

## Supreme M 451

### Chapter 451 Courts Part 2

Kaelarn dragged the Count away from the ballroom. He wanted to get out of there as fast as he could.

'I must find out who that man is. I can't risk angering both the Dawn Court and the Darkwatch. With the support of the council of the Awakened ones, those filthy living-huggers might even wipe out the Night Court.' He thought.

"Master, why are we running away from a human?" Count Xolver was unable to admit his own defeat, let alone understand why a vampire who he considered nigh omnipotent would act so cowardly.

Kaelarn didn't miss his Vassal's allegations, nor the reproachful tone Xolver was daring to address him with.

"Listen to me, you idiot." Kaelarn turned around abruptly with a glare that turned the Count into stone.

"We are not running away. I never run away! I'm retreating from an unknown threat that you might have unleashed on our Court, you imbecile! Judging from his smell, that man is barely twenty.

"Yet he withstood my mental powers and my strength without flinching. It can only mean that he is an Awakened, and one with a powerful mentor at that. He also has a Dawn Court pass and allies hidden inside this room.

"I have nothing to gain from a fight. If I win, the Night Court will kill me for having exposed my nature and ruining all our careful planning to get hold of this city. If I lose, even if I manage to escape, the Night Court would have even more reasons to kill me. Now shut up and follow me."

Kaelarn was already regretting having taken Xolver as his Vassal. The same blind thirst for power that made the Count a perfect lapdog also made him dangerously stupid.

If the Night Court wasn't in dire need of the Xolver's Household riches and connection with the city Lord to expand their area of influence, Kaelarn would have already killed the Count for causing that mess.

Meanwhile, Lith's left wrist had swollen to the size of an orange and was turning purple because of the compound fracture the vampire had inflicted him. His bluff would have been likely exposed if he hadn't cut off his pain receptors.

'Dammit, that guy was really strong. Even with fusion magic, I couldn't keep up with him and I'm almost sure he used only a fraction of his powers. Solus, do you have an estimate of his real strength?' Lith thought.

'Sorry, no. It's the first real blood core we meet. I can only tell you that compared to Kalla's or the Count's, Kaelarn blood core was mostly composed of blood and with only a few tinges of black.' Solus was still shaken by the unexpected encounter.

'Maybe Lith's paranoia is affecting me too, but I can't help but feel him slipping away from me. Ever since the academy ended, he doesn't need me as he did before. Now he is able to relate to people when he wants to.' She thought while looking at Kamila in envy.

'Without a mana geyser, I'm just a voice in his head. I couldn't help him fight the feeling of isolation he felt while we were in the wild, just like now I couldn't help him against that vampire. By my maker, I feel so helpless.'

"Lith are you all right?" Kamila had regained her cool the moment she had noticed his injury. She took two long silver knives and handkerchiefs to splint the wrist, but Lith stopped her.

"That was close, but yeah, I'm fine." One of his rings released a white light that fixed his injury in a matter of seconds. It was actually a true magic spell. He couldn't waste a ring's charge that he might need soon.

"Who was that man? How could he be that strong?" She asked.

"We have a situation." He activated his communication earpiece, replying to both Kamila and Jirni, to prevent the latter from ruining their plan by having the army and the Association storm the place.

"There is at least a vampire in the ballroom who has turned Xolver into some kind of human empowered thrall." At those words, Kamila went pale while Jirni inwardly cursed.

"What's your status?" Jirni asked.

"I'm not dead, yet." Lith's reply was the code word for "I'm safe", whereas if he said something like "I'm fine" or "Everything is okay" it would mean that he needed help.

"Good. It's time to move to the next phase. Vampires are outstanding necromancers. If they are the ones behind the meat puppets, your little squabble may have tipped them off. We need to wrap this up quickly." She had all the troops surrounding the Lanza Mansion prepare for action.

Jirni walked up to Hessie, Mynna's personal housemaid, who was serving drinks and snacks at the tables.

"Inform the staff that it's time to serve dinner." Just like Mynna's role had been to assemble the suspects, Hessie played an important part in dealing with the preparations.

Leaving an empty room where Manohar could conduct his tests, allowing some of the troops to hide inside the mansion in case something went wrong, it all required the help of someone who knew the house's protocols to arrange things in a way that wouldn't alert the house staff.

It was another calculated risk. Jirni had no idea who she could trust, but both Mynna and Hessie had a spotless past and had helped the investigation.

"Yes, your Ladyship." Hessie replied while giving Jirni a deep bow. Hessie was honored at the idea of helping the Royal Constable. Since their last conversation, Hessie's parents' neighborhood had become much safer.

Also, she felt like one of the main characters from the books she borrowed from Lady Lanza. Once Mynna heard Jirni's order via the communication earpiece, her beautiful smile turned into a frown.

"Are you sure you've checked them all already?" She asked with an expectant look. Unlike her dance partner, her mask was just a strip of silk with exotic plumes attached to it.

"I examined them thrice." Manohar hissed, unable to hold his contempt anymore. He hadn't been humiliated so much since that time Marth had forced him to attend an academy's board meeting without giving him the freedom to speak or sleep.

To escape from the clutches of that clingy harpy, he had managed to beat repeatedly his own spellcasting record, diagnosing multiple people at once every time the music stopped and Mynna introduced him to her guests.

"We are on a tight schedule. The fate of the world depends on this!" He hoped to scare her, yet she giggled instead.

"As you wish." She nodded. "We can continue this conversation later. Othre has much to offer to a genius like yourself and so do I." Her seductive smile and sensual voice would have melted Manohar's heart, if only he had one.

"Yeah, and if I had a silver piece for every woman who said that to me, I'd be richer than the King." Her amiable mask crumbled for a split second before she regained her composure. Yet there was enough rage in her face to make him wince.

#### Chapter 452 Great Minds Part 1

"My esteemed guests." Mynna's magically enhanced voice resounded through the ballroom. "I hope our master musicians have helped you to work up an appetite because our chefs have given their all to prepare our meal."

The audience clapped at their host before moving to the adjacent room. Mynna and Manohar approached Baron Mox, who was hosting the meat puppet most likely to survive the extraction process along with its host.

"Baron Mox, my father would like to have a word in private. He is waiting for you in his office." She gave him a graceful curtsy before offering to accompany him. Mynna held his arm while making small talk and giggling at every of the Baron replies.

He didn't even notice Manohar walking a few steps behind them. The Professor whispered one spell after the other, to make sure the events with the first meat puppet wouldn't happen again.

The Baron was so distracted by Mynna's flirting that he didn't pay attention to his surroundings. There were many people waiting for him in the office, but Marquis Lanza wasn't among them.

The moment they stepped inside, a mage from the Association struck the back of Mox's neck with an enchanted club, making him faint.

"Good, this will cut the connection with his master. Now make me some space." Manohar stepped forward and activated the tier five spell Life Ward, enveloping all those present but the Baron with a thin layer of light magic that prevented their life forces from being affected by external sources.

He had developed it to counter all those abilities similar to an Abomination's touch, making it impossible for vampires or meat puppets to harm his mind or body respectively.

Then he cast in rapid succession his diagnostic spell Third Eye and his Split spell. They were both tier five spells that Manohar had created when he was still a fifth year student and had kept perfecting them every time he expanded his knowledge.

The core of the spells was always the same, but Manohar had updated them so many times that if he bothered keeping track of all of their different versions, he would discover to have recently reached the triple digits.

Third Eye was similar to Invigoration, allowing Manohar's mana to resonate with the patient's body. By shifting his focus whenever he perceived an anomaly, Manohar would obtain detailed information almost up to the cellular.

Split was one of his most prized spells and the reason behind most of his achievements. A normal tier five healer spell would use darkness magic to destroy diseased tissues and replace them with healthy ones.

Split defied this logic. It used darkness magic to surgically cut the diseased tissues, or in this case the meat puppet, from the patient's body while nurturing them both. This way Manohar would heal the patient and collect a perfectly preserved sample to study afterward.

Since Baron Mox was unconscious and the vortex dormant, the whole process required less than a minute. The meat puppet screeched and squirmed while the Professor pulled it out in one piece from the Baron's mouth.

The puppet looked like a section of intestine, except it was full of throbbing veins which burst open and released dozen of small tentacles. The tentacles shapeshifted into small hands, clawing the air in an attempt to harm Manohar, but to no avail.

His shield made of light prevented the infection, while his armor blocked the weak limbs. The thing then turned into a small head. Its blue eyes had just opened when the Professor shoved it inside a darkened container which he promptly sealed with a spell.

He ignored the retching sound the guards and Mynna were producing while putting the magical jar in a bag. It was made of a thick black cloth, covered in runes which would prevent the puppeteer from locating the position of their minions.

"What in the gods' names is that thing? Who could be so evil to create such an abomination?" Mynna managed to say between barfs. Manohar was supposed to tell her to turn around, or at least to warn her about the nature of his task.

Unluckily, all the time lost made him impatient and unwilling to cuddle a young miss's feelings.

"That which is done out of love is always beyond good and evil. And we mages do love our work. If you are done puking, your Ladyship, I need to collect another specimen." Manohar said while casting a few cantrips that cleaned Mynna's dress and made nausea disappear.

Cursing her bad luck, Mynna stepped outside the room and moved to their next target.

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'That should be impossible!' The one controlling the meat puppet couldn't believe their own eyes.

'Manohar managed to extract my puppy bypassing its self destruct mechanism, keep it alive despite the lack of a host, and even sever our connection thanks to that bag. To add insult to the injury, this time he was even faster.

'Now I'm certain there is a flaw in my opus. Centuries of hard work ruined by a mere brat! I need to capture him alive and force him to reveal to me how can I fix this flaw. Even if I kill him, whoever inherits his legacy would still be a threat to me.

'It's time to get serious.'

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Mynna and Manohar approached Viscountess Ebla and lured her in the Marquis' office. Everything went as predicted until the meat puppet was flushed out of its host. Unluckily, it had already a completely formed mouth, which allowed it to activate an array hidden inside the room.

Manohar's focus was on the puppet. Keeping three tier five spells was demanding even for him. When the creature triggered the trap, he was helpless against it just like Mynna. Chains of lightning turned the room into a thunderstorm.

Manohar managed to cast a few healing spells, but since it was made from the flesh of its master, the creature was immune to the lightning. It controlled the array with cruel precision, focusing the lightning bolts on the Professor as soon as the others lost consciousness.

"This shouldn't be happening. I checked this room for arrays." He said while the array tormented his body.

"I know." The creature replied with a grin. "That's why I placed it right after you left."

Before fainting, Manohar could almost recognize that low, feminine voice.

Almost.

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Jirni and Lith were respectively keeping an eye on the guests and the Marquis' office. When they heard screams of pain coming from the latter, they immediately shapeshifted their clothes into their much more comfortable uniform while running toward their destination.

"Secure the perimeter and send back up! Something went wrong, we..." Before Jirni could finish giving her orders via the communication earpiece, more screams ensued but they came from the main hall.

This time they were screams of fear. Jirni and Lith turned around just in time to see all the remaining suspects with glowing blue eyes. The nobles' bodies expanded as they absorbed those near them and turned into a mass of bulging muscles.

A dozen Carpenters roared their challenge as they charged toward the Marquis' office to protect their companion.

"We need help, and we need it yesterday!"

## Chapter 453 Great Minds Part 2

Panic spread like wildfire in the main hall. The convened nobles screamed in terror at the sight of their peers, people that they had known for a lifetime, turning into hideous creatures.

The bodies of the meat puppets' carriers burst through their clothes like inflated balloons. A single touch was all that it took them to assimilate those too close or too terrified to dodge their deformed limbs.

Tista and Dorian had tried to destroy the creatures before they could become more than an overgrown lump of flesh. Unfortunately, when the nobles saw the bloated monsters rearrange their organs and muscles, terror turned into horror.

Some fainted or remained frozen in place, but most of them ran away disregarding anyone's safety but their own. The frenzied crowd almost trampled the two mages and managed to slow down Lith's and Jirni's reaction.

Lith had no idea what had gone wrong. He, Manohar, and Jirni had spent a long time preparing their plan, divulging information only on a "need to know" basis.

Mynna and Hessie only knew about the room, not what would take place there once the events were set in motion, and so did the guards from the Association. Since it was a critical point of their plan and its only known weakness, Lith and Manohar had swept the office several times to make sure that no one would tamper with it.

"There no way someone took down Manohar in a direct confrontation. This must be an inside job." Jirni snarled while she stepped sideways to avoid being trampled by the runaway mob.

"Come to me." Lith said as spirit magic brought him the Gatekeeper sword from under the sofa where he had hidden it right before the gala started. After sheathing his blade, his hands quickly formed seals until he was enveloped by a thin layer of darkness.

"Is this spell as good as Manohar's? I'd be really impressed if you successfully imitated a tier five spell after seeing it once only a few days ago." She said with a surprised tone.

"Not even close." He shook his head. "It should still protect me from those things, and if they try to gobble me up, they are in for a nasty surprise." He replied.

Their situation would have been much easier if not for the city array blocking dimensional items. They could only use what they had on them, and there was only so much normal pockets could store.

Jirni's needles weren't an issue, but wands, blades, and all kinds of magical tools couldn't be carried around without other people noticing them.

"The good news is that those guys are weak." Lith said while assessing their opponents with spirit magic and Solus' mana sense.

"None of them is marked as a remarkable mage. They should be magicos tops. The bad news is that we don't know what the heck is happening in the office nor we can leave our back exposed."

"That's why I ordered to leave the Association's squads outside and let only the army in. We can't risk our mages getting assimilated and turned against us." Jirni replied.

The Carpenters had yet to finish their transformation when four five-man units of the army's elite squads burst through the windows and doors, unleashing a barrage of spells from their wands and staves.

Being assaulted from every side, the creatures were immediately pushed on their back foot.

The reason why each Carpenter had assimilated only one guest was to be able to cast spells and attack at the same time without being burdened by dead weight. The bodies of the nobles were only trained to indulge in hedonistic pleasures.

They had no value as mages or fighters. Forming a Carpenter posed a heavy burden that those flaccid bodies were unable to sustain without constantly assimilating world energy.

A third body would make them weaker rather than stronger. It would increase the energy expenditure without giving the creature any advantage. To sort out the best parts it would take time and time was of the essence.

All that mana flying through the room forced the puppeteer who was controlling the creatures to stop the vortexes, to prevent their creatures from self destructing.

'Well, well, well. This time not only do I have to use half baked pawns, but they are also made of trash materials. This should make things interesting.' The puppeteer was actually grateful for Jirni's tactical choice.

Secrecy made things go much smoother, but after kidnapping Manohar, finesse was a waste of time. They could finally have some fun after months of boredom.

The soldiers were all veterans who had been debriefed about all the enemy's known weaknesses and abilities. They kept their distance while using water spells to freeze and slow down their enemies.

Without the vortex and with their spells constantly interrupted the Carpenters had only two choices: to stop and fight or keep marching forward and be decimated. Faced with an impossible choice, the puppeteer had the creatures closer to the soldiers activate their vortex.

It poisoned them, but at the same time, it jammed all the nearby magical tools and allowed the other creatures to safely assimilate world energy and regain their vigor. Three Carpenters fell to the ground as their first mana core collapsed due to mana poisoning.

Thanks to their sacrifice, the remaining nine reached as many soldiers and ripped them to shreds with the giant talons on their deformed limbs. Jirni immediately understood that the enemy was turning the tables.

The creatures on the front line were now jamming again the alchemical tools while the three fallen Carpenters stood up the moment their second mana core activated and used the dying soldiers to replace the lost one.

It took just over a second to switch from one core to the other, but on the battlefield, it was half a second too much. As soon as three more creatures collapsed after having lost their core, Tista struck them with a volley of Plague Arrows.

Darkness magic was slow, but fast enough to hit the creatures before they recovered. With the crowd gone, she was finally able to take action while Dorian got those who were still paralyzed by fear to safety.

Her spell ate through their flesh and corrupted the energies that kept their makeshift bodies together. Three Carpenters were down due to mana poisoning, while three more were helpless because of the Plague Arrows.

With their numbers reduced to half, the rhythm of the enemy's attack was disrupted long enough to allow the soldiers to retreat and regroup.

Lith exploited the temporary ceasefire to jump in the middle of the creatures' formation and activate the Death Call spell he had cast earlier. Fire couldn't be used in such an enclosed space, there was no earth to manipulate, and water magic had proved to be ineffective.

Tista's darkness spell, instead, worked like a charm, making Lith doubt again about what kind of magic could give life to the Carpenters.

'Are they a cross between undead and flesh or is just darkness magic being that good?' He thought.

After his fight with the orcs, Lith had modified the spell to make it more effective in close range. Instead of tentacles, the layer of darkness surrounding his body took the form of four arms that clawed at the nearby monsters like ravenous beasts.

#### Chapter 454 Perfect Form Part 1

The ethereal limbs pierced through four different Carpenters, incapacitating them and throwing the puppeteer's strategy in disarray. With their line of fire clear, the soldiers focused their spells on the ten fallen creatures, killing eight of them in one fell swoop.

Now that they outnumbered and outmatched the creatures, the soldiers had no problem dealing with the remaining Carpenters on their own.

Lith activated Life Vision to check what was happening inside the Marquis' office before deciding what was the best course of action. Manohar's and Mynna's life forces were still active, which made him sigh in relief.

'A purple core Carpenter is the last thing I want to see. I wonder why whoever captured them didn't escape while we were dealing with those flesh bags.' Lith thought.

'I can answer that.' Solus replied after assessing the situation with mana sense. 'I can sense two more Carpenters in there and they belong to a completely different league compared to the ones we faced before.'

'Not only did they assimilate mages instead of nobles, but they are also taking their sweet time to arrange their bodies in the best possible way. With each second we are wasting here, they're getting stronger and more efficient.'

"Did someone escape the perimeter?" Jirni asked via her communication earpiece.

"Negative. We have captured and quarantined all those who came out of the house." A female voice replied.

"This means we have a huge problem." Jirni said to the rest of the team.

"If there was someone capable of defeating Manohar fair and square, they would have already left the room and rampaged their way out of here. So, either there is a secret passage leading outside of which we are unaware of..."

"That's impossible." Lith interrupted her. He needed to make haste, otherwise based on Solus's reading soon the Carpenters would become so strong that he wouldn't be able to defeat them without revealing his abilities.

"I didn't trust the Marquis' word nor the house's blueprints. Both Manohar and I searched the room with earth magic. No secret passages."

"Or they are still holed up in there, waiting for us to fall into their trap." Jirni nodded, surprised by his unusual unrest.



"I can't think of many ways to take down a member of the Queen's corps that fast. The most likely hypotheses are a traitor in our midst, an array, or both. We can deal with a traitor by shooting down whoever is still conscious, but an array is another story entirely. Lith?"

Lith snorted in exasperation while walking toward the office and chanting the array detecting spell.

'Solus?' He trusted her mana sense much more than a basic Warden spell.

'No array aside from those which protect the house. There is a strong residual mana, but it could be either because of Manohar's spells or from whatever has been used to stun him.'

"Nothing. I still think it's a trap. You guys remain here and prepare for the worst." Lith took a multi colored potion from one of his pockets and drank it in one gulp.

It was a top grade alchemical concoction that temporarily boosted its user's physical abilities to a magical beast's level. Lith didn't really need it, but it allowed him to use fusion magic without arousing suspicions.

The moment Lith was about to touch the door's handle, a huge clawed hand the size of a table pierced the hardwood up to its writs. Lith's chest would have suffered the same fate if he hadn't kept Life Vision active the whole time.

Dodging the attack with fusion magic had been easy. Pretending to be unaware of the danger, not so much. He jumped back at the last second as a completely formed Carpenter charged out of the room, quickly followed by a second one.

They were different from those Lith had faced before. They were humanoid creatures, around 2.5 metres (8'2") tall, with a blood red skin. They had extra mouths on both their abdomen and left shoulder.

For a second, Lith thought they had some kind of blue halo around their head, before realizing they were a series of glowing eyes which allowed the creatures to see in every direction at all times.

'Those bodies are unnatural.' Lith thought. They reminded him of Gadorf the Wyvern's human appearance. 'Not even by using two like me as building materials, they could have muscles so thick and bones so strong. These Carpenters are the result of Body Sculpting.'

The first Carpenter opened his left palm, releasing a fireball at point blank. Once again, Life Vision saved Lith's skin. Even if none of the creature's mouths were moving, Lith had seen the mana amassing on its hand and moved accordingly.

The blazing sphere missed its primary target and hit in the middle of the group. Lith's companions managed to dodge only because they were distant enough from the caster to have the time to react.

Tista used air fusion to come out of it unscathed, while Jirni was caught by the fringes of the explosion despite her timely jump. She had to roll to disperse the momentum. Dorian did the same, but without her training, the shockwave sent him crashing against a wall.

'Son of a gun!' Lith thought as he extended his right hand and pretended to use the spells stored inside his rings while actually unleashing the true spells he had ready. 'He aimed the fireball so that if I dodged it, the spell would not go to waste. We must avoid lining up.'

A barrage of air blades struck where the major arteries were supposed to be while lightning bolts bombarded the Carpenter's chest. They were supposed to turn it into a charred corpse, or worst case scenario to stun it long enough for the Plague Arrows behind them to cripple its strength.

Lith felt his life was becoming a play about Murphy's law when anything that could go wrong did go wrong.

The air blade cut the Carpenter's flesh to the bone, nearly chopping off its legs and head. Unluckily, not only did just trickle of blood spurt from such deep wounds, but also the cuts were so clean that regenerating them took the creature less than the blink of an eye.

The lightning bolts struck their target, leaving behind only blackened dots as proof of their brief existence. The cuts and the bolts combined effects locked the creature into place, preventing it from dodging the Plague Arrows.

The Carpenter used its giant right hand to intercept the darkness spells, swatting them like they were flies. The flesh on the limb rotted and fell, revealing that the hand was composed mostly of bones.

The Carpenter activated its vortex. It both helped the creature to counter the Plague Arrows' effects before the hand could fell off and left Solus astonished.

'This is really bad! A fully formed Carpenter can use both of its cores at once.' She explained as the creature waved its healthy hand and unleashed the tier four War Mage spell Chasing Lightning.

Five bolts of electricity came out of its fingers, with each lightning resembling a snake in both motions and appearance. Lith knew that dodging them was pointless. As their name implied, they wouldn't let go of their prey.

'What does it mean?' Lith replied while setting up his defense and sending invisible strands of spirit magic against the vortex to poison it.

'It means that the vortex is located in the secondary core, so even if you corrupt it with your mana, the Carpenter can still use it to accumulate a mother lode of world energy until the auxiliary core crumbles.'

## Chapter 455 Perfect Form Part 2

'These creatures are unstoppable war machines.' Solus explained.

'Even without the vortex, by using two cores at once it's like they have one core of superior purity. With the vortex, the core purity is upgraded twice and they have the same effects of a full elemental fusion.

'To make things worse, the double core synergy allows them to ignore the mana poisoning effect as long as the secondary core holds. Basically, it works like a filter. It protects the main core by tanking the foreign mana while the creature uses the vortex to accumulate loads of world energy.

'This way, even when the second core crumbles, the Carpenter can keep fighting at full strength for an extended period of time.'

Lith cursed the enemy's ingenuity while activating earth fusion to block most of the damage from the five incoming Chasing Lightning and light fusion to heal his wounds the moment they opened.

Luckily, the War Mage spell was slow enough to allow Lith to intercept two lightning bolts with his earth magic infused Gatekeeper. It wasn't as good as a stone wall but it was the next best thing. Lith felt a sting when the blade and the bolts clashed, but nothing more.

He gritted his teeth ready to tank the other three, yet nothing happened. Three enchanted needles were stuck in front of him. They drew the incoming spell as if they were lightning rods and grounded their energy making it harmless.

"The other one is escaping!" Jirni pointed at the second Carpenter which was walking upstairs double time towards the balcony. It held in its huge hands the limp bodies of Manohar and Mynna.

"I don't feel like turning my back to something capable of silent casting." Lith's voice oozed sarcasm. He had yet to understand how the Carpenter had timely produced a tier four spell out of the blue.

'Solus?'

'No clue. Their cores have a static flow, so they aren't Awakened. That's all I know.'

Tista took off with a flight spell, taking advantage of the Ballroom high ceiling while none of the Carpenters seemed to pay her any attention.

"Not so fast, little girl!" The Carpenter's voice was a low rumble, like an echo coming from a deep cave. Its thin lips formed a cruel smile and his voice was amused, like a child who had just received a new toy.

The creature was incredibly nimble despite its size. It leaped with inhuman strength to intercept her with its clawed hand while the other was set ablaze, ready to unleash the tier four spell Scorching Blast.

Tista grinned in reply. She reversed the Carpenter's gravity and turned its jump into a head first dive into the ceiling. Both the claw and the spell missed their intended targets with a wide margin.

"Gravity magic?" The creature's surprise turned into shock when Lith and Tista combined their efforts, reversing the gravity around the creature again and amplifying it by ten times as the Carpenter plummeted to the ground.

Even with its enhanced physique, such a huge body already exerted a huge strain on its joints due to its height and weight. Between the fall and the artificial gravity, the Carpenter's kneecaps shattered even though it had conjured an air cushion at the last second to lessen the impact.

Tista left Jirni and Lith to deal with the crippled monster as she darted toward the second Carpenter to prevent its escape. The joyful expression on both creatures' faces disappeared as their plan was suddenly taking a turn for the worse.

The rest of the team had drunk the same potion Lith did before approaching the Marquis' office. This allowed Dorian to recover in a matter of seconds from an impact that otherwise would have knocked him out and Jirni to circle around the enemy with the speed of a cheetah.

'These things have eyes even on the back of their heads. I know that I can't perform a sneak attack, but there's something I need to verify.' She thought.

One of the advantages of not taking part in a fight was the possibility to calmly observe the events like they were nothing more than a game.

Since Solus's magical abilities were usually negligible against Lith's opponents, her role had always been to analyze the enemies and use the collected information to help him devise the best strategy.

'Those earlier cuts bled too little.' Solus and Jirni reasoned as one. 'The anatomy of these things must be completely different from a human's. If I were in their maker's place, I'd put their vitals in places hard to reach during a fight.'

The two needles in her hands shapeshifted into curved knives as she approached the enemy's back in what seemed to be a cut throat attack. From the other side of the creature, Lith had finished casting Death Call again.

Four arms made of darkness energy emerged from his body and enveloped the Carpenter's limbs while he aimed for its head. With one hand he executed a horizontal slash with the Gatekeeper to cut all the eyes at once, while the other shoot a volley of Plague Arrows to the torso.

Without its legs, the Carpenter couldn't dodge both attacks at once. Not with Jirni timing her attack to match Lith's. Their coordination was so good that it was hard to believe it was an improvised maneuver.

Yet instead of panicking, the creature smiled again.

'The kid is good for his age, but that's it.' The puppeteer thought. 'With all of his fancy spells and weapons he thinks he has won already. He doesn't realize that no matter how good a potion is, he can't exploit its full potential.'

'Having the abilities of a magical beast doesn't mean knowing how to use them. They can use about 50% of their new capabilities without them becoming a burden. Unlike them, I don't need to get accustomed to this body's prowess, nor to worry about the aftereffects.'

'It's way weaker than mine and it's only disposable trash. Sometimes I wonder if Balkor used my work as a template for his undead.'

The vortex suddenly activated at full force, dispelling both Death Call and the Plague Arrows, leaving Lith exposed to a counter attack. The Carpenter's first mana core tanked the damage while the world energy brought the second one to a purple core level strength.

At the same time, two humanoid arms previously camouflaged by the creature's bulging muscles emerged from its back, revealing how all the space where kidneys and liver were supposed to be was actually empty.

The arms completed the last hand sign before moving to intercept Jirni's hands. She managed to step back at the last second, avoiding her wrists getting crushed, but she was too close to completely dodge the stream of lightning that appeared at point blank.

The Carpenter's grin grew wider as the ice spikes it had conjured appeared behind the stumbling Constable and turned her into a pin cushion. To add insult to the injury, the first set of arms ignored Lith's sword and lunged their bone claws to his sides.

At the same time, the mouth on the Carpenter's abdomen opened and released a jet stream of purple flames. It was just another tier three spell, but the vortex boosted its destructive power to the extreme.

The lightning bolt had squeezed the air out of Jirni's lungs and pushed her back while her body still refused to obey her. Her Constable armor coupled with the potion's effects had taken the brunt of the damage, but pain radiated from the point of impact turning every movement into agony.

Yet pain was an old friend to her, something Jirni had got used to ever since her family had trained her to inflict and withstand torture before she even turned ten. Pain was what allowed her to regain control of her limbs.

The ice spikes barely managed to pierce her skin before she pivoted on the balls of her feet to redirect the momentum of her fall to the side and roll to safety.

Lith was having it much worse than her. The city array prevented him to Blink while the Carpenter's vortex was close enough to rob him of his magic aside from fusion magic. His rings were useless, he couldn't fly or use spirit magic to pull himself away.

Lith had to choose between being turned into a kebab, a charred corpse, or both. He chose the fourth option, the one he created. Lith jumped back and to the side, putting himself willingly in front of the closest of the enemy's clawed hands.

With one hand on the blade's hilt and the other on its flat side, Lith used the earth magic infused Gatekeeper as a shield against the enemy's middle finger.

It was the longest and the closest one among those forming the spear-like hand which was darting at him with the speed of a freight train.

It was also the most dangerous one, aimed at his heart. Lith used the force of the impact to propel himself away from the spell and the other hand. What he couldn't expect was that the remaining three fingers dislocated themselves, becoming long enough to reach his head, abdomen, and left leg respectively.

Lith was still in mid air after parrying the middle finger, he couldn't dodge while his magic was still sealed. Cursing at the enemy's wits, he could only tilt his head sideways to avoid the deadly tap at his forehead. The puppeteer laughed at his feeble attempt. The incoming spear head wasn't a mindless projectile, but one of their fingers. Carpenters couldn't feel pain. Receptors were among the many things they had discarded to make their strength as explosive as their lifespan was short.

The Carpenter's forefinger followed Lith's movements, striking him on his right temple as the other two phalanges pierced his body.

Blood spurted from Lith's stomach and left thigh, yet the moment his clenched muscles stopped the fingers, the darkness magic infused Gatekeeper performed a circular motion that cut all four of them almost down to the knuckles.

Ravaged by the chaotic energies, the creature's secondary core and its fingers collapsed at the same time, reducing its battle strength considerably.

'It's impossible!' Suddenly the puppeteer had nothing to laugh about. 'I know that a wound caused by the tip of one phalanx is bound to be shallow, but even a few centimeters deep hole in the head is supposed to be deadly!'

Yet there wasn't even a bruise on Lith's forehead. Only a curved stone plate that had deflected the projectile and reduced the impact to an oversized finger flick.

'Are you all right, Solus?' Lith asked as the plate turned liquid and hid under his clothes again.

'Nothing that a bit of rest can't heal.' She replied. 'Our combined earth fusion did most of the work, otherwise I would be shattered in pieces.'

The Carpenter roared in outrage. Its kneecaps were healed, but both of his prey were alive and well.

The puppeteer couldn't believe that the body and techniques they had perfected after centuries of training couldn't get rid of two newborns, not even after being forced to go all out.

'Our enemy has lost one hand and its secondary core. Without the vortex, its remaining core is a cyan one. With the vortex it can reach the output of a blue one, but if it gets poisoned too the Carpenter's strength will plummet.' Solus explained.

Lith smiled in reply while weaving a new set of spells that he knew the enemy couldn't risk absorbing anymore. Jirni kept her distance and circled around the creature, with Lith quickly following her lead.

"Three mouths, three spells at once!" Even though the second set of arms was hidden again in the creature's sides, Jirni was certain that they were forming hand signs non stop.

Now that they had been exposed, the quiet mumblings coming from the jaws on the Carpenter's abdomen and shoulders explained the trick behind its 'silent casting'. Fake mages could delay the activation of their spells until their focus was broken, just like an Awakened.

Hand signs required less time than most chants, but a normal mage would make them last as long as the chanting to perform them with accuracy.

Yet the Carpenter had several mouths, so while one chanted the others would make noises to cover the incoming spell and start the next one as soon as the first set of hand signs was completed.

The creature tried to escape from the encirclement, but it discovered that the duo could follow its movements with ease. Jirni's air infused needles pierced its four limbs while Lith's magic froze and deformed the marble floor at its feet, turning the Carpenter's footwork into a mess.

Jirni then activated several wands at once, releasing a barrage of lightning bolts that could sweep the whole ballroom. The puppeteer thought that she had gone mad. They only needed to make the creature crouch to dodge what looked like the spell of an angered thunder god and make Lith its new target.

Their coordination was too perfect. They were always at the opposing sides of the Carpenter, making it easy to exploit any incoming spell and turn it against the other human.

Lith ignored the incoming thunderstorm and released a volley of Plague Arrows, leaving the creature twice dumbfounded.

'Is he insane? He'll take the Constable's attack head on, whereas I only need a roll to escape from such a slow spell.' The puppeteer was disappointed. Their prey were clearly panicking, turning what was supposed to be a fun game into a farce.

The lightning bolts curved sharply, following the four needles like the remote tracking devices they were. Even with multiple layers of body fat shielding the nerves, the electrical current was so violent that it caused a seizure in all four limbs.

The Carpenter found itself paralyzed, so none of the Plague Arrows missed its target. The dark energies spread like a disease, eating away the creature's physical and magical strength. Its focus was lost, and so were all the spells it had prepared.

Refusing to accept their loss, the puppeteer activated the vortex to escape from the trap and kill both those pests by burning away all the lifespan their creature had left. Much to their surprise, even in its boosted state, the creature was unable to deal a lethal blow.

Jirni and Lith were both able to follow the Carpenter's speed with ease.

While normal humans under the effect of a potion were fast, they were fast and graceful. While any other human opponent the puppeteer had ever faced was just strong, they were strong and feral.

'I was wrong. They can use the potion's effect to its maximum, if not even more. These guys move more like beasts than humans!' The puppeteer's heart was filled with joy and awe.

Finding two worthy opponents outshined even Lith's blade slowing their prized creature long enough for Jirni's long knives to stab it in the ass, right where its brain was hidden, and send it into oblivion.

## Chapter 457 Double Trouble Part 2

From her hiding spot in the lounge on the first floor, Kamila had been watching the fight from the beginning. Her feelings changed from awe to horror and back with each second.

'Thank heavens Constable Ernas sent me away the moment the last phase of the plan started. Otherwise I would have just been just a burden for them. I always dreamt of becoming a Royal Constable one day, but if Lady Ernas is their standard, I'd rather remain behind my desk for life.' She thought.

What Kamila was unaware of, was that Jirni was considered a monster even among the Royal Constables. They were mainly investigators, prosecutors, and interrogators. Most of them wouldn't take part in a single fight their whole lives.

Jirni's family, the Myrok Household, had a different philosophy on the matter. Regardless of the profession one of its members would choose, they would all be trained as assassins to get rid of bad apples whenever the Crown required their assistance.

While Jirni and Lith dealt with the first Carpenter, Tista and Dorian did their best to stop the second one from running away with the two hostages. While they had the advantage that the creature couldn't use its hands unless it dropped Manohar and Mynna, the situation was still dire.

The trick of the second set of arms hidden in the creature's sides had yet to be revealed, so they were still worried about its silent casting abilities. Tista had no Gatekeeper for close combat and even if she did, she wouldn't know how to use it.

She had been an Awakened for less than a year. Her body was only slightly better than a normal human's, she knew few true magic spells that she could use during combat, and had no Solus to help her plan ahead.

'What a mess.' She inwardly cursed. 'I can't use fire or lightning without risking injuring the hostages. If I use the marble in the floor, the house might collapse and darkness magic is so frigging slow. I'll have to use water and spirit magic.'

Tista kept Life Vision active while accumulating a densely packed sphere of spirit magic. Her plan was to poison the creature as soon as it activated its vortex and then stall for time until it fainted due to the loss of one of its cores.

She had no idea how different a perfectly formed Carpenter was compared to the makeshift version she had previously slain. Tista cast a hail of ice spikes, all aimed at the creature's legs and at the pavement.

The puppeteer had no troubles controlling the two Carpenters at once and hoped this duo would prove to be as fun as the other one. The creature dodged the spikes with the grace of a ballerina.

Tista's attempts to avoid hitting the hostages made their trajectory obvious. Or so the puppeteer thought. Some of the spikes melted on impact, while others froze the water turning the floor into an extremely slippery surface composed of water and ice.

The Carpenter lost its footing as Dorian used an earth spell to make the stairs collapse and force the enemy to choose between releasing the hostages or going back to square one. The creature smirked in amusement at the trap and refused to fall.

A simple floating spell allowed it to walk on air unhindered by their efforts.

'These guys are disappointing.' The puppeteer thought. 'They clearly don't have any close combat ability, otherwise they'd try to exploit my alleged lack of arms. Or maybe they are just too scared I will use their "friends" as shields...'

Their train of thought was interrupted when the other Carpenter failed to kill either of its targets despite going all out.

'Enough playing. Time to get out of here.' The creature activated the vortex at full power and its best flying spell. Tista didn't miss the opportunity and struck the enemy with all the spirit magic she had amassed up to that point.

The creature's secondary core crumbled almost instantly, leaving the puppeteer as surprised as they were angry. One of their masterpieces was being beaten into submission, they couldn't allow the other one to be lost too.

The Carpenter darted head first toward the balcony, with Tista in hot pursuit feeding poison to the vortex. The creature stopped abruptly, letting her come close enough to disrupt her flight spell and kicked her hard while she was unable to defend herself.

Dorian tried to catch her, but was struck along with Tista by powerful lightning that would have made him faint if not for the potion coursing through his veins. He swallowed down the pain along with all of his fears and kept moving.

Dorian broke her fall along with several of his ribs. Tista was a lithe girl, but the kick and her armor made her an enchanted cannonball. They both tumbled on the ground while the Carpenter flew away at an almost sub sonic speed, burning its lifespan to get to its destination before its core crumbled.

The sound of cracking bones broke the silence in the ballroom, reaching even Kamila's hiding spot. It reminded her of when she was still a child, and her brother added wood to the fire. The contrast between her happy memory and the sight of her two companions lying on the floor made her shiver.



She waited, for a time that seemed to last an eternity, hoping to see at least one of them stand up.

'Please, gods, let them be okay.' She silently prayed with all the faith she could muster. 'They are good people. Servants of the Kingdom trying to save lives. I'm just an analyst who can't even lift a box full of paperwork. I can't help them. I'm useless.'

The Carpenter unleashed five lightning bolts at Lith, and Kamila's heart almost stopped. She could almost see his body sprawling on the floor in a seizure. Tears streamed down her face as he and Jirni blocked the spell, making her fear grow even stronger.

'Please, save them.' Kamila kept praying while a small pool of blood was leaking out the mouths of the two fallen mages. 'I'm not even a mage, I'm just human. Monsters walk among us, please, don't let them die. I don't want to be alone again.'

Yet aside from the clash of bone and metal, no answer came to her pleas. Before she could realize what she was doing, Kamila was rushing towards her companions. The voice of her Drill Sergeant echoed in her ears, scolding her at every step.

'You're too slow, move that ass! Stumble as much as you want, you crippled maggot. You'll fail them like you've failed everything else in your life and their deaths will be on you! Why the fuck aren't you using cover?'

Sergeant Heartmann's voice was cruel but helpful. She finally remembered that her dress was special. Kamila had never had an enchanted item aside from communicator amulets, so her memory lapse was understandable.

Yet she cursed herself while it shapeshifted to her uniform and she used the toppled tables to hide her movements. She reached Tista and Dorian, checking their vitals before administering healing potions to them.

'If their bodies are too weakened, the healing process could kill them...' Her brain stopped as the creature sent Jirni to the spikes-filled floor and cornered Lith with a three pronged attack.

What scared her the most wasn't the flash of spells nor the splashes of blood. It was the savage smile of the three monsters amid the chaos. It made her feel like the last human on Mogar, forced to witness a battle between gods.

## Chapter 458 Help Request Part 1

Kamila quickly snapped out of her reverie and made Tista slowly drink a healing potion. She was the more gravely injured of the two and needed immediate assistance. Kamila checked her pulse between gulps, to make sure that Tista's body could handle the strain.

Once the bleeding stopped and Tista's heartbeat became steady, Kamila took care of Dorian. A few seconds later, the Carpenter was dead and Lith rushed to her side.

'Remember to chant. We don't know who could be watching.' Solus warned him before he could forget to keep up his act in his worry. Treating two people at once was already something unheard of, doing it with silent magic would have been beyond stupid.

Lith's chant was a streak of English swear words as his hands performed random gestures before he activated Invigoration on both Tista and Dorian. Contrary to Kamila's expectations, he was the one in the worse shape.

Even though she had received a full-force attack from a Carpenter, her Awakened body amplified the potion's effectiveness and reduced the life force consumption the healing process required.

'Dammit! Both arms have compound fractures, cracked and splintered ribs, punctured lungs, internal bleeding, ruptured organs, second-degree burns from lightning, lacerations and a concussion. Those are not injuries but a fucking grocery list!'

Lith inwardly cursed while he used tier four true magic to heal their bodies and replenish their life force. The abundant energy from the respiration technique brought color back to their pale complexion.

Kamila had no time to rejoice. She noticed two brown stains on his chest and left leg that were slowly getting bigger as the red of his blood mixed with the green of his ranger uniform.

The holes in the fabric had yet to self-repair. Even though light fusion had almost stopped the bleeding, the wounds looked pretty nasty. Kamila was about to splash a potion on his injuries to make them heal when Jirni caught her wrist.

"Right move but wrong moment, Lieutenant. If Lith loses his focus due to the combined exhaustion from the fight, his wounds, and the potion, these two could need days instead of hours to recover."

"I'm sorry, Constable. It's just..." Kamila didn't know what to say. Her eyes moved from the potion in her hand to Lith's open wounds. She inwardly cursed the gods and herself for being utterly useless.

"First time on the battlefield?" Jirni sat beside her. A flick of the Royal Constable's wrist made all the needles scattered throughout the room return to her pockets.

Kamila nodded, biting her lower lip in worry. Whatever Lith was doing, the effort was draining color from his face by the second. Healing was much harder than destroying. Even Invigoration had its limits.

"Well, it's normal to worry about the people we like. Normal and a bit rude." Jirni said, drawing Kamila's gaze on herself.

"I may not be as young and sexy as he is in your eyes, but I'm wounded nonetheless." Jirni took the potion from Kamila's hand and gulped it down. It was only then that Kamila saw the scorch mark on Jirni's chest and her bleeding back.

"Oh gods, I'm so sorry. I..."

"Relax. I was joking." Jirni cut her short with a laugh. "You did a good job keeping them alive. With no specimens, Manohar gone, and no more suspects to interrogate, at least no one died. That's all that matters."

Kamila grimaced and pointed at the bloody mess in the main hall. Bits of nobles, soldiers, and Carpenters were splattered on the walls.

"I mean none of us. You can't save them all. Do this job long enough and you'll learn that small victories are what lets you keep moving forward. If you focus on the losses, you'll go crazy in no time."

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Later, back at the Association headquarters, everyone was eating like there was no tomorrow. Sharing life force with someone prevented them from dying, but they still needed to replenish all the nutrients spent to reconstruct bones and mend flesh.

Tista had used Invigoration to replenish Dorian's and Jirni's strength, so that Lith would have some time to rest and all the members of the group were back at their peak physical condition.

Psychologically, aside from Lith and Jirni, they were a worried mess. Tista kept reviewing her fight with the Carpenter in an endless loop. Every repetition only made her more bothered.

'That's what they mean by "Don't bite more than you can chew". If that thing wasn't in a hurry because of the mana poisoning, it could have killed us both. I need to learn more offensive spells before starting my travels.

'There's no such thing as a second chance in a fight.'

"How did you know that thing had an ass for brains?" Lith asked

"It was actually obvious." Jirni replied. "It didn't flinch when you aimed at its head and the torso is always the biggest target available. Legs and arms were a no go, big muscles like that need space to flex.

"Since the second set of arms took almost all of the lower back, where else could it be?"

"We're screwed." Dorian said once his stomach had finally stopped grumbling. "Not only has the investigation hit a dead-end, but we have also lost Manohar, maybe for good. Things couldn't get any worse."

"That's not true." Jirni shook her head.

"Count Xolver still has a lot of explaining to do. Before we had nothing on him, but this evening he both assaulted a Ranger and illegally accessed his personal file. The Crown has given me free rein on the matter."

"How did he get his hands on my file?" Lith's eyes brimmed with rage. The creep had made things personal one time too many.

"Not your real file, just the one we leave available to known corrupt officers." Jirni explained. "It only contains public information and enough details to make it look authentic.

"That way we can use it to track their contractors and anticipate their moves. So far, someone has requested classified information on all of us the moment the investigation started. I didn't tell you because we failed to track the delivery.

"Lith's file has been accessed again this evening, right after his quarrel with the Count. We failed to track the delivery again, but the timing is too suspicious. The Crown prefers to ruffle some medium importance noble's feathers rather than risk losing the Kingdom's two best diagnosticians at once."

"This would be fantastic news, if not for Xolver disappearing right after leaving the Marquis' mansion. None of the men stationed outside his house have seen him for hours. Also, there is no record about this Kaelarn guy. It's another dead end."

"Maybe it is and maybe not." Lith would have liked to steeple his fingers while thinking, but Kamila's hand was stuck to his like a boot on a car. Listening to his reports was one thing, watching him risk his life several times in a single night was another.

"I have a contact in the undead community that might be able to help us."

"Why didn't you tell us that as soon as you arrived? Withholding information during a royal investigation is a crime!" Dorian was grateful to Lith for saving his life, but not enough to forget about their shared duty.

"Because we had no solid lead. I never believed it was the work of a Necromancer and I still don't. Even if I'm wrong, undead doesn't equal necromancy. Take Balkor for example. Also, what was I supposed to ask? For a list of all the undead in the region?"

"Only after tonight's events do I have a name and a description. I wouldn't even risk exposing her existence if we weren't clutching at straws."

'Her?' Jirni, Tista, and Kamila frowned at the word, each for her own reasons.

## Chapter 459 Help Request Part 2

Lith couldn't forgive Xolver for messing with him twice. The idea of becoming the next Royal Healer if something happened to Manohar was a strong motivator too. He valued his freedom as much as the mad professor did.

Lith took out his communication amulet and pressed Kalla's rune. The Wight's hologram appeared instantly.

"Hello, Scourge."

"How many times do I have to tell you to use my human name?" He said in exasperation, afraid that more misunderstandings could ensue.

"Fine. Hello, Shadow of Death. To what do I owe this call?"

"That's not my human name either!"

"I wouldn't be so sure." Jirni and Kalla said in unison.

Seeing an undead bear instead of a woman, put both Jirni and Kamila at ease. Tista was still wondering why her brother had never told her about this particular friend of his.

"What do you mean, 'I wouldn't be so sure'?" Lith asked.

"It all started as a moniker Nana used to refer to you with the Association after you killed Garth Renkin and his father." Jirni explained. "After the plague, wherever you go someone coincidentally dies or bad things happen. So it stuck."

"People consider me bad luck?" Lith was astonished. He could almost hear Kamila thinking about it was only after dating him that she had got dragged in that mess by Commander Berion.

To be fair, it was just his paranoia speaking.

"Only the envious ones." Kamila said without leaving his hand. "Those who speak behind your back and think that your achievements aren't enough to justify the prestige you hold in the eyes of the Crown."

"Your potential enemies refer to you as such too." Kalla said. "Scarlett told me that's how the underworld refers to you, human and not, ever since you killed that Wyvern. Anyway, what can I do for you?"

Kalla was still recovering from the injury she had self-inflicted on her life force. Being unable to further her research, she was bored to death and eager for a distraction.

Lith told her everything that was happening in Othre before describing her Kaelarn and his Vassal.

"Whatever it is, it's not necromancy." Kalla spoke with the same certainty she had that the Sun would rise in the morning.

"The blue eyes are simply a side effect of a partial consciousness transfer from the maker to their creation. Judging from your description, it seems like a twisted version of light magic.

"You are looking for someone who alters the life force of the living rather than reanimates corpses. The two disciplines have one common feature, though. They both deal with the research for the perfect immortality.

"A human named Arthan Griffon conducted thorough research on the matter. As far as I know, his only achievement was to set the very definition of Forbidden Magic."

"Isn't that the same guy you thought resembled the god of healing Xhal?" Dorian asked. He knew the Mad King's name only because of the nursery rhymes his mother used to scare him with whenever he misbehaved as a kid.

"Yes, Dorian. He is, but I don't think it is wise to waste our time with trivia. I can only imagine that our enemy will rush their plans. They have Manohar and are aware we discovered their backers' network. It's only a matter of time before they flee." Lith replied.

Arthan was barely a footnote in the Kingdom's history books. His name was forgotten and his legacy lost to all those without the highest clearance level.

Unbeknownst to all those in the room, Arthan had been the very first god of healing. To quickly find a great number of test subjects for his experiments, he had established a free health system that lasted until his plan was exposed.

It saved millions of lives and the people worshipped him like a savior. The clerics of Xhal thought to ride the King's coattails by reshaping the statues of the ancient god in his image, hoping to draw the masses back to their temple.

Their plan royally backfired, becoming the last nail in the coffin for most religions.

"By the way, who are these people?" Being interrupted twice made the bored Wight curious about the nature of her audience.

"Don't worry, Kalla. They are all good humans." Lith replied to the implied question if they were or not fellow Awakened ones.

"As I was saying, you are not facing necromancy. At the same time, it's unlikely for the local undead community to not be involved in the matter or at least know a good deal about it. Many disappearances make feeding and hiding much harder.

"Whenever something bad happens, people always blame curses first and undead later. They are the perfect scapegoat and once panic spreads, even eccentric normal people who like wearing a mask or prefer night life become targets.

"Plus, I heard multiple times about projects aimed to build meat puppets to allow undead with an unpleasant appearance to have a normal life, or just to experience the sunlight again.

"Some need it for business reasons, others because they are unhappy with their limits.

"I'm not the only one researching for a cure for undeath. What you are describing sounds like a perfect temporary fix. Maybe I can point you in the right direction, but it's going to be dangerous. How much do you know about the undead?"

"Only enough to recognize them and kill them if necessary." Lith admitted. Most of the knowledge about greater undead was classified. He had never wasted precious merits to learn things that Kalla could teach him for free.

"Such a narrow perspective." She shook her head in disappointment.

"I'll keep it short. Sentient undead are divided into three Courts, based on their standpoint on the living. The Dawn Court, the only one I have a connection with, respects all kinds of life forms.

"Be they humans, plants, or beasts, the Dawn Court regards them as creatures that despite being weak and short lived, can still be worthy of the gift of eternal life. They do not take slaves, are patrons of the arts, and don't kill while feeding unless strictly necessary.

"Just like the Royal Court, the Dawn Court is ruled by a King and a Queen. They are by no means related by nuptial vows or even race and are often at odds with each other to further their own power plays.

"The Dawn Court is not content with survival, they want to enjoy their existence. The Royals are elected every year among those who brought more prosperity to the Court, be it in terms of wealth, social connections, or safe havens.

"Most of those who became undead against their will and wish to retain, if not to regain, their old life style seek asylum among their ranks.

"The Dusk Court are just loners who grouped up to not get harassed or disturbed by other Courts. As long as they are left alone, they don't care about the living. Their feeding and social habits are unpredictable.

"They have no leader nor a rigid structure. They assemble only when one or more of their members is threatened. They are the most difficult Court to contact or deal with. If attacked, they don't bargain nor do they seek compensation. They retaliate until their enemy is destroyed. Most Liches belong to the Dusk Court.

#### Chapter 460 Dawn Court Part 1

"The Night Court despises the living. They consider them just like humans consider their food. Inferior sentient beings, a lesser ring in the food chain, or two steps behind on the evolutionary scale if you prefer.

"They only value power and rank themselves like an army rather than a Court. A General keeps his authority only as long as he is capable of defending it. They believe that the end always justifies the means, making betrayals and conspiracies the norm.

"They are their own worst enemy. Their only rule is to not kill among themselves, otherwise their numbers could be counted on one hand in less than a week. To them birthing an offspring only means to create more rivals, so they don't share the gift of undeath easily.

"Unlike the Dawn Court that mingles with nobles, artists, and politicians, Night Court members are usually active members of the human underworld.

"With its human trade, drug trafficking, and weapon dealing, the black market allows them to hide in plain sight. To obtain what they want and get away with it. They like to befriend corrupt nobles and officials.

"Such people are the perfect straw men to take care of their business during the day and the perfect fall guys in case something goes wrong."

"What's a Vassal?" Lith asked.

"For the Dawn Court, a potential new recruit. For the Dusk Court, a friend. For the Night Court, a means to an end. Some undead, like the vampires, can bestow their gifts to the living, allowing them to temporarily surpass their limits.

"Becoming a Vassal means to be a willing servant, but it's also the first step to become a greater undead. Don't get me wrong, none of the Courts are absolutely good or bad, just like there are not only good or bad humans.

"Their philosophy on most things may be different, but they are all predators. Ancient and powerful beings that have no mercy killing whoever can expose their existence or ruin centuries of hard work.

"I don't know anyone in Othre, but I think I can still put you in contact with members of the Dawn Court. They will act friendly because of my backing, but to them, you are still a living and a stranger, hence disposable."

"Don't worry, he is not going there alone. We'll have his back." Jirni said with a steel gaze while placing her hand on Lith's shoulder.

"No, you won't. They'll never accept so many strangers at once and even if they did, it would be a death trap. Once inside their territory, you would be forced to abide to their rules or die.

"Exposing themselves to you is a big risk that would demand compensation. One favor is all they need to involve you in the Courts' quarrels and make you unable to survive without their help, which would require compensation in an endless loop.

"The only thing that can keep Lith relatively safe is the blessing I bestowed him. I'll call you back as soon as I know something."

Kalla hung up, leaving an awkward silence fill the room. Jirni opened her mouth more than once, but in the end she didn't say a word and walked out of the door.

"I don't think you should go." Dorian was the first to speak.

"I'm in charge of the investigation. I handpicked each one of you for the task. What happened so far is my responsibility, I can't allow you to take such risks."

"Exactly." Kamila added while squeezing his hand so hard that her knuckles turned white. "You only came here as a diagnostician and to protect Tista. Neither the army or the Association can force you to meet those monsters."

Lith appreciated her concern, yet her words stung at him.

'Monsters? They just do what they think is right for their survival and have no qualms killing those who stand in their path. I don't see any difference with what I do, with what society does every day under the pretense of "morality" or "the greater good".' Lith thought.

'I wonder what she would say if she saw my other form.'

'Don't be too harsh on her.' Solus was jealous of Kamila. Jealous of all the care Lith put in each of their dates, of the camellia, yet she admired her courage and honesty.

'It's the first time she leaves her desk. Even Phloria considered magical beasts as monsters back at the academy. People are always afraid of the unknown, but it doesn't mean that they stay scared forever.'

'Let's be honest.' Lith preferred to put that thought aside and focus on the matter at hand.

'I don't really have much of a choice. If Xolver is really the one who requested my personal file, then Kaelarn is investigating me. I don't think our squabble will escalate, but it's not safe to remain as ignorant as I am now about the Night Court.

'Also, we always planned to make contact with the undead to solve my reincarnation problem or at least find a proper body for you. This is an opportunity as good as any other to see if they can be of any use or if it's just a dead end.'

'It's all true.' Solus sighed. 'Not to mention the possibility of you becoming Manohar's replacement if we fail to find him, or of the creation of another Black Star.

'If the Professor is right about the kind of Forbidden Magic taking place in Othre during the last months, there is no telling how powerful the cursed object resulting from all the missing people could be.'

Jirni returned after a few minutes, while the others were still debating about where to start looking for Manohar. Othre was a big city. Even if they used every single soldier and mage available, it would take weeks for a comb search and they had hours at best.

No one doubted that Manohar's captor wouldn't stand his antics for long. Still, the Professor's death was unanimously considered the best case scenario. If the one behind the meat puppets and Manohar worked together, it would be a nightmare.

"We need to talk." Jirni sighed as she pulled Lith outside the room.

"I've just finished talking with the Crown. The Griffon Kingdom is long aware of the Courts existence and the Royals are not happy with this situation more than we are. They were against the idea of sending you to meet the Dawn Court until I mentioned Arthan's name."

She handed him her communication amulet, making Queen Sylpha's hologram appear. Lith knelt down, well aware that all of his reasonings were about to become irrelevant.

"Stand up, Great Mage Verhen." Her square chin and sharp features made her serious face look almost intimidating.

"Since I have to send you into the lion's den, I think it's fair doing it in person. I hereby command you to do everything you can to find your missing colleague and unveil the identity of our enemy."

"As you command, your Majesty." Lith inwardly grinned. He would have done it anyway. At least now he would also get rewarded for it.



'I knew it would happen, sooner or later.' He thought. 'You can't be valued as one of the best mages in the Kingdoms and not expect to be thrown into the proverbial hornet's nest.'