

BATTLE OF MAGES

CHAPTER 1

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To my Belle Bibi That I will love always

1

Conor still remembered when his mother told him about it. The legendary battle of the two mages. The greatest of their time.

It was an autumn night, the streets of New York covered in a carpet of gold as beautiful as it was ephemeral, similar to the existence of humans.

But it wasn't just humans who populated the Earth.

The night was cool and slightly windy, and in the late hours of that Thursday, when the rather busy streets were now almost deserted, a beautiful young woman passed on, looking like a fairy with her veil dress and all-white cloak, and her bright green hair like young spring leaves wet with dew.

Her breathing and light footsteps echoed faintly in space. She was clearly on her way home, and gave the impression of flying away at the slightest breeze.

She paused for a moment to take a deep breath of the deep night and think about something that had been bothering her recently when giggles could be heard from the shadows.

One didn't need to see their origin to understand their meaning - danger.

And out of the darkness sprang a whole group of thugs who seemed never to have done a good deed in their lives, and who stared at the young woman with their dark eyes animated by an ominous gleam. Their intention was obvious.

First, they followed their prey with their eyes, hissing and booing, before approaching and surrounding her.

The young woman frowned, worried at first sight.

"Leave me alone, please. I just want to go home." she asked in a voice as soft and attractive as her appearance.

The one who was obviously the leader, more tattooed and charismatic than the others was the first to laugh before followed by the others.

"I don't think so, my pretty. We've got other plans for you."

“What do you want!”

This time, the group laughed outright.

“You know very well, my pretty. There's no need to play innocent, even if innocence of another kind would please us even more.”

The chief reached out and stroked a lock of her long, silky hair.

He ran his tongue over his lips.

“You're beautiful, you know, very beautiful, and we're really going to enjoy trashing that beauty.”

“Don't touch me!” the young woman screamed at him, slapping his hand to let go and taking a step back.

“Ah, aggressive too. I'm going to love this.” he scoffed even louder.

“If I were you, I wouldn't do that,” said a deep voice that also emerged from the darkness.

The group of thugs gasped and turned towards its owner. It was a man sitting at the foot of a pillar, wearing a tailored indigo suit, a large hat and dark, very dark glasses. His legs were crossed, his head leaned nonchalantly on one hand behind his head, a toothy grin on his lips.

His wrists were adorned with a watch and a thick gold bracelet.

He exuded mystery, wealth and power.

“What do you want, weirdo.”

“I'd just give you a little free advice. My rates are out of reach for starving people like you.”

The chef took a few steps toward him.

“You seem to have a pretty big mouth for a sick bastard. And rich, to boot.”

“So what?”

“And then when we're done with our beautiful prey here, we'll come after you...I hope for your sake you don't intend to play the hero, sicko, otherwise it'll be the last thing you do with your crazy life.”

“That, I highly doubt.”

“Oh yeah, and for what.”

But the mysterious man said nothing. The young woman advanced towards him and, to the thugs' surprise, curtsied.

After that, she faced the group, straightened up and beamed, transforming herself before their shocked and frightened gaze into a gigantic, enraged beast.

“I warned you,” laughed the man, as if at a joke.

The beast, having sufficiently frightened them with its new form, pounced on them like the prey they had become.

The roles had reversed, or more precisely, had actually been revealed.

The beast tore them apart, taking her time and leaving nothing but a pond of flesh and blood.

The mysterious man laughed heartily.

“That was quite a sight.”

The young woman resumed her original form, and turned to the man gracefully.

“Thank you, Your Excellency.”

He laughed as he slowly disappeared in a dusty, shimmering breath.

The young woman smiled, arranged her coat without needing to, then resumed her walk.

“I’ll have to hurry, I’m sure he’s waiting for me.”

Conor ran around the apartment, struggling furiously whenever his nanny managed to get her hands on him until he escaped her firm but tender hands.

And by nanny, she was a gleaming bright-red flying creature who hardly ever spoke, and often took on the appearance of a grumpy but hand-on-heart.

This was obvious from the indulgence she showed her little protégé.

He grunted to make it clear that it was time for him to go to sleep. Even though it was long past his bedtime.

The little boy refused, and made it clear by constantly running away and throwing tantrums that were as false as they were annoying.

He would make deep grimaces that faded as soon as he heard the front door open.

Now a broad smile lit up his face as he rushed towards the person who came through the door.

It was the young woman from the alley, answering to the sweet name of Marion.

Her face, too, was radiant as she opened her arms to receive the little rocket racing towards her, screaming her name.

“Mommy!”

“It’s okay, baby. Did you behave yourself while Mommy was out?”

He nodded vigorously as his mother lifted him in her arms.

“But I’m not a baby anymore!” he quipped as he struggled to get down.

“Ah yes, that’s right. You’re seven now!”

“That’s right, So, I’m allowed to sleep late.”

“No, you don’t. Now go to bed, there’s school tomorrow.”

The little boy refuted fiercely with his head as he fled to the living room and climbed onto the sofa to jump up and down, shouting his opposition.

“I don't want to!”

Marion approached her child while gazing at him long and deeply.

She loved her little boy so much. A little boy who had been anything but blessed by nature.

Despite the passage of time, she still ached at people's stares, their criticism, their barely disguised contempt when they saw the glaring contrast between mother and son.

While she herself was of extraordinary splendor and dazzle, Conor was of barely tolerable ugliness and heaviness.

He had dull black hair and almost transparent light-gray eyes.

To compensate for this almost unfair appearance, his mother spoiled him as much as she could, indulging his every whim, and buying him nice things, like the clothes he was wearing at the moment, a pair of designer navy blue jeans and a top-quality T-shirt featuring the design of his favorite hero, Vector, the golden prince of fairies.

But he was growing up and beginning to feel the cruel mockery of others, of children, especially those his own age.

What evil fairy could have bent over his cradle to curse him so? Marion cursed it with all her being.

She winced, then stroked his hair.

“You really need to go to sleep.”

“I said no.”

She put her hands under his shoulders to lift him.

“Then let's make a deal. If you agree to go to bed...I'll tell you a story...”

“But you always do!” interrupted Conor.

“Yes, but this time the story will be different.”

“Really!”

His son's eyes shone with excitement and his smile widened even more if possible.

“Really.”

“And I'll like it?”

“I'm sure you will.”

He laughed as he clung to his mother.

“Then it's agreed.”

He let his mother carry him to his room, whose decor betrayed a great love, including that of magic.

The room was decorated in shades of blue and white, with the walls adorned with drawings of moving cartoon heroes, and the ceiling decorated with dimly lit constellations.

Marion laid her son gently on the floor, reached into his wardrobe for his pyjamas and handed them to him.

“Come on, get changed quickly then you're going to brush your teeth!”

Conor changed, Marion went to magically put his clothes away again, but instead of going to the bathroom, he opened his mouth to his mother.

She tried to be stern, but it was a losing battle.

She sighed and magically cleaned her beloved child's teeth.

“Thanks, Mom.”

He jumped into bed and his mother arranged the covers, then sat down beside him and prepared to begin her story.

“I'm ready, Mom! Your story.”

“Then listen carefully.”

She took a deep breath.

“Once upon a time, a hundred years ago, there was a great battle, so great that it destroyed almost half the city. The battle between the warrior mage Zion and the black mage Jaros. The greatest mages of their time.”

“Why did they fight?” the little boy couldn't help asking.

“For the reason of all time. The confrontation between good and evil. Light and darkness.”

Marion clasped his hands together as he continued.

“Can you imagine it, my darling? This extraordinary, astronomical battle. Grandpa told me, that the earth shook and everything collapsed, that the rain was made of blood and dissolved, burned everything it touched, and that the night they created in their immeasurable confrontation seemed never to end. The spectacle was as epic as it was monstrous. But after three days, three days as interminable as they were catastrophic, the battle finally came to an end.”

“And who won?”

Marion stroked her son's belly through the clothes and blankets.

“What do you think won?”

He thought for a moment, then exclaimed, hopeful.

“Zion.”

“Yes, that's right. The great warrior prince Zion has won, my darling. Good has triumphed.”

“Wow, how I wish I'd been there, Mom.”

“I know.”

Conor's radiant, dreamy face darkened, which worried and saddened his mother.

“What is it, my precious?”

“I wish I could be like Zion when I grow up. To be as powerful, wonderful and handsome as he was. Because he was handsome, wasn't he?”

His mother held back her tears with all her might while stroking her son's hair, his repulsive face.

“Yes, he was. He was the best. And I'm sure,” she added, not without forcing herself to bleed her mouth, “that you'll be just like him one day.”

“As soon as I awaken my magical powers, I'm going to work very hard. When is that, in fact?” he frowned, reflecting all his fear in his eyes.

“Soon, my darling.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

He winced and sketched a pout.

“The others say I'm slow. That I can't do it.”

“But no, my love. You're just a little late, that's all.”

But in truth, it wasn't a little late, it had long since expired. Child mages awakened their magical powers when they were just a year old. The most retarded, two years, but they were really special cases. But for her little one, her ugly, adored baby, who was already seven years old and had awakened nothing at all, or hardly anything at all - you couldn't even use that term anymore - it was already a lost case. She knew it, and deep down her child must have known it too, but they both preferred to deny reality.

Marion was stupid and consciously cruel to have let him hope that he could become this warrior mage incomparable to the others in everything, but she didn't have the heart to tell her child the truth, and she probably never will.

What's more, Conor wouldn't need her to help him understand how different he was in the worst possible way.

That's what the world and its inhabitants were there for.

“Okay, I'll trust you.”

“It's time to close your eyes and have sweet dreams, my angel.”

Marion leaned over to kiss his forehead.

“I can't wait to go to sleep because I'll probably dream about him, about Zion. I'll be him.”

“I'm sure you will, my love.”

And finally, Zion closed his eyes.

He drifted off to sleep.

Marion looked at him for a moment, familiar, heart-rending emotions swirling around her, then sighed as usual and left him.

Marion returned to the kitchen, where a dozen colorful flying creatures, including Conor's nanny, were busy preparing tea and cakes.

“That's it,” she announced, falsely cheerful, “the little monster is finally asleep.”

The other creatures replied, also falsely cheerful, then resumed their activity.

“Well, where do we stand?” asked Marion, who couldn't even blame them for their reaction.

And as she asked, she walked over to a shelf, touching one side to reveal a secret drawer from which she pulled out a thick recipe book.

She stood in the center of the room, the book floating in front of her as she studied all the recipes.

“Well, I think you should now be ready to bring me the first sample for Orion's tea recipe.”

Three creatures: red, green and grey flew towards her and each presented her with a cup.

Marion tasted the red one first, Conor's nanny.

“It's good, but too fragrant,” she judged, placing the cup on the table.

Now she tasted the green one, whose stem was white.

“This one has a stronger taste but there's a weird aftertaste that kills any desire to taste it again.”

Now it was the gray creature's turn.

“Too bland. Even the scent isn't appalling at all.”

The three creatures picked up their cups and returned to their posts to try to correct it, to improve it.

“Come on, kids! We really need to come up with a new recipe tomorrow, and make it good enough to be popular with our customers. Remember what happened last time?” she added, and everyone nodded in agreement.

“We all thought it was good and would be a hit with our valued customers, especially our regulars, but in the end, it wasn't. In fact, it was so unpopular that we eventually had to take it off our menu.”

The creatures pretended to weep.

“This means only one thing, my friends. Our customers' tastes are unquestionably fickle, so we have to be careful.”

Frowning, Marion turned to Conor's nanny, who was looking at her with an eloquent expression.

“Well, you're right, I don't know everything that's happened, so back to work, we've got to think of something!”

After several hours, the gray creature, visibly extenuated, returned to Marion with his mug. It handed it to her with a sort of solemnity, so Marion drank in the same way. Everyone fell silent and stood still, waiting for the result. Marion gave it only after a long but significant moment. And then she just nodded. It was the most explicit of reactions.

Everyone came alive with joy.

“Very good work, my little ones.”

As they were about to clean up, their mistress stopped them.

“Go to sleep, all of you. You've earned it. I'm the one who's going to clean up, and don't worry, you know very well it'll be done in no time.”

The little creatures all yawned tiredly, nodded and were off.

“Good night, sweet dreams.”

After they left, Marion cleaned up and recited a little formula silently, so everything began to clean up, while she went to the window with the famous cup, absentmindedly admiring the New York night sparkling with a thousand lights.

She savored the wonderful tea without really feeling it.

The euphoria of her new find had already dissipated and her mind returned to her child and all his strangeness.

She knew he was magic. So did everyone else, but even so, nothing could awaken his magic. She had taken him to the best specialists, and even they, who confirmed that he was a mage, could find no explanation for his condition. They did all the necessary and thorough research: diseases, spells, curses, but found nothing.

He was just that. And he had to live with it all his life.

As she continued to contemplate the cold, brilliant night, finishing her now cold tea, a group of water fairies passed by her window and dazzled her for a moment, so she thought of making a wish.

She knew that in the human world, fairies are of great importance and in their belief, would even be able to make wishes come true, so she did the same.

Meanwhile, the object of her wish slept peacefully in his room, dreaming, she hoped, of this Zion whose magic and personality was so great that it reached the order of myth.

In fact, on the verge of drifting off to sleep, Conor opened his eyes wide and asked, very intrigued:

“But actually, Mom.”

“Yes?”

“Where's Zion now.”

Marion took her time before replying.

“Nobody knows, darling.”

“What do you mean?”

“After he triumphed over Jaros, he summoned creatures from the magical world to guard this black mage's vanquished territory, occupying the entire Northern District. He did this so that no one would ever be able to seize what this abominable being had left, and thus perpetuate his legacy.”

“Wow, Zion really is incomparable.”

“The best, baby.”

“And what are the monsters like?”

“Monsters as giant as they are ferocious, devouring anyone who still has the audacity to set foot in the territory hence the name of this lost and cursed place - Rexus: the realm of the Devourers.”

“I'd like to go there one day and fight them, all of them!”

“You will, my love.”

“I'll start tonight, in my dream kingdom, with Zion.”

“I'm sure you will.”

The day dawned, filtering light through the curtains, and illuminating Conor who was still sound asleep, but it wasn't to last, for the ringing of his alarm clock woke him up mercilessly. He was now fifteen years old.

He hardly opened his eyes. When it was done, he turned to his alarm clock, a classic black case with the time displayed in red. He winced as he pushed back the sheets and sat on the edge of his bed, thinking with envy and disgust that his classmates were capable of creating an alarm clock, making it according to their imagination.

In the case of Marianne, for example, the most popular girl in class and also the most intelligent, she created a fairy-like alarm clock that sang her an enchanting but striking song every morning; or Bryan, the class sportsman, whose alarm clock was a sort of commentator who commented on an imaginary match in his sonorous, appealing voice; or Josh, the class

beau, whose alarm clock was a woman whose manner of waking up was censored by the teacher.

Creating an alarm clock was an exercise that had been learned a month earlier, and everyone in his class had mastered it to perfection by now. All except him.

He also glanced ironically at his room. It could have been mistaken for any kind of "normal" teenager's room, decorated in shades of white and blue with brown wooden floors, only the necessary furniture, and...a bookshelf occupying half a wall and crammed with books containing all kinds of spells...and which were only of theoretical use to him.

It was different from his classmates' room, of which he'd only ever seen photos, of course, and still far from it, as none of them would ever invite him to their home, a room whose walls he saw covered with various fantastical moving drawings ranging from magical forests to illuminated, animated cities, or even video-game sets.

It was the dream, a dream that was forever out of his reach.

He sighed as he did every morning. The alarm clocks were getting harder and harder.

A gentle knock on the door interrupted Conor's brooding. His mother, Marion, peered in, her brow furrowed with concern. "Conor, dear, Breakfast's ready. Hurry up or you'll be late..."

Conor couldn't hold back a brief, painful chuckle.

"Late? As if being or not being late would change anything!"

"Conor!"

"Oh, please! I know you didn't come just to let me know the food's ready! You usually send one of your flying stuffed animals! My favorite is my former nanny that seemed to grow redder with age."

Marion regarded her son with brilliant, indecipherable eyes.

"Baby, I heard about your exam results. Why didn't you tell me you were struggling again?"

Her voice laced with a tinge of melancholy and disappointment.

Conor, always seated on the edge of his bed, gazed listlessly at the open textbooks sprawled on his desk. The weathered pages, adorned with flowing diagrams and intricate runes, mocked him and his inability to grasp the most fundamental magic. While his peers at the prestigious Ogemos mage high school effortlessly manipulated the elements, summoning flames, conjuring gusts of wind, and weaving spells with seamless elegance, Conor could only manage to change the color of his pen - a meager, embarrassing display of his magical deficiency.

Conor averted his gaze, his fingers nervously fidgeting with the hem of his shirt.

"Breakfast is ready."

Conor smiled cynically.

"And what else?"

"What else?"

"Mom, you never come to tell me about breakfast. You send these round, flying creatures who are too enlightened to do so. My favorite still remains this purple red grump. Which means there's something else going on, and knowing it is undoubtedly about me, it's probably serious. " Marion hesitated and went to sit next to her son on the bed.

"The principal called me personally this morning. About your results. "

"He was slow to do it. "

"Why didn't you tell me you were having trouble at school? "

Conor looks at his mother as if she's lost her mind.

"You've got to be kidding! "

"No, of course I'm not. "

"And I think you are! You think I'm going to tell you that I suck at school! "

"Why wouldn't you? "

"Because there's no point. School always informs you, and above all, it won't change anything. You can't do anything for me. "

"Don't say that!"

"Mom, I'm different! There's nothing you can do. There's nothing any school can do. "

"Oh, darling! You mustn't think like that, you mustn't lose hope! "

"I wonder if sometimes you hear yourself, Mom. You really do sound like a broken box that can only repeat the same thing, even though what it's repeating has long since lost all meaning."

His mother was visibly flabbergasted and hurt by these harsh and somewhat true words, but she didn't give in and tried again to console him.

"My love, you're getting over it, aren't you."

"Of what now?"

"That you're not defined by magic."

"And what should I be defined by?"

"You have so many other options! You have so many other talents!"

"Oh yeah, like what?"

Her mother thought about it, but couldn't think of anything to say. And when she realized it and it was reflected in her eyes, her child nearly screamed with rage. He wished he could explode with rage, destroy everything around him. But he couldn't.

"You see? Whether you like it or not, you're the one who's most aware of it. After me, of course." he added cynically, as if it were self-evident.

"Oh, my sweet boy. I know how much you'd like your wish to come true. But if it never does, you can always do what your grandfather did."

Conor frowned.

"You mean fisherman?"

"He's the best of his group."

"Mom, he uses his magic to fish!"

"But humans don't!"

There it was, the long forbidden word that was no longer forbidden. They were beginning to get beyond that.

Marion spoke of it so lightly because she was a mage, one of the best, in fact. Her reputation was well established. So she had no trouble broaching the subject. Despite all her love for him, her only child, she didn't understand, and there was no way she ever would.

She had no idea what he was feeling, his anger, his deep sense of injustice, his unhappiness, his humiliation, and above all his helplessness. This appalling powerlessness to change what was.

He wished he hadn't been a disappointment to his mother, worse, a shame, but he was. He didn't understand how anyone could be born the way he was, but that's how it was, and nothing could fix it. For his misfortune, for his mother's misfortune.

However, he could divert the discussion by tackling another that was particularly close to his heart, and in a way that seemed even more difficult to deal with.

"I don't know how many times you've told me that. But why always Grandpa? Why not...my father?"

Even though Marion had expected Conor to broach this most delicate of subjects for both him and her, she could never quite figure out how to behave, and remained in a tense silence that was impossible to break.

Mother and son stared at each other for a long time. It was so intense that Conor finally turned away when he saw the tears welling up in his beautiful witch's eyes.

"Don't worry, Mom. I'm not going to cook you this morning. I've got too much to do."

Conor rose to his feet.

"Well, I'm going to take a shower and eat this damn breakfast before I go to that school that only keeps me there out of pity, and also for you. But I think their patience is about to run out."

Conor storms out of his room.

A few minutes later, Conor exited his building, walked down the stairs and passed the concierge's observation room, Suri, an ageless Japanese woman who always watched him with her small, shifty eyes.

"Oh, young Conor. I see you still haven't changed! "

"Hello to you too, Madame Suri. "

"I wonder what your problem is! "

With this old woman always in the same place, always dressed in the same shabby, dark clothes, it was best never to start an argument, but it was difficult, really difficult.

"I don't think it's any of your business. "

"I don't even have to ask to know. "

"Thank you for your concern! "

Suddenly, a shadow passed by, startling Conor. It was a black bird with glowing eyes that landed on the railing of the staircase.

The young man was terrified by its greedy gaze, the cold, black aura it gave off.

"What the...?"

"Oh, it's a Reg," the concierge informed him, sniffing.

"Yes, I know, but what I want to know is what the hell is it doing here? Normally..."

"Normally these awful beasts and rabid gobblers are only found near an ocean of flesh, death and black magic. Birds of misfortune in all their splendor."

Another bird descended to perch beside its companion.

"They can only live in a cloud."

"What do they want?"

"A whole swarm has taken up residence on the terrace of our building."

Conor looked up and saw the Regs hovering in the space of the building and others posing on the edges of the terrace.

"But why are they there! There's no ocean of darkness here."

The concière sneered as she swallowed a piece of meat dripping with oil.

"Who knows, kid, maybe they're here for you."

"Very funny."

Madame Suri laughed harder and was only joking, but this didn't make Conor laugh at all; on the contrary, her words worried him for they were truly ominous beasts, one of the worst kind in existence, incapable of being hunted except by astronomical power, they were never more than in a place where there was misfortune and black magic was in freak abundance.

There was something in their building, in their neighborhood that attracted them, that they coveted, that they revered, everyone was obviously too scared to try and find out what.

"Given your peculiarity, one never knows."

The young man had heard enough. He arranged his satchel.

"Good day to you too! That is, if it's possible! "

After angrily throwing it away, he left.

Twenty minutes' walk for a normal person, but so much less for "real" mages.

Most students went there on the back of their magical animal, or at breakneck speed, or by teleportation, or even by chauffeur, and yet...

No one did as the young man did, because he was different, and in the worst possible way.

He felt so out of place, and not just in school.

Two girls in their twenties, arm in arm, passed by and glanced at him absent-mindedly at first, but when they realized what they were seeing, they gasped and even stopped for a moment to follow him with their eyes.

"And to think I always took my little cousin for a little monster. "

"I'll never complain about my boyfriend again. "

Conor pouted and murmured.

"I can hear you, you bitches! Go to hell !"

As he crossed the streets, people turned on him. And it was because of his look, not the look he would have liked to have, like any normal teenager would have to, no, it was rather a look so repulsive that even he was sometimes frightened and disgusted by it.

He was larger than average, not to say fat, and short to boot, his inky-black hair wasn't of the best quality, despite all the care he and his mother took of it, and finally his eyes, so light gray they were transparent, and always clouded with gloomy thoughts.

The girls usually felt so sorry for him that most of the time, they left him alone. For that matter, they didn't see him. He might as well have been completely invisible to them. But that wasn't the case with the boys, who saw in him the perfect victim, and therefore the ultimate whipping boy.

Arriving at the huge gates of his famous establishment, Conor stopped and took a deep breath. This was an ordeal he had to go through every day, crossing the magical barrier that protected the whole place and allowed only beings endowed with magic to pass through. Everyone else

passed through it effortlessly, not even aware of its existence, whereas for Conor, of course, it was a completely different story. It was a really bad time to spend every day.

Most of the students didn't even bother to watch him do it anymore. But some still took the trouble to watch him cross the barrier. In rare cases, it had become a ritual for them, especially if they too belonged to the bottom of the pile; like for those three.

"Still not tired of coming here, failure?"

"I get the impression that it's getting harder and harder for you!"

"Eh Failure! You've long since become a legend."

"Failure" didn't even bother to think about how he might have answered them. He was busy and realistic enough as he was.

Besides, it must have been such a relief for them to see that there were worse people than them.

Conor would probably have done the same. Alas for him, he didn't even belong to any category.

The repulsion that the magic of this invisible, imposing wall inflicted on him hurt and took his breath away. It took him at least ten minutes. He'd always come out exhausted, having lost half his strength, just to carry out this act, which was so trivial for any magician; so when it came to magic tests, it would have been better if he hadn't passed them on at all.

Every month, his mother received a red notice about him, and not just about his results.

That day, the young magician stopped for a moment to contemplate the school where he was studying.

This time, he didn't have to worry about making an even bigger fool of himself because everyone had arrived. He was last, as usual, as in everything.

He stood before the grand entrance of Ogemos that towered above him like an ancient palace.

His eyes swept across the ornate architecture, taking in the intricate carvings and the shimmering chandeliers that cast a warm glow over the bustling courtyard. The very air seemed to hum with an electric energy, a palpable sense of ambition and potential that both awed and very intimidated him.

As he stepped through the towering archway, Conor felt the familiar tightness in his chest.

This was anything but an ordinary place; it was a bastion of academic excellence, a place where only the brightest and most driven students were welcomed. Their faces brimming with confidence, their eyes fixed on their goals with strong determination.

Even the students who kept insulting him and harassing him at the barrier surely had nothing to fear.

And here he was, a modest, ordinary boy, even less than ordinary, suddenly thrust into a world of privilege and prestige where everyone thought he didn't belong. Including himself. Conor leaned heavily on his locker, where it was clearly marked 'FAILURE', and pulled out a gourd from his bag, drinking the contents greedily, for it was an invigorating liquid specially concocted by his wonderful mother - one of nature's most incredible witches and famous for her remedies.

The liquid worked, but not as well as it should have, given the young magician's condition. The others laughed as they watched him empty his bottle, and the girls still couldn't help but give him a pity, scoffing look.

Conor opened his locker and grabbed his wand and combat suit to use during the day's exams. The corridor teemed with students, who suddenly stood at attention on either side.

Conor closed his eyes for a moment and leaned his forehead against the door of his locker, knowing what this means.

"Stop looking at him like he's worth something," commanded an authoritative, magical voice not far from the young boy.

Conor sighed and turned to the newcomer who was none other than Deryl, the valedictorian of their class, a real daddy's boy, spoiled rotten but so gifted it was unfair, not to mention handsome, blond with blue eyes the color of the sea. In short, he was everything Conor would have liked to be but, alas, never will. It was the difference between an earthworm and a star. Life was just too ruthless.

He was accompanied, as always, by his two friends and minions - Rod and Ayden, the offspring of wealthy and influential families as well, though less so than their handsome and talented leader.

Deryl came to lean on the locker next to Conor's and regarded him with his cruel laughing eyes.

"So, exhausted early in the morning, failure?"

"You've asked me that plenty of times, Deryl."

"Because you're such a curious case, failure, I wonder what will or stubbornness, or whatever, drives you to come back here every day of the year when you're learning nothing...when you are nothing."

Conor clenched his fists tightly as he reached into his locker to touch his lucky charm, a feather from the wing of his good and stern nanny.

At any other time, Conor wouldn't have dared answer them, in fact, he'd never have thought of doing so. He played submissive, lowering his head as they passed, raising it only when he was out of everyone's sight, but this time, he did.

Why? How? He had no idea. But maybe it had something to do with the discussion he'd had with his mother this morning, with the realization that it was soon the end for him at this school. It was humiliating and inevitable.

The side they pointed out, the incredible, astonishing willpower that helped him to hold out to the end, was finally making him stand up to his bullies.

They were right, and there was no question of spoiling it all.

He took a few deep breaths and counted to ten before turning to face his enemy and tormentor.

"Oh, I don't know, Deryl, can't you guess?"

A tense, shocked silence settled over the corridor. No one had expected that the failure would finally retaliate as he had long wanted, and with such audacity.

The young heir squinted his eyes while staring at his interlocutor like a snake ready to bite and swallow.

"I could, but even though I'm curious to know what's going through your head less than nothing, I have no time for you, failure."

"Then it shouldn't matter to you that I'm not telling you anything, Deryl."

Ayden growled as he approached Conor menacingly.

"Oh, you've got a pretty big mouth for a failure. What's with the rebellion...You finally got it in the pants?"

"And I'd rather be one than the token stooge."

The stooge tensed like an enraged predator then smashed Conor against his locker and held him up by pressing his arm under his chin, but his boss intervened by raising a lazy arm.

"Leave it, Ayden, you won't need to do that because the exams today will take care of that for us. And we'll be in the front row, as we always are."

Conor laid his hands on the muscular forearm; stifling but as usual, unable to lie down.

"Follow the order of your darling boss, the minion, because you, you can't afford to disobey him. Unlike me."

"You're really crazy," Rod exclaimed, "as well as being good for nothing."

"Yeah, I'm really looking forward to seeing you smash your face in today's tests," added Ayden, who, after one last brutal pressure on his throat, finally released him.

"Dirty failure!"

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