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## [077]

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Problem: Khalid had made a golem out of wood and metal mana, his first seventh-circle mage-spell, and a nasty piece of work, if Liam said so himself.

Even if Khalid had yet to fully test and comprehend the details and limitations of his creation, Liam knew them fairly well. A creation of pure metal mana would be tough to impact, but unbending, easy to tear apart, where a more flexible creation could better absorb damage. A creation of pure wood mana would be incredibly brittle, but continuously self-healing and capable of changing its shape far more easily. This creation had a lot of metal and a bit of wood, meaning it could move, it could mend, and it was the toughest thing to pierce through in the whole damn city. This was no light statement either, because the golem was harder to damage than the barriers empowering the two mage towers.

And if the damage didn't reach the core, then it would just naturally expend some of its power to heal itself back up. Not as quickly as a pure wood-mana construct, but enough that it just made the entire thing absurd.

It was, after all, a seventh-circle spell.

This thing was at a power-level that could just flatten a couple major cities unopposed.

Technically speaking, Liam could just wait for the golem to cave in on itself. It was a being made out of mana, unable to replenish its reserves, merely existing was energy intensive. Problem was that, with the golem just sitting on its ass doing nothing, that would likely take a couple years. Probably more. In a similar vein, if he caused enough damage to the golem, that time for self-collapse would be shortened. But that would also prove a very big challenge, the thing's durability was insane, smacking it around with a trebuchet would likely be no different from having it just sit and do nothing.

This left Liam with no readily available options he could think of, not while his jaw was clenched so tightly his ears were buzzing.

Finally standing up and dusting himself off, he turned to face the mage.

"Ready to give up?" The najasil asked smoothly, having switched his beverage of choice to something herbal and devoid of caffeine.

“Only if you accept you lost.” Liam answered coldly, waiting for the glare. “Thought as much.” He pointed at the golem. “If I’m going to work through a way to break it, I will need access to... well, access to stuff.” His glare met the mage’s head-on. “Unless you intend to tell me I need to destroy your golem by staring it down.”

Khalid sneered. “Won’t your God just solve this for you?”

“First off, she’s my client and friend, not my God.” Liam’s lips curled into a smirk. “Second, she respects promises.”

“Be warned that I will not allow you to financially ruin my household nor harm my servants out of spite.” Khalid huffed, crossing his arms. “But other than that, feel free to ask away.”

Turning around, he left towards the house, and once he was gone, Liam’s anger abated.

“Fuck.” He swore under his breath. He shouldn’t have let Khalid get under his skin. He’d known the elder had a very sharp tongue, but it was one thing to imagine you’re going to be insulted where it hurts, and another to receive the words in the heat of the moment.

Now Liam just wanted to run up to the guy and punch him.

He hadn’t fucked up, the situation wasn’t impossible to save. Not yet at least.

Deep breath.

Glaring up at the golem’s doughy shape, Liam’s knee bounced up and down as he began to try and figure out the best way to bruteforce this. The golem’s design was already a nightmare to tackle, and it wasn’t as if he could just cast spells at it. Though even if he were a mage, he wouldn’t just lob bombs at the thing, it’d be incredibly wasteful to do so. Meaning... piercing would be the key. Something precise, energy efficient, and severely intense.

Something to puncture deep enough to reach the core and break the spell entirely.

Piercing the toughest substance in the whole damn city.

“Another thing.” Khalid’s voice rang out, cold like a gong as the mage emerged from the building. “You have one week to fulfill the challenge or leave with your tail between your legs. But the moment you use a single bead of aether from my coffers, I will have your head if you fail.”

“Yeah, sure.” Liam snorted loudly. “Seven day’s more than enough to figure out how to break the crowning achievement that took you half a century to realize.”

Was he pushing too far? Maybe.

Did he still want to punch Khalid's snout in? Definitely.

With an angry hiss, the najasil left without another word. Within minutes came a handful of servants, playing it off as being there to fulfill his needs, but Liam knew them to be there also to keep an eye on him. It wouldn't do if he "cheated" his way into success after all.

His first request was some parchment and something to write with. "Also, could you bring me the family alchemist?" He requested, earning a few odd looks but a quick nod

Now... now it was time to experiment and consider. He'd known many of the baseline properties of the seventh-circle golem spell from his story, but he never really got into the minutia. So he'd need to figure the construct out.

It began easily enough. First he used the divine forget-me knife, trying to see whether the insane sharpness could do anything here. And though it did scratch the surface of the golem's knee, the wound wasn't even a full hair in depth and patched itself back up within seconds. Next he went for blunt weapons, if just to confirm that hammering at it was no different from hammering a metal wall. It didn't even dent, and it ended up hurting Liam's hands more than anything.

"You called for me, young master?"

The voice came from a draxani dressed in protective leather, with his snout covered by cloth, only his eyes visible, showing aged grayed scales and a slightly bent posture. Liam immediately stopped his small experimentation and approached, giving the older man a respectful bow. "Yes, I did. My name is Liam Carter, it is a pleasure to meet you, sir."

The older draxani hesitated, caught by surprise from the show of respect. "I am al-Ashtar's alchemist. There is no need for titles, young master, I am called Braro."

A family alchemist... or the person in charge of turning all waste into something useful. Most of the man's work gravitated around making fertilizer, but there were other compounds and substances that could be gathered from processing the content of communal latrines.

"Well, mister Braro, the elder tasked me with trying to see if I can injure his creation." Liam intoned. "So with that in mind, I wanted to run some tests. Would it be too much to ask for your assistance?"

The slightly hunched draxani glanced at the golem, then at Liam. “I hesitate to ask, but in what manner would you require my aid?”

“Just two things, mostly. I want to see how it reacts to extreme heat and corrosion.” With a slight toothless smile, Liam kept his tone amicable. “It’s my understanding you have access to some of the materials that might prove useful?”

“I... can certainly think of a few things, young master. How extreme were you considering?”

“My father was an alchemist of sorts.” Not exactly a lie, Liam’s father had worked in a chemical factory for quite some time. “One secret he’d imparted to me was that a small amount of powdered aluminum could improve fertilizer effectiveness. Would you happen to have some?”

In standard medieval times within Liam’s world, aluminum was a massive resource investment and extremely hard to extract out of the ore, making it pound for pound as much of a valuable metal as gold. In this world and time-period, however, there were monsters and magics that made the ore far more accessible. It just wasn’t seen as very useful within standard applications, so the metal was still hard to find outside of some specialties. Specialties like “true” alchemists and “family” alchemists.

“Oh, certainly!” Braro straightened up. “Though, why would you require powdered aluminum?”

“I’d gladly show you once we’ve put everything together. What of corrosives? Could you bring some as well? Would you mind if I helped bring everything in?”

“Sorry, young master, but only myself and my assistants are allowed within the processing rooms.” He gave a small apologetic bow. “I will try to be quick. How much would you need?”

“A bowl’s worth of every ingredient, if possible.”

With the instructions provided, the draxani quickly hobbled away, calling for some of the servants to come assist him. Liam in the meantime began to mentally review what he planned to test out.

Personally, he considered a basic rite of passage for an author to search and memorize weird science. From the ever infamous poisons such as arsenic and ricin, all the way down to the scary chemistry family and the horrible ways it could mess someone up. Actually, thinking about it, Liam was mostly sure that between searching up poisons,

warcrimes, how to make home-made explosives and so on, he'd probably made his way into a fair number of watchlists.

It didn't take long for Braro to show up carrying the requested items, and it took less still for Liam to mix up a batch of thermite to put upon the golem's toe and ignite it. The blazing white light drew a startled gasp from the servant, but Liam mostly chagrined. The metal wasn't even warm to the touch, it seemed Khalid had indeed deployed basic "protections from simple physics". Chances were the mage hadn't even considered "attack by thermite" but had just thrown it in as a basic measure to get the construct to move.

If he wanted to poke a hole through this thing, his only real option would be magic of some sort.

Thanking Braro and sharing some details for potential uses for thermite, he sent the man off and was left with his own thoughts.

Maybe he could look for some sort of enchanted item to do this? It would certainly be cathartic to just have a tool that could one-shot anything Khalid ever made, but... that would just be too massive of a humiliation, and pointless in the end.

Khalid would just become that much more of a pain to deal with afterwards.

"Shit." Liam had gotten so excited and deep into the puzzle of thoroughly destroying the golem that he'd forgotten he had to win the "right" way.

Khalid as he knew the mage to be would become insufferable as a companion down the line if he had nothing to grasp at. The man wasn't one who cared for vengeance, but he sure as hell would not forget that. And if the guy became Maridah's champion, that would just spell one gigantic mess for him.

"Shit, shit, shit."

How was he going to break through the golem while also not leaving Khalid feeling like he'd been cheated thrice over? The mage saw personal growth and personal skill as far more important than most anything else. It was why the mage was so thoroughly begrudgingly humbled by Bellisandre, the only tenth-circle mage in the Caliphate, and having achieved that rank within less than forty years of age.

Liam began to carefully circle the golem, reaching out to poke at it if only to give himself something to do, while his mind began leaning away from the standard possible solutions involving chemistry from his world.

As he switched directions, reaching out with his right hand, a spark jumped out, jostling his finger.

Slowly, he glanced down at his right hand, then at the golem.

“I think it’s time to do some research. I wonder how happy Khalid will be with sharing his personal library.”

He smiled.

The mage was going to ***hate*** this.