

Supreme M 86

Chapter 86 Results 2

Quylla stopped talking, laughing her ass off at the memory, while tears of joy rolled out her eyes.

"He is quite fast for someone his size, you know." She said as soon as he managed to catch her breath.

"He beat mercilessly the one that assaulted me and those that did nothing but watch as well. He then made clear that if they attempted something funny again, he would get them expelled. After that, my teammates and I reached an agreement.

I would help them, but only at the condition that I would not take watch at night and get the first choice about food. We didn't last long, but I had the time of my life, ordering them around.

So, when I got back at the castle, the first thing I did was getting a Ballot!"

Quylla took out the black sphere from her cuffs, slamming it on the table, drawing all the eyes on her.

"The feeling of freedom is intoxicating, Friya, you should get one too. I don't see why a smart girl like you has to endure morons all day long.

What about you, Lith?"

"We lasted until the afternoon of the third day, everything went fine." Lith cut his report short, it was time to get something back from his investment.

"During the exercise, I noticed that I cannot make full use of the potions without a weapon."

"You brought potions along?" Yurial was incredulous.

"Yes, I did. I bought them as soon as I got some spare points. I needed to get used to their effects, before using them in actual combat. I tested how long they lasted, their potency and how strong I could hit or get hit before injuring myself.

Nothing special, it's just the same thing we all did with the academy's uniform."

Judging from their blank stares, they had no idea what he was talking about.

"You do know that the uniform protects us, right?"

They nodded.

"And you didn't feel the need to check how it works? How much punishment it can take before ripping? What kind of blows you can take head on and what to dodge?"

Silence befell again.

"Well, between this and the potions, I'd say you just got yourself some homework to do during the next days." Lith said smiling encouragingly to them.

"Don't worry for the uniform, it can self-repair from small damages."

"Thanks for your advice." Friya said. "What were you saying about a weapon?"

"That even if I had it, I lack the proper training. Friya, your second specialization is Mage Knight. What weapon do you use?"

"Wow, I mentioned it to you only once and you actually remembered. I use a rapier. It's a quick and nimble sword, that easily pierces through an armour's joints, but it's not good for blocking heavy hits or cutting the enemy.

According to my mentor, with my build it's the weapon that suits me the best."

"Can you teach me the basics of swordsmanship?" Lith asked. "Having an enhanced strength is of limited use without a proper tool. Right now, when enemies come too close, I can only resort to first magic. I need more options."

"Maybe I can help too." Everybody turned to the unexpected guest.

"Mind if I join?" Phloria asked. "I didn't get the chance to thank you earlier."

- "Not you again." - He inwardly sighed.

"Not at all." Like a perfect gentleman, Lith stood up welcoming the newcomer. For a split second, he had been struggling to keep his amiable façade.

Despite how tired and stressed he was, Lith could only play his part.

"Guys, this is Phloria, my former team leader. Phloria, these are my friends from the Healer specialization, Yurial, Friya and Quylla." It had taken him a lot of practice to say the word "friends" instead of the more accurate "colleagues".

Back on Earth, when Carl visited his workplace, many had got slightly offended with him for introducing them as simply colleagues. At that time, he didn't care, it was only a dead-end temporary job until his brother attained his master.

Now, though, personal relations were of the utmost importance.

- I never understood why people have such a loose definition of friendship. A friend is someone that knows you. From things like your passions and ambitions to trivial things like your favourite book or colour.

As I see it, they are not my friends. They don't like me as a person, only my academic achievements.

They don't even know the names of my sisters."

"Don't be so hard on them, they are just kids." Solus mind-shrugged. "They have met you in a though moment of their lives and you have become close. You often spend time together, either in class or during the private lessons you gave them.

For most people, that's more than enough to call someone a friend. Especially considering you are not really open with them." –

"Thank him for what?" Yurial interest was piqued. Lith was far from bad looking, especially since he had stopped with perpetual frown and the murderous glare. Being both rising stars in the Light department, Yurial had tried multiple times to set a double date, but to no avail.

This was the first time that a girl that had come looking for him had not been dismissed with a polite excuse. Considering that they had spent a few days together and seemed in a good relationship, Yurial was hoping to get some juicy gossip.

- "He sure likes them tall." – He thought.

"Didn't he tell you?" Phloria was honestly surprised. Between her group's horrible start, and how they heavily depended on Lith the whole time, she had expected him to complain about them with his friends as soon as they met.

Instead he had welcomed her with one of his rare dimpled smiles, while the others clearly had no idea who she was.

"Tell us about what?"

"As much as it hurts my pride to admit it, he was the key member from start to finish. Without Lith we would have never lasted more than one day, let alone rack fifty points per day." Phloria sat down, ordering her meal.

Friya whistled with admiration.

"Thirty points each for three days is a great score, considering it was a surprise test. How did you manage to do it?"

Phloria chuckled.

"Sorry, I misspoke. I meant we each earned fifty points per day."

"One hundred and fifty points in just three days?" Yurial dropped his fork from the surprise.

"So much for 'nothing special'! Please, tell us all about it. For some reason Lith has been quite evasive, to use and understatement."

They didn't have to ask twice. Phloria told them how he single-handedly repelled the magical beast on the first day, how he found and built them a safe haven.

She put particular emphasis on the trick with the Clacker's venom and on how he taught them how to survive in the wild with first magic.

"You wouldn't tell at first look, but shorty here is a monster!" She said patting energetically his back.

The last word forced Lith to remember his encounter with the Scorpicores, sending a cold shiver down his spine. He didn't like the idea of being somehow related to Abominations, even less how close he had got to die.

Luckily, his stiff expression blended perfectly with the others. Everyone at the table was shorter or barely taller than Lith, despite being older. If he had to be considered short, what were they supposed to be? Gnomes?

"An artificial cave! How could I not think about it?" Yurial held his head between his hands in frustration. Being a Warden, things like that were supposed to be his specialty.

"Finding the hill was just a stroke of luck." Lith dismissed the whole thing with a wave of the hand. "I'm sure you would have done the same if you had the chance."

"Wow, I never pegged you for the humble type. In your shoes, I would brag about the exercise for at least a month." Friya said, looking at him in a new light.

"Phloria exaggerates things too much. Yes, I did my part, but it was a team effort. Visen actually made the cave stable and habitable, not to mention providing the outhouse and supporting us in battle with his arrays.

Phloria herself had a rocky start the first day, but she learned from her mistakes, and saved me from the Clackers. She turned to be an excellent leader, and it's only thanks to her plan that we managed to survive the second day.

She is the one that managed to envenom the Ry, I just gave her the means to.

Belia, well, she clearly lacked Visen's confidence or our battle experience, but she rose up to the occasion and did her part splendidly. I, on the other hand, am incapable of leadership, and proved to be short fused, often venting my stress on my teammates."

Lith resulted really convincing, mostly because he had been sincere. He had underestimated too many dangers, and lost control of his emotions more than once.

It was hard to draw line where his mana core issues ended and his anti-social behaviour started.

He knew he had a problem, but no idea how to fix it.

"Whatever." Quylla said. "Next time, I want to be in your group. Things would be so much easier."

"Dream on." Friya sighed. "There are only thirty-four healers for over two hundred and fifty students. Hence at least sixteen groups had no healer during the exercise. It's impossible for us to ever end up together."

"Maybe, and maybe not." Yurial said. "After the first trimester, students can go to the forest during the weekends, to collect precious herbs and materials for themselves or exchange them for points. Not to mention, it's all experience."

Lith felt that his plea for help had been lost in conversation, but the topic was quite interesting.

"Is mandatory a group for the forest? And will we be under surveillance again during our training?" He asked.

"No, there is no need for groups, one could go alone or with twenty friends. Although a five men group is highly recommended, especially for fourth years. And no, there will be no surveillance, we would be on our own.

The only safety measure is a panic button, very similar to a Ballot, but with only one function: a distress signal to call for help in case something bad happens."

- "Interesting." Lith pondered. "I could go alone to vent my stress, or with them as a shock therapy. Two days are too little to make me snap, but more than enough to steel my feeble social skills." –

"Isn't your team one member short? It would be a pleasure and an honour to work together with the top students of the Light department." Phloria's request hit their egos in all the right spots.

"How could we possibly say no to someone Lith holds in such high regard?" Friya stood up and shook her hand.

Since things were spiralling out of his hand, he decided to get the best of it, and ask Phloria's help too. But that was the wrong moment, his companions were too happy from having found a kindred spirit, and he was too tired to bring them back to reality.

Lith decided to postpone his request for swordsmanship lesson after the four days break. Because of the private lessons he had imparted them about first magic, he had never got the chance to get back home during the weekends.

It was time to correct that situation.

Chapter 87 Homecoming

Since Lith had been officially admitted at the White Griffon academy, the lives of the inhabitants of the village of Lutia had become easier and safer, especially for Nana. When news spread that the village was the birthplace of a mage, nobles had become friendlier, avoiding to break the law or cause any trouble.

Even passing merchants would be more likely to offer discounts, no more harassing the local smiths. The usual crowd of rogues and troublemakers, that usually hanged around the tavern during the night, had turned meek or left altogether.

Of course, such behaviour didn't come from the goodness of their hearts, nor from the fear of the youth that maybe in the future would become a great mage. Everyone knew he was away, and it would take no less than two years for him to return.

The reason for such sudden change of heart, depended by the fact that those who didn't behave had made the strange habit of disappearing without traces, kill themselves leaving behind a suicide note confessing their crimes or simply died in accidents.

What everyone but Nana ignored, was that a mage's birthplace was his starting fief. Being Lith evaluated as a Rank A student, one of the Queen's personal units was constantly monitoring the village, weeding out problems in the bud.

They had no way to distinguish a simple criminal from someone that, either by his own will or because manipulated, was attempting to harm Lith's family. Most importantly, they did not care.

As soon someone was identified as a potential threat, even if the investigations gave no results, they would get rid of the problem, just to be on the safe side.

The Queen kept them updated on Lith's performance and potential, stressing the importance of giving him no further reason to resent the Griffon Kingdom and defect.

After the results of the mock exam, it was only because of Duke Hestia's compliance toward the school rules, leaving his daughter alone in hot waters and not trying to take revenge, that he barely managed to keep his Dukedom and his neck.

Based on what her contacts had told Nana, once Lith's talent had been recognized by Manohar himself, both the Court and the Mage Association had taken to heart his well-being.

For Nana it meant the chance to keep a big price on her services, despite having nothing more to do outside her role of healer.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" She laughed enjoying another sunny morning. "Who would have thought that helping that young spirit of your brother could bring the new heyday of my life. It's never been so peaceful in years."

"How could my little brother have anything to do with it?" Tista chuckled, while using chore magic to clean the room.

Nana shook her head.

"Tista, my girl you outshine your brother in many things. Looks, kindness, bedside manners. There are just two things that you should really take from him."

"One is talent. What about the other?" Despite having learned spells up to tier three, Tista had still no idea how Lith had managed to cure her. She could only explain it with an abysmal gap in their gift for magic.

"No, I would never criticize someone about something innate. I was talking about being cynical and practical. You are too naïve for your age.

If your brother was here, he would look at me with his soul chilling glare, make a couple of questions to which I would answer enigmatically, and I'm sure he would understand what I mean."

"Lith doesn't have a soul chilling glare!" Tista rebuked her mentor.

"He is the most loving and caring little brother one could ask for."

Nana scoffed.

"Because he always treated you like a precious gem. Try asking your future brother-in-law what does he think about Lith. And when you do, look him straight in the eyes and don't let him change the subject."

Tista was about to rebut, when the door of the home office opened. Both the women turned their heads, discovering that it wasn't a patient, Lith had returned.

"Lil bro!" Tista welcomed him with a warm hug.

"You haven't changed at all!"

He held her tight, wishing he could kiss her on the head, but she was seven centimetres (3 inches) taller than him.

"I went away for a month, not a year! Or did you expect me to come back scarred from the battlefield?"

"Meanie!" She pushed him away with fake rage, giving a small punch on his shoulder.

"Thanks for everything you did for me, Master Nana. I wouldn't be in the academy without you." Lith hugged his old mentor too.

Nana enjoyed the embrace for a moment, asking herself if it hadn't been a mistake choosing to not have children. After her fall from grace, she had withdrawn, avoiding any meaningful relationship to not get hurt again.

Maybe it was just the old age, or maybe hanging with those two little brats had cracked her armour. In any case, it was too late.

"Why are you wasting time with this old bat?" Nana scolded him, poking him on the head with her walking cane.

"Your parents are worried sick about you. Tista, you can have the rest of the day off. Bring him home, use force if you must."

Tista giggled, taking his brother's arm before leaving.

"Someone feels clingy, today. Since when do you like getting spoiled?" Lith laughed at the affectionate gesture.

"Since ever, duh!"

During their walk, Lith noticed many youths suddenly changing direction or crossing the road.

Between her beauty, her status and income as the future healer of the village, Tista was one of the most coveted maidens. Very few cared about the fact that she was still two years from the marrying age.

Before Lith's departure, most were too scared to approach her. He had killed men at the age of six, a magical beast at eight, and was infamous for being overprotective of his family.

While mothers and girls praised his decisiveness, it struck fear in the hearts of the suitors, that now believed to finally have free hand with her.

"Is there someone in particular bothering you?"

Tista made one of her radiant smiles that could light up a room.

"No, thanks. I can defend myself. Besides, they are harmless."

"Are you sure? Accidents happen. You just have to say the word."

Solus jolted. Despite the casual tone and his bright smile, he wasn't joking at all.

Tista didn't notice, and laughed at the 'joke'.

"Speaking of accidents, the village lately has become really quiet. I feared that after you left, brigands would attack as soon Nana left the village. Instead the whole region has never been so safe in years."

Lith raised an eyebrow in disbelief, it didn't make sense until he remembered Linjos' words.

- "I had almost forgot my family is under surveillance. I must be careful not be followed when I perform my experiments." –

Since they spoke on daily basis with the communication amulet, Tista asked him why he had disappeared in the last three day. Lith told her everything about the mock exam, leaving her in awe.

"Five mages fighting together against evil magical beasts? What an experience! I bet you looked like the heroes of the stories dad always told us when we were little."

"Magical beasts are not evil. Some are good, other bad, just like humans. And we didn't look like heroes, more like scared teens. Plus, I'm terrible with people, and you know it. Have you not been listening or are you just trying to flatter me?"

Tista punched his arm again in reply.

When they arrived home, Lith noticed that the cultivated fields were bigger than he remembered, there were farmhands helping their parents. Now that all their kids had become independent, Elina and Raaz had decided to expand the family business.

When they saw him, they ran to his side, hugging him while crying uncontrollably.

"My baby, my little baby is back." Was the only thing they managed to say.

Lith felt incredibly happy and awkward at the same time. Happy for their infinite love, awkward because he had yet get used to it and because he didn't know if he deserved it.

The real Lith, their son, had died twelve years ago, replaced by an alien mind. He knew it wasn't his fault. He didn't kill the baby, nor he had chosen them willingly.

Sure, Orpal and Trion had damned themselves with their actions, yet it was the miraculous survival of the baby that had led them to those events. Lith felt responsible for breaking up that wonderful family.

- "Aren't you forgetting something?" Solus meddled with his train of thoughts.

"Without you, your mother could have died of childbirth. Remember how weak she was at the time? If she had been grief-stricken, she may have not survived, letting herself go without fighting.

Not to mention that we don't know what would have happened. Orpal might as well started targeting Tista instead of you, and we both know how she wasn't able to stand up for herself. She could have died, either by illness or by your sick brother's hand.

I can easily see him, teaching her a lesson resulting in her conditions getting worse. Sure, he would later apologize and realize his mistake, but I still think he would have gotten himself disowned.

Did you somehow force him to say all those mean things to Tista, making her, your mother and Rena cry all the time? Did you manipulate him into sending those five goons to beat you to a pulp? No. It was all his doing, and he paid the price.

It's much better having two healthy good children, instead of a hot-headed conceited a*shole. The only way Orpal had to be happy was to be an only child." –

Knowing the human nature, Lith was prone to agree with her. Stealing a newborn food, his obsessive need for attentions, were all indicators of a twisted personality. Lith hadn't forgiven Orpal, nor felt sorry for him. Only for his family.

Feeling Tista's warm embrace, seeing her safe and happy, quickly dispelled the doubts that were clouding his mind. Saving a single Tista or Rena, was worth killing a thousand Orpals.

Chapter 88 Solus' Surprise

After entering inside the house, away from prying eyes, Lith made use of his newfound knowledge as a healer.

He used Invigoration to spot and fix all bone, muscular and even intervertebral disc damages accumulated in his parents' bodies over time, due to the hard work in the fields and the aging.

He also used tier four magic to not make them feel tired because of the treatment, borrowing them his energy.

"What the?" Raaz moved around, feeling the subtle changes.

"I feel full of energy and my knots have disappeared. It feels like I am twenty again!"

"Glad to hear it." Lith replied hugging his father. "I have learned so much in just a month. The academy has showed how limited my horizons were. There are many things I can still improve."

He also performed a full check up on Tista too. She was always fit as a fiddle, but Lith never stopped worrying about her.

They talked about his mock exam, of which Lith gave an accurate description, although removing the encounter with the Scorpicores from the picture.

Instead he put particular emphasis on how he developed a good relationship with his teammates and Phloria in particular.

The doctored version of the story was aimed to avoid them worrying about him being alone in the academy, hoping to help overcome their long-term sense of guilt for him never having any friend in the past.

His parents kept believing that Lith had spent his childhood alone, because the family needed money and food, forcing him to become a hunter first and a healer later. But that was only half the truth.

He had almost nothing in common with teenage magicians, let alone with young children. Work had always been an excuse, to avoid taking any unnecessary risk of blowing his cover.

After settling the matters with his family, Lith decided to take a walk in the woods. He needed some time alone, not only to sort out his chaotic feelings, but also to try to convert everything he had learned from the academy and its books in true magic.

Knowing that he could be under surveillance too, he walked toward his private clearing in the Trawn woods using Life Vision, while Solus scanned their surroundings with all the senses at her disposal.

- "Aside from us and the animals I can't find anything else." She reported.

"Same. I believe that it's possible for the Queen's men to have magical items that conceal their presence, but I doubt they can avoid all our combined resources. I use true magic, while you, well, beats me what you use.

Bottom line, I think we are safe. Probably they have been sent to keep an eye on external threats, not on me."

"Yeah, but it's better be safe than sorry." Solus gave her his first paranoid remark ever.

"By the way, do you remember that before the mock exam I talked about a surprise?"

"Of course."

"Well, time to reveal my new gift. We need a special place, so I need you to follow my instructions." –

Lith casted his slipstream flight spell, moving in an irregular pattern toward the destination Solus had pointed him to. At the same time, both of them were scanning their surroundings.

Following them at such high speed while remaining covert should have been impossible. They soon reached the inner part of the woods, where months before they had assisted the three kings against the Wither.

It was still a wasteland, only grass and weeds had started growing anew.

- "We are in the clear. I didn't notice anyone following us. Did you choose this zone because it provides no cover to our pursuers?"

"No, because it's one of the few spots that can serve our purpose. Thanks to my sense of self, every time I regain a new function, I always know how to make it work. This one is special, and needs a special spot."

"What's so great about this place? It's depressing and more dead than Julius Caesar."

Solus chuckled.

"Did you ever wonder why the Wither moved in this direction every time it managed to escape?"

"Normally I'd say it was just desperate, but I bet you have a better explanation."

"Bingo! I noticed it the first time we came here, but back then I couldn't make head or tails about it. You see, with my mana sense I'm not only able to differentiate people, but also landscapes.

That's because the world is literally full of mana, and some places more than others. During our travels, I noticed several spots where the world energy was much more abundant than usual, and this is one of them.

I believe that the Wither was looking for this place to leech the massive amount of world energy to survive the fight." –

Solus detached from Lith's finger in her usual spider form, reaching a clearing a few meters away, before starting to burrow into the ground.

In front of his astonished eyes, a blue pulse lit the clearing. At every beat, something came out of the ground. It was like looking at a fast-forwarded video, where one could see a seed become a flower in less than ten seconds.

But in Solus' case, the small pebble grew into a tower.

A puny, demolished tower, to be precise.

It barely reached 10 meters (33 feet) of diameter, with a single door flimsy enough to get carried away by a strong gust of wind. The tower only had the ground floor and no roof, debris covered its top, like it had collapsed on itself.

- "This is indeed a surprise." Lith was impressed nonetheless. "Does this thing come with any defence mechanisms? If so, wherever we go, we will always have a place to stay, avoiding humans and beasts alike."

"First of all, this is not a thing, that's me!" Solus was quite pissed off being treated as an object.

"And yes, I do have defence mechanisms. So, get your rude a*s inside, so I can activate them." –

Lith did as instructed, discovering that the structure inside was bigger than it looked on the outside. On his right there was a set of crumbled stairs going up, and another that seemed to go down unimpeded.

In front of him there was a single door, leading to a bedroom almost identical to the one Lith had made build in his house. Yet the bed was a king size canopy one, and the room had a private bathroom, just like his room at the academy.

"Mass displacement?" Lith asked in amazement.

"Yes." For the first time, he could hear Solus's voice with his ears. "Only part of this form exists in our plane, the rest is actually in the pocket dimension. Do you like this piece of home away from home?" She was clearly eager for a praise.

"Very, it's an amazing replica. I can't thank you enough for giving me a real toilet, it means the world to me."

Solus giggled.

"You are welcome. But this is not the surprise, just part of it. Go downstairs, please."

In the basement there were two more rooms, the first one was a perfect copy of the forgemastering training hall, down to the last small detail.

"I was able to reproduce both the potion and the forgemastering labs, even the equipment." She explained. "But I cannot create from nothing ingredients or consumables. Some things we can only buy them."

Lith opened the drawer supposed to contain rings and amulets to enchant, but just as Solus had announced, it was empty.

"Not a problem." He replied. "There is not much that I can do with my limited knowledge.

Luckily, when I told Professor Wanemyre that I wanted to do some practice on my own, she gave me a few rings and a bottle of the liquid for drawing magic circles. We have enough for a few attempts at applying true magic to forgemastering."

The only Forgemaster's spell Lith had seen, was the one for realizing dimensional items. He drew the circles and the runes with the utmost care, there was no one to help him in case something went wrong.

When he finished, he placed a pebble in its center. He wasn't expecting to succeed, only to study to mana flow to reproduce it with true magic.

So, instead of chanting, he used Invigoration to call upon the world energy and sent it to fill the magic circle. It was easy, and it didn't affect his mana reserves, since he was employing external energies.

Unlike Professor Wanemyre, he didn't fill the circles to the brim. Being an experiment, the less energy the better, not to mention he wanted to avoid creating top tier rings after just a month.

According to the books, it was sufficient to give the circles mana until the air started to crackle to obtain the lowest class dimensional objects.

Lith knew the thirteen runes and their spells like the back of his hand, he had performed them countless times during the lessons and on his own.

Remembering the characteristic feeling of each one, he weaved the runes' incantations in rapid succession. In Lith's mind, Wanemyre's performance, albeit exceptional, was like a kid playing a

piano one key at a time.

He was convinced that to maximize the effects, the different spells had to complement and integrate each other, like in a magical symphony.

The runes rose in the air one after the other, forming a perfect ring around the pebble in the blink of an eye. Lith then started compressing the mana inside the runes. Soon all the energy was encompassing the little stone, trying to seep inside.

Now it was the most critical moment, Lith had to force energy and matter to fuse together. Things were going smoothly, but in the back of his head there was a constant alarm that something was wrong.

Suddenly, the energy mass imploded, pulverizing the pebble. Despite being unable to escape, the mana gone wild still managed to burn the circle, leaving a crack on the floor.

"Ouch! That hurt!" Solus said.

"Sorry, my bad." Lith said embarrassed by his failure. "Any idea what has gone wrong?"

"Right off the bat, I can come up with at least eight errors you did." She actually replied at his rhetorical question, leaving Lith in awe once again.

Chapter 89 Trial And Error

"First of all, Wanemyre said that the size of the circle matters, and you made it too big for a pebble. A smaller one would have been better to save ink and better focus the mana.

Also, you formed the mana sphere too fast, not giving it enough time to get properly imbued with magic. Then there is the matter of how you arranged the runes..."

Solus started nit-picking every single mistake he had done. According to his own earlier analogy, more like someone playing a symphony, Solus was making Lith feel like a button masher had attempted to go pro at fighting games.

Everything she said sounded right, and that made her even more irritating.

"Well, why didn't you tell me all of this earlier?" He grunted.

"How could I spot mistakes you had yet to do? It isn't my fault if being the wise one I am capable of learning from others' mistakes, while normies like you must stumble and fall before walking properly."

"Oh yeah, miss wisea*s? If you are that good, why don't you come here and show me how is done?"

"Gladly."

The room started pulsing with a white light, the crack in the floor disappeared. Then, another pebble flew on the ground, while several drops of ink hit the floor, forming the runes again in a perfect circular pattern.

"You have forgotten the circles, Solus. So much for being a wise one." Lith playfully mocked her.

"Do you mean this?" Suddenly the space around the pebble was filled with mana, perfectly contained in a circular shape, just encompassing the runes.

"How did you..."

"I learned Invigoration from you, and we are actually sitting on a geyser of world energy. Is not that hard to keep it stable, for someone capable of space displacement." She proudly explained, cutting him short.

"Do you mean in this form you are capable of keeping the mana stable without a limit?" Lith stopped their cheerful quarrel, shocked by the revelation.

"Well, duh! Why?"

"Because that means that time is no matter an issue, at least while I practice in here. This is a perfect magical furnace for a complete beginner like me!"

Lith weaved the thirteen spells again, following Solus' instructions and earlier advices. No more worried by the mana dispersal, he bid his time, making sure that the mana sphere was strong and stable, letting the energy seep in the pebble before the final step.

And so, the pebble melted before he could even attempt the fusion between matter and energy.

"Another failure! What did I do wrong this time?" Lith asked in frustration.

"Honestly, I don't know." Solus mind-shrugged.

"There were some things you could have done better, but in theory it should have worked."

Just to be sure they weren't missing anything, this time Lith put on the ground one of the spare rings, and with Solus' assistance, they repeated the whole process, but this time using fake magic.

The forgemastering went without a hitch.

"What the heck?" Lith could not understand why true magic was failing him.

"We did the same thing, step by step. Why did it work this time?"

"Third time is a charm?" Solus said without actually believing it.

They kept crushing, melting and vaporizing many pebbles, but at the end of the day their only success was the low-grade ring made with fake magic.

"It's almost noon, better stop, or your mother will worry."

"Yeah." Lith left the lab, heading back at the ground floor. His eyes wandered inside the bedroom, whose door he had left open.

"Solus, do you remember my comment about the dirty mind of those who designed the academy's rooms?" He asked while rising an eyebrow in suspicion.

"Yes, why?"

"Why does my room have such a big bed? And why the hot tub is clearly designed to comfortably accommodate two persons?"

"Well, I thought that maybe, sometime in the future, you would like to have some company." If he didn't know her any better, Lith would have sworn there was a hint of mischievousness in her voice.

"Thanks for your concern, but I'll give a hard pass on that. I'll never reveal to anyone your existence, it's too dangerous."

With a sigh on her side, both the bed and the tub shrank.

"On second thought, keep the bed big. It's more comfortable that way."

Ignoring Solus' grumblings, Lith was about to exit, but stopped at the last moment.

"Is the coast clear?"

"Yes, in this form all my capabilities are enhanced by the world energy. I can even spot the three kings, despite how far away they are from us. I can't imagine someone escaping my detection. Even in my weakened state, I'm always a legendary mage tower!"

"You have yet to tell me what defence measures you can use."

"Uhm, not much, actually. I can turn invisible, and when you are within the premises, I can sink underground without leaving any trace.

At the moment my options are quite limited. I couldn't even sustain this form without borrowing such abundant external mana."

Lith was impressed nonetheless. Her cloaking, spatial displacement and mana manipulation were already at that level despite the yellow mana core. What would Solus be capable of once she reached the cyan level too?

Lith returned home fast as he had gone, to make it harder spot their new special place.

- "Don't you think you are wearing your paranoia cap too much?"

"No." Lith replied. "If I was the one supervising the village, keeping an eye on someone like me would be wise. In their eyes, I'm still a kid, our family isn't poor anymore but it's not rich either.

I have no real ties with the Kingdom, on paper I am the perfect example of a talented youth that could be easily swayed with promises of riches, power and money." –

Once again, neither of them spotted a tail, but that wasn't enough for Lith. His pursuers could just really be good at hiding or waiting for him to lower his guard.

Back at home, for the first time in a month, the whole family was reunited for lunch. Lith arrived just in time to hear Rena complaining that her fiancé couldn't join them because of his work.

Lith was secretly happy with that. After three days of pretending, he just wanted to be himself. He did not like Sentar, but since he never liked any of his sister's suitors it didn't mean much.

"Dad, I think this is partly your fault. You should stop glaring at him every time you think I am not looking."

"Since when do I glare?" Raaz put the right hand on his heart, feigning sincerity.

"You know that I like that boy, otherwise I would have never consented to the marriage."

"Please. Since I was twelve, you glared at everyone who got anywhere near me, no matter if kid, man or elder. You seem to have passed that skill to Lith. Senton said to me multiple times that whenever he is alone with you, he feels like facing a firing squad."

"That's sign of a guilty conscience." Raaz rebutted.

"Mine instead is clear." Lith chimed in. "I have always been frank with him." In fact, it was the barrage of not-so veiled threats that scared his future brother-in-law the most.

"You too, sis? Lil bro doesn't glare, he is only protective!"

No one in the family had the courage to tell Tista that her brother that she considered a hero in her heart, wasn't as perfect as she pictured him, so they happily changed topic.

Lith really enjoyed the meal with his family. Despite she did not have access to the high-quality ingredients like the academy's cooks, his mother's dishes were always the one tasting the best.

Raaz shared with him his plans for expanding the farm. The days when they had barely the money to keep the house standing were long gone. As soon his father finished, the family started with a barrage of questions he was unprepared for.

They wanted to know everything about the academy. How were the Professors, how his schoolmates were behaving, if he was eating well and so on.

Clearly, they had only half believed to Lith's daily reports, and wanted to have clear answers while looking at him in the eyes. It took quite a while to convince them that no one was harassing him and that both the Headmaster and the Professors were good people.

He even had to exaggerate his relationship with the exam's group, making it sound like they were already good friends. Contrary to his expectations, none of his parents seemed happy with such news.

"Lith, I don't think you should be so trusting. You barely know them from three days." Elina said.

"You see, not always people are like they appear. For every good and sincere person you meet, there is always another ready to say everything, just to get what he wants. I'm sorry dear, but it's the truth.

I wanted to hide this as long as I could, but your safety is more important than preserving your innocence. Even in our small village, since Nana took you under her wing, your rise in status has made many of our community proud, but many more envious of your success.

My friends kept me posted about all the gossip, how so many thought you were an arrogant brat at first. Then, once you started your apprenticeship, they started to wish for you to fail, just to feel better about themselves."

Raaz took Elina's hand, holding it tight.

"What your mother is trying to say, is that if even people that we know from years and almost consider as family can be so mean, the more the reason to be wary of strangers. Don't believe blindly in pretty words and kind smiles.

You don't know a person true worth until you really need their help. Always remember what happened to the poor Nana. So, don't try to change or force yourself to be someone else just to please a bunch of snotty kids.

If they really are your friends, they'll accept you for who you are. If not, know that is not your fault. It's just that the world is harsh, true friendship isn't as easy to find like in the bedtime stories I told you when you were little.

A real friend is like a treasure, hard to find, even harder to keep. Life will keep pushing you away, but you must never let go of a real friend."

Lith unconsciously rubbed his thumb on Solus' ring, making her giggle like a little girl.

- "I never expected my father to be so direct." Lith thought, without realizing what it meant to him thinking of the word 'father' without making it sound like an insult.

"I always took him for a simple and honest man, trying his best at a simple and honest job while taking care of his family. Who would have guessed that one day he would make me a speech about being cynic and distrustful?" –

While pondering about life's twisted irony, Lith realized the key element he and Solus had been missing to make true forgemastering work.

Chapter 90 Lith's Surprise

Lith first instinct was to run away and test his theory, but he hadn't returned home to spend his time working, he really needed some real rest while enjoying the luxury of being his real self, with no strings attached.

"Mom, dad, thank you." He replied. "I know how cruel people can be. I learned it from experience since the day I started working as a healer. It started with that noble trying to kill me, and continued by showing me what a man can do to his wife, a parent to his own children."

He avoided mentioning brothers, since despite the passing of years, Orpal's name kept stirring a lot of pain in his parent's hearts.

"This village is not perfect, the world is not perfect. But I'll do my best to remain true to myself and make you all proud of me."

Lith could say that looking them straight in the eyes, since the wording of choice didn't mention what his morals were or how he meant to achieve his goals. In his mind, it was all a white lie to prevent his family from worrying about him.

He stood up and hugged his family one at a time, feeling the warmth of their embrace and love.

After finishing their meal, Lith insisted to be the one to do the dishes. Elina opposed at first, but before anyone could even move one plate, he had already washed and cleaned dishes, cookware and the whole room.

"Show-off!" Tista pretended to scold him.

They spent the following hour discussing the last arrangements for Rena's marriage, which brought several grunts from the male side of the family, and Lith's academy life, which brought several grunts from the female side of the family.

He had lived all his life as a monk, going from home to work and vice versa, and doing nothing else. They had hoped that being surrounded by so many girls, he would have found one of his liking.

- "Dammit, first Yurial tries to set me up with a date, then you, Solus, with all your innuendos, and now this? For crying out loud, who cares about romance at twelve?"

"You would be right..." Solus replied. "If this wasn't a world where people get married around sixteen and seventeen years of age. There's only so much time to just hang out for fun or make experience with the opposite sex.

Unless one plans to marry with his first girlfriend or has an arranged marriage, of course." –

After that, everyone had to go back to work. Daylight was precious, and only Lith was actually on vacation. Before going back to his forgemastering lab, Lith visited and treated all the animals in the farm and the farmhands his parents employed.

It would ensure the rise of their reputation and saved them quite some money.

Once back inside Solus's ruined tower form, he could finally share his enlightenment. He had actually offered her to read his mind, to stop the pestering, but she refused.

With the growing trust between them, they rarely accessed each other mind, preferring to rely on their telepathic link, unless it was absolutely necessary.

"The problem with our earlier experiments, is that we were just imitating the form of the forgemastering spell, not his nature."

"Meaning?" Solus asked.

"Well, replicating a fire ball is easy, it's just an exploding flame. But what does exactly forgemastering do? What does each rune individually? That's the problem that we overlooked. Fake magic is like true magic with auto-pilot."

He took out the dimensional amulet he had bought from the academy, using Invigoration on it, while Solus did the same.

Unlike for normal unanimated objects, Invigoration was capable of tracing the mana flow cursing through magical item.

It revealed a mana sphere similar to a core, but much rougher and simpler, kept stable by thirteen mana patterns that insulated it from external influences.

"By my maker, how did you get the idea of using Invigoration like this?" Solus was amazed by this discovery.

"Actually, I didn't. It's all thanks to that Scorpicores. Remember when it passed me its pince-nez to analyse it?" Solus mind nodded.

"That's the first time that I did it, but back then I was too scared to understand the implication of the lesson the creature imparted me. I don't know if it did it on purpose to teach me how to recognize cursed objects, or was just trying to convince me of its good faith.

Whatever was its purpose it taught me something new about true magic, and in turn the true nature of forgemastering. Unlike some hypothesized, forgemastering isn't about feeling the mana flow in an object and enhance it.

On the contrary, it allows to create a pseudo mana core, that has to be literally engraved into an object, and then stabilized by precise mana patterns, that feed on the world energy for self-sustenance and prevent the core from dissipating.

Unlike yours, the pseudo cores have no conscience, just a purpose. Without an external binding they would just dissipate in the thin air. To double check my theory, let's analyse the cuffs of my uniform too."

The pseudo core designed to store the Ballot was even smaller than the one in the amulet, but more refined.

"Well, this makes sense." Solus pondered. "The amulet can store anything, while the cuffs only the Ballot. To apply such restriction, the core must be more complex. But that means..."

"Yeah." Lith sighed. "It means that we will have to forgemaster all the items in the book with fake magic, just to study their cores and understand the underlying principles, before creating something really new."

Lith needed several attempts to understand how to carve the patterns inside an object without looking into it via Invigoration. Every test required a lot of focus and mana expenditure, but with every failure, he was closer to success.

"Well, now we also know why Forgemasters require so much mana. Even an inanimate object offers a tremendous resistance to the external energy. The more complex and powerful the artifact, the more complex the pseudo core must be.

If a 'simple' dimensional object it's taking so much time and effort, I wonder how powerful was the mage that created that pince-nez." Solus said.

"Probably it was his/her life's work." Lith replied.

"Yeah, it also explains why second attempts at forgemastering are useless. Every rune leaves a carving, if one creates a wrong pathway for the mana, the object becomes useless."

Lith nodded, noticing something unusual.

"Odd, I should have exhausted my mana many times over, yet I'm only starting to feel tired now, and I have yet to use Invigoration once."

"Maybe thanks to our bond, you have access to the world energy geyser too." Solus proposed.

"That would explain why in the legends mages were said to be invincible in their towers. Between an almost endless supply of mana and the tower defences, defeating them should be nigh impossible."

Lith and Solus kept working non-stop, and before sunset they had already realized their first dimensional pebble. Lith brought it in the bedroom, and Solus framed it right beside the entrance, adding a small tag with the date and a small incision.

"Our first work together."

After that, they created seven low-tier dimensional rings with true magic. He was certain to be able to craft even the high tier ones, but that would have been a fatal mistake.

Dimensional rings could not be kept hidden, they had to be used, otherwise it was like not having one at all. According to the academy's records, Lith creating low-tier objects was already an impressive feat.

Distributing freely high-tier ones would be madness, no less than putting a bullseye on his chest and back.

Before returning home, he went to Selia's place, her first mentor, the woman who taught him how to survive with his hunting skills.

"Look who's back! Still all dressed up and everything, I see." Selia hugged him, leaving Lith quite shocked. He never pegged her for the affectionate type.

"Well, yeah. This uniform can't get dirty and is almost indestructible. I have no reason to change outfit." He explained returning the hug.

"Wish I had one too." She sighed. "Since you left, doing the house chores is such a bother."

"This disciple is really sorry, Master Selia." Lith mocked her. "But I hope this will make your life easier." He handed her a ring.

She wasn't impressed at all.

"You know, is all right for a hunter to be stingy. But being smug while handing a cheap ring like this is below even us."

Seeing her disappointed, Lith laughed out loud.

"I admit the ring isn't worth more than ten copper coins by itself, but just like me, it's more than meets the eye."

He shortly explained her how to imprint the ring. Even someone who had never practiced chore magic could do it at the first try. After realizing what it was, Selia was left speechless.

"I did it myself." Lith explained. "It can only store three square meters (33 square feet) but at least you will not be bothered anymore by your equipment and your preys. If you feel lazy, you can even use it to store food and keep it warm."

"This... this is too much. I cannot accept it." Selia knew that such object was worth over thirty gold coins.

One could build a luxury house at Lutia with all that money. Not to mention it was an invaluable tool for a hunter, keeping the preys fresh before field dressing it or while looking for a good buyer.

She tried to give it back, but Lith closed her hand around it with his palms.

"You can, and you must. First because once imprinted, it's useless to anyone else, unless you die, of course.

And second, because despite you have always been a stingy, nagging Master that would make rip-off deals, it's only because of your help that my family was saved from hunger and starvation, and that's a debt that not even this ring can settle."