

“You’re nervous.” Maridah’s voice needled into Liam’s ear like a tiny hair trying to tickle inside his brain.

“I’m impatient.” He replied, fingers tracing lightning upon the surface of the black rope as he practiced the spell-knots. “My brain keeps saying that waiting five days is a massive waste of time as well as an ill omen, even if I know it’s not.”

“You said we shouldn’t rush.” The Goddess teased. “Without him discovering you were rig-”

“I know!” Liam growled, letting out a yelp as he lost control of the spell, the rope snapping shut so fast it pinched his finger. “Dammit. I know. It still feels like I was ghosted. You have no idea how uncomfortable it feels, miss ‘*I can take a thousand-year-nap*’.”

“I **could** put you into a nap until such a time as you stop being annoying.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time.” He chuckled darkly, rubbing his wounded finger.

“How WILL you know if he’s reached enlightenment to begin with?” Maridah asked.

“Oh, that one’s easy.” He waved her off. “Experimenting with unknown magic requires extreme safety measures. Khalid’s safety measures are pretty damn thorough by even those standards. Unfortunately for him, the metal-wood mana emulsion is way more powerful than anything he could’ve-”

BOOM

“-imagined.” Liam blinked twice, feeling the shudder traveling through the ground. He blinked twice more as he stared out in the general direction of the a-Ashtar estate. “I... huh.” He scratched his chin awkwardly, then frowned. “You sensed the buildup and timed this conversation, didn’t you?”

The Goddess chuckled, but did not answer.

The damage to the al-Ashtar estate was not ignorable. A whole portion of the outer wall and outer building had crumbled into a gigantic crater, one containing a chubby metal doll ten stories tall.

It was like a marshmallow-man made out of dark green steel. There were no embellishments nor details upon its body, merely the contours of its puffed up form. By all standards, it looked as if it were squishy and soft, yet Liam knew the shell was probably the toughest thing short of a divinely enchanted shield or a specialized monster.

Coiled at the foot of the metal statue was Khalid, looking up at his creation through eyes that held mixed feelings. If Liam could read najasil expressions, he might have guessed at the emotions on the man's face. As it was, it almost looked like the mage was a finely adorned snake at the side of the road of someone cosplaying as a chromed Pillsbury Doughboy sans the hat or eyes.

There were guards mulling about, mostly for the sake of pushing away people that might get too close or too curious. But Liam found none of them paid him any attention, as all he had to do was walk up to the very edge of the wall, invisible thanks to Maridah's illusion.

"So you finally made it." He chimed, leaning against the walls as the Goddess made him visible and audible to only his target.

Khalid's head snapped to lock on to him. "You."

"It is I, Liam." He smiled in amusement. "I happened to be in the area, not much to do you see, and I heard the commotion. Congrats!" He chuckled. "I am very happy to see you've achieved your goal. After... What, a century of trying? You have now become the topmost golemancer this Age has ever seen. Not that there are many contenders. Still, now that you've reached your peak, there's nothing to do but sit back and spend the rest of your days basking in the glory." His voice rang out almost like a tune, singing along as he idly caressed the ruined wall, watching the mage twitch. "Now, keep in mind, you're not the best golemancer in all of the Ages, hell, not even the best in the past three Ages, but being the best in an Age is a pretty big success in my book."

The al-Ashtar elder regarded him with a blank stare, a mix of anger and shock mingled to such a degree as to leave him in stunned silence. The najasil's whole body seemed to just slacken as his mouth parted ever so slightly. The man tried to say something, but

words failed him, and slowly, ever so slowly, his fists began to tighten, jaw snapping shut, nostrils flaring.

“I do not find amusement in the way you toy with our interactions as if a child wielding a stick.” He declared coldly. “I am elder Khalid.”

“Oh, sure. If you want me to call you elder, I will.” Liam shrugged. “I just chose not to because it’s a title that was imposed upon you. You are forced to bear it, to take it on your shoulders and watch others besmirch and stain the household you once willingly desired to lead but now are chained to support.” Liam softened his tone, mentally praying that if he pushed too hard and went too far, then that Maridah could pull him out of this before things got ugly. It was nice having a Goddess in your corner of the ring. “Mr al-Ashtra, I’m only interested in your character and the skills you’ve honed over your lifetime. Neither household name nor ancestry are of my concern, nor that of my client.” He gestured at the golem. “You took only a handful of days to figure out a wood-metal mana emulsion, that alone is a sign that you’ve been standing at the cusp of success and only needed a tiny shift in the direction of the wind.” His words were followed by a shrug. “But unfortunately, your lack of curiosity is a strong detriment here. A seventh circle mage is nice and all, but someone that stagnates out of their own lack of curiosity is not exactly what we’re looking for.”

As an author, Liam had faced a problem he liked to believe any author would eventually stumble upon: what do you do to write a character that’s smarter than you? Even if they’re “merely” smarter in a singular subject matter, it is a very complicated task, one that, in the end, requires time. Time to think, time to consider alternatives, and so on. Liam had not spent the past few days idly waiting, he’d been very carefully trying to figure Khalid’s “character” out on a deeper level than he ever had as a writer. It was why he followed the mage around whenever he left his estate, and why he’d quietly observe what few interactions he could.

The preparation had paid off, his words having struck true. The anger in Khalid’s body-language stilled, and the mage regarded Liam carefully. For a moment, he stared back at the metal golem that now dominated so much of the ruined area, standing like a statue commemorating something monumental. The mage looked upon the creature and with a flicker of a frown, saw as it slowly took a step forward. Stone crushed underfoot, and the metal groaned, yet as it finished the step, it did not collapse.

Another twitch, and the golem reversed the step, returning to the spot it had been standing on a moment prior.

“Are you a spirit?”

Khalid's question was not one Liam had been expecting. But it felt like it was a sign that things hadn't been screwed up just yet. "No, I just happen to know a lot about many things." His lips curled ever so slightly upwards. "Why, I'd even claim I know more secrets about golemancy magic than you do."

"You're no mage." Khalid spoke harshly and quickly, gaze snapping back at the human, tongue flicking out. "If you're neither spirit nor demigod, then at least that much I can claim for certain."

"Not a mage **yet.**" Liam's fingers crackled with lightning as he traced circles on the crumbled stone wall. "But in my little quest to know you better, I took the chance to delve into the subject. The minutia might be lost to me until I manage to start casting spells, but I can assure you, in the theoretical department, I have you beat."

The najasil straightened out. "It is one thing to have some manner of telepathy, to peer into the mind of another to steal their secrets. It is another to then claim you have mastered that knowledge and even expanded upon it."

The human's grin could not be larger. "This is no trick, mister Khalid, though I suspect by now you wouldn't trust a truth spell even if it told you I'm not lying." Liam was positively giddy, and it wasn't exactly easy to hide either, not that he needed it. Khalid's irritation at him had only grown, the mage was no doubt salivating at the prospect of turning the tables on him. "But spell or not, even if you can't trust your spells, you can trust your knowledge. So how about a little game? It's an old game, typically held amongst mages, but one that I feel can be played even under the current circumstances." Sitting down on the wall, he grinned. "I provide you a riddle, and you provide one back in turn. Back and forth until one of us gives up. Obviously, neither is allowed to provide something that has no possible answer."

Even as they spoke, Liam could see the glint in his eyes. "A game with a wager, I take it?"

"Of course." His lips curled into a shark-like smile. "If I win, you agree to invite my client to your home for at least a day, and have a single meeting with her. Of course, she'd follow the rules of hospitality."

"It appears to me like there's more to your insistence regarding hospitality than mere decency." The Goddess whispered into his mind. *"Suspicious."*

He ignored the little jab with amusement, keeping his gaze locked on the mage. "What say you, mister Khalid? I know you don't think too kindly of deities, so I wonder whether you'd find the wager a fair one."

“I would sooner take your head than allow a deity into my home.” The najasil replied in an angry hiss, approaching the young human, looming over him. “But a life is not being wagered, thus, I will settle with taking that strange arm instead.”

Liam felt a chill run down his spine, it pooled into his stomach alongside a sense of certainty and excitement.

Khalid al-Ashtar was pissed, seriously pissed, how wouldn't he be? The greatest achievement of his lifetime had been reached thanks to the words of a contemptuous disrespectful stranger. One that just so happened to openly and clearly have divine backing of some sort, that this deity is not of the current pantheon being entirely irrelevant. His ego was bruised and his temper thoroughly poked.

That he demanded Liam gamble his own arm was a sign the man didn't just want retribution, he was now calling him out. It was the exact reason why Maridah could have never managed to convince the najasil to meet with her.

In his eyes, a God could never put anything meaningful on the line when against a mortal. It was like how making a bet with an ant could, at most, get you a few bites or with a few less sugar-cubes.

If Liam folded and stepped away, he'd never get past the colossus that was Khalid's pride.

“*Liam-*” Maridah began to warn him.

“You have yourself a deal, mister Khalid.” His heart was pumping now, jaw tight and gaze sharp. “Time and place?”

“Here and now.” The mage hissed.

“Oh, if that's the case... May I enter, mister Khalid?” Dusting himself off, he moved to stand upon the wall. “It wouldn't do to play a game of mage riddles on the street.”

The mage's anger tempered, he drew into himself, body relaxing ever so slightly. There was a fair bit of suspicion in those jewel-like slitted eyes, but the man appeared to have tempered himself a fair deal. “I invite only you inside, not your deity.” The mage flashed his fangs in a facsimile grin. “It would not do if a game between mortals were intervened by a deity.”

“Ah.” Liam hesitated, not coming down from the wall. “If my client were to... say, step away, then I will be visible and audible to all.”

“Not a problem.”

“You can’t be serious.” Maridah growled into his mind. *“You could be attacked, he could kill you. Worse, another deity might step in.”* Her tone was snappish, oozing concern. *“And what of your goals? If you lose your arm...”*

She had a point, of course.

“If my life is in danger, then hospitality will have been breached, and all rules are out the window.” He spoke the words in plain English, his jaw setting into place as he kept his confident smile plastered across his face. “Outside of that one instance, do not intervene.”

Was this enough? Possibly. Liam certainly hoped it would be enough to convince her.

“If you lose, then this will at least serve as a lesson in limits.”

“I won’t lose.” Liam replied confidently, taking the step to enter Khalid’s family household, sensing the Goddess’ presence vanishing as he dropped the half-foot into the dirt. “I’m way more stubborn than he is.”

Stepping closer to Khalid, he looked up to the looming figure. With a slight bow of his head, he provided proper greeting before grinning at the mage. All around them the guards and laborers had appeared to notice the pale fleshy human approach the elder of the clan. Many eyes were set upon them, most of them draxani, a fair few najasil.

“Nice home you’ve got, mister Khalid.” Liam called out, keeping up his curled lips in amusement. “Now, how about some refreshments before we start?”

Khalid twitched, and he grinned.

This was going to be fun.