

Supreme M 71

Chapter 71 Change Of Plans

- "Before going to the cafeteria, can we please go to the Library? I need to copy the whole book to be able to follow properly the next lessons." Solus asked.

"How do you plan on doing that? My Forgemaster schedule is full of theory, I doubt we will cross the Alchemists again."

"That's why I stole a schedule from an airheaded kid. We just need to make time so that you can give me a ride back and forth. Now I'm strong enough, surviving two hours by myself is easy as pie." –

In a corner of his mind, where Solus couldn't read unless she willingly searched for it, Lith added:

- "Wish I could say the same." –

On the road to the library, they shared their memories of the respective lessons, yet Lith omitted all the parts where he suffered from loneliness and isolation. In his mind it was a sign of weakness, something to be ashamed of.

- "By my maker! Another hot teacher? Even the male Professor from the Alchemist class was quite a sight for sore eyes, the girls wouldn't stop staring at his a*s every time he turned around to write on the chalkboard.

Do you think that it depends on their mana cores, or is it just a marketing move on the Headmaster part?"

"Both are possible, but I believe the latter to be more likely. Young minds are easily swayed around, especially if their hormones are properly channelled.

Back on Earth, my medium school music teacher was so hot that all the boys in the class learned how to play at least an instrument properly. Some even started listening classical music, just to impress her." –

When they reached their destination, and opened its double doors, the academy's Library turned out to be exactly as Lith had imagined the Prize Hall to be, except with books instead of magical items.

The bookshelves were full to the brim, forming corridors between themselves. The room was so big that Lith suspected they had made it with dimensional magic. At the entrance, a clerk in his mid-twenties asked if he needed help.

Luckily, the library had been organized well, and with the clerk's directions Lith was soon back with the Master Alchemist textbook and all the tier four magic books he managed to carry with him.

On every shelf there was a tag, stating that the use of dimensional items was prohibited, and Lith would never risk getting banned by such gold mine.

"I'll borrow these books, please." He said.

The clerk was shocked by the amount, it was more than the average person would borrow in a whole year.

"Sorry sir, the max allowed is three books at a time."

Lith clicked his tongue, picking the book for Solus and a tier four spellbook each for the War Mage and Battle Mage specialization. He was eager to find out what spells of mass destruction looked like and how to improve his battle spells.

Cross checking Lith's profile with the books of his choosing, the clerk inwardly smiled.

- "Sigh, so young and naïve. He is clearly biting more than he can chew, but at his age, everyone dreams of being a genius." –

Back in their room, they spent all the time before dinner copying the books. They had long prepared for the mammoth task, bringing with them enough empty books and ink in the pocket dimension to put the Encyclopaedia Britannica to shame.

Solus' task was the longest one, she needed to copy every single page, while Lith would just make an abridged version of each spell, copying only hand signs, accents and a short description alongside its name.

That would make possible for him to recognize those spells on sight, so when facing another mage, he would have the opportunity to take the necessary countermeasures. It would also allow him to reproduce them with true magic without being discovered.

At dinner, he sat once again with his fellow healers. As much his heart cringed at the thought of their company, he wouldn't be at the academy forever.

Lith needed reliable connections in the outside world too. Besides, he had just discovered how lonely he really felt without Solus.

He needed to get back in touch with his human side.

The mood at the table, though, was gloomy. Friya kept stirring the food in her plate, just nibbling from time to time. Quylla wolfed down her food, again, but there was no joy in it. She kept avoiding their gazes, like she expected to be scolded any second.

Lith was gripped by his inner conflict. He would have much preferred being alone with Solus, yet he needed to get a hold of his emotions, like the adult he was.

Now that he had a cool head again, he had realized that even Professor Wanemyre had called him "mean eyes" at their first meet. Solus had proven to be right all along, he couldn't keep glaring all his life.

He had to make peace with his inner self, or at least learn again how to control the emotions that showed on his face. To achieve any of that, he needed to be around people, either learning to appreciate their company or at least to fake it.

Yurial had the impression that someone had died, and he was the only one kept in the dark.

"Friya, how was your day?" He said trying to break the ice.

"Terrible. It's just the second day and I needed help to succeed in Nalear's class and in my Mage Knight specialization. Don't get me started about Trasque.

I don't know if it felt worse scoring so few wins, or his smug grin every time I lost to a commoner.

Why that stupid tutor of mine didn't focus more on chore magic? I feel so stupid and insignificant. I have always considered myself as someone talented, special.

Yet now I am just another noble that everyone makes fun of, either because of my looks or my lack of skill. I am so tempted to give up, but I'm the first person in my family to get accepted in one of the six great academies.

I cannot waste this opportunity."

"It's perfectly normal to feel that way." Yurial replied. "I didn't fare any better today, and my father is an archmage. But from Nalear's class, I learned that it's better to swallow my pride.

I didn't hesitate to ask for hints during my Warden specialization, since time is part of the grade.

What about you Lith? Why are you feeling so down? I heard you aced your forgemastering class, gaining quite some points. You should be walking on air, don't let yesterday's bad memories ruin your day."

Lith put down the silverware, trying to collect his thoughts.

"Being harassed is never pleasant, but I faced worse. I'm not worried about that. As for my success, I'll admit it was quite pleasant. If I dismissed it saying things like 'it was nothing much', I'd be a lying hypocrite.

But Like Friya, it's my first time too being away from home, surrounded only by strangers. It helped me realize that I spent so many years hunting in the wild, that I forgot how act like a human. Be honest with me, do I glare a lot?"

"Every second." "Yes." "Always." The consent had been unanimous.

Lith didn't trust them, so he had shared with them just a secondary issue. He was actually talking about his real worry with Solus, to make his expression match his emotions.

- "As much as it pains me to admit it, I'm worried about the future. Now I have everything planned out, but what if I succeed? I have no purpose outside making me immortal, and at the end of the day, is it even worth it?

Rena has already left, Tista will sooner or later marry, and my parents deserve to finally have some happiness and time on their own. But where that leaves me? Outside my family and you, I have nothing and no one that I love.

I can't live my life for them. Not only I would become a burden for them, but it would also aggravate my problem. Sooner or later, everyone will die, and I will be left alone. What worth could possibly have a world devoid of joy?"

"Oh Lith, you are really hopeless." Solus was really moved, he had actually put her at the same level of his family, outside a joke context.

"You are just twelve, yet you already worry about something that will happen decades in the future. I told you back then and I'll tell you again, give this world a chance. Over time, many things can happen or change.

Focus on the present, whatever problem you'll have, we will face it together. Trying to control and predict everything is a desperate endeavour, and it will eat you from the inside." –

"My father always says that from great power comes great isolation. But don't worry, Lith. That's what friends are for. To shed a light in your darkest days." Yurial patted him on the shoulder, trying to console him.

In another moment, Lith would have sneered at him, pushing his hand away.

But thanks to being able of making small talk with strangers again and mostly to Solus' words, he managed to actually relax his expression for the first time since in the academy.

"Thanks, Yurial." He said with a smile.

- "Friends, uh? Then why are you consoling me and my small problem, instead of Friya that has much bigger issues? Not to mention he completely ignored Quylla. Friend my a*s, you are just trying to suck up to me." –

"What happened to you, Quylla?" Lith asked.

She followed his example, taking a pause from eating to talk easily.

"Honestly, this academy sucks hard, it's even worse than my village. Before becoming a healer, I was considered a burden because I was too small and weak.

After learning magic, since I was much stronger than my predecessor, everyone started treating me like a monster. Even as a child, I could tell that they were afraid of me, of what I could have done if I wanted revenge.

I always felt different and alone back home, so I decided to come to the academy, hoping to find others like me. To make friends, to have a magical family that could understand me, someone to actually trust."

The more she spoke, the angrier she became.

"Instead my bubble burst from day one. Everyone here pushes me around, calling me names like cockroach, skank, and after I started taking the tonic, even pig. I'm sick and tired of being afraid. In hindsight, I was better off at the village.

At least there they feared and respected me. Here I'm a laughing stock, either because I'm short, ugly or because I picked only a specialization. But what could I have done?

I never learned how to fight, my body can barely withstand powerful healing magic, let alone more violent kinds of magic. During Trasque's lesson, I lost all my fights, and even if they humiliated me, he never reprimanded one of them! I hate him too!"

To be fair, no one had dared to humiliate anyone, not after Lith had so easily lost points at the beginning of the exercise. Trasque had let them fight fair and square, the problem lied in Quylla short arms and flimsy build.

Being unable of using any kind of silent magic, except for the light one, even girls of her age could overpower her with a single hand. Using magic or a weapon was just overkill.

Lith: "Guess the only one that had it easy is Yurial." Friya: "Yeah, mister 'archmage heir'. No one has the guts to mess with him." Quylla: "F*cking lucky b*stard."

Suddenly, an honest smile appeared on Lith's lips. The mood around the table suited better his tastes, so full of anger, mistrust and deception. He saw potential in each one of them, especially Quylla.

She resembled a young Tista that he could turn into another Lith. He was the only one, aside maybe from Professor Vastor, that knew that once her body developed properly, her mana core would have no limits to its growth.

Cyan for sure, maybe blue, if not purple.

"Well, Quylla, people don't need a reason to pick on you." Lith said.

"They need one not to. And the best reason you can give them is a Guilty Ballot. Think about it, I am tall for my age, talented, or at least so they say, and yet I get harassed on daily basis.

If the tonic works and you start to grow, nothing will change. Remember Nalear's story, she had talent and looks, yet survived only because of the Ballot. You should learn from her, and not repeat her mistakes."

He could see from their faces, that both Quylla and Friya were seriously considering the idea of getting a Ballot of their own. Lith needed a few deep breaths, to find the strength to say what he needed to.

"As for your problems with first magic, I..." He needed his sheer willpower to keep his expression relaxed, instead of acting like someone that was spewing poison off his tongue.

"I could teach you all. We don't have lessons during the weekends, we would have plenty of space and time." The table exploded with cheers, his proposal was immediately accepted.

Lith knew that respect and trust were something that had to be given, before they could be given back. Yurial and Friya had both a light cyan mana core, like Nana, but theirs could still grow.

Quylla had a bright green mana core despite her childish body, so for her the sky was the limit. Even without his help, it was just a matter of time before they mastered first magic.

He would exploit their desperation, giving them what they wanted before it lost its value. Just like when he helped Marchioness Distar, it was the best moment to make his investment.

Chapter 72 Mock Exam

In the following weeks, life at the White Griffon academy became more hectic by the day. After the Lift spell, Professor Nalear made them learn more educational spells with increasing difficulty and restrictions, putting the students to test at every lesson.

Professor Trasque started making use of all the available rings in the training hall, giving them military trained soldiers as sparring partners. They were equipped with enchanted armours, and would use a different weapon every lesson.

The students, in turn, could only use one element, based on the scenario Trasque had devised for each training session. After every defeat, their partners would teach them footwork and point out their mistakes.

The Master Healer lessons went without a hitch. The divide between Professor Vastor's favourites and the rest of the class, became so wide that soon no one dared anymore to hope stealing their spotlight.

The only thing left for the other students, was trying not to fall too much far behind and placing their bets about who would come out on top.

Most of the Forgemaster courses took place in a classroom. Professor Wanemyre, or one of her assistants, taught them how to differentiate runes based on the elements and how to combine them to obtain different effects.

Solus was enthusiast about the Master Alchemist lessons she kept taking, and promised Lith a big surprise. She had quickly finished copying her book and now the two of them would raid the academy's library at every visit.

As for the private lessons, they went smoother than Lith had expected. After a month, Quylla had already mastered five kinds of silent magic, while Friya and Yurial were struggling with the fourth one.

Her learning rate was terrifying, worthy of someone that managed to enter the White Griffon with no mentor. Lith suspected her to be a genius, and kept a close eye on her.

Thanks to the tonic, she had grown of 5 centimetres (2 inches) and had gained 10 kilos (22 pounds). She was still thin, but her mana core had already evolved to deep cyan.

Over time, he had managed to gain their trust and confidence, or at least so he hoped. Lith decided to teach them only silent magic, keeping the secrets for perfect silent magic and multi casting for himself.

He wanted them to be reliant on him, not dependant, or it would dampen their growth and self-confidence. Not to mention he had no desire to give away such precious secrets and get nothing in return.

Lith had proved them that they could trust him, now it was up to them to return the favour and show their usefulness.

It was exactly a month after the beginning of the private lessons, that all the fourth-year students were summoned by the Headmaster in the Main Hall at the ground floor, right after breakfast.

Several Professors appeared as soon as the gong that signalled the nearing start of the lessons resounded. They opened multiple Warp Steps, bringing them to their destination.

The abrupt change of their routine left them confused. They had started that day like any other, preparing the spells and the books for the daily courses.

"Hello, my dear students." Linjos said when the last Warp Steps closed.

"I hope you enjoyed breakfast, since it will be the last decent meal you'll get for a while. At least, if you are good enough. Today, you will start the mock exam, to prepare for the trimester's finals.

You will be split in groups of five, according to the specializations of your choice. Each group will be composed by two attackers, two defenders and one healer. Your current evaluation will affect how your group will be formed.

The duration of the exam is one week. It will take place in the forest surrounding the White Griffon. The only thing that's required from you is to survive as long as you can.

Don't worry, it's a controlled environment, the Professors will rescue you in case anything goes wrong. Questions?"

Several hands were raised, Lith's was among them.

"Lith from Lutia, speak freely."

"I thought there would be no tournaments or competitions." Lith said. "Why this change?"

Linjos chuckled.

"It's no competition. The forest is really big, different groups will go in different areas.

The chances of meeting are nigh zero, and even if it happened, a team disrupting another would be immediately stopped, with devastating effect for its members grades.

I forgot to specify that you will be constantly monitored, so beware what you do or say."

His voice became cold during the last phrase, searching in the crowd for the most troublesome figures. Then, he pointed to a girl.

"Histi Cawfor, speak freely." Lith recognized her, she was one of the last placed in the Healer class.

"Isn't this setup too unfair? Forests make no favours, if the groups are formed based on the evaluations, isn't it like dooming those who are still struggling to failure?" She was of course speaking of herself. There wasn't a single topic where she shined, yet.

"You misunderstood my words." Linjos shook his head.

"The groups will work on equal footing. What I meant before, was that they have been assembled so that all the groups have the same rank. I would never allow such a pointless exercise.

This is an opportunity for you to socialize and learn to rely on each other. The test is meant for the whole team, not for the individuals. If the Kingdom will ever call for your help, you won't get to choose who to work with, you'll need flexibility and solidarity."

Murmurs filled the air, the students who reputed themselves good were already cursing their trashy teammates before even knowing them, while the bottom feeders were praying the gods to give them someone that would lead to an effortless success.

All hands went down at that point, so Lith raised his own once again, while the sorting had already begun.

"I'm sorry, Headmaster, one last question. I get that this is a team effort, but what if someone falls to a beast and get saved by a teacher? Can he get back in the team, or does the whole group fail?

"He/she will be considered to have 'died' and returned to the castle. If only one member remains, a group is considered as wiped out. Needless to say, harming your own group is forbidden. You have to solve your differences, not escalate them."

Suddenly the air was shaken by a furious bellow.

"What do you mean I am in the same group of this commoner trash?!"

Curious, Lith asked to Linjos, who explained to him she was the one on the top of the Battle Mage specialization, and was referring to a girl that was quite far behind her.

"Thank you for pointing it out, young mistress." Said Professor Binlow, the one in charge of the battle mage classes. The girl put up a big, satisfied smile, finally something was going her way.

"Minus fifty points for questioning orders, and another minus fifty for having the gall to say that to my face!" He yelled at her like a true drill sergeant, making her cower.

"Without discipline there is no victory. An arrogant leader who disrespects her soldiers, can only lead them to defeat! Besides, who's trash? Have you ever fought something in your life? How do you know how she reacts to danger? Or how you do?"

Real fights are different from the classes, and usually those who flap their gums more are the first to fall in battle. Now shut up, unless you want to lose another fifty!"

Having lost half her points in one go, she obeyed.

Lith ended up in a group of three girls and a boy. He didn't know any of them, so he tried to do his best to act friendly, like he did with the healers' group. In the last month he had regained quite a bit of his social skills, and lost his edgelord demeanour.

When Professor Trasque opened their Warp Steps, he was ready to move forward, when one of the girls grabbed him by the shoulder, forcing him to a halt.

"Professor Trasque, you haven't told us who is the leader. The chain of command must be clear."

Lith facepalmed inwardly, while Trasque, with his usual sass, did it openly.

"Good gods, are you deaf or what? This is a group exercise, between people that don't know each other. Is up to you to decide who is the leader, and is a choice that has nothing to do with grades, status or prestige.

A leader doesn't just yap orders around, she will also bear the responsibility if her team fails. Is it clear?" He glared at the nearest girl, before pushing them all through the dimensional door.

Once inside the forest, all Lith's senses went on alert. It was a completely unknown environment, he could rely on the books inside Soluspedia to recognize plants and animals, but they were of little use for survival.

Magical beasts would not give him points for his expertise, they would only try to rip him apart, dooming him to failure.

He was looking at the tree barks, while sniffing the air with his heightened sense, trying to ascertain the nature and kind of the local predators, when the worst noise possible reached his ears.

"We still have to decide first who's in command." Said another girl.

- "F*ck me sideways! How can anyone be such a bonehead? If they keep up like this, we'd better surrender." – He thought.

All his efforts to talk sense into them ended up in failure, they accused him of trying to steal the spotlight again, like during the common classes.

Lith had even opened his speech saying he had no interest in being the leader. He just wanted them to be quiet and start moving. That just made them angrier, yelling at him to stop ordering them around.

In the meantime, a few dozen kilometres away, the ruler of the forest was taking its first morning nap, snoring soundly. One of the giant front paws was pressed against its eyes, shielding them from sunlight while enjoying spring's warmth.

With each of its breaths, the world energy would enter its body, nourishing and strengthening the mana core, pushing it forward to the next evolution. Numerous small birds scampered on his curled massive body, chirping boldly.

Nothing would dare attacking them while on the highest throne.

"Boss! Boss!" An enormous Ry, its height at the withers reaching 2 meters (6'7"), with a golden fur, with shades of red and yellow, approached galloping. The birds gave it no heed, continuing their business.

"Wake up! It's that time of the year again."

The Scorpicores body shook up, suddenly alert and clear-headed.

"Oh gods, no! I'd swear I had cubs until just a few months ago. Finding a decent mate is such a hassle! Not to mention how much care those adorable furballs require. Thanks, M'Rook, but I think I'll hard pass. I need some me quality time."

If a living human soul was allowed to spectate, he would see a Ry facepaw itself in frustration.

"Not that! I mean the man-pups from the made-mountain have invaded your turf once again."

The Scorpicores stood up on its four, stretching its spine and front legs with cat like movements, forcing the birds to fly away.

"You moron, you should have said that earlier!" It growled, towering above the Ry like an adult with a child.

"Finally some fun! Alert all the dens, I hereby declare the game season open!"

Chapter 73 Mock Exam 2

The Scorpicores was a monster big enough, to make any sane man willing to face it rethink his life choices, no matter how brave he was.

Its shoulder height reached almost the three meters (9'10"), it had a scarlet red fur and mane, with shades of white, black, blue and yellow. Actually, there were also red shades, even though only an interior decorator could have noticed them.

The monster had the body and the head of a lion, bat-like membranous wing coming out from his back and the tail was that of a scorpion.

From one of its pocket dimensions, the Scorpicores took out a gold rimmed pince-nez, that as soon touched the snout, grew big enough that each of its lenses became the size of 17" screen.

["Let's see where are the nearest playgrounds."] Thanks to the magical glasses, the monster gained an ability that closely resembled Solus's mana sense, paired with the ability to zoom in like a telescope.

["One group is near the green spring, another in the river clearing..."] Despite the great distance, it was able to locate the groups of five unknown mana cores, identifying the students' drop spots.

["Order and chaos, these humans have no imagination. Everything is identical to the last time! Where's the fun in that?"]

While grumbling about mankind's lack of originality, the Scorpicores started sending teams of three magical beasts to intercept the humans and banish them from the forest.

["Rules of engagement?"] M'Rook asked.

["Same old, same old. Make a roar, growl, po*p on them, whatever. Let them somehow notice your arrival, otherwise everything will be over before we can say 'order up'. As long as the Headmaster doesn't break the rules, we'll play along."]

["The who?"]

["By the Great Mother, M'Rook, you are an excellent second in command, but you need to start to pay attention to human's hierarchies. The Headmaster is the boss of the castle, the thing you call made-mountain."]

It had almost finished dispatching the clean-up teams, when it noticed a pleasant surprise.

["Wait a minute, there is one group of six mana cores instead of five. I call dibs on that!"]

["What's a mana core?"] Asked a Cron, a hawk evolved in a magical beast, the size of a small piper plane.

["You are too young for that, Sentar. Survive another twenty years and I'll teach you how to evolve again."]

["Boss Scarlett, you are making no sense, we are already at the pinnacle, right?"] Sentar tilted its head diagonally in disbelief.

["Yeah, right, and I was a born a Scorpicores. No dimwit, magical beasts are just a step. Before evolving in a Scorpicores I was just a Shyf and before that I was a cute and cuddly house cat."]

Scarlett rolled on its back, exposing the giant tummy to the sun, purring like a muscle car. Despite all its efforts, it was more disturbing than cute.

["You are joking right?"] Asked M'Rook.

["No, I'm not. It's not like only you forest folk can turn into magical beasts. And if you keep doubting my word, I'll rat you out to one of my dragon friends that once was a lizard.

I'm sure he will be happy to have you all for dinner, with some good red wine."]

The various magical beast preferred swallowing down their incredulity. Boss Scarlett told them the most ridiculous stories all the time, yet every single one of them turned out to be true.

["M'Rook, Termyn, Sentar enough chatting, follow my lead!"] With a single flap of its wings, the Scorpicores took off. Only Sentar was able to follow it, while M'Rook and Termyn, a Cingy (boar type magical beast), could only stare up.

["What a d*ck."] They said as one, while the Scorpicores was laughing its a*s off.

["Have you seen their faces? This joke never gets old. They are too serious. They need to learn how to sit back and relax. When I was your age..."]

Sentar stopped listening to the Boss' rantings, just nodding from time to time and giving a random answer.

Meanwhile, Lith's group was still arguing. Everyone wanted to be the leader, to prove themselves being as good as the so-called top tier students. Lith could only think of them as four caged hungry dogs, with only a piece of meat.

The problem was that the cage restricted only them from harming each other, it offered no protection from real threats. Every second they spent yelling and arguing, was like setting up the table for all the beasts in the proximity.

He had already tried all the diplomatic approaches he and Solus could come up with, but with no result. Him being a top tier, made them dismiss all of his proposals as attempts to rack more points at their expenses.

Sick and tired of their childish behaviour, Lith summoned a strong gale, that took them by surprise, making them fall butt first on the ground.

"Listen up, you idiots." If being nice didn't work, he could as well return to his original demeanour.

"Do you see that, that and that?" He pointed at several claw marks on different trees nearby.

"Those are not rustic decorations to embellish the landscape. Beasts use them as territorial marks, meant to warn intruders they are trespassing in their turf.

If you take a second to look away from your ego, you'll notice that this area is being contended by several magical beasts. Each of them is capable of leaving claw marks the size of a book, and your rantings are alerting them all!

This is a group survival test, we are supposed to get along, put aside our differences and work as a team. I want anyone watching us know that if we get wiped out before even an hour, it's all these idiots' fault!"

He said looking around, having no idea were the magic cameras could be.

The speech, especially the last part, worked like a charm. After getting back up, they didn't even complain about the surprise attack. They reconsidered their actions from the beginning, and prayed the gods to turn back time and give them a do over.

Being the gods otherwise busy, the timeline kept moving forward, and so did Lith.

"I am no leader, I always hunted solo. But one thing I know: in a dangerous environment the key to survival is being as stealthy as possible. We need to find a place where to hide during the day, and easily defensible at night.

We must leave before..."

The high-pitched shriek of bird of prey filled the air, while the ground started trembling below their feet.

Lith stopped talking, immediately taking the three fake potions out of his dimensional pocket and gulping them down. He could now activate fire, earth and air fusion magic without arising any suspicion.

Before he could finish drinking, Sentar swooped down, kidnapping the cutest of the two black haired girls from the group, and taking her up in the air.

- "What a moron." The Cron thought. "Still defenceless despite my warning. Fourth years are the worst opponents, barely offering any resistance." –

Cursing whoever Professor had picked his teammates, Lith could only watch the Cron getting higher and higher, supporting its flaps with powerful updrafts.

- "I wish I could run away and let them get what they deserve. I hate teamwork!" – Lith thought.

Everyone else was still in a daze, refusing to accept reality.

"What the f*ck are you doing? Someone must take flight and save her! With her arms locked in the talons, she can't use magic!" Lith wanted to beat them to death himself.

"A monster, another monster!" The high-pitched little girl-like voice actually belonged to the only other boy of the group. He was pointing at a black mass, as big as a carriage, approaching at break-neck speed.

It was Termyn, the Cingy, joining the fray while announcing his presence causing small quakes as he closed in.

"F*ck you all! If you want to stay on the ground, take cover while I..." Lith realized that talking was useless. The two girls had fallen on their knees, hugging each other, while the boy, judging from the repugnant smell, had pi*sed himself.

- "Now I get why Trasque was so hard on me and them the second day. Yet it was all for naught!"- Lith thought.

A Cingy was a tough opponent, and Lith could only use fake magic. He needed to keep his three rings' charges only for desperate situations. Being all five of them still in play, he racked his brain searching for a solution.

- "Wait a minute! Usually Cingy are limited to the use of water and earth magic. I can exploit that! Magical beasts do not control all elements." –

Termyn was unable to escape its boar nature, charging straight toward the prey. It saw an evil eyed kid starting to chant something, so Termyn activated one of his best defensive spells, Mountain Body.

The Cingy knew all too well how predictable was its attack pattern, so he never underestimated an opponent. Mountain Body raised its body weight and defence to the limit, making it impervious against weapons and magic alike.

- "Chant all you want kid. You'll never finish your spell in time, I'm too fast. It will be your requiem!" – Termyn inwardly sneered

Yet the chant ended right after it started, and Lith began a new one, while a small yellow orb flew in collision course with Termyn.

- "What an idiot! My earth magic is the perfect counter to air magic. Zap me, push me, whatever. It will never work!" -

When the two collided, nothing happened, not even a small spark against its hide. The Cingy started to think that the boy had misfired out of fear. Then, Lith completed the second spell too.

"Brezza Reale!" He had invoked the training spell Lift.

Suddenly, Termyn felt like a gentle caress on its belly, yet it managed to push it several meters in the air, like he was just a balloon. Then a second and third push came, making it rise above the threes.

Hidden between the bushes, Scarlett was watching the whole scene, giggling under its whiskers.

["Termyn, you idiot, the first was a basic Float spell. It wasn't meant for damage, but to make you weightless and set-up for another quick spell, to take you away from the ground and make you helpless. Pride goes before a fall.]

Listening to the Boss' explanation, the Cingy understood what had happened, and started laughing at itself.

["Damn! Such a feisty brat! I'll keep you for last!"] He yelled at Lith, that unable to understand animal-speak, ignored the beast's oinks reciting his third spell.

One of the greatest advantages from forgemastering, was that he had trained chaining short simple spells for over a month, making him able to move his fingers and mouth non-stop, no matter he was using fake magic, like before, or using the true one.

Lith reconsidered Lift value, since it allowed him to keep pushing away the Cingy even when he was casting another spell. After he finished casting his true magic flight spell, he rushed to save the girl.

Sentar was slowed down by her weight, and everything had happened in barely a few seconds. He was expecting Termyn and M'Rook to have the situation below under control. When he perceived a magic perturbation in the air currents, it was too late.

Lith had coupled the flight and slipstream spell, making him faster than a bullet. He had scarce knowledge about magical beasts, but he remembered well how despite their big sizes, the birds' hollow bones made them frailer than they looked.

So instead of using a spell that could be easily countered by the opponent's air and darkness true magic, he just combined his speed with the hardness and the explosive strength from fusion magic to land an uppercut right under the beast's beak.

Because of his almost vertical trajectory and the fire generated by the friction between his fist and the fast air currents, it looked exactly like a dragon punch.

Chapter 74 Mock Exam 3

Sentar's head snapped back on impact, losing control of its flight and letting the prey go. To make things worse, Lith quickly snapped his fingers in succession, generating several flashes of light and booms near the Cron's head, making it blind and deaf.

- "Damn, I took my sweet time enjoying her screams and that's what I get in return. I was no Cron, more like a sitting duck. Now I can't even get where's the up and down. If I crash land because of a pup, the boss will never let me hear the end of it." –

Lith would have liked to keep striking the iron while it was still hot, but the black-haired girl was plummeting like a brick. Cursing her stupidity, Lith swooped down with a swing motion, first down then up, to avoid breaking her ribs during the catch.

The rescue was successful, but judging from the smell, Lith understood that she was relieved from fear on several levels.

"What the heck were you doing?" He yelled in her ear, thinking how ridiculous were in real life those romantic moments in action movies, right after the hero saved the damsel in distress.

Between the smell and the impending danger, there was no space for romance and tender one liners. The only thing they both wanted was a safe haven and a hot bath.

"Don't you know first magic? Why did you let it drag you around like a sack of potatoes? More importantly, do you know a flight spell?"

She nodded while holding him tight with both arms and legs, like she was trying to get inside his clothes.

"Then go ahead and use it! My spell is not meant for two, I can only glide while carrying you around. Once that thing recovers, we will be doomed. Do something, remember they are watching us!"

Free from the grip of fear, she realized that the whole staff of the academy had been spectating at her humiliating performance. The girl became purple from head to toe for a second, before letting him go and chanting her flight spell.

"Let's get the others and retreat! In the open we are too disadvantaged."

They both quickly returned to the ground, pulling the other three back on their feet, and literally kicking their a*s'es to force them to recover from the terror and get them moving.

"Take flight, fast!" Lith yelled. "We have no hope of shacking them off on foot. But keep close to the ground, the Cron will turn us in mincemeat if we try to fight in its element."

To his teammates, Lith words sounded those of a strong and experienced leader, that had full control of the situation. The reality, though, like the Professors could assess while facepalming, was that he was just remembering them common sense.

"This year's batch is awful." Said Scarlett in its communicator amulet.

"They always are on the fourth year." Linjos replied with a sigh.

"Remember our pact, and don't be stingy. I want their weight's worth in meat, and I mean the good stuff, no bones or nerves. And tell your servants to play by the rules, you don't want to see me getting ugly."

Linjos had the communicator in conference call mode, so everyone could listen. The Professors didn't like being called servants, but they understood very well that in the wilderness the strong ruled above all.

The Scorpicores' help guaranteed that no student would be seriously harmed before being rescued, not to mention that such a powerful guardian defending the academy was worth far more than just meat.

They were truly blessed by having a monster at their disposal, reasonable enough to be useful, but stupid enough to not understand its true value.

After closing the communication, Scarlett had a smug grin on its feline snout.

- "Imbeciles, I don't care about the meat, I would do it even for free. Your stupid lessons allow me to train the magical beasts in anti-magician tactics. They use us as sparring partners, but that's a game that two can play.

Another bonus is that when the fifth-year students train in the forest, I get updated about the tactics they employ and the spells they teach. I bet they sleep much better at night, believing me a dumb monster that only wants food in its belly. –

Meanwhile, M'Rook had joined the fray, and was rapidly catching up with Lith's group using air magic to move faster and his sense of smell to not lose their traces.

Lith was on the verge of tears, this experience was a full-blown disaster. He was sick and tired of playing baby-sitter, but what choice did he have left? He slowed down, detaching from the group, appearing beside the Ry.

It followed a quick exchange of spells, since Lith never allowed M'Rook to get close to him. He kept moving in all the three dimensions, gaining a tactical advantage since the magical beast was only relying on its legs to manoeuvre around.

Lith wasn't trying to harm it, he used only tier one and two spells in quick succession, with the aim to ruin the opponent's focus and slowing down its movements.

- "Who the heck is this pup?" M'Rook thought gritting its teeth in raising frustration.

"It's like he learned how to fight from a Ry, he anticipates almost all of my moves. But that's impossible!" – In the Trawn woods, Protector's ears were burning.

Lith used a fine mist to detect incoming invisible wind blades, while moving around with no pattern to avoid lightnings. After stumbling on a conjured mound, M'Rook finally lost it, jumping with all its strength trying to catch the pup with the jaws.

- "Imbecile! That's what I/he was waiting for! You can't dodge in mid-air!" – Lith and Scarlett thought as one.

"Checkmate Spears!" Lith yelled, releasing the tier three spell stored in his ring. Thanks to various experiments, he had learned that he could store even charged up true magic spells, as long they didn't exceed the ring's capacity.

Hence, he was able to unleash his most powerful spell in its empowered version in a split second.

["F*ck me sideways!"] M'Rook whimpered when dozens of ice spears as thick and long as small trees encircled him from all directions, before crashing against its body.

Their mass was too big to deflect them with a simple air barrier, and fire would need time to melt so much ice before rendering it harmless. Desperate, M'Rook used its strongest attack, Flaming Tornado, on itself.

By combining its best fire and air spells, M'Rook used the strong winds to deflect the spears from its vitals, hoping for the scorching hot temperatures to smooth down their deadly extremities.

When the Tornado disappeared, M'Rook was alive and well, but its body was beaten and battered with countless small wounds. Between the spell and its tick fur, the spears hadn't managed to pierce, but they still hit like a truck.

Lith wasn't there to gloat or to deal another blow, he had already returned to the group yelling trivial instructions.

"Use the fist magic darkness spell Conceal, you idiots! Do you think a Ry's nose is for decoration? Hide your smell, now!"

He took out some old clothes from the pocket dimension, turning them into shreds with air magic, and sprinkling them with the sweat he had always forgot to throw away since the run to Professor Vastor's first lesson.

Then, Lith threw the shreds in the wind, hoping to create multiple false leads for the magical beasts to follow.

"Not to be the Lith of the situation, but I don't think your group will last a week." Solus giggled at her own joke.

"No sh*t, Sherlock. I bet we will be wiped out by tomorrow."

"Tomorrow is too soon. My bet is full annihilation within three days."

"Deal." -

They kept flying for about ten minutes, before feeling safe enough to take a break. The group had come across a small hill, about ten meters (33 feet) high. With the backs against something solid, they could finally catch their breath.

Lith scanned the surroundings with Life Vision, allowing himself to relax only after finding nothing stronger than a normal beast in the surroundings.

"How many hours do you think have passed since the exam's start?" Asked the boy, looking around like a cornered mouse.

"Less than one." Lith replied after checking the sun's position.

"But it felt so much longer." Said the tallest of the black-haired girls. All of them had a dejected expression, there was no trace left of their previous overbearing pride.

Lith brought the index finger against his lips, remembering them to be quiet, then he started circling around the hill. The other four promptly followed him, forming a single line.

"Aww, your ducklings are so cute, Mother Goose." – Solus said.

Lith made a complete lap, checking for caves. They had been lucky, there was none. A natural cave was too much a convenient asset to be left vacant, and he couldn't afford to drive off wildlife with the risk of being exposed.

After choosing a spot devoid of grass or vines, he used earth magic to create an artificial cave, by condensing the porous soil, and turning it hard enough to hold the improvised ceiling.

At the same time, Lith erected small stone pillars to support the whole structure. It wasn't much, but still big enough for all of them to sit and rest comfortably. While the others were looking at him in a daze, he added more pillars along the walls.

He wasn't an engineer, and preferred to be safe rather than sorry.

The boy walked toward Lith with a big smile and holding out his hand.

"I'm not going to touch any of you until you have cleaned yourself properly. I suggest using darkness magic, it will clean the dirt and remove the smell."

After everyone was cleansed, Lith used first magic to close the entrance with a thick layer of earth and to light the inside of the cave. Then, he pretended to cast a spell while activating Hush, generating a small air dome.

"Thanks to that, no sound nor smell can escape, so we can talk freely. I'd say that our introductions are long overdue. I'm Lith from Lutia, and I'm supposed to be the healer." His voice was exuding sarcasm.

Several kilometres away, Termyn and M'Rook had finally collected all the cloth shreds, destroying them to not be swayed anymore by their strong smell. Sentar landed near them, ready to report.

["Can't find them anywhere. It's like they disappeared."]

["Same." Replied M'Rook. ["Aside from these things I can't smell them any longer. Boss, we need your trinket."]

Scarlett scoffed.

["That would be unfair! It's you versus them, I'm just enjoying the show. You'll wait until after noon before resuming the search. You need some time to heal properly, and they deserve a little rest."]

Chapter 75 Day One

Not even an hour had passed from the start of the mock exam, and Lith was already tired and vexed enough to seriously consider the idea of throwing in the towel and return to the White Griffon.

His teammates were so embarrassed, that despite each of them opened their mouth more than once, not a single word came out. No matter what apology came to their mind, they all sounded too little and too late, even to them.

First, they had ostracized him, then they had ignored all of his warnings until it was too late. He was the only reason why they hadn't get instantly wiped out, despite all their undeserved confidence and embarrassing performances.

The two that had previously lost control of their bladder, had a particularly hard time watching the others in the eyes, and could only thank the academy's Forgemasters for the self-cleaning uniform.

"I'm Visen De Brae." The first one to muster the courage to speak was the boy, once again holding out his hand. This time Lith shook it, but barely, his anger still smoldering.

"I'm supposed to be... I mean I'm a Warden." He corrected himself, laughing nervously. Visen was a fifteen-year-old, 1.63 meters (5'4") high with brown hair and chestnut eyes. He had a regular build and a small mole right under his left eye.

"As such, my specialty is a sturdy defence. Wardens can conjure several kinds of arrays with any element, we can even alter the landscape if needed.

In time of war a Warden can easily build makeshift bridges and siege towers, we are the only defence an army has against War Mages. In times of peace, instead, our role is to build dams, castles, roads, whatever the Kingdom needs. Let me show you."

Visen casted an unknown spell, and placed his hands against a wall. Then he casted another, moving around the stone pillars and strengthening the whole structure.

"See? First, I checked the stability of the ground, then I fixed things so that the cave now is safe like a natural one." He kept smiling, hoping to have proven his worth.

Usually Lith would be impressed, even taking a mental note to check out Warden's spells.

- "A Warden that cannot even stop a Cingy despite seeing it coming from a mile away. What the f*ck has to smile for?"

Right now, it took all of his willpower to not strangle him on the spot, so he just nodded in response.

Then, the second one of the p*ssing duo stepped forward.

"My name is Milna Kratic, I'm a War Mage." She was fifteen too, 1.60 meters (5'3") high with shoulder length black hair. She had a fully developed slender body, but her round face had too many childish features to call her beautiful. She was pretty at best.

"I know what a War Mage is. My mentor is one too." Lith cut her short.

She became red from rage, but managed to hold it in.

"I can shoot down a magical beast with a single spell." She continued with a stone-cold voice.

- "You wish." - He sneered inwardly

"My name is Phloria Ernas, I am Mage Knight." She was the tallest of the group, 1.76 meters (5'9") high, with chin length black hair and the build of a professional swimmer.

"My specialty is defence too, but unlike a Warden, my skills are better oriented at covering a smaller area or a target. Mage Knights are also trained in the use of weapons." She said opening her robe, and revealing an estoc hanging by her side.

"Hi there, and thanks. I'm Belia Ulphar. As a Battle Mage, I'm a jack of all trades, or at least I am supposed to. According to my Professor, I should be able to hold my ground alone in every situation, or to support any team member needing help.

But considering my performance so far, either he is bad at teaching, or I'm a slow learner." She was 1.7 meters (5'7") high, with long blonde hair with shades of black held up in a pony tail.

Her honesty was refreshing for Lith, all the others were still kind of stuck up, flaunting their skill like it was actually worth something.

For a moment, he thought about lashing at them, reminding how useless they had been in an actual fight. But then he decided against it.

- "Calm down, old man. Rage will not get us anywhere. Besides, it's likely we are still being watched. They can lose as many points they like with their foolishness, but there is no reason for stooping down at their level." He said to himself.

"Yeah, remember what Shakespeare said: 'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players'." Solus chimed in. "Oh, another thing, this is what I think about the test...." -

While listening to Solus, Lith took a few deep breaths to regain his composure. He extended his hand to every member of the group. They shook it immediately.

"Okay, let's forget what happened before. Let me share with you what I think of the current situation." At those words, the other four stiffened up their expression, expecting a scolding or for Lith to brag about himself.

"First of all, never underestimate a magical beast. Their intelligence is almost at human level, if you treat them as dumb beasts, you'll fail fast."

From the faces of his teammates, he could see that they were doubting his words, but had not the courage to say it openly.

"I fought several of them in the past. Some I killed, others I ran away from, with the tail between my legs. It's not just them being smart. As you have seen yourselves, they can use magic in a different way, with much shorter casting time."

With all that had happened, they had missed that part. His explanation not only made perfect sense, but also sent shivers of fear down their spine. Making them feel even more weak and insecure.

"I will not lie to you, if they weren't crippled by the inability to use more than two elements, I doubt I could ever defeat even one of them" Lith lied, belittling himself not for acting humbly, but to make them realize the strength of their enemy.

"And to be completely honest, I believe that we would have already been wiped out, if it wasn't for the fact that they are just playing along with the Headmaster's plan."

"What do you mean?" Phloria quickly regained her cool, intrigued by Lith's words.

"Think about it." He said rephrasing what Solus had told him earlier.

"This is just a bigger and improved version of Professor's Trasque exercise on the second day. Didn't you find odd that the magical beasts announced their presence before attacking? What sense does it make shrieking before swooping down?"

The Cingy had no reason to perform that quake, it could have softened the ground and make its charge silent as cat's steps. Also, why attack one by one, instead of all together? They are clearly playing their part according to a script."

Milna scratched her head, thinking at full gear.

"That's why the monster bird kidnapped me, instead of biting my head off, or ripping me apart with the talons. I thought it was just playing with me before going for the kill. But this does actually make more sense."

Lith nodded.

"No one would send unexperienced teenagers in a dangerous and uncontrolled environment. If they are so certain to be able to rescue us, it means they have some kind of deal with the creatures.

But that doesn't mean we can't fail, or get severely injured. Otherwise why adding a Healer? To last for a week, we need to pool our resources and skills. In my dimensional amulet I have some food, potions and my hunter kit. What about you?"

An awkward silence fell in the cave.

"No food?" He asked in disbelief.

"Well, the canteen is open 24/7. I had no reason to store any." Phlora replied, keeping her head low, fiddling the ground with her foot.

"What about the potions?"

"Never bought one." Milna said. "They are cheap, but I can't waste my points in one-use items. I never got why they sell them, they are useless." The others nodded at her words.

Lith scratched his head, resisting the temptation to pull out his hair.

"Useless?! How do you think I was able to cast so fast? To hit the Cron so hard to force it to release you, without breaking my arm?" He wanted to add more, but only swear words came to his mind.

"What the heck do you have in your dimensional items? Tell me at least there's something useful."

It turned out they were mostly employed for storing books, feminine products and personal items, like jewels, money and family mementos. Viseen even managed to surprise Lith with his properties.

"I have only school books and, uhm..." He whispered in Lith's ear. "...other kind of books, you know, for research purposes. I can't have them lying around, so I always keep them with me. I can lend them to you if you need to relieve some stress."

Lith didn't know if to laugh or cry, he hadn't heard that phrasing since browsing online comics back on Earth. He took out a plate of freshly baked cookies, stress eating them to calm his nerves and hasten his mana recovery.

The delicious sugary smell of almond pastries and chocolate chips immediately drew everyone's attention. Lith shared them with a heavy heart, hiding behind his smile the wish for his teammates to choke on them and put him out of his misery.

The food managed to rise everyone's spirit, and when they run out of cookies they seemed refreshed and ready for action.

"I'll keep the rest of the food for emergencies. It would never last for seven days, splitting it among so many people. We need to hunt on a daily basis. Who has any experience with it?"

Phlora and Mirna both raised their hand.

"Good! Do you know how to use first magic to help you during a hunt?"

"No." Mirna said, shaking her head. "But I think I'm speaking for everyone when I say that we now understand how ill prepared we are for this task. For any task, to be honest. Lith, you are the only one that seems to have an idea of what we are doing."

"Do you want to be team leader?"

Their gazes full of expectations made him want to puke, there could be only a possible answer.