

Supreme M 441

Chapter 441 Meat Puppet Part 2

The group spent the morning interrogating more witnesses, but neither Jirni's wits nor Tista's charm managed to find anything that could further the investigation.

"Embezzlement, illegal gambling, fencing. All things that would make today a field day if they weren't completely irrelevant for the task at hand!" Jirni cursed in frustration.

To add insult to injury, no made mage had appeared since they had defeated the merchant the previous day. It left them with only one shot at cracking the mystery behind the specimen still stored inside the quarantine array.

"Did you learn anything useful from that meatball?" She asked Manohar.

"Many things. First, keeping it alive requires a steady supply of mana and flesh. Second, it uses part of the mana to convert the flesh it consumes into its own and the rest gets stored somehow. Third..."

"Lith?" She cut him short, since Manohar seemed unable to understand the "useful" part.

"Not much. We know that whoever made it is a genius and that they employ Forbidden Magic. So far we have no clue about its purpose or how to track its source." He replied, making her sigh.

"There isn't much we can do right now. You three get back to the lab and please bring me good news. Mage Felhorn and I have been summoned by Marquis Lanza, Othre's ruler. He doesn't seem too happy with our results."

"Did he really expect us to solve the case in one day? Why not also demand that we turn hay into gold while he is at it?" Tista said sarcastically.

"Before our arrival, he was the one the Crown held accountable for the ongoing crisis. I guess the old coot is eager to put the blame on us and wash his hands of the problem. Keep me posted, I'll do the same."

Once they reached the Marquis' office, both Jirni and Dorian had a clear idea of what to expect.

"So much for your experts, Felhorn. In less than 24 hours they managed to ruin months of my hard work! The Crown will be informed of it and believe me, they will not be pleased." Lanza said while smoothing his black mustaches.

The Marquis was a man in his late fifties, around 1.67 meters (5'6") tall, with greying black hair and a wide belly that was a testament to his love for good food. Despite the cold weather and an open window, he was sweating profusely.

His vast amount of excess body fat helped Lady Ernas to make up her mind.

'Today I'll have roasted pork for lunch.' She thought while pondering which side dish was better suited for her meal while she pretended to listen to his rants.

"At least while I supervised the investigation, the collateral damage while handling the made mages was minimal. You allowed a single one to burn down a whole building in broad daylight! Do you

have any idea how many lives you have destroyed? Or the panic you have caused?" He lied through his teeth.

Made mages had done plenty of damage already, and their victims' body count had reached the double digits. The only differences with the Marquis's crisis management were that the made mages would die at the first spell and the victims would be forced into silence.

"Winter is coming and I have six families that have lost everything, without even a place to live. Merchants came to me claiming the fire has destroyed hundreds of silver coins worth of merchandise. Who is going to pay for that?" The Marquis' voice was outraged, but his grin told another story.

'The bigger their failure, the more negligible mine will appear in comparison.' He thought.

"The Association will cover all the expenses." Dorian said with a nod of his head.

'I bet a good part of that money will end up his pockets.' Was what he actually thought.

"It's the least you can do." The Marquis said.

"Your incompetence has caused incalculable losses to Othre's establishments. Now everyone knows about made mages. People are so scared that they prefer to stay at home all day rather than risk their lives.

"Even my poor Mynna had to cancel the weekly gala we host in our home because not one of our friends is willing to attend!"

"I know you are upset, father, but you're being unfair to these people." Mynna walked into the room, followed closely by a housemaid.

She was a stunning young woman in her early twenties, with light chestnut hair and blue eyes. Mynna was as tall as her father, wearing a skin-tight yellow evening dress that emphasized her soft curves.

'What the heck?' Mynna's arrival interrupted Jirni's internal debate about the best suited wine to accompany her lunch. 'They seem like they were pulled out of the "The beauty and the pig" fable. The only reasonable explanation is that she is adopted.'

"Between people going missing on a daily basis and the blue pillars reaping our peers, most of the members of our social circle left Othre weeks ago. Even our friends don't trust your skills. Mage Felhorn deserves the benefit of the doubt!"

Mynna said with an angry tone.

'Definitely adopted.' Jirni thought.

"But pumpkin..." The Marquis turned beet red from embarrassment.

"No buts, father! Have you told them about Count Xolver?" She cut him short.

"No, he didn't. Why do you think he should have?" Jirni asked.

"Count Xolver is a lunatic. He is the only one in his family that was born without a shred of magic power. He's always been obsessed with the dream of becoming as powerful as his siblings.

"He wasted a small fortune to pay mages, Alchemists, and every charlatan that promised him they could boost his talent for magic. When I heard about common people suddenly turning into powerful mages, he was the first suspect that came to my mind.

"Yet my father never listened to me because the Xolver household is among his most loyal retainers!"

"Watch your mouth, young miss!" The Marquis seemed to have regained his spunk.

"I will not allow you to berate your father or our dear friends solely because you have no pity for an unfortunate gentleman. Go to your room, now!"

Mynna and the housemaid left the Marquis office, but not before the young lady 'accidentally' bumped into the Marquis' desk and spilled an inkwell over his documents. Hours of hard work were gone in an instant, and so was Mynna.

Jirni and Dorian ignored Lonza's desperate pleas for help and followed the young miss outside the office to obtain more details about the Count.

Meanwhile, in the Mage Association's underground lab, the three healers kept studying the living tissue. The moment they had removed it from the quarantine array, it had resumed its growth.

It kept getting bigger with each piece of game they were forced to feed it while they performed their tests.

"I think it would be a good idea to seal it again." Tista said. "Its growth rate is much faster than yesterday. Something is very wrong."

"Nonsense." Manohar replied. "The more specimen we have, the more experiments we can perform. Without a host this thing is powerless. A good healer is always cautious but never afraid of the unknown."

Just as Manohar had finished talking, the living tissue that now was as big as a small dog, started to writhe and twist until it assumed a humanoid shape made only of veins and muscles.

"...of the unknown." Its pseudo mouth echoed with a voice that sounded identical to the Professor's.

While Manohar performed a tier five spell at breakneck speed to place the sample back inside the quarantine array, the living tissue shapeshifted again.

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The new form the living tissue had assumed was that of a featureless human head with a slender neck which ended with the outline of a left shoulder. It would have reminded Lith of a broken mannequin, if it weren't for its glowing blue eyes.

"This is bad." He said. "I can't be sure of it, but the only time I've seen blue eyes was during Necromancy classes. If I'm right and the principle is the same, we're being watched."

The head's lips curled into a smile, confirming Lith's suspicions. Manohar had completed his spell, but nothing happened.

"Fascinating. Remote control despite the Association's arrays." The Professor took the enchanted tray the specimen was set upon, to seal it inside the quarantine array again.

Suddenly, thin tendrils of flesh emerged from the severed neck and shoulder, wrapping around his arms.

Nothing happened, again.

"And?" Manohar grinned at the thing's surprised expression. The tendrils let go of his arms and went straight for his face, but a thin barrier of light surrounding Manohar prevented them from touching his skin.

"As I said, without a host you are powerless. You're not the first pest I've faced. I was just testing the limits of this form of yours."

"You really are just as annoying and arrogant as they say you are." The head replied with a soft, feminine voice that was identical to Tista's. "Let's see how you respond to this..."

Tista and Lith stepped back while pretending to cast a fake magic spell. Manohar, on the other hand, didn't budge.

"You're just wasting my time. The door is closed, I've protected the three of us, and I'll not let my specimen die. You..."

"Please, Professor, let go of me! Help! Somebody help me!" The face screamed with a terrified crying voice.

As usual, Tista had made quite an impression on the mages standing guard outside the lab, just as Manohar did for completely different reasons. As soon as they heard Tista screaming for help, they assumed the worst and opened the door while calling for reinforcements.

"Told you he is a creep! You owe me twenty copper coins!" Mage Trewan said to his partner, Mage Assa.

"Close the door, you dimwits! Can't you see I'm busy?" Manohar yelled in outrage.

The thing had shapeshifted again, assuming Tista's features and melting the half of the face not exposed to the guards. The melted flesh formed a naked shoulder and a part of an arm.

Its tendrils were still clinging to Manohar's body despite his best efforts to get free of the living tissue without damaging the specimen. So what the guard saw was a half-naked young woman whose body was covered by the Professor's ample robe screaming for help.

"Help me! He tried to rape me!" The head sobbed, sending the two guards into a frenzy. They didn't even notice the real Tista standing a few meters back staring in horror at her doppelganger.

"Nice try, but no one is dumb enough to believe..." Manohar was cut short by two massive high-pressured wind blows that sent him crashing against a nearby column and made him lose consciousness.

It was the tier tree Soft Blast, a non-lethal air magic spell devised in case of hostage situations. It all happened so fast that Tista and Lith barely had any time to react. The head sprung from Manohar's body and bolted toward the now shocked guards.

Lith attempted to catch it with spirit magic while Tista conjured a ten centimeters (4") thick wall of earth to stop its advance. As soon as it perceived the pressure from the mana tendrils, the thing split itself into smaller pieces to escape from them and charged toward the barrier.

The smaller bits remained stuck inside Tista's spell, but the impact created several cracks and weakened its structure enough to allow the two biggest fragments to reach the other side of the wall.

'How the heck can they be so powerful?' Lith thought while staring in awe at the broken barrier.

'That thing is full to the brim with world energy. The merchant first and our experiments later allowed it to feed to its heart content. Do you remember Manohar's words? Half the mana was stored all along.' Solus explained.

Tista didn't waste time and made the wall implode, destroying all the fragments still stuck inside it and clearing their line of sight all at once. Sadly, it was too late.

The living tissue had turned the mages into its hosts and was merging the two bodies into one.

'Fuck! We can kiss our specimen goodbye.' Lith cursed the unknown enemy. 'That thing made a magico as strong as a mage. I can't afford to discover what it can do to someone with a decent core.'

'The guards both had bright green cores.' Solus thought. 'I have no idea how two mana cores in one body will interact, but based on what happened earlier, it should be like fighting a blue cored mage.'

"Tista, I'll hit high, you hit low we must..." In the heat of the battle, Lith had completely forgotten that his sister had never seen an Abomination, one of Balkor's undead, or any of the monstrosities which had been his bread and butter for years.

Tista was pale as a ghost, incapable of averting her gaze from the bodies of the two mages as they were twisted inside out. Their bones snapped and merged forming thicker limbs.

Their flesh writhed and bulged, spurting blood whenever a blood vessel proved incapable of sustaining the increased pressure just to be mended a split second later.

Lith looked at Manohar, still on the floor with a small pool of blood forming under his head.

"We don't have much time left." Said the left head using Lith's own voice.

"Let's play." Said the right one, accomplishing the unbelievable task of making Manohar's voice even more annoying.

Count Lanza's Mansion.

"Your allegations could put Count Xolver in some serious trouble. What makes you so certain that he could be the one behind the made mages?" Jirni asked.

"You don't know him like I do." Even if the corridor outside her father's office was pleasantly warm, Mynna Lanza shivered while recalling their shared past.

"Arik has always been envious of anyone capable of lighting a fire without matches. He's not just talentless, he can't even use chore magic. Over the years, envy turned into hate, it's gotten to the point that he has forbidden his staff to use magic.

The last time I visited him Arik almost whipped a butler to death for conjuring a glass of water." Her beautiful blue eyes turned watery. "He was yelling like a lunatic, babbling about restoring his honor. He had a feverish look in his eyes, like he'd become insane."

"Thanks for your help. I assure you we'll pay Arik Xolver a visit." Jirni said.

At those words, Mynna gave them a curtsy with a look full of gratitude before taking her leave. The housemaid accompanying Mynna hesitated before following her ladyship.

Jirni hadn't missed how the housemaid had kept staring at her Constable badge during the whole conversation, nor that she had bitten her lower lip more than once to stop herself from speaking.

Lady Ernas caught up with her before she could disappear around the corner and grabbed her by the shoulder.

"Is there anything you would like to add, miss?" Jirni asked.

The housemaid turned around nervously, making sure no one was in sight before answering.

"Please, don't listen to the Marquis. He's only telling you half of the story."

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The housemaid introduced herself as Hessie from Namar. She was a plump woman in her mid-forties, with brown hair and eyes of the same color. Her maid uniform covered her from neck to toes.

It consisted of a black dress with a full skirt and a white smock apron.

"I'm Lady Lanza's personal maid, it's my duty to serve and follow her." Hessie had a high pitched voice, which fear made it sound almost childish despite her age.

"Her ladyship and her father have quarreled several times because he has falsified the numbers of missing people for months before the Association took charge of the problem."

"That would explain why we underestimated the seriousness of the situation until it was too late" Dorian pondered. "This information may help us to incriminate him later, but right now we have other priorities. I'm really sorry."

His eyes were sincere and he meant those words, but there was nothing he could do.

"No, you don't understand. The problem's not only that people disappear, but also that some come back." Hessie's eyes dilated from fear, her voice trembled to the point she started stuttering.

"One of my neighbors, mister Roza, went missing a month ago. He returned a week later, saying he had left Othre for a job he had been hired to do. Yet he wore the same clothes that he disappeared in and he was as broke as the day he left."

"I'm sorry, but I fail to see the relevance of your neighbor to our investigation." Jirni said with a kind tone.

"I know this will sound crazy," Hessie stuttering got even worse. "but ever since people started going missing, everyone in my neighborhood is afraid to leave their homes late at night. Odd folks with glowing blue eyes walk around the streets."

"Once, I watched outside my window and I noticed several of them moving towards the old temple. I could swear that mister Roza was among them."

Jirni took note of everything Hessie said just to be polite and reassured her they would look into it. The housemaid gave them a deep bow and left in a hurry to catch up with Mynna.

"Have you heard this nonsense before?" Jirni asked Dorian once they left the Lanza household.

"Many times." He nodded.

"It's related to an old legend about a necromancer that would send his revenants to capture people for his experiments. Whenever there is a draught, a bad harvest, or even a harsh winter, the people of Othre start claiming that blue-eyed creatures are responsible. I..."

Suddenly their communication amulets received a call at the same time. According to Dorian's secretary, there was something wrong with the underground lab.

Unlike Treius, the thing didn't wait to be fully formed before attacking. As soon as it finished its taunt, the creature jumped toward Lith with a maniacal laughter. At the moment it was a humanoid skinless creature, about 2 meters (7') tall with two heads, four arms, and two legs.

The flesh and muscles were laid bare as they rearranged themselves to fit the new body. Veins as thick as a finger ran from its exposed twin hearts to its six limbs. They pulsed with a steady rhythm despite the frenzied assault the creature was performing.

Its first set of arms was human-like, while the second one had been fused with part of the legs of the second guard.

The result was a pair of deformed arms coming out of the creature's shoulders, that ended in hands as big as coffee tables. Each hand only had three fingers that resembled the talons of a huge bird of prey.

Thanks to Life Vision, Lith could see that, just like a made mage, the creature was now generating a vortex to suck all the world energy from its surroundings.

'Idiot!' He inwardly sneered while conjuring a stone pillar from the ground which struck the creature while it was still in mid-air.

'The vortex can grant you endless mana, but it also absorbs mine. One spell is all that it takes to kill you by poisoning your core!'

'No, not really.' Solus pointed out. 'The moment you cast your spell the vortex disappeared. Whoever is controlling that creature can switch the vortex on and off at will.'

The creature ripped the pillar off the ground with its deformed arms and used it as a mace trying to squash Lith.

"Tista, snap out of it!" He yelled while dodging with a roll. The pillar came down smashing the table full of expensive equipment they had used until a minute ago. Shards of wood, glass, and stone flew across the room.

If not for their enchanted armors, only Lith would have survived the rain of deadly projectiles thanks to his enhanced physique. Tista only felt a prick on her skin, but it was enough to make her regain her cool.

"Hang on, I..." She tried to speak, but Lith interrupted her.

"Watch out! Remember the eyes and watch out for its chanting!"

'Why my first monster has to be this hard?' Tista cursed her bad luck.

'I must always pretend to chant and use hand signs because even if we kill it, the puppeteer will survive. I can't blow up our cover.'

The creature split what was left of the pillar in half, the room was too small for such a huge weapon. A simple earth spell turned the rocks into clubs, which the creature swung around displaying a level of mastery that sent shivers down Lith's spine.

One mouth kept laughing as the other one was chanting a spell while the human-like arms performed the hand signs.

'The silver lining of this nightmare is that at least we are not fighting an Awakened one!' Lith thought wielding the Gatekeeper with one hand while performing hand signs with the other one.

"A Mage Knight?" The first head stopped laughing from surprise. "That wasn't in your file!"

Lith didn't bother replying and charged forward instead. The Knight Mage tier four spell, Full Guard, enveloped his body with a spherical blue aura with a radius of 1.65 meters (5.41 feet).

Thanks to Full Guard, he had no blind spots. Whatever entered the sphere would be detected, allowing Lith to strike and dodge without looking.

'I can't use fusion magic whereas with its four arms mister Carpenter here has no trouble casting and fighting at the same time. I need all the advantages I can get.' Lith thought.

Even if the situation was dire, Lith's name of choice for the creature made Solus chuckle.

'You are insane. You know that, right?' She said while using all of her senses to find a way to quickly kill the Carpenter.

'I would have died years ago if I was any saner.' Lith replied as he also conjured a tower shield made of ice and earth to block the enemy's tier four Lightning spell. Mage Knight's spells only required one hand and had a short cast time compared to other specializations.

Their major downside was the very short area of effect, but in such an enclosed space it didn't matter

Lith had trained with Phloria countless times, he knew the basic spells of her specialization like the back of his hand. The Carpenter's left arm tried to block his advance, but Lith needed just a thought to send the tower shield intercepting the attack.

The right arm swung its club with inhuman speed as the left one swatted the shield like a fly, shattering it into frozen pebbles. Lith managed to dodge by a hair's breadth, but was quickly forced on defense.

The Carpenter roared in triumph while it was driving Lith into a corner with its superior physical prowess and technique. The creature would finish him as soon as its next spell was ready.

Chapter 444 Blue Pillars Part 1

While dodging the clubs' swings that were raining on him non stop, Lith still couldn't believe how things had escalated quickly. When the specimen had proved to be able to shapeshift, he had prepared contingency spells to restrain or contain it, not kill it.

It was their only lead and it was seemingly harmless. It could change its appearance, but not create weapons nor use magic, which together with Manohar's light barrier's protection made it nothing more than a creepy talking head.

Lith had hoped that whoever was controlling the flesh puppet, would say something that he could use to find the real source of the made mages.

He would have never expected the guards to believe that something could happen to Tista on his watch, nor that Manohar could be so arrogant to not have prepared any kind of protection for himself.

Lith had seen the Professor ready another spell, but Manohar had been so focused on the specimen to not even glance at the wannabe heroes.

'Humans' stupidity never ceases to amaze me.' He thought while rolling under one of the deformed arms and striking with the Gatekeeper at the human hands, disrupting the spell.

'Its behavior doesn't make sense.' Solus was dumbfounded as well. 'If its aim was destroying the specimen, then it could have just self destructed. If it wanted to escape, why ignore the open door? What does it gain by fighting us?'

Lith was too busy avoiding to get cornered to even try to find a proper answer. The creature was physically stronger than him and its fighting skills were better than most of his instructors demonstrated when he had trained in the army.

'If this person is so good while controlling a makeshift body that wields improvised weapons, I don't think I could win against their real body without going all out.'

Meanwhile, Tista had finished healing Manohar and was waiting for the right moment to strike. Her eyes were brimming with mana because of Life Vision.

'Why it doesn't activate the vortex?' She thought. 'Lith can't focus on a spell as long they are so close, but I can. Spirit magic is invisible to fake mages and I've conjured enough to kill it in one go.'

'Without the vortex, though, it would just give it a strong blow and reveal our ace in the hole.'

Much to everyone's surprise, the Carpenter was getting weaker by the second. Most of the accumulated mana was spent and a green core couldn't sustain its abilities for long, not without the vortex's boost.

'Before attacking, the creature said something about not having much time left. Maybe the vortex has some limitations we are still unaware of.' Solus pondered.

Lith grunted as he deflected the stone club coming from his left. He then raised the Gatekeeper while switching to a two-handed grip before chopping off the deformed hand at the wrist's level.

The Carpenter's movements were getting sluggish. It tried to reattach the hand with tendrils of flesh, but the darkness magic the Gatekeeper was infused with was corrupting the hand faster than the creature could regenerate it.

"Seems I have underestimated you a bit." The creature said with Manohar's voice while taking several steps back. Both heads were wheezing, gasping for air.

Lith didn't let it get away. He kept close to the creature while swinging the Gatekeeper. With its only arm left, the Carpenter couldn't keep up with him. The bastard sword was infused with darkness magic and with each hit the creature's vitality dwindled.

Yet its mouths continued grinning. The vortex reappeared, sucking all the world energy in its surroundings and filling the Carpenter with new energy. Its wounds closed, even the stump started regrowing a new hand.

Tista unleashed all the spirit magic she had accumulated while Lith stepped back and conjured some of his own. The Carpenter's heads kept their eyes on the siblings, ready to shut down the vortex the moment they cast a spell or activated a magic ring.

Yet nothing happened.

'How disappointing. They are both frozen in terror. This has been a waste of...' The creature's train of thought was cut short by a massive amount of foreign mana flooding its system.

The Carpenter stopped the vortex, but it was too late. Lith's could only produce filaments on such short notice, but Tista's spirit magic had been densely packed. Her mana reached the creature's green core, degrading it quickly to yellow and then to orange.

The Carpenter laughed despite the pain, still looking around for the source of the attack.

"Brilliant! I didn't even notice you setting up this trap." The creature while staring at Tista. "Too bad it's not enough!"

The Carpenter reactivated the vortex, uncaring of the consequences. The moment Solus informed Lith that the creature's core was down to red, he resumed his attack. Even under the effect of mana poisoning, the creature's muscles were still growing, its wounds healing.

Lith unleashed all of his rings and the creature sucked the spells just as he expected.

'Grey and fading, now!' Solus gave him his cue.

The moment the Carpenter's eyes stopped glowing, Lith used fire, air, and water fusion on himself with all the strength he had left. His movements turned into a blur, each slash was perfectly chained to the following one with no delay thanks to water fusion.

Lith was like a human blender, even Tista couldn't follow the Gatekeeper's speed. The only thing she could see was a flash of light each time a part of the Carpenter flew away.

First Lith decapitated both heads with a horizontal slash while jumping. Then, he adjusted the blade's angle and while falling down he amputated the creature's right arms.

The moment Lith touched the floor, he changed stance again. He pivoted on his feet, chopping both legs at once while spinning on himself. Lastly, he used the momentum for removing the left arms with an upward slash as he returned facing the creature.

When the second green core went online, the Carpenter was still full to the brim with mana. Unluckily, being limbless it could do nothing as Lith stabbed the chest and flooded it with darkness magic until it turned to dust.

"Two assimilated guards, hence two cores." He explained to Tista's disgusted look. "Rule number one, never stop until the monster is..."

He was about to wipe out the Carpenter's remains when a blue pillar descended from the sky and pushed him away, like he was just a speck of dust. Under their astonished gazes, the pillar enveloped their enemy and sucked away all the mana it contained.

'What the heck? This isn't at all like when a magical beast evolves, nor like when I refined the blue mana core. It feels empty, like Kaduria after I destroyed the Black Star. Could it be...' Lith's reasoning was interrupted by several mages storm the lab.

What they saw was a bloodbath where the living tissue had assimilated the guards, Manohar lying unconscious on the ground in a pool of his own blood, and most of the lab equipment trashed.

The colleagues they had come to help were nowhere to be seen, whereas Lith and Tista were standing unscathed.

"Nobody moves!" Screamed Thane, the Great Mage leading the backup unit.

"Drop the sword and get on your knees, now! If you so much as to say a single word, I'll not hesitate to put you down."

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City of Othre, unknown location.

'What the heck?' The one controlling the Carpenter remained mildly amused discovering that their creature was incapacitated.

'It takes barely more than one second to switch the main body after the first one becomes poisoned. The little bastard must have saved a tier four, if not even five, magical ring for the grand finale.

'Otherwise the Ranger had no way to deal that much damage in such a short amount of time.' They reviewed the whole fight, assessing each team member's threat level.

'Playing with them was the right choice. Manohar is just as dangerous as they say he is. No one has ever managed to extract one of my puppies from its host before. I've spent a long time to make sure it's something impossible to do, yet he pulled it off at the first attempt.

'He even managed to neutralize its assimilation abilities after less than a day worth of study. There's no telling what he could discover if they catch another made mage and I can't hope for the same trick to work twice.

'I need to find out the weak point Manohar exploited, or the next time they could stop me.' Yet instead of being worried about their plan being ruined, they smiled instead.

'It's refreshing finally meeting a worthy opponent. Fooling Constables and leading Healers by the nose becomes boring after a while. He seems the kind of man that would gladly join me, I need just to...'

When they noticed that the sun was about to set, they were forced to interrupt their plans and prepare for the evening.

'Dammit, I shouldn't have chosen this ridiculous body. Between family and servants, I have barely the time to collect mana from my puppies. My next alias will be someone inconspicuous and with much fewer responsibilities.'

Tista and Lith had a hard time explaining they had nothing to do with the two guards' disappearance. It was the first time for her seeing two humans die in such a gruesome way. Compared to the Carpenter, even the Fallen races looked cute and cuddly.

As for Lith, being found with a bloodstained blade while standing right in front of a pile of ashes made him the prime suspect. Their situation improved the moment Great Mage Thane checked Manohar condition and discovered he was fit as a fiddle.

Unluckily, things took a turn for the worse when he woke up.

"Idiots! Because of those idiots, I've lost a unique specimen!" He yelled in a temper tantrum.

"Not to mention your life." Lith was serving a tee spiked with a strong liquor hoping to calm the mind of those present.

"Who cares about my life? I mean, I survived far worse." Manohar corrected himself once he realized he was the one they were talking about.

"If those incompetent fools weren't already reduced to dust, I would raise them from the dead just to have the pleasure to kill them myself!"

"How dare you?" After Manohar, Thane too spilled most of his tea.

"Trewan and Assa were good men! Trewan had a wife and two small children. They died because of your crazy research. What I'm going to say to Trewan's wife?"

"That he should have followed his colleague's example and not spread his idiocy to the future generations!"

Lith and Kamila took good care of Tista while the two men quarreled like children. Tista was still in shock. Even covered by multiple blankets, she kept shivering with cold.

"Does this kind of things happen often to you?" Once the adrenaline rush from the fight had faded, she turned pale as a ghost.

"Gods, no. Aside from Balkor's thralls I've never met a monster like that. If you start traveling like I do, though, sometimes you're bound to see people die." He shrugged, drawing to himself a reproachful stare from Kamila.

"No, he is right." Tista drank a big gulp of liquid courage. "I don't plan on playing tourist. I'd rather hear the truth, scary as it may be, instead of lies that could coddle my feelings and get me killed."

Soon Tista fell asleep despite the two mages yelling at each other. After Jirni and Dorian returned from the Marquis' house Lith shared his doubts with them.

"As I told to Great Mage Thane, we witnessed a blue pillar. What I have left out is that, after it vanished, the surroundings were almost devoid of mana, just like Kaduria after I destroyed the Black Star.

"If my hypothesis is right, it means that someone is stealing huge amounts of world energy, just like the Black Star did. The process is faulty, though. The vessels can hold only for a limited amount of time, after which the energy dissipates in the form of a light pillar."

"Are you crazy? Why did you hide such an important detail?" Dorian said.

"Because this could mean that Manohar is right. Someone is using people to harvest mana, and only a cursed object or worse could require so many sacrifices." Lith explained, making the Professor grin with pride.

"Thane questioned us in front of his unit. If I told him the truth, one of them might have preferred to lose his job but save his family and the news would leak. If people think that Othre is going to become the next lost city, panic will kill thousands.

Also, until we don't learn what's actually happening, we can't risk spreading those critters to the rest of the Kingdom."

"Interesting." Jirni mulled over his words. "Yet now I'm the one who thinks cursed objects have nothing to do with this story. Didn't you say that the creature had glowing blue eyes?"

Jirni told them about the two new leads they had gotten from Marquis' Lanza home.

"I just know the basics of lesser necromancy, but I don't think this is the work of a Necromancer." Lith shook his head. "The vessels are all living beings, and so was the specimen. Sounds more like Forbidden Magic to me."

"Maybe the blue eyes are just the sign of a mage's will controlling their creation, and maybe not." Jirni replied. "I'll request the Forbidden Magic and Necromancy department to provide us all the information available on the matter.

"If what Hessie told us is true, then the made mages, the blue pillars, and the missing people are all the work of the same person."

Chapter 446 Search Part 1

"This is much worse than I expected." Jirni paced around Dorian's office while assessing the gravity of Othre's predicament in the light of the most recent developments.

"Royal Constables don't deal with mages. It's the duty of the Mage Association to prevent idiots with more power than brain from endangering the Kingdom and its subjects. My problem is that if I call in the Knight's Guard without a proper cover story, panic will spread."

Even if she wasn't referring to him, Dorian felt the need to justify himself anyway.

"I assure you that there has been no early sign of a conspiracy of this magnitude. I performed background checks on every mage that entered the city during the last months.

"Also, the materials necessary to build a lab need special permission to be bought. There's no record of someone applying for one in years."

"It's not your fault. Necromancer or not, we are dealing with someone smart enough to cover their tracks. We don't even know what is their real agenda. Based on what Lith said, made mages and blue pillars victims might be failed experiments.

"Even though I don't see what they could possibly achieve by giving powers to random people. But if Manohar is right and we are dealing with the making of a cursed artifact, then only the missing people are relevant and the rest it's just a diversion.

"Think about it. Small time nobles dying in the middle of the day are bound to draw attention and so are rogue mages bent on destruction. We need more information and we need them fast. We don't know how close the mastermind is to bring their plan to fruition. Any ideas?"

"We could require a copy of Brigadier General Vorgh's report for the Kaduria events." Kamila proposed. "Lith said that the aftereffects of the Black Star and of the blue pillar are similar.

"Kaduria's world energy was sealed by the arrays. Maybe after disabling them, the General noticed something that could help us understand what's happening here."

Lith considered it a waste of time, but said nothing.

'I've never seen blue pillars before, not even after Abominations absorbed small villages' worth of world energy. The phenomenon must be related to the kind of Forbidden magic employed. Since we are clutching at straws though, we might as well give it a try.' He thought.

Then, after pondering Jirni's and Dorian's words, Kamila took out her communication amulet and started browsing through her notes. Her hands moved on the holographic interface with the grace of a pianist during a solo.

Her expression was so focused that Jirni stopped pacing to not disturb her work.

"I knew it!" She said with a warm smile that reminded Lith the reason he had asked her out the first time they had met, right after she had finished reproaching him. There was something in her disposition that made her more than sunny, almost radiant.

"So far we have considered the nobles involved with the blue pillars as victims, but if we consider them part of a bigger scheme, then I think this could give us a lead." Kamila handed her communication amulet to Jirni.

The data collected showed that every victim had renovated a part of their mansions during the previous months. Some had set new arrays, others had bought new magical commodities.

Taken individually, each order was inconspicuous, but once put them all together, there were more than enough magical resources to build a decent lab.

"Excellent job, Lieutenant." Jirni said while returning the amulet. "Do a reverse search and find me someone that fits the profile of the victims and the timeline of the purchases who is still alive. The first name I want you to check is Arik Xolver."

Kamila frowned as soon as she typed the name. Count Xolver had been flagged by the Mage Association multiple times over the years, but there were no recent activities on his accounts.

To Dorian, Jirni said: "Damn! Why didn't you check on him? He has an Alchemical lab, a Forgemastering Lab and at least two others. With all this stuff, he could be doing everything by himself."

"We did. He has no magical powers and whenever he built a lab, a certified magician worked for him. We didn't intervene because he has the means but not the skills to use them. When the problems started, I searched his place and checked his inventories.

"There was nothing missing and he hasn't hired a mage in the last two years. I can send another team to make sure the magical equipment is still on the place too if you want."

"No, it's better to wait. We have no solid evidence he is related to this story. I can't just storm inside his house and interrogate him. Before we ask him questions, I need to know some answers. Jirni replied.

"While Lieutenant Yehval searches for more potential suspects, I want everyone to rest. We have to be ready if another made mage appears and if they don't, I want to take a look around the old temple to check for glowing blue eyed people."

It took Kamila a couple of hours to complete her task. Knowing what she was looking for and the timeframe for the purchase of magical materials to be relevant, allowed her to narrow her research greatly.

Since it was almost sundown, the group decide to scout the area where Hessie lived and make sure that her claims weren't just born out of superstition.

The building called "the old temple" was one of the rare relics of the time before Magus Lochra Silverwing gifted her legacy to the Garlen continent. After mages learned to perform tier four and five magic, religions had slowly disappeared.

The temple was located in the outer Rim of Othre, in one of the oldest and poorest parts of the city. The district was too distant from the city gates to be of any use for the merchants.

The streets were narrow and the pavements were full of cracks and holes due to the lack of maintenance. Lith noticed the lack of beggars and street urchins that were common in all the other zones of the outer rim that he had visited.

'I wonder if it's because they got scared by the people going missing in the neighborhood or just because the residents have nothing to worth stealing,' Lith thought.

The old temple belonged to Xhal, the god of healing. It reminded Lith of a Greek temple. It was a simple rectangular shrine with protruding side walls, forming a small porch.

The temple was composed of two sections. An outer space surrounded by columns, and the inner area which housed a stone altar engraved with runes belonging to a lost language and a statue of Xhal. Both areas of the temple were entered and exited through ornate niches.

The god was depicted as a bearded man wearing an ample robe. His right hand held a human heart, while the left one was destroyed, either by time or thieves.

"Is it me, or this guy resembles Arthan, the Mad King?" Lith had seen Arthan's picture more than once while researching for a cure for his reincarnation problem.

The others had no idea of who Lith was talking about and there was no time to explain to them the whole story, so they kept looking around the temple.

Chapter 447 Search Part 2

The inner area of the temple was 30 meters long and 20 meters wide. Every step the group made echoed inside the empty hall. Dust and dirt covered the statue and the altar. Even the stone benches where once believers would sit on to pray looked like nobody had touched them for months.

Everything of artistic value had been stripped from the walls over time. Where once were bas-reliefs and mosaics, now there were holes with jagged edges.

"This is odd." Jirni said after checking the side rooms. "Despite the lack of maintenance, the temple is still in good shape. I would expect it to be a playground for the kids during the day and a shelter for the homeless during the night."

The mages checked for secret passages with earth magic, but to no avail. Even using Life Vision and the array detecting spell revealed nothing.

"When did you find the time to learn Warden magic?" Jirni was surprised seeing Lith scanning the place with spells belonging to different specializations.

"I'm not a Warden. I just learned how to detect arrays and how to cast the most useful ones for combat situations." Lith had been too busy with his research to have the time to become even an amateur Warden.

He knew how to cast the array detecting spell because otherwise he wouldn't be able to share what he discovered with Life Vision, which allowed him to see all kinds of hidden magic.

The only arrays he knew were the so called "impossible arrays", formations that only an Awakened could cast and which belonged to the legacies left by previous Magi.

After a full sweep of the temple which resulted in a bust, they split into groups of two. Jirni would go with Manohar, Kamila with Tista, and Lith with Dorian. They needed to cover as much ground as possible in the little time they had left.

"The trick is to blend in." Jirni explained while her uniform and Manohar's shapeshifted into a simple cotton dress and a white shirt over brown pants respectively.

"Mix up with the crowd and ask normal questions. People love to gossip when given the chance." She messed up her hair to make them disheveled and applied a fine powder that made them look shaggy.

Then she put make up to her face, neck, and hands until she lost any resemblance of nobility. She even dirtied her nails on purpose before doing the same to Manohar. When she finished, they looked like two daily laborers.

"As long as he shuts up, I'll make my way while pretending we are a married couple just arrived in town who is looking for a cheap home. It'll give us a reason to ask about the neighborhood."

"Don't flatter yourself, woman." Manohar scoffed. "Even while looking like this, no one will ever believe that a handsome man like me would marry an old bat like you. I'm not Lith, I don't like old-timers." He said while pointing at Kamila.

"I'm younger than you, jerk!" She replied in anger.

"Tista, Lith, no one in their right mind would ever believe you come from a poor upbringing, no matter how much make up I apply to you. You have to improvise." Jirni explained as she executed a knee strike on Manohar's gonads, making him double over in pain.

"Dorian, Kamila, usually people hate uniforms, but maybe they are desperate enough to ask for help. Pretend to patrol the streets and wait for people to talk to you. Any questions?" Aside from Manohar's groans, the temple was silent.

"Good. Let's meet here an hour after sundown."

Tista and Kamila walked for about half an hour before giving upon Jirni's plan. Instead of seeking their help, people approached them to make sure they weren't lost and warned them it was a dangerous place for two young women.

To Kamila, Tista asked: "Do you know first aid?"

"Of course. Even non operatives have to regularly attend classes, in case of emergency."

"Then we are set." Tista replied with a smile. They walked to the nearest clinic and introduced themselves as a Healer and her assistant. The local practitioner was dubious because of Kamila's uniform, but he changed his mind as soon as he heard the "work for free" magic words.

He provided Kamila a nurse scrubs and put them to work immediately. They followed Jirni's advice, not asking any question that wasn't medically relevant.

Kamila monitored the waiting room, eavesdropping the patients' conversations, while Tista listened patiently to their worries whenever someone was willing to open up.

Between Lith's build and Dorian's silver uniform, they had no problems following Jirni's script. At first, only a few were brave enough to approach them, but once word got out that they would deal with the requests immediately, a long line formed quickly.

At first, was just small stuff. Pest infestations, minor injuries, quarrels between neighbors. Then, people started reporting them all their fear and problems.

"Please, my son disappeared two days ago. We reported it to the guards, but they barely listened!" Said a couple whose teenage son was gone.

"It's the third time my store gets robbed this month. Where are the guards when you need them?" Asked an angry shopkeeper.

"This neighborhood is a nightmare. Between muggers, drug dealers, and all those creeps walking at night, we need to barricade ourselves in after sundown."

Lith was amazed by Dorian's patience while dealing with all those people. He would let them vent as long as they needed before making a question. Lith used that time for scanning his surroundings and looking for vortexes.

'Even if a made mage gets blue eyed only when they are mind controlled, I should be able to perceive the carriers of a meat puppet. They can't turn off that pseudo Invigoration ability.'

As the minutes turned into hours, Lith discovered how unsavory the bread of knowledge was. During their rounds, he noticed several individuals emanating a vortex from their mana core.

They were all very small compared to those of a rampaging made mage, but their sheer numbers were impressive.

'Damn! I hate being always right. How do I explain to the others what I know without mentioning Life Vision or ditching Dorian long enough to create a believable cover story?'

'You can't.' Solus shrugged. 'We need Manohar to extract the meat puppet and if he asks you how did you diagnose it from a distance, he's not going to believe a farfetched explanation. He knows light magic far better than you.'

Lith and Solus racked their brains for a solution, but when they found it, it was already too late. As soon as the sun started to disappear behind the city walls, the streets emptied, leaving him no choice but to go back empty handed at the old temple.

'This is actually a blessing in disguise.' Solus sounded relieved, she had found a flaw in his plan. 'Even if your idea may work, you were bound to fail. Knowing Jirni, she has turned off their communication amulets to not blow their cover.

'Without Manohar's help, you might have alerted the enemy and destroyed any chance we have of taking them by surprise. We have once shot at this, we have to make it count.'

Chapter 448 Masked Gala Part 1

"I've talked with everyone who had a room for rent, but I didn't learn anything useful." Jirni sighed.

"Everyone complains about the high crime rate of the neighborhood, of the people going missing on a daily basis, and only a few talked about blue eyed people. The silver lining is that those who did always saw them near the temple of Xhal."

"I have a suggestion about how to find people carrying a meat puppet." Tista said beating Lith to the punch.

"I noticed that some of today's patients had a mild adverse reaction to both my diagnostic and healing spells. They all presented the same symptoms: unease and stomach ache. The same of mana poisoning victims.

"I think Professor Manohar could give them a look and if I'm right, extract the puppets safely from their hosts."

All gazes turned to Manohar, who didn't seem to be impressed.

"I discovered a few of them on my own too. I just had to use air magic the whole time we were around people and see who would suddenly feel sick after getting touched by my invisible winds.

"I even managed to examine a couple of carriers. The puppets were there, yes, but they were already dying on their own. Most of them were so undeveloped that they wouldn't survive the extraction process, and even if they did, I wouldn't have enough time to find a way to stabilize them.

"Despite the failure, the experience allowed me to collect some significant data. The carriers were both male and females, never than younger fifteen years old. Some were even older..." When Manohar noticed Jirni's glare as he was pointing at her, he almost choked on his words. His hands quickly moved to protect his groin.

"I mean less young than Constable Ernas, here."

"I performed the same experiment as Professor Manohar, but I didn't attempt to check on the specimen to not put at risk the patient's life." Lith said.

"The ones I noticed, though, were mostly young."

"Same for me." Tista confirmed. She had been very scared at the idea of using magic on someone with a vortex in their mana core. She didn't want to harm them but had no idea how to refuse to treat them, since the other healer would do it anyway.

She had used a weak diagnostic spell first and when she noticed that the vortex was too weak to cause mana poisoning, she had cured the patients as fast as she could.

"The younger the patient, the milder was their reaction. Sometimes I wouldn't have even noticed their distress if they hadn't asked me if their symptoms were normal after being cured."

"Maybe there is a link between the age of the host and the puppet's growth." Jirni read the reports about the personal details of the made mages killed so far.

"Most of those gone on rampage were above thirty years old."

"Or maybe the younger ones get collected and the older ones don't. Lith and I received many missing person's reports today. Most were about youngsters. Also, if you remember HESSIE's words, mister Roza disappeared and then returned. Maybe we should pay him a visit." Dorian proposed.

"Already tried that." Jirni shook her head. "His house was the first place we visited and 'coincidentally', his landlord told me he left the building around the time you fought the creature."

"Another unfortunate 'coincidence' is that no made mage popped out since we extracted the meat puppet. Whoever is pulling the strings is not leaving loose ends. We must move with caution, if the enemy discovers we are getting closer, there's no telling what they could do."

In the following days, no more made mages appeared whereas two more nobles died after being enveloped by a blue pillar. The group kept patrolling the zone nearby the old temple, looking for witnesses and blue eyed people, but to no avail.

The men of the Mage Association investigated all those who had purchased magical resources around the time the incidents had started. Once they had narrowed down the list to a few names, Jirni decided to act.

"With no clues at our disposal, we have only one move available. If we approach our suspects one by one, they might get spooked and disappear, or they may just get killed by our mysterious opponent."

"Since we can't detain and interrogate middle importance nobles just because they have renovated their houses, we need to be smart about it. I've contacted Lady Lanza for help and she has accepted."

"Tomorrow, she'll organize a masked gala and all those on our list will be invited. The plan is to round them up in the same place, arrive there unexpected, and if Manohar after examining them confirms the presence of a meat puppet, we'll have all the reasons to perform a proper interrogation."

"Or if they die, we'll at least be able to collect a number of specimens big enough to locate our enemy. Questions?"

"One." Lith asked. "How do we know that we can trust this Lady Lanza?"

"We can't." Jirni shook her head. "It's already suspicious how our only two leads all came from the Lanza Household. It's a trap in the trap. I spoke directly to her, so Mynna Lanza is the only one that knows we'll attend."

"If something happens to our suspects, we'll know she is involved. That's why I've put her under surveillance. Manohar will act as her surprise guest. The god of healing is still one of the most eligible bachelors of the Kingdom."

"While you mingle with the nobles, you'll have to examine our suspects without them noticing. The gala is for tomorrow night. You'd better not screw this up."

The following night, all the nobles who had yet to escape from Othre despite its crisis, were glad to attend to the gala hosted by the only daughter of the Lord of the city.

Lith still had his doubts about the plan.

'I don't trust this Mynna. If one or more of her guests get arrested during the gala and the other nobles discover her involvement, her reputation will be ruined. What does she gain from helping us?' He wondered.

'Maybe she is just worried about her city. Good people do exist.' Solus objected.

Lith ignored her naïve remark and walked slowly through the ballroom. He was wearing a black tuxedo and bowtie, with a silver mask covering his face. He hadn't worn one since the plague, and he discovered that he still liked the feeling it gave.

Lith didn't have to worry about hiding his feelings or where his eyes wandered. Kamila was walking by his side while holding his arm. She wore a golden mask and a silk-satin red evening dress with a v neckline.

The dress left exposed her shoulders and emphasised her bosom.

"Why do you think Lady Ernas picked for me such a flashy dress?" She asked with a whisper, glad that the mask would hide her embarrassment.

"Because most of our targets are men. If they keep their eyes on you, they will not notice me. Mask or not my height is easily recognizable." He replied, glad for Jirni's choice.

"Look, isn't that Count Xolver?" Kamila tugged his arm, nodding to her right.

Count Xolver was wearing a black tuxedo too. Contrary to Lady Lanza's description, he had an amiable expression and spoke with a calm voice.

"Wasn't he supposed to be without any talent for magic?" Kamila whispered in surprise. The Count was sipping his wine while his flute was floating on its own.

'That's not all.' Solus pointed out. 'His deep red mana core could barely light a match, but his blood core is another story entirely.'

Chapter 449 Masked Gala Part 2

Lith had only met two individuals with a double core and, even if he wasn't aware of that, both of them had been artificially created. The first was Kalla, with her blood core which was meant to expedite her turning into a true undead.

The second was Gadorf the wyvern, who had a black core to assist him to forcefully refine his mana core by feeding on the magical energies of others. Both the artificial cores had been placed far enough from the natural one to not alter its functions.

According to Solus's mana sense, Count Arik Xolver's situation was completely different. The blood and the mana core so close that they almost overlapped. Unlike Kalla's blood core, Xolver's wasn't stable and needed to drain small amounts of mana from the nearby mana core to sustain itself.

'This is odd.' Solus pondered. 'It's not like the monster you created by accident, Xolver's blood is not getting drained while he uses magic. Only the blood composing the core gets consumed, but it doesn't get replaced.'

Thanks to the mask he was wearing, Lith could activate Life Vision without anyone noticing his eyes flare up with mana. The Count was alive, yet from his body originated both the red wind of the living and a faint black wind typical of the dead.

His life force was stronger than anyone else's in the ballroom, except for Jirni and Lith, while his mana flow was weak. Lith had seen yellow cored individuals with a stronger flow.

He took notice that despite the vigor of his movements, the Count was sickly pale and had resorted to light make up to make his skin appear rosy.

'Either he has obtained his powers recently, or he is overeager to show them off.' Lith thought while observing that Xolver was performing even the most menial task with magic. His mask was floating in mid air, just like his wine glass and his plate.

'Classic rookie mistake. Using three spells at once requires a lot of focus and wastes mana you could need later. Him using silverware to eat shows that he is basically a one-trick pony. He can keep things afloat but he can't move them.'

Lith looked around the room, keeping an eye on the suspects and his companions. Most of the nobles on Kamila's list had small vortexes coming out of their mana cores.

By observing them, Lith and Tista noticed that they could adjust the vortex's strength at will. It would remain dormant while they were chatting and grow in size when they executed elaborate dance moves, like lifting their partners, which required a physical prowess they lacked.

"All the targets are in sight." Lith whispered in his communication earpiece as he danced around the ballroom with Kamila. Dorian and Tista were on the opposite side of the room, while Jirni watched everything from the gallery on the first floor.

The ballroom's floor was made of white marble, which together with the pristine white walls reflected the light coming from the crystal chandeliers and made the room as bright as if it was in the sunlight.

Aside from the musicians, who were performing from a small bandstand near the north wall, and the refreshment tables lined up along the west and east walls, the room was completely empty.

Two flights of stairs near the entrance lead to the balcony on the first floor, where sofas and armchair were arranged around small tables for those who needed a place to rest or simply enough quiet to converse without yelling.

"Where is Manohar? We can't start without him." Lith was worried that the eccentric genius might have fled like usual.

"He is paying his due, don't worry." Jirni sighed. "Look at your right."

Lith turned around just in time to see the Professor dancing with Lady Lanza, who kept him into such a tight embrace that he had barely the space to move without tripping on her legs.

She was saying something to him that Lith was unable to hear due to the music and laughter, but judging by Manohar's flustered face the young Lady was hitting hard on him. She was as lithe as a feather, while he looked like a death row inmate.

"I had to promise Mynna a bit of alone time with our resident genius to obtain her help. I hope she's only interested in his status of Royal Healer rather than in his personality. Otherwise she's even more insane than he is." Jirni explained.

The orchestra was playing a tune similar to a Viennese Waltz, where the dancers had to hold each other closely. Kamila was short of breath due to the dance being fast-paced and her lacking exercise.

"How can you scout, dance, talk, and not even breaking a sweat?" She panted.

"Practice." Lith lied. His enhanced physique made such a dance like slow-motion, while water fusion allowed him to move with grace despite his natural aversion for ballrooms.

They reached a refreshment table just in time before the following dance began. Kamila took off her golden mask to have something to drink, revealing her flushed cheeks. Her red lipstick matched her dress and emphasized her lips making her quite attractive.

Unluckily, Lith wasn't the only one seeing her that way. Count Xolver was so enthusiastic about his newfound abilities that he had been switching dames all night. He would only approach those who after removing their masks proved to be worthy of his consideration.

"The night is too short to waste it on ugly ducklings." He thought. There were several ladies he was keeping an eye on, but Kamila was the only one who had stopped dancing, so he followed them like a lion stalking its prey.

"Good evening, dear friends." He said approaching the couple and making Lith curse his bad luck.

'Thank heavens Tista's dress is baggy and Jirni was adamant about never removing our masks. The two of us are too easily recognizable, even if for completely different reasons.' Lith thought.

"The gala is an opportunity to mingle." Xolver continued while looking only at Kamila and ignoring Lith.

"Don't you think you are being rude hogging such a fair lady all by yourself? Let have her some fun." Xolver said while patting Lith's arm. Solus could see with mana sense a small thread of mana emanating from the Count's eyes.

It was very similar, yet different, to spirit magic and it quickly traveled along Xolver's cheeks, neck, and arm before entering Lith's body and go straight up to his brain.

Lith felt a small nudge like he was tired of Kamila's company and wanted to stay alone for a while.

"Thanks, but we're engaged." Kamila smiled while clinging to Lith's arm.

'No way I'm letting this creep put his hands on me. Meat puppet or not, there's something wrong with this guy.' Kamila thought. Her survival instinct was screaming at her.

"Come on, just a dance. It's all that I ask." He took her hand too fast for her to dodge him and another mana thread emanated from the Count's eyes.

"Even your fiancé agrees, right?" This time Xolver grabbed Lith's arm and gave him a double dose, just too be safe.

"Just one dance." Kamila echoed. Suddenly she felt very rude refusing such a gentleman's plea. Yet she still refused to move.

"Come on, they are about to start." Xolver was about to pull her when Lith's hand intercepted the Count's in a grip.

"Nice try, but no." Lith said with a snarl.

Chapter 450 Courts Part 1

As soon as the physical contact was broken, Kamila snapped out of it and hid behind Lith so fast that she almost dropped her wine glass.

Count Xolver's surprise intensified when he sent more and more waves of his willpower only for them to crash against Lith's. The Mesmerize ability required to make eye and physical contact with the target.

It could nudge their will, making them more receptive to "friendly advices". It couldn't force anyone to do something they weren't willing to do, though. It could only manipulate someone's feelings, not their nature.

In Lith's case, it would have been easier to tilt's Mogar's axis than convince him to part from something, or someone, he deemed as his own.

'This guy must be mad jealous to resist that easily. Well, if the easy way doesn't work, the hard was will.' Xolver thought while returning the grip.

"I don't think you recognized me, dear friend. I'm Count Xolver and I'm a very powerful man. You don't want to have me as your enemy."

'Watch out.' Solus warned Lith. 'The blood core expenditure is much bigger than before. His life force is now even stronger than yours.' For once Solus was happy to not have a body.

Otherwise she would have kicked the Count to the curb and blown their cover. Her hate for creeps was only surpassed by that for super powered creeps.

"Really?" Lith remained unfazed by activating earth and fire fusion to even the field.

"I think you should reconsider your actions." He let pure mana flow into his left hand, making the runes Kalla had gifted him resurface on his palm. Despite their white glow, only Lith and the Count seemed capable of seeing them.

'According to Kalla, they are an introduction letter. If Xolver is involved with the undead community, this should resolve the matter without him making a fuss.' Lith thought.

'If the one controlling the meat puppets is really a necromancer, I can't risk exposing our plan.'

Sadly, the Count had no idea what they meant. His eyes flared red as a thin black fog formed a small dome around them which seemed to rob its surroundings of light and warmth. Those near to the scene unconsciously stepped away.

No one was able to see or hear what was happening inside the fog dome unless they focused really hard on its presence. Kamila had no idea what was happening but she was starting to get scared.

"I'll ask you one last time. Let the lady come with me and I'll make it worth her while." At that point, the Count couldn't care less about Kamila. It had become a matter of power. He couldn't stand the idea of a lesser man disrespecting him.

Not now that he had finally obtained the invincible power he had always dreamt about. His killing intent filled the dome adding mental pressure to the physical one.

Lith was tired of playing nice. Instead of replying, he activated Invigoration, which allowed him to detect that there were two different kinds of blood flowing inside Xolver's veins. One was abundant, weak, and held less magical power than Lith's dirty laundry.

The other was thin and of unknown origin, but it carried enough mana to make a mouse as dangerous as a tiger. Lith released small pulses of darkness magic that destroyed the undead blood coursing through his opponent's veins.

Despite feeling weak, Xolver refused to budge and kept pumping more and more power until his blood core was on the verge of collapsing.

"Peace, brother. Please, forgive my Vassal. He's still unaware of the protocols among our kin." Another man stepped forward, so fast that Lith didn't even notice his appearance until it was too late.

He was around sixty years old, barely 1.72 meters (5'8") tall, with silver hair and goatee. His silver-rimmed monocle couldn't hide the red glow from his eyes as he grabbed Lith's wrist with enough strength to force him to let go of the Count.

He had a bright blood core empowered by centuries of experience and abundant feeding. The man had gentle features and a warm smile, but in his eyes Lith saw a beast ready to attack.

"You can call me Kaelarn, I'm..." The newcomer only needed a second to understand that Lith was one of the living. Kaelarn's pretense of kindness disappeared, replaced by a feral snarl as a second fog dome covered the scene.

"What's a dog of the Dawn Court doing here? Who's your master?" He asked while his iron grip turned into a vice. Kaelan released enough killing intent that Kamila almost forgot how to breathe.

Lith was stuck into place, his wrist kept cracking and healing almost at the same time thanks to light fusion. He felt an immense pressure coming from the small man in front of him, with a force that closely reminded him of Scarlett the Scorpicores.

Yet he refused to yield. He was stronger than four years ago and had learned many new tricks. He countered the killing intent by releasing his own while at the same time releasing a strong pulse of darkness magic that forced the undead to release his grip.

The pain was so intense that Kaelan growled in pain, baring for a split second canine teeth too long to be human.

"I was enjoying my evening, like everybody else, until your Renfield here bothered me and my companion." Lith had no idea what the Dawn Court was, nor what vampire protocols might require.

So he decided to bluff his way out by confusing his opponent as much as he was. Kaelarn was indeed confused. He had never heard the term "Renfield" but he was certain it had to be an insult.

"My name is Scourge." He used his code word for help while activating his communication earpiece with spirit magic. "Kalla the Wight sent me here."

As soon as she heard Lith's safe word, Jirni tried to locate him and Kamila. The ballroom was reduced to a blur like she was looking through a distorting glass. Only her focus and training allowed her to see through the fog.

"If I don't hear from you within a minute, I'll send the reinforcements." She said.

Kaelarn snarled again. His enhanced senses allowed him to hear Jirni's voice, but once again he had no idea who she was or what she was talking about.x

"I never heard of this 'Kalla'." He refused to back down to a human in his own turf, but Kaelarn hadn't survived for so long by being stupid.

"Just like I never heard about you." Lith had noticed that the vampire had lost part of his edge right after Jirni's message.

'There are too many people around us, I doubt he wants to fight at all costs. Time to raise the ante.' Lith thought while powering up Kalla's runes again.

"These are my references. If you want to offend the Dawn Court for that lustful idiot, be my guest!"

Kamila felt like she was spectating two strong currents clashing against each other, each wave stronger than the previous one. Kaelarn was amazed by the amount of killing intent Lith was releasing. Amazed and intrigued.

"Let's go, Xolver. We're done here." He said when the minute was almost over and the fog dome unable to hide the pressure they exerted.

"I don't care who you are." He said to Lith as parting words.

"Mess with the Night Court's plans and I'll make you pay."

Then when he noticed Xolver idiotic grin, he added:

"Right after disposing of you for forcing my hand." Xolver grin disappeared, and not even his make up could hide his pallor anymore.