

## Supreme M 431

### Chapter 431 Dragons Egg Part 2

Lith spent his morning visiting the small bookshops located in the city's middle rim. Othre was divided into three areas. The outer rim, where Lith resided, was the biggest and the poorest one.

It was where the commoners lived and the warehouses were located. Unless one possessed many dimensional items, moving huge loads of merchandise required wagons and draft animals.

The former generated intense traffic that made it almost impossible to walk during the busiest hours of the day despite the large roads and sidewalks. The latter naturally produced a pungent smell that would make even a stable boy puke his guts out.

The houses were one or two stories high, made of stone or wood based on the owner's income. There was not a single empty space between them. Warehouses were easily recognizable by their huge size and double doors to allow carriages to easily get in and out at all times.

The closest a warehouse was to the city gates, the more expensive it was, whereas for housings the opposite was true. The smell was a big deterrent, that was why Lith's hotel was located in a small street where carriages couldn't pass, away from the warehouses.

The middle rim was occupied by merchants' shops, craftsmen's and artists' workshops. Only the middle class could afford a house there. They were all at least two stories high, each with a private garden.

The middle rim's streets were too narrow for carriages, only stagecoaches were small enough to pass. Small parks were present every few blocks, to give some space for the children to play and a place for the travelers to rest in the shade of trees during the hottest hours of the day.

The inner rim was where the rich, the nobles, and the mages resided. There weren't houses as much as mansions. Unlike Belius, the taller a building, the richer was the household.

Lith avoided big shops because they had the necessary staff to go through all their merchandise. They were bound to identify real books about magic and sell them to the Association that held the monopoly of the mystical knowledge.

Small shops, instead, would buy more books than they could handle. With a bit of luck, one could find a precious tome cataloged as a diary or even in the bargain bin. Many mages mixed research and personal life in their writings, others used such convoluted technical jargon that a layman would easily mistake it for gibberish.

It was the reason why unless those books had some drawings, no one would give them a second look. Lith could only once again curse at the city arrays when his communication amulet interrupted his fruitless research.

Normally, he would store a book in Soluspedia and search its contents in an instant before deciding if it was worth buying or not. The dimensional magic lock forced him to actually read them one by one in what he considered a colossal waste of time.

The first call came from the army. Kamila notified Lith that the Commander had agreed with the Association's terms and ordered him to talk with their representative.

The second one was from Mage Dorian Felhorn, who gave him an appointment at the local branch of the Mage Association, located in the inner rim. The building consisted of a three stories small castle built with reddish stones.

Each of its four corners was occupied by a small tower surmounted with a blue mana crystal.

A middle aged clerk led Lith in an office located on the ground floor. The room's walls were covered by bookshelves, the only source of lighting was a magical chandelier hung in the middle of the ceiling.

Dorian welcomed Lith and invited him to sit on one of the armchairs in front of his black mahogany desk.

To Lith Dorian said: "First of all, know that you are currently relieved from your role in the army until the end of the conversation. I'm not speaking with the Ranger, but with the Great Mage."

"Why am I here?" Lith asked while feeling more comfortable. The Association worked on a voluntary basis. They couldn't order around members that didn't seek an active role in their ranks.

Dorian explained to him the reasons for the Association's decline and how they hoped to solve Othre's current crisis to avoid being swallowed by the army.

"That's the reason you need me." Lith shook his head. "I am asking you why I should accept."

Dorian had yet to explain the nature of the crisis and felt already up against a wall. The Association could award merits, not money and Lith had no use for them. The knowledge he sought needed the approval of both the army and the Association.

He had already earned the necessary clearance level from the Association's side, which left them with a bad hand. Merits could be traded in exchange for noble titles and their connected lands. Usually, they were the Association's greatest bargain chip.

Unluckily, Lith had already refused a noble title twice, so offering him one was meaningless. They couldn't afford to offer him money off the books. If exposed, the scandal would bury them for good.

'He doesn't care for the power balance in the Kingdom. Judging from the invoice he submitted for healing innocents and how he left a dozen of people stuck in the concrete for hours, I'd say there is no better nature I can appeal to.' Dorian inwardly sighed.

'It's time to let the dragon know we have his egg.'

"The situation is dire. Countless lives are at stake and if the news of it spreads, panic could make more victims than our invisible enemy. Someone is killing people for unknown reasons. We have lots of corpses but so far we've failed to understand what's happening."

"If you refuse to answer, then I'll take my leave." Lith stood up, tired of hearing nonsense.

"We need the best diagnosticians in the Kingdom." Dorian grabbed Lith's arm and felt his hostility growing. A saner man would have jumped away, but Felhorn had no qualms putting his life on the line.

"That's why we have hired Professor Manohar from the White Griffon..." Lith freed his arm and walked away.

"...and Mage Verhen as his assistant." Those words froze Lith in place and with him the mana in the room.

"What did you say?" There was no rage in his voice, yet the room felt colder and the lights dimmed like a setting sun.

"Mage Tista Verhen volunteered the moment she heard about the situation. If I'm right, there is a monster hiding inside the walls of Othre. If I'm wrong, we could be facing another plague." Dorian put emphasis in each of his words yet he could tell that Lith wasn't listening.

After a few seconds of awkward silence, Lith clapped his hands while a creepy smile appeared on his face.

"Well played. Now I only have two choices. Either I walk away, leaving my sister in the hands of an incompetent paper pusher and a madman, or I help you. I accept the job. Beware, though, because this kind of tricks only works once.

"Once I explain Tista how you manipulated her, I can guarantee you that neither of us will ever help the Association again. Also, now I know what to ask the next time the King wants to award me with something."

Lith slowly passed his thumb along his neck before slamming the door behind his back and alerting his handler he wouldn't leave Othre for a while.

#### Chapter 432 Duplicity Part 1

Before leaving the Mage Association, Lith collected the money they owed him for treating the people wounded during the last accident.

'Poor guy. It wouldn't surprise me if he was writing his last will right now. Your acting skills are impressive.' Solus chuckled.

'Because most of what I said is true. I don't care about their problem and unless I get properly compensated, I'll find a way to get even with them. The moment the Commander ordered me to listen rather than to do something, I knew something big was going on.

'What I didn't expect was that they would drag Tista in this mess to force my hand. I tried twisting their arm to get a juicy reward and ended up with my own arm twisted. Whoever is behind this is going to owe me big time.' Lith replied.

'Not Dorian?'

'Dorian is just a mage, he hasn't the power to pull off a stunt like this. He is just obeying orders and it's the one pulling his strings I'm after.' Lith came out of the building and called his sister.

"Where are you?"

"Good morning to you too, lil brother." Tista replied with a radiant smile, ignoring his cold tone.

"I've just reached your hotel. Your room is really nice. I was expecting you would sleep in a hostel to save money and you picked a suite instead. The trip to Othre must have been a nightmare."

"And thanks to you the stay isn't looking good either. I'll be there shortly." He took off and reached the Swan's Song less than a minute later. The moment he stepped inside, Lith was welcomed by a familiar vibe. Envy mixed with hostility.

"Tista." Lith said with a sigh. Whenever they traveled together, she drew a lot of attention on herself and turned most men in Lith's sworn enemies. The fact she introduced herself with his same last name without ever saying she was his sister added fuel to the fire.

Even the half pint receptionist at the front desk was outraged enough to glare at him.

Lith went upstairs and found the "Do not disturb" tag hanging off the doorknob. He was about to knock, just to be safe, when a voice inside said:

"Come on in!"

Tista ran to him and hugged him tightly. Lith returned it for a second before pushing her gently away.

"I missed you, big sis."

"I missed you too, lil brother. Why the angry voice earlier?" She asked with a curious tone.

"First things first, how did you get in here?"

"As usual." She shrugged. "I told the receptionist I'm with you and I showed him my ID."

"The one with my family crest and name? Now everyone will think we're married." He sat on the nearest sofa like a deadweight.

"That was the plan. I've yet to find a creep or a wannabe playboy that dares to bother me after seeing you." She chuckled.

"Fine! Now would you like to explain to me how could you let yourself be dragged in whatever is happening here?"

"You really don't know how grave the situation is?" Tista was stunned.

"I don't care about the situation."

"Well, you should! We took an oath as Healers and even if they are just fancy words to you, they mean a lot to me. After all I went through as a child, I can't stay idle while people suffer." Tista was angry at his indifference, she wanted him to be better than this.

"They fooled you to get my help. There isn't nothing noble in letting yourself being manipulated so easily." He replied with a snort.

"How stupid do you think I am? I knew what the Association was after the moment they mentioned the city of Othre."

"Then why did you accept?" Lith steepled his fingers with a look that made her feel like she was his student again.

"For several reasons. After I received their offer, I contacted one of my classmates that lives here. He confirmed everything Mage Wren, my recruiter, told me. The city is on the verge of chaos.

"Every day, odd corpses are found lying around all the three rims. A lot of people have disappeared and no one knows what happened to them. Last, but not least, rogue mages no one have ever heard about are pillaging Othre.

"The Association has managed to keep things under control only because the Warp Gate allows for backup to arrive instantly when needed. But if whatever is happening here spreads through the

merchants back to their cities, once winter begins no one will be able to help them until it's too late."

"So?" Lith didn't bother to hide how underwhelmed he was.

"So, I decided I could do some good and make it worth my while. By accepting I got the chance to work together with two of the most brilliant minds of the Kingdom, one of whom happens to be my always missing brother, and to join the Mage Association. Two birds with one stone."

"Wait, I had to teach for two years at the White Griffon to join. Are they really that desperate?" Lith had no need for merits, but maybe he could force the Association to pay him in magical resources.

"Yes." Tista nodded. "I also consulted Professor Vastor before making my demands. According to him, Archmage Kwart, the current Chairman, has led the Association to the brink of extinction. He needs a big win to stay afloat and he needs it badly."

A ravenous smile appeared on Lith's face. He didn't like the hand he had been dealt, nor the game he was been forced to play. The pot, though, looked more alluring by the second.

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Army's Headquarters, city of Belius.

Commander Berion, Lith's commanding officer and sponsor in the army, had just been reminded how dangerous it was to underestimate a cornered prey.

'I should have never allowed Ranger Verhen to listen to their demands. General Morn Griffon is already out for my blood, I can't let more members of the High Command turn their back on me. It would be the end of my career.' He thought.

The army's upper echelons were already celebrating the Association's funeral when Archmage Kwart had thrown a monkey wrench into their plans. They were sure Lith would refuse.

The Association had nothing to offer him and he wasn't the kind of man to work out of the goodness of his heart. No one expected Kwart would manage to recruit Manohar, nor Tista Verhen.

If Kwart's ploy succeeded, Berion would be held accountable for that. Controlling the Association would mean for the army to gain authority over the noble system and change the criteria to assign a title and the lands that came with it.

The game had yet to begin, but he was already on his back foot. Two of the major players were outside his reach and according to their deal, Lith would be considered belonging to both factions.

He was in desperate need to do damage control.

"Excuse me, Sir. First Lieutenant Kamila Yehval has arrived." His secretary announced through the amulet.

"Let her in."

Kamila's relationship with Lith wasn't a secret, nor it was the fact that the only one Lith was loyal to was himself. Berion knew that his poor decision had left himself exposed. She was his only chance to tip the scale in his favor.

Chapter 433 Duplicity Part 2

Kamila had never been summoned in a Commander's office except when she had been promoted from Second to First Lieutenant. After years of hard work, she hoped Berion would give her an opportunity to prove her worth.

'I don't want to spend my life being an analyst and a handler.' She thought while giving him a salute.

Commander Berion was a man in his early thirties, 1.8 (5'11") meters tall with pitch-black hair and eyes. His pale blue uniform could resemble a high-end coat with a standing collar over pants of matching quality and color.

The only distinguishing features were the Commander silver epaulets on his shoulders and the insignias above his heart.

"At ease, Lieutenant." Berion said while inviting her to sit down.

He didn't mince words describing how bad was Othre's crisis nor how important was for the army to not lose in the ongoing power play.

"I need someone to keep me constantly updated on the situation. Someone with the necessary sensitivity and competence to make use of every opening to bring the balance back in our favor.

"I can't rely on Ranger Verhen alone. He's barely able to give three reports a day and I'm afraid his judgment on this matter may be compromised. I've already made the mistake of relying on second-hand information and paid the price for it.

"Do you think you can rise to the occasion?"

"Of course, Sir." She said with confidence, even though she wanted to puke.

'This isn't what I've hoped for, this is politics. The army and the Association are more worried about their measuring contest than about the lives of the inhabitants of Othre. If I refuse, I can kiss goodbye to any future chance of being promoted.' She inwardly sighed.

Kamila Warped from Belius to the army's headquarters in Othre. There she found a stagecoach waiting for her that went straight for the outer rim.

"I think there is a mistake." She said to the Desk Sergeant accompanying her.

"Shouldn't we go to the Association's branch?"

"No, ma'am. Our orders are to bring you to Ranger Verhen's quarters. You'll be debriefed together once the rest of the team arrives."

'Son of a...' Kamila inwardly cursed. 'The Commander doesn't need a liaison officer with the Association. He wants to exploit our relationship. Now I understand why he picked me and why that ridiculous claim about Lith's judgment being compromised.

'I'm just a fucking honey trap! I remember something about an Academy sweetheart, probably the Association is playing the same game. I've never been so humiliated in all my life.'

Never before did Kamila resent the army. Her colleagues were her family and her job as an analyst was all she had. In her head, the images of her mother and the Commander overlapped.

Both didn't care for her feelings or her career and were only interested in exploiting her for their ends. She wanted to cry, but aside from turning paler, her face displayed no emotion.

'Gods, I'm so stupid. I should have understood it earlier and turned down the offer. Now either I help the Commander to manipulate Lith or I tell him the truth and risk losing my job.'

Albeit brief, the journey seemed to never come to an end. Kamila was torn between her sense of self-preservation and to rise above that mess by doing the right thing. When the stagecoach reached the Swan's Song, she had yet to make her mind.

"Excuse me, what room is Ranger Verhen staying in?" She asked the receptionist, a short man about Lith's age who looked at her in a funny way.

"Room 201, the honeymoon suite. He is about to have lunch with his missus. Who do I have to announce?" The man replied.

At those words, Kamila really had enough bullshit for one day. She ignored the receptionist's question and went straight for the suite. She knocked at the door in a frenzy to the point she almost fell forward when it was abruptly opened.

"Kamila? What are you doing here?" She barely registered that Lith seemed surprised and happy to see her before all hell broke loose.

Sitting on the king-size unmade bed there was the most gorgeous woman she had ever seen. She was 1.76 (5'9") meters tall with waist-length auburn hair that had several shades of red.

Tista's oval face and her delicate features only emphasized the perfect proportions of her curvy body. Kamila was left speechless, incapable to decide if to be angry, envious, or just hope to wake up and discover it had all been a nightmare.

"Oh gods! Is she really that Kamila?" The fairy seemed happy to see her.

"Nice to meet you, Kamila. I'm Tista, Lith's sister." At those words Kamila discovered to be able to breathe again, her lungs were just starting to burn.

"His sister? He never told me you were so..." She had no idea how to put it into words without making it sound a pick-up line.

"Thanks." Tista giggled. "You are identical to the image he showed us, that's how I recognized you."

Lith waved his arms behind Kamila's back while mouthing Tista to shut up.

"Us who?" Kamila did her best to smile back and not blush.

"The whole family. Our niece, Leria, even asked if you are a princess."

Lith facepalmed hard as Kamila turned beet red.

"T-Thanks." She stuttered. "So, Lith can create images of people, not only flowers?" She asked, eager to change the topic.

"Flowers? Did he gift you the camellia?" Tista asked, making the situation even worse. Another facepalm ensued.

"Did he really name it after me?" Both Lith and Kamila were unable to look at each other in the eyes.

"Well yes, but actually no." Tista said trying to correct the mess she finally realized to have created.

"That's how I call it because I really like your name and I think it would suit the magic flower."

"Thanks, you are too kind. Can I use the bathroom for a second?" The moment Lith pointed the way, Kamila closed the door behind her and sat on the bathtub edge not knowing whether to laugh or cry.

"At least he is not married." She mumbled to herself.

"Smooth move." Lith whispered with a voice oozing sarcasm. "Why you didn't tell her that Mom wouldn't mind the age gap if we gave her a grandchild, while you were at it?"

"I'm sorry, but it's the first time since Phloria that I meet your girlfriend. I got carried away." She whispered back.

"For the love of... Don't call her my girlfriend." Lith was fighting the urge to strangle his own sister. "If she hears that, she'll dump me like a bad habit."

They ordered another serving and consumed their meal in awkward silence until they received a call from Mage Felhorn inviting them to the Association's headquarters to be debriefed about the crisis with the rest of the team.

Dorian led them to the morgue in the basement, where dozens of corpses occupied long lines of metal scaffolds. They belonged to people of different ages, gender, and social class. The only thing they had in common was the lack of any kind of wound.

The girls gasped while Lith's attention was drawn to a familiar figure in his late twenties, with black hair and shades of silver. He was around 1.74 meters (5'9") meters tall and a slender build.

He was standing near a metal stretcher the occupant of which was covered by a heavy blanket.

"Professor Manohar." Lith was happy to break the silence. "Nice to meet you again. How come this time you didn't disappear?"

Manohar attempted to answer but someone else beat him to it.

"Believe me, he tried." Said Jirni Ernas raising her right arm and revealing the cuffs linking the two of them.

#### Chapter 434 Death from Above Part 1

"I resent the use of the 'disappear' term." Manohar said with an indignant tone.

"I don't run away like a spoiled brat, I simply seek the isolation a complex matter like my endless research requires."

"You are a spoiled brat." Jirni replied as she opened the cuffs. Manohar had the habit of gesturing like a hysterical bird while he talked, almost dislocating her shoulder in result.

"Without constant supervision, you'd break more laws in a week than a serial killer in their whole life. You never fill your paperwork and neglect your students to pursue your own agenda."

Manohar wanted to reply, but Jirni scared him. He decided that shutting up and hiding behind Lith was in his best interest.

"I know you said that you're a fan of my work, but this is more like stalking." Lith said while giving Jirni a bow.



"Don't flatter yourself, kid. This time I'm here for him." She laughed at the joke while pointing at Manohar.

"Once you geniuses find some answers, it will be my job to decide how to continue the investigation. From now on, you all work for me. Mage Felhorn, explain to us what's really happening in Othre."

"Gladly." Dorian stepped in the middle of the room and took a deep breath to calm himself. Death and madness plagued the room, making it hard for him to decide if to find more unsettling the corpses or the living.

Aside from the two young women, he had the impression to be the only human in the room.

"It all started a couple of months ago, when the first caravans arrived to exchange goods for food and vice versa. At first, the crime rate spiked. It's nothing alarming since Othre's population doubles until winter ends.

"Then, things escalated from the usual routine to crimes of magical nature. People with little or no magical talent turned into powerful mages and settled old scores the worst possible way." He pointed at the corpses on the metal scaffolds.

"The phenomenon started from the outer rim and slowly spread to the whole city. The only thing we know is that receiving those powers is a double edged sword. It makes their wielder very dangerous, but in exchange, they die when struck by a spell.

"No matter the element employed, a tier one spell is enough to kill them. While we were still trying to sort things up, our analysts reported that the number of missing persons had spiked as well.

"It took us a while to notice because most of the victims were foreigners. Once it started to happen in the inner rims of the city too, the missing person reports led us to discover that the situation was even worse than we suspected.

"People come into Othre every day. We don't know if we are looking for dozens or hundreds of kidnappings." Dorian was crestfallen noticing the lack of reactions in the room.

Tista's and Kamila's were genuinely worried, but the others seemed bored as if he had been talking about his vacations.

"We have been able to cover up both these issues and prevent panic from spreading, until these things started to appear." He moved near the stretcher and pulled away the blanket hiding its content.

It was a corpse, but unlike the others on the scaffolds, it was completely dried up. The eye sockets were empty, the nose was replaced by two small holes in the skull, and the skin was so stretched that the mouth was deformed into a crazed smile.

"Unlike the other anomalies, this phenomenon appeared at the same time in all the rims. Also, in some cases we have witnesses, so at least we know what happened even though we have no idea of how or why.

"The gentleman in front of you is, or better, was Sir Rosen Stern, Baronet of the Kingdom. He died in front of over twenty guests and every one of them said the same thing.

"One moment they were having an amiable conversation and the following a blue pillar descended from the sky enveloping him. When the pillar disappeared, he had become like this."

"Fascinating." Jirni, Manohar, and Lith said as one while coming closer to the body.

"We haven't been able to identify a pattern in the timing or in the places of the alleged murders. Everything appears to be completely coincidental. Our only certainty is that whenever a blue light pillar appears, someone dies.

"All the victims belonged to the middle class or the nobility, which makes it impossible to cover it up. Especially since some of them died in front of numerous witnesses or in crowded places."

Jirni knew of substances capable of inducing hallucinations and venoms that could reduce the victim into a similar state, so she searched the body for puncture wounds.

Lith used all of his and Solus's abilities to perform a full body scan of the corpse.

'The light pillar from the sky manifests when a magical beast is about to evolve. Usually it's of a golden color, while mine was silver. I've never seen a blue one. What the heck could it mean?' He thought.

'No idea.' Solus replied. 'There's one odd thing, though. The body is completely dry of mana. Check it with Life Vision.'

Everything on Mogar was imbued with mana. Rocks, trees, even corpses. Yet only sentient beings developed a mana core and could use magic.

Ever since his first meeting with Kalla, Lith's Life Vision was capable of perceiving the mana permeating all things in the form of a faint wind of different colors they emanated according to their nature.

Green for the plants, grey for the stones, red for the animals, and black for the dead.

Lith pretended to chant a spell, touched his eyelids and activated Life Vision. His eyes now burning with light magic revealed that the corpses on the stretchers had no mana at all. There was no black wind.

It was the most unnatural thing Lith had ever seen, a void that he couldn't even begin to understand. Even Abominations were infused with mana.

Manohar cast a few spells while examining the body and after a while his eyes shone like those of child staring at his carefully wrapped Christmas presents.

"The reason I called you here is to solve the mystery behind these anomalies. Our first priority is to understand what killed Sir Rosen and is still killing his peers." Dorian continued.

"What about the others?" Kamila knew she was just a liaison officer and had no active role in the investigation. Yet she couldn't help but be outraged by such a manifest discrimination.

"Are their deaths less important just because they were poor or commoners?"

"No. It's just that we have no leads. A problem that I hope our diagnosticians will be able to correct soon." Dorian said while giving a small bow to both Lith and Manohar, even though after all the troubles he had gone through to recruit them, he felt they didn't deserve it.

"Cases like that of sir Rosen are so peculiar that, according to our experts, there are only three possible explanations and they are as bad as each other."

#### Chapter 435 Death from Above Part 2

"The first is that they were victims of an Abomination. When those creatures feed, they leave behind a trail of corpses not different from the one I showed you.

"The second one is that we are facing a vampire. They can feed off people's emotional energies, in which case they are better known as Incubus or Succubus, their blood, or their very life force.

"A victim of the third kind of vampire would resemble Lord Stern. I'm not really convinced by this hypothesis, though, since some of the deaths happened in broad daylight.

"The third and the worst one, is that we are against someone with the skills and the resources to employ Forbidden Magic right under our noses. It's a branch of magic that is universally outlawed because it requires living sacrifices to work.

"It allows you to break the rules of magic. You can create life, prolong your existence, become stronger, even steal a part of someone's soul. It's very risky and almost always lethal, but there are very few things you can't achieve with it.

With the proper preparations, killing from a distance is hardly a problem."

Dorian finished his explanation and hoped for the best.

"Maybe coming here wasn't a complete waste of time. I don't know who did this nor the why, but I think I know the how." Manohar said with a conceited smirk, like he was the only one with a brain in the room.

"Only a less competent mage than me could believe that nonsense."

"That's impossible." Dorian blurted out. "We didn't manage to find a clue in weeks and you're saying that with a glance you have already understood everything?"

"Gods, you're really stupid." Manohar slapped his own face in annoyance.

"Even Linjos, may the gods rest his soul, was brighter than this. No, I'm saying that I figured out what's happening, but since you'll have to explain it to that halfwit boss of yours, I'm dumbing it down for you.

"Ever since Balkor's attack we have conducted thorough studies about the Abominations. Vastor and I are the leading experts in the field. Even without that egg man, I can tell you that no Abomination did this."

"Yeah." Lith agreed. "There's too much waste here. When they feed, they only leave the bones intact."

"Exactly!" Manohar performed a few hops of joy. Lith's explanation was dumb enough for everyone to understand it.

The rest of the team tried to avoid thinking about how the duo could have performed their studies on the feeding habits of such deadly creatures.

"As for the vampire, not only they hate daylight, but also the organs of the victims would have already started to rot. This leaves us with only one possible explanation: we are dealing with Forbidden Magic."

"That's preposterous!" Dorian said in outrage.

"It's not." Lith shook his head. "I'm no expert in Forbidden Magic, but this corpse is unnatural. Have you checked it with magic?"

"Of course not. Even the light element is useless on cadavers. It would have been a waste of time. We just performed a regular search of the body and took a few samples to have them analyzed by the Alchemists."

"You noticed!" Manohar said ignoring everything Dorian said. "Dear Lith, it's a shame you left the White Griffon. We had so much fun together."

Lith had a hard time considering his role as Manohar's assistant as fun. He had to substitute for the Professor's lessons, fill his paperwork leaving to him only to sign the documents, clean his messes, and take the blame for his actions whenever he lost sight of the Professor.

"Thanks, I guess. Tista, try to animate it with darkness magic." He replied.

Tista did as instructed, but instead of turning into an undead, the corpse regained a part of its volume. The effect lasted only for a few seconds before it returned to its previous state.

"This man hasn't just been killed. Somehow, they have drained every single drop of mana he had." Lith explained.

Then, Manohar said:

"If I had to take an educated guess, I'd say that someone is sacrificing their lives to create a cursed object. It's a task that demands an enormous amount of mana and a very complex array to contain the energies released in the process."

Lith wasn't convinced by the Professor's theory, but he couldn't voice his doubts. He needed to see one of the blue pillars to be sure of his theory.

'If they really are like those that appear during the evolution of a magical beast, then it's unlikely to be some sort of ritual. Harnessing the amount of world energy contained in a single pillar would be enough to create another Black Star.'

He thought while reviewing the cursed object's blueprints stored inside Soluspedia.

Dorian quickly took a map of Othre and marked the spots where the desiccated corpses had been found. If there was a pattern behind their position, Lith wasn't able to find it. Even after joining the dots with lines the resulting image reminded him more a childish doodle than a magical circle.

"Let's say it's the truth." Dorian sighed. "What about the other corpses? What about the missing people?"

Manohar and Lith examined the bodies on the metal scaffolds for a minute, exchanged a few words, and then both shrugged.

"These are regular corpses. If you want me to discover what killed them, bring me a live specimen. Even better, bring me as many as you can. Sometimes it takes a few failures before succeeding." Manohar said.

"We are talking about people, not cattle. What you call 'failing' is actually murder!"

"Well, I can't diagnose something without a patient." Manohar clicked his tongue. "This simple observation stands for both your regular corpses and your missing people. If you want me to make an omelet, give me some eggs."

Before the bickering could continue, Jirni stepped forward.

"Silence, you two. I hate to admit it, but Manohar has a point." At those words the Professor gloated.

"That doesn't mean we're going to kill random people. At least now we have a lead. If he is right..."

"I always am." He said with a smirk.

"...it would explain why the phenomenon is so recent. Forbidden Magic requires more than evil thoughts and a maniacal laughter. The caravans are the perfect cover to smuggle rare ingredients inside Othre.

"Luckily, most of those substances are strictly regulated. Buying them on the black market means spending a sum that can't go unnoticed, not with dimensional magic sealed.

"Our best line of action is to interrogate the witnesses and dig in the life of the victims to find out if they have been chosen at random or if they befriended the wrong person.

"As for the other cases, I want to be notified immediately if another of those frenzied 'mages' appear. Do not engage them unless absolutely necessary until my or Lith's arrival.

We need answers and dead men tell no tale."

#### Chapter 436 Investigation Part 1

"There are six of us." Jirni said after a headcount. "Usually I'd split us into groups of two to cover more ground without wasting time. However..."

She took a long look at the bizarre team she had to work with.

Two young women with no real field experience, an average mage who seemed to be more a political puppet than an asset, two feral monsters in human guise who didn't give a damn about the tragedy that was taking place inside the city of Othre, and Manohar.

She knew his personal file inside and out. Jirni would need to consult a thesaurus to properly describe the god of healing.

"...I can't take my eyes off of him, so he has to come with me." She said cuffing Manohar to her wrist again.

"I'm here as Manohar's assistant. I belong in your group." Tista walked to Jirni's side.

"I'm here as her bodyguard. I go where she goes." Lith followed suit.

"That's not our deal!" Dorian was starting to get the Royal Constable's point.

"You are here to support the Association in whatever manner we deem necessary. Not for spending quality time with your family."

"I don't care about what you think. If I can't protect her, then our deal is off and I walk." Lith's tone didn't leave space for negotiations.

"The Army has nothing against Ranger Verhen resuming his duty." Kamila's words put the last nail in the coffin. Dorian glared at her, well aware that her role was to make the Army's best interests, even if it meant sabotaging the mission.

If Lith left, the team would lose one of its only three real players and there was only so much Lady Ernas could do while babysitting Manohar. Once brought outside the lab, he was only a liability for the mission.

"Which leaves me with an oversized team and two political lapdogs of no use." Jirni said with a sigh, making both the liaison officers turn red in embarrassment.

"I may have no magic power or any experience as an interrogator, but I've been a data analyst for almost ten years. If you give me access to Othre's interlink I'm confident I can provide you the information you need by the end of the day."

Kamila said referring to the magical network connecting the communication amulets to the various archives in the Kingdom. Bank accounts, transfers of funds, everything that left a trail of paper could be remotely accessed through the interlink.

Be they banks, merchants, or nobles, they needed to be able to explain every single dime or artifact they possessed. Otherwise, while being subjected to an investigation, everything that wasn't accounted for would be confiscated and added to the Royal Treasury.

It was one of the many reasons Royal Constables were feared.

"Who will you report your findings first? To me or to Commander Berion?" Jirni's eyes held neither trust or suspicion. She considered herself to be a good judge of character, there was only so much one could learn from a background check.

Kamila's reply was to hand Lady Ernas her army's communication amulet and then showing her civilian one which held no contact rune related to the army besides Lith's.

Jirni frowned at the sight for a split second.

"I stand corrected. One political lapdog of no use." She said while granting Kamila's civilian communication amulet access to the interlink and her contact rune before returning both communicators to her.

"Either you trust someone, or you don't." She replied to her surprised expression.

'She said it while looking at Kamila, but I'm pretty sure she was talking to me.' Lith thought.

Under the Constable questioning gaze, Dorian could only lower his eyes in shame.

"I have no skills that could be of use during the investigation." He admitted. "I'll remain here to coordinate the efforts to prove Professor Manohar's theory. If anything happens, I'll relay it to you."

"Good." Jirni nodded.

"Four people move faster than six. We need to be firm but tactful, otherwise the witnesses may turtle up and slower the investigation. This means that unless you discover something strictly relevant to the case, you are forbidden to talk. At all."

She said while glaring at Manohar, whose uninterrupted series of social blunders had become a legend throughout the Kingdom.

"Can I be cuffed to Tista instead of you, mom- I mean, ma'am? It would at least give me something nice to look at to pass time." Manohar said.

"Good point." Jirni's reply crept Tista out. Lady Ernas dug inside one of her pockets, but instead of the key to the handcuffs, she took out a communication earpiece.

"Congratulations, kid. You have just been deputized to be my assistant too. I'll talk to the women while you'll take care of the men. Just smile a lot and repeat the words I speak to you via the earpiece. It will make our job much easier."

Lith couldn't help but chuckle at Manohar's dejected expression.

"From Healer to honey trap. This is not the career I hoped for." Tista sighed.

Her words stung at Kamila's heart, reminding her of the elephant in the room only Jirni and her were aware of.

'I can't let things fester any longer. I need to make up my mind once and for all. Career or self respect?' She walked out of the room without even say goodbye. Between Jirni's words and Kamila's reactions, Lith's paranoia was piecing together the facts.

The four of them flew from the Association to Baroness Izra's mansion. She was among the witnesses of Sir Rosen's death and one of his closest friends. The Baroness was a plump woman in her late thirties.

She had red hair, green eyes, and a gentle face full of freckles that not even her make up could completely hide. She wore a simple light green silk satin dress, emphasizing her eyes and pale skin.

Like any sane person, she was nervous while facing a Royal Constable. Her smile was forced and she couldn't stop wringing her hands.

"How can I help you, Constable Ernas?"

"I need to hear from your voice your recollection of the events prior to Sir Rosen death." Jirni smiled, trying to make the Baroness feel more comfortable. She had even switched Manohar's cuffs to Lith's wrist before entering the house.

The rattle of the chain during the questioning could easily get the suspect defensive.

"There isn't much to say." She twisted a fan made of an exotic bird's plumes between her hands.

"We were just talking, mostly gossiping about our neighbors, when suddenly a blue pillar appeared from the ceiling and plummeted on the poor Rosen.

"The most dreadful thing was that we were all scared to death, whereas he was smiling and giggling like when his wife accepted his marriage proposal. We told him to get out of there, but he wouldn't listen.

"Baronet Sahg tried to grab him, but the light was as solid as a wall. There was nothing we could do."

Lith and Tista roamed the room while using Life Vision. Several weak arrays encompassed the whole house. Even with their limited knowledge about non combat magical formations, they couldn't find anything out of the ordinary.

It was just the standard set of home defenses they had seen countless times.

## Chapter 437 Investigation Part 2

"I hate prying in a gentleman's personal life." Jirni lied through her teeth while still sounding so sincere that she would manage to sell sand in the desert.

"Yet we suspect that Sir Rosen's death may be related to the practice of Forbidden Magic. I need to know if something changed in his life recently. Maybe a new acquaintance? A new hobby? Anything at all?"

At the mention of the forbidden arts, even Baroness Izra's freckles turned pale.

Forbidden Magic was outlawed in all the countries of the Galen continent. The term usually referred to all kinds of spells or artifacts capable of altering the lives of their targets benefitting only their caster.

Examples of it were the slave collars or creating greater undead since both would rob a living creature of their free will. It was considered the most inhumane thing a mage could do.

The highest forms of Forbidden Magic required to use the life of others to empower spells or magical objects. Such magic could give birth to miracles, but only at the cost of many lives and posed huge risks.

Forbidden Magic was an unnatural process, that allowed subverting the laws of magic by sacrificing vast amounts of life force and mana to upset the balance. It was very powerful but also very volatile.

One tiny mistake could turn the miracle into a nightmare, just like it had happened during the creation of the Black Star. Like any kind of magic, to perfect a single spell required several attempts and each one of them could bring consequences comparable to a natural disaster.

"I know nothing of Forbidden Magic and I'm sure neither did Rosen. He wasn't a perfect man, but he would have never consorted with someone capable of such a despicable thing." The Baroness squeezed her fan so hard some of the plumes fell off.

"Interesting. What do you mean when you say he wasn't a perfect man?" Jirni's tone remained amiable even while noticing the witness tensing up in realization of the slip of her tongue.

"Well, like most of our common circle of friends, Rosen was born in a wealthy family. He never worked a day in his life, which made him easily bored. He would seek fun in the most disparate ways. Sometimes even illegal ones."

"Like what?"

"Nothing much. Brothels, clandestine fights, gambling clubs. He was just a Baronet, he hadn't much to spend without endangering the sources of his annuities."



"Interesting choice of words. So, what could he have done if he had more money?" Jirni pressed forward as her prey got more tangled up in her web the more she struggled.

"I've nothing to add!" Izra stood up. Her expression was indignant because of Jirni's allegation, but her eyes were terrified. "Now I'd like to be left alone. I'm still mourning."

"As you wish, Baroness. I'd answer my questions now, if I were you. Otherwise the next time I will not be so gentle." Jirni dropped the act like a live grenade and added a sliver of killing intent to her words to emphasize her threat.

The Baroness withstood the Constable's glare for a second before her eyes rolled up and she fell onto the ground with a thud.

"Damn! I hate it when they faint. I can't question her more aggressively without proof. Forcibly waking her up is not an option. The only silver lining is that I now have a good medical reason to have her examined."

Tista, Lith, and Manohar took turns using their diagnostic spells on the unconscious noblewoman.

"I think she and Rosen shared more than their social circle." Tista said when she was done. "I found traces of abuse of drugs and alcohol in her system, both common and magical in nature. I wouldn't be surprised if she sniffed the dust instead of sweeping it."

Lith nodded in agreement. When he had used Invigoration on the Baroness, he had noticed an unnatural thinning of her airways, which together with the heavy damage to her kidneys and liver told him a history of searching for fun in the wrong ways for an extended period of time.

"That's it?" Manohar scoffed. "I can tell you she has five years at most left. Maybe fifteen if she stops abusing from today and keeps herself clean until the end of her days."

"How do you know it?" Lith performed a second scan without finding any signs of impending death. Even Death Vision showed him that the Baroness was more likely to experience a violent death rather than organ failure or overdosing.

"A discoloration in her life force. It suffered such extensive damage to have permanently changed. Even if we cleanse her body and regenerate her organs she may not recover."

Lith used Scanner, but found no trace of the discoloration Manohar had mentioned. Only after focusing on the melody of the life force he noticed that its volume was slightly lower than usual.

'I guess he's not called the god of healing for nothing.' He thought while they left the Baroness' house and moved to the next witnesses.

Most men were so eager to impress Tista that they had no qualms in confirming the late Baronet's vices. Sometimes they would incriminate themselves while trying to flaunt their knowledge of the local underworld.

Jirni took note of everything but let them go. It was more useful to her letting them walk free.

"As soon as they realize what they have done, they will panic. I'll keep them and their communication amulets under surveillance. With a little luck they'll lead us to whoever provides them their daily dose of 'fun'."

She had just finished talking when her communication amulet buzzed.

"A merchant is currently attacking the shop of her fiercest competitor. She is known to barely have a magico level of power, yet she is displaying abilities worthy of a lesser academy mage. I think..." Dorian was cut short by Jirni's angry voice.

"Save it! Just tell me where." A holographic map of Othre appeared from her amulet, showing both Lith's group's was and the attacker's locations marked by one red dot each.

They flew to their destination, finding a whole building on fire and a tall middle-aged woman with chestnut hair who was unleashing one spell after the other against everyone who attempted to put off the flames.

There were several mages on the scene, but they followed Jirni's orders and never retaliated. They only blocked incoming spells and helped the residents to evacuate the building.

"Now this is an offer you can't refuse!" The woman said with a crazy laugh.

"One fireball for free and the second one too!" The explosions caused splinters and debris to fly everywhere. The angry merchant couldn't be damaged by her own magic, but the splinters pierced her legs, face, and torso.

Yet she seemed to be immune to pain.

"Damn! With those wounds she'll die in a few minutes and we can't even heal her." Jirni cursed.

"There's no time to lose. Lith, draw her attention. I need to get close to paralyze her!"

"What about me?" Manohar complained as Jirni unlocked the handcuffs.

"I was once part of the Queen's corps, you know? Why do I get to miss all the fun?"

Jirni ignored him and circled around the frenzied merchant.

'Thank the gods wannabe mages only know how to use one element.' She inwardly sneered as Lith used fire magic to put out the flames. When she heard him chanting loudly, the woman turned around in outrage.

Unfortunately, in doing so she spotted Jirni with the corner of her eye and unleashed one lightning bolt for each of her new enemies.

'Or not!' Jirni thought.

## Chapter 438 Specimen Part 1

The lightning bolts conjured by the frenzied merchant were tier one spells, but their power was on par with those produced by a tier three one. Lith was far enough from the caster to not have problems dodging the attack, whereas Jirni wasn't so lucky.

Her Royal Constable uniform was able to tank a lot of damage before she would get seriously injured, yet she couldn't afford to get hit. It was because of her orders that no one had stopped the woman from laying waste to the building.

If the target died before they captured her, it would have been all for naught. To make things worse, Jirni hadn't missed that the woman had been casting spells non stop since their arrival.

'If she gets me once, she'll keep attacking until I'm dead.' Jirni thought. She extended forward her right hand, with which she was holding in between her fingers the three needles she had planned to use to paralyze her target.

They reacted to the incoming spell by turning into lightning rods that diverted and trapped the energy making it harmless. Jirni exploited the surprise effect to get close enough to incapacitate her enemy, but the merchant reacted so fast that her movements were almost a blur.

She dodged Jirni's needles and kicked her at the same time. The woman was no fighter. Her attack was sloppy and telegraphed, allowing Jirni to jump back to significantly reduce the impact.

The kick was still too fast to avoid and so violent that it squeezed the air out of her lungs.

Lith too was in a pinch, but of a completely different kind. After extinguishing the fire, he had no idea what to do. He had countless ways of stopping the crazy merchant, but they all required him to use magic.

'I don't even know if I can get close without killing her.' He thought.

'Life Vision shows me that she is sucking even more world energy than the last psycho I fought. She might be able to feed on the mana I naturally emit as an Awakened one and die of mana poisoning because of it. Any ideas?'

'Violence is not an option.' Solus pointed out. 'If ten centimeters long blazing splinters piercing her body don't cause her any discomfort, I doubt even fractures could hinder her.

'I can block your mana flow, but that would mean no spirit nor fusion magic. You would be left with only your enhanced body as an asset.'

Lith inwardly nodded and joined the fray. Jirni was one of the few persons he really liked, maybe too much. They were so similar that it almost scared him. Mostly because he was afraid to end up like her, with a family of his own.

Yet he didn't want to lose her, nor he wanted her relatives to experience what he had went through with Carl. They were all his friends, even Orion. The merchant saw Lith's approaching and reacted accordingly.

Or at least she tried.

The gap in height, training, and physique was overwhelming. Even without fusion magic, she was moving in slow motion in Lith's eyes. His right fist struck the tip of her chin with pinpoint precision to induce a concussion that would make her faint.

The hit dislocated the jaw with a snap, but the woman kept standing. Lith followed through with a liver shot with his left that would have incapacitated a man triple her size.

The jaw fixed itself with another snap as the woman flexed her muscles turning the splinters stuck in her body into deadly projectiles. Not a single drop of blood came from the open wounds, which instantly healed.

"Light magic too? This wasn't in any report!" Jirni grunted while stopping the improvised bullets with her bare hands. They were no threat to any enchanted armor, but a single stray shot was enough to kill a civilian.

'More like a full elemental fusion.' Solus explained. 'No sense of pain, rapid healing, an endless supply of world energy. I don't think we can take her alive.'

'You are right, we can't. At least by ourselves.'

Lith cursed at his bad luck and unleashed a barrage of attacks. He adjusted their speed to make them slow enough for the merchant to see them but too fast to be dodged. Once she was focused on the defense, Jirni closed in as silent as a ghost.

She stabbed the merchant at the base of her neck with two needles, severing her spinal cord and making her fall limp like a puppet the strings of which had been cut.

"I can feel her body regenerating so fast it's rejecting my needles. I can't let go of them or we'll be back to square one. Whatever you have to do, do it now!" Jirni said.

Solus released Lith's mana flow allowing him to use Invigoration after pretending to chant a short spell. Just as he had feared during his previous encounter with another 'made mage', whatever was force feeding the woman with world energy attempted to suck his mana too.

This time Lith was prepared and true magic was all about willpower. The vortex located in the woman's mana core and Lith fought a tug of war for his mana. He had to scan the merchant's body for anomalies while preventing his energies from reaching her core.

Even with all his years of practice and the new powers his blue core granted him, it was one of the hardest things Lith had ever done. Keeping the mana from Invigoration in one place long enough for it to detect something required his utmost focus.

Whenever even a small sliver of mana slipped out of his control, he was forced to reclaim it and start everything from scratch. Seconds turned into minutes as the constant strain on Lith's mind and body wore him out.

In normal circumstances, Invigoration would constantly restore his energies. Because of the vortex, however, the world energy would get stuck between him and the merchant, unable to replenish his core.

In such a situation Lith was no different from a fake mage using a tier five spell.

"I can't do it anymore. Professor, you can give it a shot." Lith wheezed at every word, his face was pale and sweaty from the effort.

"Only use tier five spells, otherwise you'll kill her." He warned Manohar.

"You make no sense, kid. Why would one use lesser spells?" The Professor made it sound like tier four and below were just cantrips. The moment his hands finished performing the necessary hand signs, his expression changed.

Manohar felt that something was trying to steal his mana and reacted accordingly. It wasn't his first rodeo, but he had never encountered such a fierce opponent before. Suddenly Manohar didn't look arrogant, bored, or excited.

For the first time in his life, the god of healing couldn't even afford to have a stray thought. What usually came natural to him to the point of being trivial was now a demanding task.

"How long do you need? I'm getting tired." Jirni's muscles were sore from the constant strain. Tista would have liked to give her some life force, but she knew her spell would be disrupted before it could do any good.

"Don't worry, I'm done." Manohar said while pulling away from the woman. Jirni's needles blocked her body, but her face could still move. It turned into a mask of horror and pain as the Professor pulled out a yellow sphere from her abdomen killing her on the spot.

## Chapter 439 Specimen Part 2

'Did he just rip her mana core out of her body?' Lith asked, incapable to believe his own eyes.

'Yes, I mean no.' Solus didn't know how to reply.

'Pick one, dammit!'

'No, he didn't. Her core was orange, not yellow. What's terrifying is that after locating the substance that generated the vortex, Manohar exploited its effects to move it all in the same spot before extracting it.

'What we have just seen was him collecting the vortex after enveloping it in several layers of life force and mana. The sphere is not her core, but it resembles it because it's made of that poor woman's life essences.'

"Did you just kill her?" Jirni had no idea what had happened, yet she knew that whatever was the answer, she wasn't going to like it.

"Of course. Because of these stupid arrays, I couldn't store the sample inside my dimensional amulet. The next best thing was to collect the sample together with enough life force to prevent it from degrading, and that's what I did." Manohar shrugged.

"A sample of what?" Jirni asked.

"Good question. There was something inside her body that allowed her to absorb mana. That's why she could cast so many spells and why those like her die when struck by a spell. It's just mana poisoning." He explained.

"Was it really necessary to kill her? I was hoping to capture her alive and have her tell us how she gained her powers."

"It would have been a waste of time." Manohar objected. "Her body was about to collapse from mana overload. This way at least we obtained something more than the ramblings of a dying woman."

"What if we arrived here earlier? Would you have been able to save her then?" She asked to both Manohar and Lith.

Lith shook his head. He had been barely able to identify the presence of a foreign substance in the woman's system before almost collapsing.

"Not yet." Contrary to everyone's expectation, Manohar's usual unwavering confidence seemed to have taken a day off.

"I don't know if this is the result of a spell, an artifact, or alchemy." He said pointing at the glowing sphere floating above his left hand.

"What I'm certain of is that, after studying the sample, I'll be able to find a solution."

Lady Ernas sighed while looking at the remains of the burned building. They had risked so much and obtained scraps in return.

"Let's call it a day. You go back to the Association and find out what the heck we are dealing with. Until then, I'll instruct the city guards on how to deal with the 'made mages' in case another attack happens."

Lith, Tista, and Manohar did as instructed. With a new toy at hand, Manohar wouldn't leave his lab until he found a solution to the enigma. They spent the rest of the afternoon studying the sample.

There wasn't enough to conduct a complete analysis but what they found was disturbing at best. The magical components of the unknown substance were all too degraded to be recognized.

All but one.

A small piece of human tissue that was able to grow as long as it was able to feed on mana.

"Fascinating. This is indeed Forbidden Magic, just as I predicted." Manohar said while placing it inside a locked array isolating it from the world energy. The specimen was surrounded by mana crystals that would provide it enough energy to live, but not enough to grow.

"Please! You also said that it was about a cursed object. Whatever that is, it's not an object." Tista mocked him.

"Maybe I'm wrong." Manohar pronounced the last word as if it was the worst insult he had ever heard. "And maybe not. We'll resume tomorrow."

He would have liked to continue, but he couldn't afford to be late for curfew. Jirni didn't trust him enough to leave him unsupervised and alone with such a potentially dangerous specimen.

Once Tista and Lith left for dinner, he was forced to leave the lab as well.

"By the way, why you didn't buy a tent for your travels? That way you could always sleep, mana geyser or not. That or maybe you could make yourself an artifact." Tista asked.

"I wish it was that simple." Lith sighed.

"I'm paranoid, so forgive me if a wall made of cloth doesn't make me feel safe. I could set up an array, but my knowledge about non combat formations is limited. Even if I learned one, to make it last a whole night I would need a lot of mana crystals.

"Otherwise it would crumble after a few hits. Don't let me started about an artifact. The best I can do right now is replicating my own equipment. I lack the knowledge and the experience necessary for realizing such a thing.

"I might as well throw my money into the gutter. It would be much quicker and I'd obtain the same results."

"Do you think Kamila will be angry because of my babbling? I kind of messed up big time this morning."

"You sure did." Lith's tone turned sour.

After dinner, Tista went to sleep in her own room while Lith decided to stay up.

He was a bit worried since Kamila had yet to arrive and he knew that something was wrong. Even with all of Tista's blunders, Kamila had been too tense and distant compared to her usual self.

It was only an hour later that she finally returned to the hotel. Her smile was forced and she looked like she was close to exhaustion.

"Do you want to order something for dinner?" Lith had a vague idea about what was happening, but didn't want to pressure her to talk.

"Yes, please. I'm starving." She replied without looking him in the eyes.

They spent the time before and during her meal making small talk about how they had spent their day. Lith avoided mentioning the dead woman or the living tissue since the mood was already gloom as it was.

"I don't think there is a nice way to put this, so I'll just say it." Kamila said while Lith poured her a cup of tea. The nicer he was to her, the worst she felt.

"I think we should slow down things a bit. Maybe take a bit of time to think about our relationship. Is it okay with you?" She said in one breath, trying to relieve the burden she felt oppressing her chest.

"Absolutely not." Lith blurted out a bit too fast for his own liking. "I mean, I'll respect whatever decision you'll take, but... why? Is it because of what Tista said?"

"No. Of course not." She chuckled while remembering that silly conversation. Both her smile and her laugh made Lith sigh in relief.

"Then why?"

"It's complicated." She had spent every minute she was away from her desk trying to make up her mind, but to no avail.

"Complicated as in 'I don't want to talk about it' or more like 'I don't know what to do'?" Lith hated riddles. He preferred to be blunt rather than to be left hanging.

"Both." Kamila replied not knowing what to say.

#### Chapter 440 Meat Puppet Part 1

Lith pondered for a while, thinking about why Kamila would have had such a change of heart so quickly. He remembered that she had never explained why she had been sent to Othre to him.

His only real clues were Jirni's words about trusting Kamila and how she had reacted to them.

"I'm aware we've known each other for barely two weeks and that you have no real reason to trust me." Lith said.

"So, if you need some space because something happened in your personal life, just tell me and I will not pry any further. Yet if someone from the army is pressuring you about our relationship, then I think I have the right to know.

"Because it wouldn't be just your problem, but our problem. You shouldn't be forced to shoulder such a burden alone. Whatever this is about, know that I'll not be part of your life unless you want me to be."

Lith's words struck a nerve. Kamila's eyes wandered around the room, almost hoping she would receive a sign from the heavens, or at least find a way out of her predicament. She stared at the door for a second before looking him in the eyes.

'I can't run away from my problems forever.' She thought. 'If I'm right and Commander Berion sent me here as his pawn, I should've been nice to Lith, smiled a lot, and even slept with him to further the Commander's agenda.'

'That's not who I want to be nor how I want to make my way up the army's ranks. Maybe Lith isn't as good as he appears, but at least he has been honest so far. If I have to live like a puppet, I might as well have never run away from my family.'

'I won't sell my dignity out of fear, I owe myself that much.'

Kamila did her best not to tremble as she told him about her conversation with Berion before being dispatched to Othre. Yet she failed. She was in an impossible situation where she had been forced to either lose her job, which had been the only safe harbor in her life, or herself.

Lith listened without saying a word nor trying to comfort her.

"So now I'm screwed no matter what I do. If I put any distance between us, the Commander will understand I'm not playing ball and punish me. If I stay with you, I will always ask myself if I'm doing it because I want to give us a chance or just because I'm too afraid to disobey."

She didn't cry, and her voice remained firm. Yet seeing her anguish made Lith feel some guilt, but mostly, he was angry. He took a few deep breaths to calm down and assess the situation with Solus.

Only then did he tell her about the dead woman, the living tissue sample, and his doubts about Manohar's theory.

"Why are you telling me all this?" She asked.

"Because it's what I would have told you anyway as my handler. I didn't mention it before only because I noticed that the woman I hope will become my girlfriend was feeling down, and I didn't want to spoil her dinner with gory details." He replied.

"I didn't mean to hide anything from you. I know how important your job is to you. Maybe you should wear a double sided nametag, so I know when I'm talking with Kamila and when I'm talking to my handler." He smiled at his own joke.

"Thanks, I'll think about it." Her lips curved up into a light smile as he placed one hand above her shoulder. She grabbed it, appreciating its warmth.

At that moment, she was grateful for many things. To Lith for not getting angry with her, for continuing to talk about "them" in the present tense instead of the past, and for just being there for her instead of making promises he couldn't keep.

It wasn't much, but at the moment it was all she had. Most of all, Kamila was grateful to herself for finding the courage to do the right thing. Her future was still scary, but no matter what would happen, she would be able to face it head-on.

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The next morning Kamila and Lith woke up almost at the same time. The suite had more than one bedroom, which allowed them to sleep separately.

'With my luck, it's only a matter of time before stuff starts to blow up in my face. I need to rest every night so that Invigoration retains its maximum efficiency.' He thought.



'I keep thinking about that thing Manohar found inside the made mage.' Solus tried to keep his mind off Kamila's situation. She could easily relate to Lith's feelings.

Both of them carried a deep sadness inside that was only aggravated by the constant feelings of isolation haunting them. Lith because of all of his secrets, Solus because she had no life of her own.

Over time, it had become as much a part of their bodies as the mana that flowed through them.

'Why give someone magical powers? Especially if they would be equally dangerous to their user as they are to those around them.'

To Solus, Lith replied: 'Off the top of my head, to create chaos, to give birth to artificial Awakened ones, or to test a Forbidden Spell on lab rats before using it on yourself. It's what I would do.'

The discussion had just gone from theoretical to disturbing in less than one second. Solus knew all too well how serious Lith was when talking about such things. In his mind, he was now killing Berion over and over for messing with his life.

Luckily, before his vivid imagination could direct a full slasher movie, Tista knocked on the door.

"Sorry to bother you, guys, but with all the disgusting things that happened yesterday, I either need some company or I need to skip breakfast. Between old creeps and Manohar, my poor stomach is still doing flips." She noticed that both beds were unmade.

"How is my favorite mistress? I could have used some of your dazzling smiles my brother is always talking about yesterday." Tista had no idea what was wrong between them. A slight sense of guilt made her attempt to remedy her previous blunders.

"What do you mean, mistress?" Kamila chuckled. She was happy to have some company. Being alone with Lith was a bit awkward between what had happened and what hadn't happened last night.

He had agreed to let her sleep in the suite to not alert Berion that she wasn't going to play by his rules and give her some time to think.

Tista explained to her how she usually deceived people into believing that she was Lith's wife to avoid being bothered.

"Some are brave enough to face a brother's glare, but a husband is much scarier." She winked.

"So, to keep the masquerade going, I booked my room under your name and now the hotel staff thinks you are his mistress. You charging in here made quite an impression yesterday." Kamila blushed a little and laughed heartily.

'Oh, gods! That's why the receptionist looked at me funnily. Tista sure has a talent for embarrassing me.' Yet the more time she spent with the two siblings, the less alone she felt.