
[078] (special)

Khalid al-Ashtar was furious.

A mage's library would be one particular source of pride, containing texts from hundreds or thousands of different sources as well as many of their own making. A library was a sanctum, a place of research and ideas. And Khalid's library was amongst the biggest privately owned collection of books in the Caliphate. Only temples and priests could truly compare, with even the Sultan himself having once gazed upon his collection in shock.

The building had taken centuries of slow but steady expansions, each little bump in size carrying with it a meticulous and careful reorganization. By now the library was its own structure, nestled at the heart of the al-Ashtar estate, and though it had many entrances, only the mage had seen frequent use of it. For this very reason, Khalid had commissioned for the floors to be of wood covered by thick rugs, squeaky wood to be exact. In this way, it would be easy to know whether anyone other than a najasil was within the library, making the prospect of a surprise assassination impossible.

Now this very feature had come back to haunt him.

The human's footsteps creaked through the mage's library like a personal affront to his every thought. And as if dissatisfied by being a passive auditory nuisance, the human would frequently hum, becoming an active headache too. This sonoral assault was one thing, Khalid might have even forgiven it for its presence, but what truly left him with his blood boiling was the ease with which Liam navigated the library. One minute he'd sit down and flip through a book on basic golemancy, scribbling things down in some half-runic half-flowing language Khalid could not recognize. The next he'd launch into a squeaky race across the library, snatching three books and returning to continue his incongruent and horrid left-to-right squiggles.

The mage would've claimed the man was mad if not because he recognized the books Liam was picking up. He might not have been able to read the strange language the human used, but the elder knew his library well enough to piece together the process. First books were regarding golemancy core designs, followed by books on studies of material interactions with mana structures, then studies in basic architecture followed by mechanical architecture. Liam flipped through the books too quickly to be reading upon them, searching for something he clearly expected to already be there. And once he

found it, he'd write something down, check a few more pages, close the book, and jump off to the next target.

Four days, and the human had yet to even step out of the library, only resting for very brief naps.

This severe lack of sleep had made Khalid suspect the human to be a spirit or deity in disguise... at first. But by the second day, the human was showing all the signs of an ever-growing exhaustion. His eyes were red from irritation, sunken into a face that had shifted from a near porcelain paleness to a gauntly corpse-like one. His movements slowly but steadily took a more erratic and twitchy nature, his demand for coffee growing steadily by the day.

Khalid would've been impressed if not because this meant so much of his day was spent just coiled on his personal pillow, overlooking the human as he scurried about like a mouse within the najasil's domain.

By now, all pretenses to be "studying" had been properly thrown out the window, instead making it blatantly clear his presence in the library was specifically to keep an eye on the human. Something that did not bother the human, it seemed, only adding to the fire of Khalid's irritation.

On the sixth day of madness, the mage felt like this could not go on any further. "Tomorrow is your last day." He spoke out, breaking the silence he'd kept throughout this past week.

Liam's head perked up from the parchment. "Wait, really?" He stared down at his ink-stained hands. "Guess time flies when you're having fun."

"Failing is fun, then?"

"Failing?" For a moment he stared blankly up at Khalid from across the room before breaking the silence with cackling. "The golem thing I figured out by the second day, most of this has been to prove my approach. Mana interactions between wood, metal, and lightning aren't quite as cut and dry as I'd expected them to be when talking between manifested materials and the raw stuff."

Khalid hesitated. "Prove your approach?"

"If I break your toy just like that, then you'd call bullshit, you'd say I cheated, used divine intervention or somesuch." He was cackling again, eyes slightly unfocused, as he pointed at the stack of parchment on the table. "But I've done my work, it's possible, it should be possible."

The mage's shoulder tensed, crossing all four of his arms. "Really now."

"Well, yeah, you didn't make the golem with the intent of fighting a mage, your design had monster fighting in mind." Liam jolted to his feet, snatching the papers. "Actually, do you have any coffee? It'll take a bit to work through the theory. See, you see the thing in my arm? The..." he snapped his fingers, creating a spark of blue jolts of electricity. "It's the key. Your golem has a lot of mana in it, the body's summoned and formed out of metal and wood, but the core? You can't give the core mana properties because then you lose the ability to control the golem, and it's a risk you wouldn't take when you've never done something like this before. So the core is unfiltered, just pure mana, sitting there, waiting for commands, like a set of batteries."

His tone grew a bit manic as his words jumbled with each other.

"I thought to myself what's stopping any mage from taking control of that core? Did the great golemancer design his baseline experimental golem with protections in mind? And I realized that of course you hadn't, you couldn't, you were experimenting with new mana interactions. Why waste time and effort and energy throwing in bells and whistles when you first need to prove that the emulsion works and won't blow up in your face? Worst came to worst, you could just make it collapse on your own."

He snapped his fingers, another jostle of electricity arched between them.

"That's when it hit me, the challenge, you gave me the challenge thinking..., no, **knowing** I'm not a mage, that I can't just waltz up to the golem and cast a golemancy spell and take over. But the core's exposed, it's just this giant pool of mana sitting there, waiting for something to... jostle it." Another snap, another spark. "The key, electric mana, distilled, because that's how my little guests do their thing. They're thirsty little suckers, because electricity likes to flow and equalize." He shoved the papers over to Khalid, presenting them as he smiled up at the mage smiling like a rabid jackal. "That's it, that's the way through. That's how I'll destroy the golem. The moment I form a channel of electric-mana it'll break, all integrity lost as the mana required to keep it together becomes hostile instead. Because wood-metal mana emulsion does not work if the wood fries."

There was something chilling about the way the human spoke, of the words he said in what was clearly a not entirely sane state of mind. Khalid's first reaction was to confirm his enchantments and protections were working as they should. At first, he'd thought the human could read his thoughts, or his memories, but the more they interacted, the more the elder of al-Ashtra began to realize it was something else. Something deeper and

unnerving, as if the excited young man weren't peering into Khalid's mind but into his very soul.

As if he knew Khalid in a way none other could have comprehended.

The mage quietly stared as Liam practically vibrated on the spot, staring down at the illegible papers for only long enough to confirm they were indeed written in a language he did not know.

"Oh shoot, it's in English. I knew I wasn't done with those. Still need to transcribe and translate into Caliphate-common" Liam reached forward to snatch the papers off of the mage's hands. Flailing as Khalid merely pulled the papers away from him.

"You are correct that this particular golem has only the bare-bones required for it to exist and move, nothing else. It was a proof of concept." The najasil spoke smoothly. "I do, however, doubt you have the skill necessary to succeed. Your arm does contain distilled electric mana, that much I've ascertained these past few days, but the quantity is minute compared to what you'd need to even reach the core let alone harm my creation."

"Who said I'd be using my own mana to do that?" He waved his arms, trying to snatch the papers, but unable to reach. The najasil just kept it too far up for the human to reach. "I just need to form a connection. Might actually need some of that aether you've got lying around to establish that line. After the circuit's in place, I can just do whatever with the core's reserves."

Khalid could see the logic in the theory, but there was one problem.

"You would fry."

The golem's core might not contain the entirety of the seventh-circle spell used in its creation, but there was far too much for what could be safely contained.

"If I can't prove you wrong, I die anyway." Somehow, his eyes became that much more manic and amused. "I say better fry."

"Nonsense, I gave you ample opportunity to back down." The mage hissed, finally letting go of the papers and allowing the human to take them back. "Do not pretend your life is truly at risk. Your God has clearly invested much in you, I see no reason or gains they would make out of allowing you to die here."

"You're missing the point, *mister* al-Ashtar."

There it was. **Mister**. A title of bare-bones respect, and one not one person had dared to use when referring to Khalid in centuries. It felt like someone trying to descale him with tweezers. The fact that it was specifically **this** human saying it somehow made it worse.

“And what point is that?” The elder asked with a hiss.

“**I’m** going to win this bet. The ‘*weak but well-read*’ human. On my own.” With a snarl, he threw the papers back on to the desk, meeting Khalid’s scowl with a glare. “I’m going to walk up to your golem and I’m going to break it. And I’m going to do it by my knowledge and not-a-mage-yet skills in magic, with nothing and no one else.”

The ferocity in his words were like a slap to the face. Khalid’s anger redoubled, the mage looming over the human. “I see,” he said, forked tongue flickering out, tasting the air, a flicker of excitement at the prospect bubbling forth. “Then show me.”