

Supreme M 81

Chapter 81 Celebratory Banque

All those who were spectating, were so astonished to be at loss for words.

Scarlett and the Headmaster called each other so fast that it was impossible to know who had called who.

"What the heck is that thing?" Asked Linjos.

"How the heck did a fourth-year student got her hands on a Stunner Clacker's venom?" Asked Scarlett.

Having got his answer already, Linjos returned the favour.

"Yesterday that group was attacked by Clackers. One of the poisoned ones was rescued and managed to detoxify himself. I never expected for him to actually store the venom for later use."

"Son of a..." Scarlett turned back at the fight, where the tables were quickly being turned.

Termyn had managed to land safely, but its energy reserves were scraping the bottom of the barrel. Belia, on the other hand, was about to finally show all her prowess.

By rearranging the ice shard that composed her armour, she was able to change the shape and size of all its parts.

Sacrificing her defence, she turned her limbs into giant swords, hammers, sickles, whatever came to her mind that was better suited to juggle the Cingy in mid-air, while her conjured weapons darted around piling up the damage.

Phloria kept sticking close to the Ry, while the venom started to take effect, making its movements sluggish and uncoordinated.

Lith instead, could feel that something was wrong. Despite all of his efforts, after a few blows Sentar had managed to put some distance between them, blocking the incoming attacks with air cushions that dissipated the force of each strike before it could reach the Cron's body.

- "Dammit! Solus, remind me never to get close to a magical beast until I get a decent weapon. First the Ry, now the Cron, I'm too weak to get anything from physical attacks, f*ck my life." –

"There, there." Solus replied. "Look at the bright side, you learned this during an exercise, instead of risking your life on a gamble."

"Yeah, you are damn right. This time the glass is half full, even for me." –

Lith stopped giving chase and started casting another powerful spell, but Sentar was too fast, even in its debilitated state. Swallowing its pride, the Cron admitted defeat, using air fusion and air magic to run away as fast as it could.

Sentar swooped down, rescuing Termyn from Belia's clutches before it was too late. With a sudden U-turn, it grabbed also M'Rook, using true air magic to make both its companions weightless.

It was only then that Visen completed the third array, conjuring multiple elemental spheres that would attack any opponent he would design as a target. Alas, there was no one left.

To his defence, the whole fight had barely lasted a minute, and every time he had to activate an array or dodge an incoming attack, his casting speed had been severely affected.

Wardens' spells were more suited to be prepared from the rear guard, rather than in the line of fire.

"F*ck!" He yelled. "Right now? All that casting and sweat for nothing?"

"Who cares?" Belia was on cloud nine. "We won! This time they were the ones running away. We should celebrate..."

"Where is Lith?" Phloria cut her short, refusing to lower her guard yet.

"Right here." Said a voice from above.

Watching his face, one could think they had actually lost. Lith could barely contain his anger and frustration.

- "Why did I even waste all that time learning martial arts again? They are useless against magical beasts, and against humans I just need the simplest spell to kill or incapacitate them."

"Well, maybe because you were so clumsy you would trip on your own feet?" Solus sarcastically reminded him.

"Also, they are not useless. All that footwork practice saved our lives countless times. If in the future you get cornered, what would have you said if you did not do it? 'Oh, why I was so arrogant? Why didn't I learn them again?'."

You are unbelievable, nothing is good enough for you. Too cold, too hot, too lukewarm. Enough with you control issues, quit whining and rejoice! You'll ruin everyone's mood." -

Just looking at him, everyone assumed back their combat position, believing Lith's demeanour was caused by an impending danger he was going to warn them about.

"Where is the enemy?" Asked Phloria looking left and right, keeping an ear out for any suspicious noise.

Lith used Life Vision, searching the proximities for any sign of danger.

"Gone, I'd say. Even from above, is all trees and small animals."

"So, did we really win?" A radiant smile appeared on Phloria's face, finally lowering her estoc. She turned towards her companions, her arms raised to the sky in sign of joy. The others followed her suit, getting close to each other.

Before something unspeakable, like asking him to partake in a group hug, could happen, Lith burst their bubble.

"Do you really want to start screaming in this gods-forsaken forest? I say that with all the ruckus we made, it's better to go back to our haven, before another uninvited guest shows up."

- "Party pooper!" Solus scolded him. "Nonetheless, let's get out of here. The rings are empty, and your mana reserves are dangerously low."

"I know. Using a tier four spell requiring hexacasting, while using three kinds of fusion magic really did take its toll. And I can't even use Invigorate too much. Having an apparently infinite mana capacity would rise too many questions." –

His words spoiled the happy mood, and by the time they got back at the cave most of the euphoria was gone.

"I still can't believe it." Belia's cheeks flushed at the thought of their battle.

"I resent that. My plan was rock solid." Phloria objected.

"Indeed it was. But you misunderstood me. I meant that I still can't believe I didn't screw up! After how I behaved during the first day, I was starting to believe I was a hopeless case."

"There, there. A single slip up means nothing, it can happen even to the best of us." Visen was mostly speaking about himself, trying to be supportive at the same time.

They started sharing the highlights of each one's contribution to the victory, patting themselves on the back and complimenting to each other.

Lith was already nauseous from all the niceties, seriously considering to cut off the next hand on his shoulder.

"If we want to eat more than hot air today, we need to prepare the meat. Has any of you ever skinned and gutted some game?"

Lith used earth magic to conjure several jars from the ground, to collect the non-edible parts before destroying them with darkness magic.

An awkward silence followed.

"I never hunted alone, before. I would always give my game to the cook. He always took care of the rest." Phloria was embarrassed, so she fiddled the ground with her foot.

- "Interesting." Lith thought. "Phloria does that every time she feels uncomfortable. I could exploit this tell, if I ever decide to plagiarize poker."

"Or if you are curious about who she is interested in!" Solus chimed in.

"What?"

"Come on, spoilsport. Don't you want to see some romance? You are all so young and hormonal, wouldn't be cute if two of your teammates hook up?"

"It would be a disaster. First their mind would become even emptier, and second, I don't want to spectate some kids making out. The cave is little and my patience short." Solus mind-pouted at him.

—

According to Solus' observations, Phloria wasn't uncomfortable around any of her teammates. That was disappointing for her, she really wanted someone to jump on Lith, just to see his reaction.

"I know only the basics, but I'm a fast learner." Visen volunteered, winking at the girls.

- "Neither of them is really cute, but beggars can't be choosers." He thought. "I will show to the girls that a real man doesn't fear a little guts and blood." —

Having already experienced high school, Lith could recognize that look at first sight. It was what undeserved confidence mixed with desperation and the willingness to f*ck anything that moves looked like.

"Okay." Lith said hiding a cruel grin behind a kind mask.

"First, you have to drain the blood. To do that, you hang them upside down and then cut off the head." He made an exaggerated movement on purpose, sending a little blood everywhere.

Visen's face lost its colour, turning pale. Lith mercilessly handed him a big fluffy rabbit. Despite being already dead, its big round eyes were staring at Visen, like asking: "Why did you kill me?"

While Visen was trying to come up with an excuse to go back with the girls, Lith had already took the skin off of his prey, handing that too to Visen.

"Put it in a jar for me, please." Lith never stopped smiling with a kind and brotherly expression on his face.

Visen let the rabbit fall from the shock. When his hands touched the greasy and sticky side of the skin, he turned green, fighting against the urge to puke.

- "You're a monster!" Solus accused him.

"Guilty as charged." He confessed. –

"At this point, you need to perform a big incision, and pull out all the organs. Like this!" He turned the gutted rabbit toward Visen, to let him better appreciate the view.

Just to keep on the safe side, Lith reinforced the Hush barrier and conjured a pot really close to his teammate.

"Why are you still holding the skin?" Lith pretended to not have noticed he was frozen stiff.

"Here, toss away the guts for me, please." When Lith handed him the viscera too, it was too much for Visen. He fainted on the floor like a dead weight. Lith had expected some screaming and puking, but that was fine too.

"What happened?" The girls asked after hearing the thump sound. They had run in the bathroom after the first blood.

"Nothing. Seems Visen is not cut to be a hunter, though." After getting rid of the poser, Lith's movements became much faster and precise. It wouldn't take him long to finish.

"Does anyone know how to cook?" He asked.

"Are you asking that just because we are girls?" Phloria sounded quite enraged.

"No, just because I hope someone can give me a hand."

"Sorry." Belia said. "I know how to eat, though."

"What about you, oh fearless leader?" Lith poked her, since Phloria still refused to reply.

"I never got the chance nor the desire to learn. But I'm quite skilled at eating too, thank you for asking." Phloria took a mental note to at least learn how to butcher, otherwise her hunting skill would lack a practical use.

Before starting to cook, Lith cleaned everything and destroyed the jars and their content. He called the girls to wake up their fallen comrade and show them how to use first magic for cooking.

When the delicious smell of roasted meat started to spread, Visen fully regained his senses and appetite. Using so many powerful spells while fighting such a hard battle, had exhausted most of their mana and stamina.

They managed to wolf down everything they had got during the morning, leaving nothing for dinner. Despite not having salt or any spice, their meal was seasoned with victory and hunger, making that the best meal the three of them ever had in their life.

Chapter 82 Interludium

After lunch, the group fell asleep. The stress and the fatigue from the last two days weighted heavily on everyone, but Lith and Phloria were the most affected.

They had been on their toes non-stop since their arrival in the forest, the only moments of rest were those that they spent in the cave. Lith had pushed his body so hard during those days that he was aching all over.

He used Invigoration as much as he could, and that meant very little. From his experiments with the potions, Lith knew that the physical enhancing ones had side effects, just like fusion magic, that only proper rest could remove.

Invigoration could make up for them, but how could he possibly justify his ridiculous recovery speed? His mind kept searching for a solution, but without success. Restless, he started reconsidering his group's situation and chances of success.

The more he thought about it, the more the exercise didn't make any sense.

- "How the heck is a group of teenagers supposed to last for a whole week? With no prior notice nor someone capable of hunting, I can't see even a genius get past the third day.

The Headmaster's magical beasts attacked once a day, and each time it was much worse. If by tomorrow they get serious, it will be our end. And that's just the icing of the cake, there's also the fear, the need to search for food and shelter.

Not to mention things like those spiders that just want to eat you.

Sure, we could just hole ourselves in the cave, but if Solus is right, then we would only risk of damaging our grades. I don't know how long I can still hold on. The forced cohabitation is pushing me to the brink of insanity.

My hatred and rage are eating me from the inside, it's only a matter of time before I snap." –

Phloria's group woke up only for a frugal dinner, at the expenses of Lith's food stock, before going back to sleep.

The moon was shining bright in the sky, and from its favourite spot, Scarlett was contemplating the last piece of the puzzle that had fallen into its lap.

The Scorpicores were atop the tallest hill of the forest, the only place from where something of its size could sit comfortably while looking at its domain.

- "First, a group of five man-pups with six mana cores. That alone was beyond odd, but with the Clackers ravaging the forest, I had almost forgot about it. But then, somehow, one of those man-pups manages to remove from his body the Stunner Clacker's venom without it losing much of its potency.

I know it's not a big deal detoxify it with magic or an antidote, but extracting it from a victim? Not even a magical beast capable of using light magic would be able to accomplish such feat. Let alone a human, with their silly imitation of magic.

It would require to be able to locate and manipulate the venom coursing through the body with surgical precision. That's something that only an Awakened like me would be able to do. I need to have a chat with this pup, before this charade comes to its end." -

Scarlett's elite squad was in a deep slumber, resting to recover from the many wounds received that day. The Scorpicores set a powerful barrier around its beloved minions, so that no one could bother them without incurring in a sudden death.

Then, with a powerful flap of its wings, Scarlett took off, using his gold rimmed enchanted pince-nez to find where the anomaly was hidden. There were just a few dozen groups remaining, between that and its speed, finding the cave was a simple task.

Once outside, it suddenly realized to have overlooked a major problem.

- "Dammit, how the heck do I start a conversation without scaring the sh*t out of him?" Scarlett scratched its right ear with the back leg, searching for a solution.

"I got so used talking to Linjos and his minions, that I had almost forgot that my appearance can be quite intimidating. Kidnapping isn't a good ice breaker. I could enter after devolving to a cat, but why should he talk to me?

Damn, this is going to be harder than I expected." –

After pacing for a while, hoping Lith would somehow notice its presence and wake up, Scarlett decided to change its approach. Thanks to the pince-nez, it could see that the anomaly was a ring.

The artifact was different from everything Scarlett had ever encountered. Its curiosity was more piqued by the second. Scarlett decided that if the owner was unavailable, it could always try with the artifact.

Scarlett sent a tendril of mana, thin as a silk thread, to connect its mana core to Solus', establishing a telepathic link.

- "Whatever you are, I demand an explanation. What are you trying to accomplish in my domain? Why are you leeching energy from a helpless pup? Speak, or I will crush you between my fangs!" –

Scarlett didn't like humans much, but was still polite towards them, hoping to avoid useless conflicts. But when facing cursed objects, it would show no mercy, stooping down at their level and speaking the only language they knew: violence.

Hearing that alien voice resounding in her mind, Solus was terrified, instantly waking up. It had been such a violent intrusion that even Lith regained his senses, his conscience dragged along with hers.

- "What is happening?" He asked.

"I don't know, there's a voice in my head, and a giant monster thingy outside." –

Using Life Vision, Lith could see through the cave's walls Scarlett's silhouette and energy signature. His mouth went agape in front of the biggest and strongest magical creature he had ever seen.

- "Solus, what's its mana core?" His mouth went dry, Lith needed to lean against a wall to not fall on his knees for the shock.

"Bright blue, but there's something odd. The amount of mana it holds is beyond words. Is like the world energy is willingly seeping in its body. It's similar to your breathing technique, but unbelievably stronger. Lith, I'm scared."

"Same. Where the f*ck are the Professors? Without them we are dead!" –

Knowing there wasn't much he could do, Lith activated Invigoration, quickly replenishing all his mana reserves and restoring his physical strength. If he had to die, he would die fighting without holding back.

Watching the world energy flow inside the pup through its pince-nez, Scarlett winced of joy. One of its questions was already answered. He was clearly an Awakened too, now the problem was to ascertain how deep he had been corrupted.

Using another thread of mana, Scarlett created a separate mind link with Lith.

- "Fear not, I mean no harm, otherwise I would have just made the hill collapse, burying you all alive. I only want to understand the cursed object purpose and goal. I don't want to kill you, but if you try defending that parasite, you'll leave me no choice." –

Lith was so shocked hearing another voice in his head, that he started to believe he was actually going mad. Everything was happening too fast, and he could not make head or tails of those words.

- "What cursed object? Who are you and what do you want from me?"

Luckily, unlike his mind link with Solus, this one was active, not passive. It required Lith's will to pass information or thoughts, so he could channel his anger and conceal his fear.

"Do you deny having a living being at your finger?"

Since the monster knew so much, Lith realized that lying would be useless, the best he could do was hide part of the truth.

"No. But it's just a dimensional ring, it does no harm." Solus' real nature had to be kept hidden, otherwise the creature could take her for itself.

"You fool!" Scarlett sneered. "Who would give life to such a trivial object? Don't you realize how deep is its deception? I can't believe that despite being Awakened you are so stupid. It's clearly a lie, and you know it!"

"I'm a what?!" Lith asked. That conversation was making less and less sense.

Scarlett snorted, cursing humans and their inability to take care of their own.

"Another self-taught? Not bad, pup. An Awakened is someone that has learned to manipulate his own mana core. Not only it allows him to use magic the same way magical beasts do, guiding it with the mind instead of the body.

But also makes possible to refine the mana core, drawing in the world energy and permanently adding it to his own. It's what you just did, pup.

Now tell me, how do you call your talent? Every one of you I met gives it a different name: first magic, the supreme art, original magic, whatever."

"True magic." - Lith mind blurted without a second thought. He had finally met someone that could explain to him true magic.

Chapter 83 Interludium 2

- "True magic?" Scarlett sneered. "Another pretentious name for my collection, then. Why don't you come out? Talking this way is tiresome."

"What about my Professors? Aren't you afraid of them meddling?"

"No. Right now their surveillance mirrors just show you sleeping. It requires a bit of effort, but I can tamper with them for a while." –

Lith swallowed a lump of saliva. The monster wasn't lying, it could have killed him ten times already. But that only made the situation even more scary.

- "How do I get out without waking the others?" – A Warp Steps appeared in front of him, leading in front of the Scorpicores. Fighting hard to keep his knees from shaking, Lith started weaving all his strongest spells, preparing for the worst.

Scarlett stared at him with an inquisitive look. Despite being so close, it was hard to perceive any trace of corruption, and that was already a good sign.

"What do you want from me?" Lith asked with one spell ready for each of his fingers.

"I already told you, I just want your cursed object. After that, I will get out of your hair."

"My partner is no cursed object or anything. Is just an artifact, you are clearly mistaken."

"Do you even know what a cursed object is?"

"No." Lith admitted.

"You see, no matter how powerful an artifact is, it has no life. It's just an object."

Scarlett handed to him its pince-nez.

"This is an artifact, believe me. Now, use your true magic and tell me, does it feel alive to you?"

Lith used Invigoration and Life Vision, perceiving many and powerful magics within it, but no life. It had mana flow, but no mana core or life force.

- "Solus, what about your mana sense?"

"It indeed has more power than many of your Professors, but no mana core." –

"That huge castle is a massive and powerful artifact, but is it alive?" Scarlett pointed to the White Griffon with one of its claws.

Once again, both Life Vision and mana sense reported a huge flow of mana, but no mana core.

"No." Lith reluctantly said.

"Now, what about your ring?"

Lith used Invigoration for the first time ever on Solus. Just like in the past he had used Life Vision to see her mana flow and life force, Invigoration revealed a small yellow mana core.

- "Why didn't you ever tell me you have such a weak core?" Lith asked, surprised by the fact that she was so weak, despite all the years spent together.

"Well, you never asked. Besides, what did you expect? After almost starving to death, I was left with barely a red one. I still need time to recuperate." –

"It has a yellow mana core." Lith admitted.

Scarlett had to swallow down a huge scoff.

- "That confirms my worries. That thing is playing him like a fiddle. There's no way a living artifact has just a yellow mana core. It must be using some trick to cloud his senses." – Scarlett nodded, and proceeded with its explanation.

"Life cannot be created on a whim, from nothing. There are only two ways to give life to an inanimated object, and both require a terrible price. The first method, requires a mage or creature very powerful and very insane.

A cursed object is when someone takes out a huge portion of himself, and binds it to a powerful artifact. A Lich's phylactery is the most common example, but is not the worst kind.

Some creatures have a deep grudge or insane ambition, but no will to live forever.

So, they pass this obsession of theirs to the one object they are most attached, giving it life. But beware, despite having a mind of its own and immense powers, a cursed object is most of the times just a shadow of the worst parts of his creator.

It entices its new master with promises of power and glory, but every time they are used, the boundary between master and servant gets thinner. The mind link they share allow the object to tamper with the owner's mind, changing it little by little.

Until he becomes a copy of the object's maker, striving to complete its loose ends. And when the user dies, they just search for a replacement."

"What about the second method?" Lith was stalling for time, hoping someone would come to his rescue.

"Well, that's even worse. To the point it's part of the so-called forbidden magic."

"Forbidden?" Lith had never heard about any kind of magic being forbidden, not even necromancy.

"Yes. Forbidden magic is the most horrible thing a magical creature could do. Using the life of others to empower his creations. Such magic can give birth to miracles, but the price is too high, the risks immense.

It's an unnatural process, almost impossible to balance. One tiny mistake can turn the miracle into a nightmare. The most common case of forbidden magic, is when the mage is so obsessed by someone to resort to magic to bound him/her to an object.

The victim becomes doomed to an eternity of slavery, and after the death of its captor, the only things that awaits is madness. Still a prisoner, incapable of free will, doomed to obey whoever holds the magic's focus.

I am no hero, nor a self-proclaimed ally of justice, but destroying such abominations is an act of mercy towards the victims of this perverted kind of magic."

"Thanks for the lesson, but my partner is neither." Lith clenched his fists, unwilling to submit.

"Isn't there anyway to prove you that you are wrong?" He asked as a last resort, hoping to avoid a third death.

"Of course, there is." Scarlett's tail stopped wagging, assuming a question mark shape. Being the tail of a scorpion, rather than a cat, the gesture resulted threatening.

Lith took several steps back, his whole body ablaze for the mana he was about to unleash.

"Damn tail. Sorry, habits die hard." Scarlett put the tail under its body, in a sign of peace.

"I just need to touch you." The Scorpicoresaid raising its huge paw. "If I am wrong, which I consider highly unlikely, I will leave the both of you alone. You have my word."

It made sense, even Lith needed physical contact to use Invigoration. If the Scorpicores had a similar technique, it was bound to work the same way.

Lith nodded, and Scarlett pressed two digital pads on his forehead. Being much older and experienced than Lith, its Aura technique not only had all of Invigoration's properties, but it also allowed Scarlett to get a glimpse of the subject's true nature.

Under the effects of Aura, no deception was possible, both the body and the mind could not lie.

What Scarlett saw sent cold shivers down its spine. The body was fine, and so was the mind and the mana core, aside from a small imbalance caused by too much refining. It was something that would fix by itself, with time.

But where Lith's true self was supposed to be, there was only a bottomless void, made of rage, grieving and hate.

Staring into that abyss, the Scorpicores could see the abyss staring back, trying to taint its mind with twisted logic and unbridled fury. Circling the void, there were several lights, keeping the void at bay and preventing it to devour everything.

Getting closer to the lights, Scarlett was able to see that each of them had a face and a name. Carl, Rena, Lark, and so on. Only one light had a name but no face. Solus.

- "Order and chaos, what the heck is this pup? This is exactly what I would expect to find in a cursed object, not into any living being. If the corruption spreaded so fast, it means it's way worse than I thought. I will probably be forced to kill them both."-

To confirm its suspects, Scarlett touched the ring, only to once again remain completely dumbfounded.

Not only the mana core was yellow, making it the worst living artifact ever, but there was no trace of madness, pain or ill will. There was only a light, like the Scorpicores was used to see in cubs and babies. The being in the ring was so naïve to be upsetting.

The black dots encompassing the light had all the same name and face. Lith. Being so close to the abyss for so long, seemed to have affected the living artifact, making it less trustful and cynic.

- "By the Great Mother!" Scarlett's head was spinning. "The human is corrupting this thing? Not the other way around? What madness is this?!"-

Because of the shock, the Scorpicores took a step back, trying to rearrange its chaotic thoughts.

"Whatever you are, you are not a kid. You are a monster." Scarlett growled.

"Well, you are not that good looking either, at least according to human standards." Lith filled himself to the brim with mana with Invigoration. The beast's tone and glare had already said all he needed to know.

"Insolent whelp! Who cares about looks? It's not about what you do..."

"Is because of what I am." Lith completed the phrase, remembering Protector's words.

- "I'm sorry, Solus. It's been great knowing you. It seems you'll have to find another partner. Please, forget about me, and live as long and happily as you can." -

The disparity between Lith and his opponent wasn't something that could be overcome with dirty tricks or ingenuity. Lith was preparing himself to die, his only hope was to give Solus enough time to run away from the mad beast.

- "No way! It's only my fault. If it wasn't for me, this thing would have left you alone. I'm not leaving you. I have no chances on my own, I much prefer to go down fighting instead than running." -

Solus squeezed her ring form hard, preventing Lith to take it off.

Thanks to its Aura technique, Scarlett was still able to see both the mana cores, the ability had long lasting effects.

For a brief moment, the cores started to pulse in unison. The yellow one took the excess energy from the cyan one, turning green and allowing it to stabilize to the next level.

The two cores resonance allowed Lith's magic power to go way beyond his limits, to the point that the ring grew and expanded, covering the right hand in the form of a fingerless glove.

It was still nothing compared to the Scorpicores strength, and yet the creature stared in amazement. Nothing that night made any sense, its patience had run out.

"I yield." Scarlett said, leaving Lith and Solus as shocked as the Scorpicores.

Chapter 84 Day Three

"You what?" Lith kept using Invigoration, overloading his body with mana. He had no reason to believe such a change of heart.

"Yeah, sorry. Finding so many mysteries at once overwhelmed me for a second. I will stay true to my word and leave you alone. I don't know what that thing is, nor what you are, but that's not reason enough to kill."

Scarlett noticed that aside from that fleeting second, both the mana cores had gone back to normal, the weak-a*s artifact was back being a ring.

"What do you mean saying you don't know what I am?" Lith was now more scared than before.

"You may have the appearance of a kid, yet you are not. You are closer to an Abomination, rather than a human being. The opposite stands for your partner. That thing is not a twisted perversion of life, but a living being like I never met before.

My reasoning was based on false assumptions. I almost let my arrogance guide my hand, and for that I apologize."

The Scorpicores lowered its head, its menacing aura and aggressive stance subsided.

"Why did you think my partner is deceiving me?" Lith didn't know how to react. The only thing he could think of, was to act friendly but remain vigilant.

"Do you know that it's taking part of your life force?"

"Well, yes. When I found my ring, it was on the verge of death. We have helped each other ever since."

The pup kept spewing unbelievable truths like they were the most natural thing in the world. Scarlett's head was spinning. The Scorpicores took pride in its knowledge and wisdom, but none of it helped making sense in that mess.

On the verge of a nervous breakdown, Scarlett decided to perform a last attempt.

It placed the left paw on Lith's head and the right one on Solus, while activating Aura.

- "Their thoughts cannot lie. If the living artifact attempts to tamper with my readings, I will notice immediately." – It thought.

"Are you a human or an Abomination?" It asked Lith.

"As far as I know, a human." Truth.

"Were you filled with rage before finding your partner?"

"I think I was even worse before." Truth with sincerity on top.

"Do you have any ill will toward the human?" This time Scarlett asked Solus.

"No. I like him very much."

That answer brought the Scorpicores to the peak of frustration.

"Everything I ever learned is a lie!" It screamed in despair, letting them go.

Unable to hold so much mana any longer, Lith let it disperse. Still in a daze, the Scorpicores had turned its back, preparing to leave.

"Wait! At least explain to me what made you change your mind."

"The link between you two is not parasitic. That thing is not really sucking out your life force. On the contrary, it allows you to use a bigger flow of mana than you naturally could, preventing the excess energy to damage your body and using it as its nutrition.

Two birds with one stone.

Killing you is also out of question. You did nothing wrong. I have watched your team during these days, you have showed respect toward the forest and its animals. As long as you behave, you are free to live your life as a student.

It is none of my business."

The Scorpicores took the skies with a single flap of its wings.

- "A good-natured cursed object and an Abomination capable of retaining its self-consciousness. Now I have seen everything." -

Lith had so many questions left unanswered in a corner of his mind. What was true magic? What was the Awakened agenda? How to contact them?

But the only thing he could think about was the joy of being still alive. He didn't want to meet the Scorpicores ever again, at least until he was strong enough to hold his ground.

Lith went back to the cave, his body was already starting to experience the aftereffects of the mana overload. Moving as silently as he could, he went into the side cave bathroom, finally losing control of his bladder.

The next day, he needed to use Invigoration just to get back to his previous conditions. Between the physical and psychological stress of the encounter with the Scorpicores, he had barely been able to catch some sleep.

He was in terrible shape, and so were his companions. Magic could heal all wounds, but there was only one way to recover their stamina without rest. The healer had to share his life force with darkness magic, but Lith was the most tired of them.

While consuming breakfast, eating the herbs and fruits left from the previous day, Lith made his pitch.

"Guys, why don't we just give up?" Everyone at the table was surprised, but no one seemed outraged at the idea.

"I mean, look at me. I'm a healer, yet I fought in the line of fire from the first day. I already used every trick in my book, if those beasts come back today, I doubt we have a chance to make it.

We were sent here to learn, and damn if we learned more than a thing or two. Now we are physically exhausted and mentally tired. If this was a battlefield, I'd say that is better to retreat to fight another day, rather than fight a losing battle."

With deep eyes and aching bodies from two days sleeping on the ground, the proposal sounded quite alluring.

"As much as it pains me, I can't accept." Phloria spoke first. "If this was a battlefield, you would be right not once, but a hundred times. But this is just an exercise, and we have a lot to learn, even from defeat."

Lith nodded, he could not refute her reasoning.

"Yeah." Belia chimed in. "I understand your point, you are a skilled hunter, and was able to stand your ground from the first day. But yesterday was my first true battle, I can't give up after achieving so little. It would fill me with too much regret."

"My thoughts exactly." Said Visen with a fierce look. "I can understand the burden on your shoulders, but this is too important to quit like that. If you don't think you can cover for me, then don't. I need to learn how to fend for myself.

I refuse to be a burden to the group."

- "Fantastic." Lith thought. "The group of rascals had to grow up a spine at the worst moment possible. I am beyond exhausted. All I want is a hot bath and get finally free from big brother's eye." –

"Don't worry, Lith." Phloria patted his back. "I know that between the potions, the fighting and the healing, your body must be screaming in pain. I'll do my best to make your job as easy as possible."

Lith smiled, inwardly cursing his bad luck.

- "Yeah, and by tonight I'll be p*oping diamonds." – He inwardly added.

Once again, their day started by hunting, away from the Clackers' nest. They managed to gather meat and fruits, but remained on their toes the whole time. Phloria was having second thoughts about her earlier decision.

Lith was the only one that could use potions, and her first plan heavily relied on that to establish their tempo and not leave Visen open. His spells could turn tables, but required a lot of time to prepare, being their magnitude and area of effect that big.

But after going all-out three times in two days, she could see how worn out Lith was. His hands kept trembling, his pace was unsteady. Knowing potions' side effects, she thought they were the cause of his lack of vigour.

Instead, he was still suffering from the shock of the previous night. Being in a life or death situation was something he was used to. Being discovered as not being a kid, but rather an Abomination, had given him a real scare.

Was the Scorpicores right about him? And what about Solus' origins? Lith only wanted some peace and quiet to calm his nerves, yet he was forced to use Life Vision, alternating it with Solus' mana sense to not waste too much energy.

Both their abilities required focus and mana to be kept active, especially for Solus, with her weak mana core and poor mana capacity. Yet they had to do it, knowing that it was only a matter of time before the next attack.

For that day, Phloria was paired with Lith and Belia with Visen.

"Incoming!" Lith yelled, prompting his teammates to assume battle formation. There had been no warning this time, everyone was astonished by Lith's keen senses and sharp instinct.

Phloria and Belia managed to conjure their equipment, but this time the magical beasts were going all out. Infused with air magic, M'Rook and Sentar moved faster than ever before, blitzing between their rank and forcing them on the defence.

Phloria's team could follow them with their eyes, but sadly their bodies were not able to keep up. Without potions and so little experience fighting on the forest ground, their only hope was to activate the flight spell from their rings.

That relieved part of the pressure from M'Rook, but made Sentar even more dangerous. The Cron was able to move faster than an arrow, now that they hadn't the cover of rocks and trees anymore, striking with spells and talons.

In a few seconds, their rhythm was destroyed, and Termyn's arrival, sealed the deal.

This time the Cingy didn't charge at all, instead chose to move silently, making the ground soft as a carpet. Using its partners distraction, he waited for an opportunity to make its move.

As soon as the students' formation loosened up, he struck at their weak spot, Visen, knocking him out with a single hit of its tusks. Lith yelled to warn his teammates, but everyone was already locked in battle.

A Professor appeared rescuing Visen, and from that point it all spiralled out of control. In the academy's environment, Lith could barely exert half of his real power, and now that amount was halved again.

His body was devoid of strength, his mind out of focus, still replaying the conversation with Scarlett. But most of all, he lacked motivation.

He was sick and tired of pulling most of the weight of the team by himself.

- "It's my fault, I made everything too easy for them for too long. I attack, defend, heal, provide the meals, hunt and cook! At this point, they could as well shove a broom up my a*s, so that I can wipe the floor for them when walking.

If they want some experience, fine by me. But I'm done baby-sitting!" –

Lith was lost when a lightning left him temporarily stunned, allowing Sentar to strike his back. Termyn and M'Rook teamed up, taking apart Belia's armour like a tuna can, while Sentar kept Phloria busy.

M'Rook managed to bite her exposed neck, but stopped its fangs before doing any damage. After that, the three magical beasts disappeared as fast as they had come. The exercise was over.

Being the last one standing, Phloria was filled with regret and frustration. There were so many things that she had overlooked, too many mistakes she could have avoided with a more proper planning.

She finally realized her arrogance, always relying on Lith's apparently infinite tricks to keep the group afloat whenever something outside her plans happened. She should have given it more thought and less wishful thinking.

By putting so much burden on a single unit, any group was bound to crumble as soon as the key member was unable to keep up. When Professor Thorman appeared to take her back at the White Griffon, Phloria was still looking back at those last three days in hindsight.

They had made so many mistakes, her plans were actually so full of holes, that she couldn't believe they had managed to last for that long.

Chapter 85 Results

When Lith regained his senses, he was back in the Main Hall at the ground floor of the academy. While getting up slowly, trying to shake off the lingering effects of the hit at the back of his head, he noticed that the Hall was filling up quickly.

There were lots of Warp Steps opened. Some were being left active, allowing students from the fourth floor of the White Griffon to reach the Hall.

Most of the Warp Steps, though, were used by Professors going to and fro the forest, bringing back the students one by one.

- "I guess that the third day marked the moment when the magical beasts stopped holding back."

"Yeah." Solus said, glad to feel the safety of the castle walls all around them.

"Honestly, I am kind of surprised that so many people managed to survive this long. Not to brag, but I was sure our group would be the one lasting longer."

"I didn't." Lith replied. "There are too many variables to consider, like who had been warned beforehand by a relative, hence coming fully prepared, or how much time they spent outside.

Not to mention that maybe some groups were just lucky, being comprised of people that were actually able to cooperate, instead of needing someone that guided them step by step." –

Judging from the expressions of his schoolmates, no one had any idea what they were waiting for, or why they had been summoned back into the Hall. While he was still looking around, Lith noticed that his team had gathered around him.

"Seems you were right." Visen said. "There wasn't much I could learn by getting my a*s handed to me."

"You should have understood that teamwork is vital, but being able to stand for yourself is equally important." Trasque rebuked him.

"I mean, seriously? Why so few of you have used first magic during the whole exercise? The Headmaster will not let me hear the end of this. He is even considering to have you all retake the whole class from the beginning with a different teacher!"

"Well..." Visen tried to be as considerate as possible toward the Professor.

"First magic is good, but what could I have possibly achieved with it? I was trying to help my companions, they needed my arrays."

Trasque glared at him, clenching his fists.

"Well, for example you could have blinded the Cingy, so that when you attempted to dodge, it would haven't been able to intercept you. A failed array can be re-done, a fallen member cannot be resurrected. Next time, instead of playing the hero, consider the bigger picture."

Among those who heard him, most took Trasque's words to heart. Aside from conjuring water to drink, very few of them had ever considered using first magic, deeming it useless.

Remembering how she had used first magic to more easily slay the Clackers, Phloria stood straight as an arrow. Lith, on the other hand, could not stop rejoicing at the idea of getting rid of those blockheads once and for all.

When all the students were assembled, the Headmasters stepped forward.

"First of all, allow me to welcome every one of you back. That said, I have bad news and good news. The bad news, is that contrary to what many could believe, this was still a mock exam.

Hence no matter if you lasted one hour, one day or three, you all get zero points."

Linjos took a pause, letting the groans and curses to die out before resuming his speech.

"This was your last wake-up call, from now on you are on your own."

This time, Linjos didn't keep still while talking, he walked among the various groups, like a general inspecting his troops.

"You should have learned that your name, status and bloodline aren't going to protect you from an enemy, no matter how important you consider yourself. It's not only in the wilderness that such things hold no value, but also in the whole world.

Do you really expect for everyone to respect or fear a feeble thing like a name? When you are outside the safety of your home, no one will ask you to introduce yourself before attacking.

You should also have realized that petty behaviours create resentment. Many groups crumbled from the start, either due to past grudges or simply because some of you were deemed untrustworthy.

Last, but not least, it seems that many of you didn't understand the nature of this test. It was meant to show you a glimpse of what a real battle is, to allow you to fraternize and overcome your differences.

You were supposed to help and teach each other, not to barely lump together because you were said so." Linjos stared at several students, that seemed to shrink under his gaze.

"The week deadline was just a pretext, I never expected that some of you would the gall to hole up, hiding the whole time. This isn't a law school, what could you possibly learn from bending the rules?

The exercise is worth zero points, but such attitude cannot be tolerated. Any open violation of the rules will be punished by deducting points.

As for the good news, points will be awarded to those that according to their possibilities, helped their teammates. While the points' deduction is individual, those gained by all team members will be pooled and divided equally among those that cooperated.

Otherwise it would be unfair toward those that sacrificed themselves during the first day, or that fell because of someone else's mistake. Also, I didn't lie when I told you it would last seven days.

For the remaining four, you have no classes, you are free to rest, go home or self-study. It's up to you to decide. I hope that you will make good use of this time to think about this experience and learn from you mistakes. Dismissed."

After saying goodbye to his ex-teammates, Lith jumped in the nearest Warp Steps, walking double time towards his room. He and his bathroom had some serious catch up to do.

No matter how Visen had made the makeshift outhouse comfortable, it couldn't compare with a real toilet. Lith could finally use Invigoration, getting his strength back and relieving his sore muscles.

He spent the next half an hour taking a long hot tub bath, while conjuring several ice mirrors to get rid of the few facial hairs that haunted is still childish visage and cutting his hair with air magic.

- "Seems I was right about this exercise." Solus said while helping him with his cut. Without her help, Lith would have looked like an IRS clerk on a Monday morning.

"Did you have any doubt?" Lith replied, still wondering after all those years what was wrong with the haircut he had back on Earth.

"It's a system devised to teach stuck-up, conceited kids respect and discipline. Once you understand its goal, the rest comes easy. With a brain like yours, cracking the code was easy like connecting the dots numbered from 1 to 7." –

Solus would have liked to get praised more, but Lith's stomach kept grumbling loudly more and more often.

With a heavy heart, Lith dressed up. He would have much preferred to sleep for the next 24 hours, but hunger was still one of the things that scared him the most. He needed to eat and rest.

He was already headed toward the canteen when Solus stopped him.

- "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"My pants are on and I have yet to plagiarize and sell underwear. So my answer is no."

"Your friends from the Healer class, silly. It's the perfect moment to get together and bond a little. After the mock exam, you surely have many things to share with each other."

"Please, have mercy. I'm so tired already, maybe next time." Lith cringed at the idea.

"I'm here only to hoard knowledge and connections." Solus said while making her best Lith's brooding tone impression. "I have no time to waste, I need valuable pawns once I become an adult again." –

Arguing with himself was beyond stupid, so he went to their rooms to invite them to an early dinner.

When it was Friya's turn, she had just finished washing herself too. Her cheeks were still rosy from the hot water. That coupled with the sweet smell of her skin and hair made Lith dizzy for a second.

- "Stupid body. Whenever it decides to grow, it will always be too late."

"Come on, she is so pretty." Solus still wanted her school romance, even if just as a spectator.

"What's wrong with a fling?"

"She is a kid and I am old enough to be her father. Everything is wrong with that!" –

Once at the canteen, no one actually spoke for a while. They were all too focused on eating the first proper meal in days. Only after the second serving they began to share their stories.

"So, how long did you manage to last?" Lith asked hiding his sour mood behind a radiant smile.

"My group was one of the last returning to the castle." Yurial didn't miss the opportunity to show off.

"Everyone agreed making me the leader..."

"Lucky b*stard." "Poser." "Smartass." He ignored the crossfire of name-calling. Yurial was aware of the power his father's status granted to him, so he accepted their envy with class.

"... hence I managed to quickly make them assume a defensive formation. When the beasts arrived, they found us prepared. The worst part was standing watch at night in turns, sleeping in the open and eating grass and fruits all the time."

"Yeah." Friya agreed. "The lack of food and the dirt were terrible. My group was comical, we had two skilled hunters, but none knew how to butcher the preys."

The smell of blood lured so many animals that we had to throw the game away and look for another place where to sleep. In the end we didn't find any, so when we got attacked during the second day after a sleepless night, we lost two members at once.

After escaping by skin of our teeth, we surrendered the next morning. We failed at making a decent camp again, and with no sleep at all we were barely standing when the sun rose. What about you, Quylla?"

She was grinning from ear to ear.

"It was awesome! Best two days of my life." Her answer caught everyone by surprise.

"Care to explain?" Lith asked.

"Sure! First, you have to understand that everyone was pissed at me, since I'm the top of the healing class."

"One of the top students." The other three remarked as one.

"Sure, whatever." It didn't escape their notice that Quylla seemed much more confident and fierier than before.

"Since they knew being second rate at best, they started to call me 'just a healer' and ordered me to 'not be in the way'. So, when the attack happened, I did as they told me and ran like the wind on my own."

When the others managed to catch up with me, after being forced running away, I learned that our self-proclaimed leader had been pummelled by a Sym, a monkey type magical beast.

They started calling me a coward, and trying to put the blame of the defeat on me. At that point, knowing that we were being watched, I gave them a solid piece of my mind.

I told them that for all I cared we could fail from day one, and that I had no intention of letting them treat me like trash for a second longer. Things quickly escalated, and when one of them tried to hit me, Professor Vastor appeared, beating the cr*p out of all of them!"