Nana sighed, her voice filled with sadness and regret, tormenting her neck where probably her dimensional amulet used to be.

Count Lark intervened, explaining their reason to hide such things from him.

"We didn't tell you any of this before, to not put you under any more stress and to not raise your expectations about your future too much, in case of failure.

Most of the applicants get rejected. In the past, when such knowledge was publicly available, there have been countless suicides among the youths that either couldn't bear the pressure or handle the failure.

Especially for those of humble origin, being admitted in a magic academy is the only way to escape their destiny. To a lesser extent, the same could be said for nobles' and merchants' sons that are not in the line of succession."

"I can see that happening. But honestly, I don't see the point in telling me all this. Is not like I got rejected for lack of trying." He lied.

"What do you expect me to do? Travel through all the County looking for magical beasts? Cause disasters just to be able to solve them? Honestly, I don't think there is any amount of merits that could change my situation."

The Count shook his head.

"We don't expect you to do anything but your best. You have spent years trying to dissuade me to not send you to the academy, and don't think that I didn't notice your total lack of enthusiasm during our trip.

You acted the whole time like it was all about someone else, someone you didn't care about. You didn't stand up for yourself, you only wanted to get out of that room!"

"Well, maybe you are right. But maybe I just wanted to avoid the Headmistress killing you on the spot. Also, it was you telling me to shut up. It would have been beyond stupid adding oil to the fire." Lith wasn't lying.

In that moment, when he had saw the Headmistress' eyes overloading with mana, he had been seriously worried about the Lark's family destiny, and had decided to drag the Count away as soon as possible.

"Point taken. You are right." Count Lark sat down with a depressed face.

"Bottom line, we still have a few cards to play. Most likely, nothing will come out of them. But if by any chance we succeed, we need you to do more than sit on the side-lines. That's the point."

## Chapter 50 Darkness Falls

That long conversation had been pretty exhausting for Lith, adding new weight to his burden. Not for the information he acquired, all in all he felt his opportunity were still pretty good with or without an academy.

The only adjustment to his plans was that after joining the Mage Association as a de facto outer circle member, a rogue magician, he would need to rack up merits as soon as he could, to get himself an apprenticeship with a good Forgemaster.

Normal merits would do him no good, he needed those he could earn as a magico, serving the Mage Association as best as he could.

The only real problem with his current situation would be rotting for yet four more years, like the proverbial frog in the well.

The reason why Lith felt so down, was that he had finally realized how much his friends had invested in him, not only in terms of money, but also time, passion and hopes.

It wasn't the failure bothering him, but the fact that with his brash and uncaring attitude, he had hurt their feeling, treating the whole thing as a joke. Lith had to admit that in their shoes, he would feel like having casted pearls to a swine for years.

Sure, Count Lark wasn't as judgmental as him, but Lith could see how deeply he cared, and how wounded he was after the last rebuke.

It was the first time that Lith felt that by having won an argument he had actually lost the war.

But aside from second-guessing, there wasn't much he could do at that point. So, he promised himself to reconsider everything with a fresh set of eyes if the opportunity arose, and decided to move to a more pressing problem.

Lith had yet to solve his problems with tier four magic, and asking Nana was out of the question. It would reveal too much to her, exposing how deep his comprehension of magic was, despite being a self-taught.

The only card he had yet to play was to ask the help of his friend, the Ry king in the west of the Trawn woods. Thanks to his cyan mana core, Lith had become less scared of it, and during the last few years they had developed an odd relationship.

Lith would use him as a confidant, sometime asking it advice about fire and wind magic, the two elements the Ry could use. In exchange Lith would help him with the problems in the east zone of the woods.

After Irtu's death, there wasn't a magical beast strong enough to take its place, and from time to time the power struggle among the various factions would affect the balance of the forest.

In those situations, the Scourge and the Protector would join hands to force the magical beasts to a truce.

At the moment, tier four fake magic was a mental bottleneck that neither he or Solus could overcome. Despite being able to cast all the spells he had found in the Count's books, they kept making no sense to him.

It was something unacceptable, eating Lith from the inside.

He had always hated riddles, unless he was the one giving them.

Lith had almost arrived home, when he caught a familiar smell.

"What the heck are you doing outside the woods? If someone sees you, it could trigger a witch hunt. The last thing I need right now is you having a bounty on your head and me having to explain why I'm not interested."

"I know." The Ry replied. "But desperate times call for desperate measures. A monster has appeared in the woods, strong enough to pose a threat for my cubs as well for yours. We need your help."

"I have never seen the Ry scared before, whatever this is, it must be damn important." Lith thought.

After agreeing to help, the Ry asked him to hop on its back, before running at full speed towards the woods. Between the use of air fusion and its physical prowess, Protector was able to easily reach the 300kph (186 mph), it would be a short trip.

When going so fast, the Ry would conjure a wedge-shaped wind blade in front of itself, so to protect their eyes and face from insects and dust, that at that speed would hit them with the strength of a bullet.

It would also create a slipstream effect, allowing it to go even faster.

Lith's horsemanship amounted to the result of one lesson, two lifetimes ago, so he needed all his focus and willpower to not fall down.

The Ry had a thick and soft fur, but not being able to follow its movements, he was forced to use both earth fusion and light fusion to prevent permanent damage to his nether regions.

"What the f\*ck it's this thing? Is it really necessary to go so fast? If it keeps like this, I don't know if there will be enough of me left to do anything!"

"Quit whining, we are almost there. And yes, speed it's of the utmost importance when facing an Abomination."

Lith's mind went through all the bestiaries he had in Soluspedia and all his table top and videogames RPG memories before giving up.

"What the heck is an Abomination? Why is it so dangerous?"

"You don't understand. We don't call it Abomination for what it does, but for what it is!"

They were headed north, in a region of the woods that he had never visited before. It started slowly, like the tension in the air before a storm. Only when they got deeper in the woods, Lith could understand what the Ry meant.

Soon the grass started to thin out, until there was none at all. The earth laid bare, with no undergrowth of any kind, dried and crumbling as after a months lasting drought.

The trees around them had their bark completely blackened out. They had no leaves nor branches left standing, resembling giant wooden stakes. There was no sound at all, everything seemed out of a post-apocalyptic movie, after a nuclear fallout.

The natural landscape was completely destroyed as far the eye could see.

After a while Lith could clearly hear the sounds from a battle, so he focused his eyes, enhancing his eyesight.

They were closing in to some kind of moving shadow, locked in ranged combat with a Gylad, a stag magical beast with a shoulder height of over two metres (7 feet) and weighting at least nine hundred kilograms (2,000 pounds), its fur light brown with shades of blue.

Attacking the shadow from the flank, there was also a Shyf, a puma magical beast as big as a tiger, with a shoulder height one and a half metres (5 feet) and weighting over three hundred kilograms (660 pounds). It had a honey-coloured fur with shades of green.

"The Gylad is the king in the north, Lifebringer, while the Shyf is the king in the south, Reaper." Protector quickly introduced Lith to their allies.

"That thing is the Abomination. Stay away from it as much as you can, or it will suck you dry like everything else."

The Abomination was oddly shaped, it could stand up on its legs, resembling a man with very long and thin limbs, or would stand on all four, becoming large and stumpy like a pig a kid had drawn.

"What the heck is that thing?" Lith unleashed five fireballs with a wave of the hand. The Abomination was surrounded by a thin black fog, with a radius of fifteen meters (16.4 yards).

By traveling through the fog, the fireballs shrank in size, and when they hit the resultant explosions were halved compared to their usual effectiveness.

The Abomination emitted a low-pitched scream that resounded of desperation rather than pain.

The Ry howled, conjuring a pillar of wind that pinned down to the ground the shadow creature, allowing the other kings to rest and regroup.

"That's your idea of back up? A human?" If someone ever thought that a stag could not look ferocious, by looking at the Gylad he would be forced to think again.

"Less yapping, more catching your breath." The Shyf panted heavily.

"If he's good enough to take down Irtu and Gerda, he's fine by me."

Lith noticed that one of the Shyf four legs was actually made of earth, the real one was unnaturally atrophied and dried.

"A prosthetic limb out of earth magic? What an amazing control must it have, to move it like a real one. I wouldn't even notice if the Shyf wasn't so close."

Having noticed Lith staring at it, the Shyf explained:

"That's what happens when you are so arrogant to let the Wither close enough to touch you. I would be dead if Lifebringer hadn't caught his attention long enough for me to escape."

"Wither? Isn't that an Abomination?"

The Gylad scoffed. He wanted to reproach the Ry, but the pillar of wind was dissipating, so he preferred bringing Scourge up to speed rather than wasting time bickering.

"An Abomination is when a creature of the forest fails to evolve. Normally they die on the spot, more rarely they lose control of the world energy, becoming mad. Abominations are incredibly strong, with exceptional powers that make them strong as monsters.



Being mindless beings, usually a king is more than enough to put them down. In very rare occasions, we all gather up to kill a unique Abomination, like in this case. It shouldn't be difficult understand why we call it Wither."

The Gylad pointed with its snout to the dead woods around them.

"How the heck did he do all this damage?" Lith couldn't believe that three creatures of such power couldn't take down a single monster.

"Simply by existing." The Ry explained. "Wherever it goes, everything dies. Whenever we are about to kill it, its body becomes so formless that not wind, ice or earth can pin it down.

So, it escapes to a healthy zone of the woods, heal itself and we have to start everything from scratch. We are fighting it from three days, we can't hold on much longer. That's why I decided to ask for your help, Scourge.

Unlike us, all the elements obey your command."

Lith nodded, trying to assimilate all that information.

"They are fighting from three days? Holy sh\*t, that's some stamina. Solus, analysis!"

"Yes, skipper, I mean Lith. All the kings have a cyan mana core, but the Protector is the one more likely to have a breakthrough in a few years."

"I meant the Wither! Misty aura, shadow body, is it an undead?" Lith watched the creature writhe and moan under the dissolving pillar. According to Earth's fantasy literature and the new world lore, undead were supposed to have red glowing eyes.

The Wither's orbits were pitch black, like the rest of its body.

"It's not an undead. Its lifeforce is nothing like I have ever seen before, and neither is its magic aura. What the heck could a black mana core mean?"